

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

Spring 1982

Review of *Stephen Long and American Frontier Exploration* By Roger L. Nichols and Patrick L. Halley

John L. Allen
University of Connecticut

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Allen, John L., "Review of *Stephen Long and American Frontier Exploration* By Roger L. Nichols and Patrick L. Halley" (1982). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1640.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/1640>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Stephen Long and American Frontier Exploration. By Roger L. Nichols and Patrick L. Halley. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1980. Illustrations, maps, notes, appendix, bibliography, index. 276 pp. Cloth. \$17.50.

The name of Major Stephen H. Long has been, for most western and frontier historians

and geographers, linked inextricably with the "Great American Desert controversy." Fairly or unfairly, scholars have tended to see as Long's major exploratory contribution the creation of the myth of the barren interior which, it has been claimed, prevented settlement of the Great Plains for several decades. This opinion regarding his role and significance as an explorer is unfortunate. Long was by no means the first or only explorer in the West in the first half of the nineteenth century to describe the Plains in negative terms. Moreover, it is highly questionable whether the myth of the Great American Desert was as controlling a factor in western settlement as has been claimed. Most important, to focus on this relatively minor aspect of Long's considerable experience as an explorer is to ignore his real contributions: the expansion of geographical knowledge, the first use of trained scientists on government-sponsored expeditions, the establishment of a system of exploration that became the "norm," and the sustaining of government interest in exploration during the hiatus between Lewis and Clark and Fremont. The purpose of Nichols and Halley's work is to describe and assess these important but often ignored contributions.

In general the authors succeed in their intent. Although the book is described as "not biographical," they begin by providing enough background information on Long to give the reader some material with which to interpret the explorer's behavior. Following this description of Long's "apprenticeship," they discuss his expeditions of 1816-17, 1819-20, and 1823 in terms of preparation, the field experience, and the results. The bulk of the book treats the 1819-20 "Yellowstone Expedition"; the heart of the authors' central objective is their discussion of that expedition in the context of American scientific development.

Although the book performs an important and necessary function, it is not without its flaws. Chief among these might simply be the error of trying too hard to make the case. The defense of Long's role is conducted to the point of tedium and the book is most repetitious on

the point that Long's contributions have been ignored. There also is an attempt, natural enough but nevertheless misguided, to make Long out to be a better explorer than he actually was. He was impatient as a traveler and observer; he did not exercise command well and fought constantly with fellow officers; his planning was less than perfect; and his reporting was flawed by a lack of scientific objectivity. The authors recognize these shortcomings; but they make so many excuses for them that they run the risk of obscuring their real message by the cloud of dust raised from the hide of a well-whipped and very dead horse. But this criticism should by no means be read as a negative indictment of the book's overall worth. It is, by and large, a nice piece of work on a misunderstood figure in the history of the Great Plains, and it certainly belongs on the bookshelf of anyone interested in that region.

JOHN L. ALLEN
Department of Geography
University of Connecticut