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Review of *The Explorers: Nineteenth Century Expeditions in Africa and the American West* By Richard A. Van Orman

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The Explorers: Nineteenth Century Expeditions in Africa and the American West. By Richard A. Van Orman. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. xiii + 243 pp. \$19.95.

Recently the history of exploration and discovery has become fashionable—possibly as a relief from the dreary “body count” social histories that have been inflicted upon us for the past decade. *The Explorers* by Richard A. Van Orman is an attempt to capitalize on the new fashion for exploration history. In this work the author attempts to analyze and compare, as his subtitle indicates, “Nineteenth Century Expeditions in Africa and the American West.”

This is an artificial topic since there is no overarching logical reason for comparing the two enterprises—at least none that the author addresses. Moreover, the author’s approach to the subject is neither chronological history nor organized logical analysis. One finds, for example, in what purports to be an analysis or description of the exploration of the two continents during the Enlightenment, a treatise on Captain Cook, who had little to do with either Africa or the American West, unless one

includes the Alaskan coast. The same confusion and superficial grasp of the subject reigns in each of the topical chapters that compose this book. For example, in a chapter devoted presumably to explorers’ backgrounds, the author repeatedly refers to a sample of thirty explorers of the American West, then never tells us who these explorers were. That is, were they mountain men, topographical engineers, artists, highly specialized scientists, men, or women? At the same time the author attempts to generalize about the explorers’ backgrounds, training, and experiences. This could have been done in a chart, but the subject clearly escaped the author.

Other aspects of the topic have also provided confusion. The author asserts that after Cook’s voyages, the world’s oceans were completely explored, that Robert Rogers created the concept of “the noble Indian,” and that eighteenth-century explorers embraced cultural relativism; he also sees “uniformitarianism” not as a geological concept but as a social concept. There is little point, however, in listing the numerous gaffes in this extremely superficial work. Perhaps its two most important faults are the artificiality of its subject and the author’s complete lack of a thesis that would provide an overall organization for the book. Rather, this work is a compilation of random comments on exploration, thrown together in jumbled fashion.

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