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Review of *In Search of Canaan: Black Migration to Kansas, 1879-80* By Robert B. Athearn

Walter Weare

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

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ing through most of 1880, thousands of former slaves (estimates range from six thousand to sixty thousand) fled the American South, determined to resettle on the "holy ground" of John Brown's Kansas. This dramatic "Exodus" captured the attention of journalists and politicians at the time, setting off a U.S. Senate investigation in 1880, and over the decades has held a mild fascination for historians. More recently, a number of scholars have caught the "Kansas Fever," most notably Robert Athearn in this volume and Nell Irvin Painter in her *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas After Reconstruction* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976). Comparisons between the two studies are inevitable.

Painter views this westward movement through the larger lens of southern and black history. Athearn does just the opposite. Southern blacks, argues Athearn, came west for essentially the same reasons as white settlers—land and economic opportunity—and often fell prey to promoters and false prophets. Painter does not discount these motivations, but she assigns at least equal emphasis to southern political oppression along with the powerful religious symbolism of the movement. Athearn does not take these political and cultural preconditions seriously enough, does not see the Exodus as a social movement in its own right, and too often allows insensitive contemporary journalists to speak for him.

The strength of the book, aside from its sprightly style, is Athearn's careful pursuit of the migration after its departure from the deep South, and more successfully, his penetration of the politics of the Exodus. At the national level, the Exodus held considerable meaning for the election of 1880, in which Democrats alleged that Republicans welcomed the plight of the refugees as an opportunity to "wave the bloody shirt" and as a means to bolster the northern Republican vote, especially in Indiana, Illinois, and Ohio, where they hoped to divert the stream of black migration. Athearn is ready to believe the worst of Republican machinations, an interpretation which renders the migrants political pawns—passive victims in

In Search of Canaan: Black Migration to Kansas, 1879–80. By Robert B. Athearn. Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1979. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. 338 pp. \$14.00.

Beginning in the spring of 1879 and continu-

a counterrevisionist view of Reconstruction history.

This is not to discredit Athearn's important analysis of the white politics of the black migration, in which he makes it clear that the Exodusters were victimized, even by well-meaning Governor John P. St. John along with liberal reformers and reactivated abolitionists who rallied around this new cause in Kansas; but viewed historiographically, Athearn may have misplaced the significance of his ostensible subject. If, as he claims, the Exodus was merely an interlude, from which white Kansans "turned their eyes once more to the practical tasks at hand, that of survival in their portion of the old American Desert," then one would wonder if the migration is worth a book. One hopes that history will remember the Exodus as a telling chapter in the black diaspora rather than as an "unusual episode" in the history of Kansas.

WALTER WEARE

Department of History
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee