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## Review of *Lies Across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong* By James W. Loewen

Thomas D. Isern

North Dakota State University, [isern@plainsfolk.com](mailto:isern@plainsfolk.com)

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*Lies Across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong.* By James W. Loewen. New York: The New Press, 1999. 480 pp. Illustrations, index. \$26.95.

Fairness demands confession of a certain chronology in my preparing this review. I read the work under discussion and then, before writing about it, began reading *The Use and Abuse of Australian History* (2000) by Graeme Davison. *Lies Across America* suffers by comparison to the masterly Australian work. My yellow-pad notes document, however, that before reading Davison I had already recorded my disappointments with James W. Loewen's work.

To give it its due, the book is entertaining and thought-provoking. Where Loewen finds fault, there generally is fault, and the accumulation of such faults in perceptible patterns gives pause. It is appropriate for self-conscious historians to critique the monumental history affixed to the American landscape.

The author's critique fails, though, in three ways. First, it chooses easy targets and peppers them redundantly, like a waterfowler who not only shoots sitting ducks but also exceeds the bag limit. How many times do we need to hear about the mythic excesses of the Daughters of Confederate Veterans? Second, the work offers no perceptive explanations of how perverse versions of history made their way into our historic sites. Calling them "lies" is cheap. Third, the author sets unrealistic expectations and then violates them himself. He demands a history that is impartial and timeless. Usually, however, after smashing the mythology of a monument, he goes on to insist on substituting his own preferred mythology.

Come home to the Plains for an example: Loewen excoriates the Nebraska State Historical Society for not pronouncing Willa Cather a lesbian right out there on Highway 281. Nebraskans instead emphasize her love of the Great Plains landscape and her compelling female characters. To demand that the mythic Cather serve the narrative needs of urban gays instead of the filiopietism of rural Nebraskans is rank colonialism.

Elsewhere on the Plains Loewen treats the naming of Devil's Lake without finding any historic site to focus on there, takes the usual easy shot at the Confederate Room of the Oklahoma Historical Society, and takes on two obscure and thoughtlessly bigoted historical markers in Gardner, Kansas, and Brookings, South Dakota. The Great Plains section of the book is dull. This in a land that contains the Pike Pawnee Village obelisk, the Wrong-Side Up monument, and of course the infamous Sand Creek battle-or-massacre marker.

*Lies Across America* is a book for the 1980s, a monument itself to American disillusionment. In the twenty-first century it rings tinny.

THOMAS D. ISERN  
Department of History  
North Dakota State University