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Review of *Kit Carson and the Indians* By Tom Dunlay

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Kit Carson and the Indians. By Tom Dunlay. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000. Illustrations, notes, index. xx + 535 pp. \$45.00.

Kit Carson—the name conjures images of a bigger-than-life mountain man and Indian fighter who attained the skills and knowledge necessary to “win the West.” As cliché-bound as this dime store novel impression may be, part of it may be warranted. Even while still alive, Carson became subject to the mythologizing process associated with the American frontier. Since that time, historians have added their own interpretations, in some cases clarifying and in others confusing the man and his times.

Tom Dunlay recognizes these errors and their origins, believing that in order to uncover the real Carson, one must understand the context in which he lived. The author rejects judgments based on today’s views that fail to include yesterday’s values. The result is a carefully argued thesis that Carson was a product of time and place, and that by using a contemporary yardstick for measure, we can see a good man who treated Indians fairly—even kindly—unless provoked. While this theme may not seem revolutionary, anyone who has read historical interpretations written in the last forty years knows that vilifying white people involved in the westward movement has been popular sport. Dunlay provides an antithetical view.

The major events of Carson’s life—including his early boyhood in Kentucky, adventures as a mountain man, service during the mapping expeditions of John C. Frémont, life as an Indians agent, soldiering against the Navajos and Comanches, and, in his last days, spokesman for the Utes—shape the book. The common thread of Carson’s views of and actions toward the American Indian runs throughout. The author does not dismiss the fact that his subject often fought Indians, but chooses to portray him as a man of sound judgment who waged war primarily for protection.

Dunlay succeeds in developing this thesis, providing an extensive review of the litera-

ture, presenting both sides of an interpretation, arguing persuasively after all the facts are in, and admitting honestly that, in some instances, there are no answers. Though he may belabor some of his points, being thorough is better than being misunderstood. Readers concerned with the Great Plains will find much of value here, although there is no missing Kit Carson’s Southwest connection. Readers interested in the man, the westward movement, Native Americans, and historiography will find *Kit Carson and the Indians* well worth their time.

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