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Spring 2000

**Review of *Transcontinental America, 1850•1915, Volume 3 of The Shaping of America: A Geographical Perspective on 500 Years of History* by D. W. Meinig**

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Lewis, G. Malcom, "Review of *Transcontinental America, 1850•1915, Volume 3 of The Shaping of America: A Geographical Perspective on 500 Years of History* by D. W. Meinig" (2000). *Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences*. 512.  
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## BOOK REVIEWS

**Transcontinental America, 1850-1915**, Volume 3 of **The Shaping of America: A Geographical Perspective on 500 Years of History**. D. W. Meinig. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998. xvi+457 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, references, index. \$50.00 cloth (ISBN 0-300-07592-8).

The editors of the *Journal of Historical Geography* considered the publication of the third volume of Donald Meinig's "magisterial historical geography" to be so important as to merit a sixteen-page special feature: an account of the project by the author followed by invited commentaries by Cole Harris and Carville Earle (*JHG*, January 1999). Meinig explains that "America" refers to the United States, though "other Americas" (Canada, Mexico, Panama, etc.) are considered in presenting it in "a broader geographic context. . . ." The *Shaping* in the series title announces an emphasis on "form, morphology, spatial patterns, [and] geographic structure"; in the author's opinion, the United States is "one of the greatest exhibits of the continuous reshaping of the human geography of areas." Meinig's overriding concerns are "with the imposition of order upon areas, with the location of various kinds of places and connections between them, with distinguishing features of constituent areas, and with spatial systems that give rise to more general patterns." He acknowledges that the "great land-forms map of Erwin Raisz and broad patterns of soil, vegetation, and climate are ever in sight or in mind as I write." But Meinig is in no sense a latter-day environmental determinist.

Arguably the greatest active historical geographer in North America, Meinig approaches his work distinctively, yet in a way by no means typical of the fraternity. There is no Meinig school to match in influence those of Ellen Semple, Carl Sauer, or Andrew Clark earlier in the century. His writings and methods have been criticized. Indeed, I seem to remember that many years ago he was accused of manipulating ordinary language. In the second of the *Journal of Historical Geography* commentaries Carville Earle categorizes *The Shaping of America* as "an exceptionally refined example of a high Tory interpretation of the American geographical past . . . a historical geography which advances with a measured and dignified sense of order and decorum. . . . [T]he present arises naturally and inexorably out of the past in a continuous shaping of American life and landscape. Continuity is thus the keystone in the arch of Tory interpretation." But stressing continuity "obscures the unseemly struggles that have pitted workers against capital, egalitarians against elites, anarchists against progressives, big producers

against small, and nationalizers against regionalizers.” In fairness to Meinig, he stresses in each of the prefaces to his three volumes that his *Geographical Perspective* is inevitably and unashamedly selective and personal.

For those, like me, who can accept this, the volumes now in print contain an intellectually satisfying, brilliantly written, and spatially organized synthesis of much of what we already knew about America’s past, of far more that we had forgotten, and a cornucopia of what we would not otherwise have known. For example, I already knew that bone men scoured the Plains for the skeletons of slaughtered buffalo, had almost forgotten that the extermination of the buffalo had been regarded by some contemporaries as an indirect way of “solving the Indian question,” but had not realized that bones continued to be mined in a small way for another half century at buffalo “jumps” in the Northern Plains. Jargon free and stylishly presented, I agree with the eminent Canadian historical geographer Cole Harris who, in the *Journal of Historical Geography’s* other commentary, evaluates the project as “an outstanding scholarly achievement . . . one of the small handful of great achievements of North American academic geography,” in which Meinig “starts with a huge, ambitious text—the story of North America—and discerns order and pattern therein.”

After many years spent writing *The Shaping of America* volumes 1 and 2, Donald Meinig must have relished turning his attention to a period in which Western issues were for the first time of national importance. A native of the Palouse country, eastern Washington, and with both his higher degrees from the University of Washington, he held a faculty position at the University of Utah before creating his reputation in the East at Syracuse University. From there most of his publications continued to be about the West. In monographs about the Great Columbia Plain (and a parallel study of the northern wheatlands of South Australia) and Imperial Texas, and in a classic paper on the Mormon culture region, he developed the themes, approach, and presentation style that characterize *The Shaping of America*. Keywords selected at random from the chapter titles of the earlier works are revealing: “entry,” “colonization,” “conquest,” “retreat,” “elaboration.” This concern with grand processes operating in macro space differentiates Meinig’s historical geography from the morphological approach to smaller areas that had characterized much written by his immediate predecessors. Space and spatial organization, however, are not processes but consequences of process interactions. In volume 3, Meinig focuses on four of these: railroad development and the binding together of the Atlantic and Pacific coasts; the differentiation of the West’s six major and several other regions; and two non-Western themes—changing patterns in the older Eastern half of

America, and American spheres of influence and outreach in other parts of the New World.

Because Great Plains settlement essentially occurred during the period covered by volume 3 it is interesting to see how Meinig treats the region. Somewhat surprisingly, he accords it a minor status, part only of "The Rest of the West" chapter and a mere ten pages within a one-hundred-and-fifty page group of chapters subtitled "The Emergence of American Wests." His justification of what otherwise might have seemed a slighting is that although the area was a physical region of great distinction, a land that made a powerful impression on all who encountered it, the Great Plains was not in itself a region for it was not a coherent regional system of settlements and activities but a particular kind of country, a whole area being probed, traversed, and its indigenous human ecology destroyed without a well-proven alternative system of domestication ready to replace it. The ensuing ten pages sketch the changes in the Great Plains region from the breaching of the "Permanent Indian Frontier" by means of Indian uprisings and the decimation of the buffalo, to cattle ranching and sheep raising, and finally the various forms of cultivation, always drawing attention to significant temporal changes and regional differences. A review of historical fluctuations in the frontier of contiguous settlement concludes that these "unstable western margins continue to mark the western limits of 'the East'—and thereby the eastern edges of 'the West.'" Nowhere, however, is an attempt made to establish which groups of Plains people felt or feel "Easterners" and which "Westerners." But, then, this great work is the unashamed perspective of one individual and not an evaluation of group perceptions. Even so, Meinig's conclusion demands critical examination by Plains specialists in a mix of fields. Nowhere does he mention Walter Prescott Webb.

I wish *Transcontinental America* had existed when, long ago, I first began my personal experience of the West. Much of it would have afforded the perfect introduction for a hitchhiking geographer schooled in and intellectually satisfied by the spatial perspective on a world that had evolved and was still evolving. The volume will be too heavy to bring with me whenever I return, but I will reread the relevant parts before doing so. Meanwhile, I look forward to the publication of volume 4, *Global America, 1915-1992*, the culmination of what will indeed be a magisterial work, arguably unequalled in the more than one hundred years since Justin Winsor's *Narrative and Critical History of America* (8 volumes, 1884-89) and Alexander Brown's *Genesis of the United States* (2 volumes, 1890). Unless there continue to be academic institutions as enlightened and supportive as Meinig's, the next hundred years may not see its equal or, in a post-literate

age, produce individuals with the time, ability, and inclination to read such a momentous work. **G. Malcolm Lewis**, *Department of Geography, University of Sheffield, England*.