

## BOOK REVIEWS

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Glenda Riley and Richard Etulain. *Presidents Who Shaped the American West*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018. Pp. vii, 264. Illustrations. Paperback \$24.95.

Distinguished Western historians Glenda Riley and Richard Etulain's new volume should be on the shelf of every undergraduate trying to connect the American West to the wider sweep of US history and politics. In eleven chapters spanning the breadth of Western presidential history from the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 to the sweeping public land withdrawals of the closing days of the Obama administration these senior historians demonstrate over and over again that presidents had an enormous influence on the West and, moreover, increasingly came from the West themselves as the region grew in population and political power.

Methodologically, Riley and Etulain follow a straightforward approach. They aim to cover several broad tracks: growing the West, Native American relations, westward migration, transportation and resources, and ever more importantly, Western political power. Each chapter begins with a portrait of the president in question and explores that president's origins, the salient features of his political career, his impact on the West and, if applicable, his personal relationship to the region. The West itself is defined, à la Patricia Limerick or Richard White, in a broadly regional sense as that block of states bordering and west of the Mississippi River—the cis-Mississippi and trans-Mississippi, as it were. While the historian interested in more in-depth research could wish for footnotes, each chapter ends with a "For Further Reading" section containing a mix of secondary sources with a few published primary sources thrown in. The sources range from timeworn classics to the latest scholarship and span political perspectives.

*Presidents Who Shaped the American West* is a synthesis, not a monograph, and its intended audience makes it a wonderfully approachable read. The authors eschew academic jargon and resist the urge to get bogged down in the "place versus process" debate so common in Western historiography, even though the entire volume is essentially a series of vignettes exploring the process of settling and developing a particular place. The characterization of the West as becoming a driving force in national economy and politics during and after World War II is strongly reminiscent of Gerald D. Nash's thesis of the colonial West industrialized through the war effort and transformed into a national pacesetter, though Riley and Etulain evince no interest in advancing a colonial argument by itself. The tone is mostly upbeat, the political bent broadly liberal.

But this is not consensus history. Though hardly presentists, Riley and Etulain do not hesitate to connect decisions made in the distant (or not so distant) past with current realities. Nowhere is this concern with relating the actions of the past to the present time more evident than in their excellent coverage of presidents' dealings—and the frequent divide between their

stated opinions and the reality of their policies—with Native Americans. From Jefferson’s aim to disenfranchise Native people through degradation to Eisenhower’s presiding over the Termination era to Ronald Reagan’s secretary of the interior James Watt facetiously arguing that Americans need look no further than the nearest reservation to experience the evils of socialism, Riley and Etulain hold presidents accountable for two centuries’ worth of cruel, blundering, or simply misguided Indian policy. The biography of Abraham Lincoln, for example, goes from run-of-the-mill to poignant in a single paragraph as the authors zero in on Lincoln’s miserable Indian affairs record. “His decision was clear,” they write, “in actions if not in words: the Indians lost. The West won” (p. 90). And while they admire the Roosevelts and their social and environmental Progressivism, Riley and Etulain are at pains to point out both men’s hands-off approach to race relations and lack of interest in the welfare of nonwhite peoples.

*Presidents* displays some real strengths. The portrait of Thomas Jefferson is perhaps the finest piece of writing in the entire book and is an excellent introduction to thinking about the West in relation to the Oval Office. Likewise James K. Polk receives a thorough, interesting treatment that goes substantially beyond a sharp, narrow man’s prosaic life and reveals not only the tumult of the age of Manifest Destiny and popular sovereignty but the practical dimension of Polk’s status as the first president to be able to keep up with and direct military operations via the telegraph.

This otherwise excellent volume nonetheless falters in a few small ways. Chiefest of these is force of argument. While the authors set out to “reveal the tremendous effect presidential policies can have on the West” (p. 254), they often fail to impart this narrative thrust to their sketches with any force. The text at times feels more like a collection of detailed, clearly presented summaries.

A couple salient elements seem left out of the book as well. Riley and Etulain gloss over the acquisition of Alaska and Hawaii: one would be hard pressed to argue the Western influence of Andrew Johnson and William McKinley. But peculiarly, the authors avoid almost all mention of Alaska and Hawaii’s statehood despite categorizing them as Western. Recent scholarship such as Terrence Cole’s *Fighting for the 49<sup>th</sup> Star* demonstrates that the territories were prominent in the minds of both Dwight Eisenhower and Lyndon Johnson.

Perhaps due to publisher-imposed limits, the book also feels much more rushed toward the end. Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan, both tremendously influential presidents in the West, receive twenty comprehensive, densely packed pages apiece detailing everything from their relations with Congress to their military spending to their relationships with public lands and the myth of the West. But George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama receive a collective fourteen. Particularly given Riley and Etulain’s keen awareness of post-Obama-era public lands issues, this lacuna is regrettable and leaves the reader wishing for thorough expositions of more recent presidents’ relations with the region.

Any small deficiencies notwithstanding, *Presidents Who Shaped the American West* is a highly useful volume, packed with detail and concise, focused analysis of individual presidents’ relationships with the American West. Undergraduates and interested laypeople in particular will find a solid introduction to Western issues and their national contexts.

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