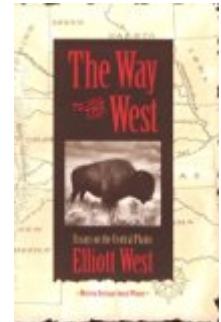


Elliott West. *The Way to the West: Essays on the Central Plains.* Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995. x + 224 pp. \$23.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8263-1656-1.



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Published on H-Rural (April, 1998)

On the surface, *The Way to the West* is a book about the mid-nineteenth century central plains--a region centered on Kansas and bounded by the Platte River on the north and the Arkansas on the south, and stretching westward from the arid side of the 98th meridian to the Front Range of the Rockies. But the deeper subject of this book is movement. One might call this treatment of the central plains, a place often imagined as a dead sea of stillness, a kinetic history. From the get-go, West puts the reader in motion, asking him or her to imagine driving across this rural landscape today at fifty-five (or eighty) miles an hour; from such a vantage, we might drive right past the complex interactions taking place here, noting only that the "country seems to have a lot of very little" (p. 4). He goes on to reveal much of the complex interactions that occurred here in the mid-nineteenth century: displaced Indians being pushed and pulled onto the central plains and moving in new ways across it on horse back, Euro-Americans being "tugged and shoved" (p. 10) onto and across it, animals moving up and around it following the growth of grasses and the flow of water, peoples and animals all making rounds

with the seasons in routes partly determined by the market and touching each other through a series of interlinked actions and consequences. Chains of connections and the reverberations caused by altering links in the chains are uncovered: one might say that the author employs a domino theory of change, but one in which there are nine serpentine sets tumbling down around each other at the same time. West argues that "The way to understanding the West is never by clean lines but by indirection and by webs of changing connections among people, plants, institutions, animals, politics, soil, weather, ambitions, and perceptions" (p. 166). Neither the movement West traces in this landscape, nor the route that the narrative takes in his book, is linear. The movement may be circular, but the journey is no dead-end: West's analysis of the history of the central plains breaks new ground and suggests novel ways to look at the multiple interactions of peoples and plants and animals in America's rural landscapes.

The book, which began as a series of talks West gave as part of the prestigious Calvin Horn

Lectures on Western History and Culture at the University of New Mexico, is divided into four topical chapters: "Land," "Families," "Animals," and "Stories." The first chapter attempts to make land come alive--that is, to show the ways that the "set of dynamic, related associations" (p. 14) that is the environment played a large role in explaining the ways that human habitation unfolded on the central plains in the mid-nineteenth century. Again, the emphasis is on interaction; West does not give us an environment that determines human life nor one that is simply the inert material into which human actions and ideals are inscribed. It is easier to posit an interactive theory of nature and culture than it is to deploy it in historical explanation. But West, by focusing on the ecological factors of two large human migration into and through the central plains, is unusually successful. The first migration was that of Indian peoples, principally the Cheyenne. West explains how their reliance on horses meant that they would have to spend the year "chasing grass." He shows how the many different microenvironments of the plains kept the Cheyenne in motion, and elucidates the vital role rare sheltered riverine environments played in getting them and their animals through the harsh winters. West then traces the movement of the other group of migrants: westering Euro-Americans, whose numbers skyrocketed during the California and Colorado gold rushes of the 1850s and 1860s. In the spring and summer, these travelers, along with their oxen, mules, horses, and sheep, moved along the rivers, tapping into those ecosystems for energy to fuel their progress. Thus, this "shuttle system of land use along the river bottoms" (p. 27) was taxing these critical places year-round. This created an ecological crisis which West skillfully shows led to a severe social and economic turmoil among the Indian peoples of the central plains which, in turn, led to greater friction between whites and Indians in the region. In this chapter and throughout the book, West skillfully weaves the insights of grassland ecology and natural sci-

ence more broadly into his account of human uses and perceptions of the plains, showing the dynamic relationships among ecology, economics and perceptions. Achieving a balance of these elements has been a formidable challenge for environmental historians; *The Way to the West* does an exceptionally good job of meeting the challenge.

This may be surprising, since Elliott West, whose books include *Growing up with the Country: Childhood on the Far Western Frontier*, is usually thought of as a social historian. He turns his attention to social institutions in his chapter on the family--which he looks at as a "procreative mechanism, a unit of economic production, a cultivator of cultural values, a relationship of power, and a means of social adaptation" (p. 86). His comparison of the biological, social, and cultural factors behind the "regenerative weakness" of Indians versus the "demographic clout" of white families in the latter nineteenth century is particularly compelling. He shows how the Euro-American family worked against frontier anomie, pulling "against the centrifugal force of westering immigration, knitting together rural settlements and connecting them with societies that had sent them forth" (p. 97). There are more detailed studies of such families available (and West readily draws on them). His contribution here lies in his application of a conceptually rich framework for understanding the functions of families and his ability to apply it with equal effectiveness to both Euro-American and Native American families. For both groups, West gracefully moves from the demographic and biological dimensions of reproduction to the webs of signification in which family life was suspended.

We are, thankfully, beyond the point where a book can be lauded for simply recognizing Indians as fully human actors. But what kind of actors are West's Indians? The most controversial chapter of West's book is likely to be the one on Animals, in which he traces the role of Indians in set-

ting off the precipitous decline of bison. He does not lay the disappearance of buffalo solely on the doorstep of Indians—"change killed them," he concludes (p. 82). What he does do is give the survival strategies they adopted within a fast changing economic and ecological climate in the mid nineteenth century a significant role (though not a necessary and sufficient one) in making those lethal changes. In most accounts, the demise of the bison is attributed to the commercial hunters of the 1860s and 70s—to the inexorable pull of a market made elastic after the development of a mechanical process of tanning the leather and the infinite greed of men who could shoot a hundred of the great animals at a time. While not discounting this history, West argues that the buffalo were already in dramatic decline by that time. He presents evidence leading to an apparent paradox: buffalo were disappearing faster from the western part of the plains than from the eastern. "Then as now," West says, "the general impression has been that an advancing white settlement was pushing bison and Indians before it" (p. 57). Only by allowing Indians "equal billing as historical actors, (p. 58), West maintains, can this paradox be resolved. West explains how important buffalo hides had become to Cheyenne and other plains Indians' economies, showing them to be part of a very active trading network. But he attributes the exceptional thinning of the western herd to peace. In 1840, the Comanches and Kiowas and the Cheyennes and Arapahoes made peace, thus erasing the contested zones between the groups in which it had formerly been dangerous to hunt. War in human society had opened spaces of refuge for bison; peace had shut them down. It is an intriguing hypothesis, tracing one of the factors of the bison's decline to a complex interaction of diplomacy, economics and ecology. But it is the kind of hypothesis that easily can be taken out of context, and turned into the kind of negative stereotypes of Native Americans as eco-destroyers that Vine Deloria, Jr. has forcefully challenged in his recent book, *Red Earth, White Lies*. To West,

the benefits of considering Native Americans as actors who could effect significant changes of the plains' ecosystem outweigh such risks.

Throughout the work, West is more successful than many historians—even ethnohistorians—in providing glimpses of the "Indian point of view." Take, for example, his quick sketch of the year 1849. To Euro-Americans, it was a year of hope, while the Southern Cheyenne remember it as "The Winter When the Big Cramps Take Place" (p. 87). He makes skillful use of native calendars and tribal oral traditions. The central lesson West hopes to convey is not that Indians were complicit in the destruction of the buffalo. Rather, he wants to emphasize that "This famous American calamity shows the dangers of easy answers, the necessity of consulting the insights of many disciplines, and the imperative to consider events from the viewpoints of all actors—human and otherwise" (p. 52).

His last chapter takes up the subject of stories, looking at the multiple and divergent narratives about the West. Not surprisingly, the stories peoples have told about the West are set in motion as well: "All of these various stories, all carrying power, naturally have pushed and bumped against one another" (p. 128). In West's choice of metaphors to talk about the movement of stories—ones of contact, force and weight—we can see that he wants to problematize the boundary between the mental and the material. He also wants to show that while in the West whiskey may be for drinking, stories, like water, are for fighting about. West looks at the "region's opposed ways of thinking about itself: the West as place, old and tangled in lessons, and the west as space, empty rooms to escape old limits, to do anything, to lose the past, to dance with wolves" (p. 161). For the most part, stories about the West written by Native Americans embrace the west as origin, as home, as a place "to reintegrate their individuality into an old, complex world" (p. 151), while white narratives have configured it as a pure space of

escape in which to fashion a new identity (a more recent generation of whites who have grown up in the West have changed the structure of the narrative). West begins to trace the work such narratives have done in the physical landscape of the West, making connections between the elaborate cultural constructions that are the National Parks (from which Native Americans were removed) and the stories that have portrayed the West as a "No Place"—an Eden always outside of history. In his analysis, myth is not opposed to reality, but rather is inextricably part of the material out of which Western reality has been and will continue to be made. While much work of the "New Western History" has concentrated on debunking Turner's metanarrative, not much serious attention has been given to the ways in which narratives have always been making up the Wests, and at how other stories have been contesting the one big myth all along. West's attention is welcome. It is important to note that he does not segregate his attention to narrative in the last chapter; rather, throughout the book he has used the different stories peoples have told about the central plains to convey a vivid sense of what the lived experience on the plains was like, and give the reader glimpses of what a multiperspectival history might look like.

West integrates these different perspectives into a narrative both enlightening and entertaining. When I assigned this book to a graduate seminar, students recognized the seriousness of its arguments but made sure to point out how much they appreciated the good humor in which they were couched. Though West once described the New Western History as a "Longer, grimmer, but more interesting story," he has demonstrated in this book that it can be entertaining as well. The University of New Mexico Press has done a fine job with the physical presentation. The maps are excellent, and the photographs, which complement the text well, are nicely reproduced.

Can this book be taken as a model for scholarship on Western or rural history? Probably not. Deceptively modest in its scope and ambitions, this collection of essays is a major contribution to both environmental and western history and has significant insights to offer rural historians as well. Yet, it cannot be easily emulated. Therein lies a paradox: much of its success lies in the relentlessly unformulaic form of the essay. The set of overlapping essays, as opposed to the building block chapters of a typical monograph, allow West exceptional freedom to draw connections among human and non-human actors and entertain their interrelationship on a number of analytic levels. But essays are largely unique explorations. And their effectiveness rests on the reader's willingness to trust the author—not unlike a passenger's willingness to trust a pilot. Writer and reader enter a compact for the journey. For most works of history, though, the reader is assumed to be a skeptic who must be persuaded with facts and evidence step by step. West's book is not like that (though all of his arguments carry citations to back them up), and for that reason may not easily be reduced to its basic elements and transported to a new terrain. Still, it does contain some tips for establishing interesting vantage points on any rural space in American history. Look at the place from the perspectives of different disciplines. Look at how animals and plants are intimately involved in human history (and at how the various human and nonhuman actors might regard or make contact with each other). The novel effect of *The Way to the West* is a bit like that of time lapse photography: it reveals land and people moving and interacting in ways we may never have before imagined.

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Citation: Douglas C. Sackman. Review of West, Elliott. *The Way to the West: Essays on the Central Plains*. H-Rural, H-Net Reviews. April, 1998.

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