

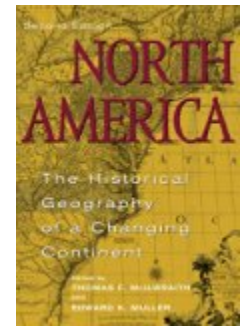
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Thomas F. McIlwraith, Edward K. Muller, eds. *North America: The Historical Geography of a Changing Continent*. Lanham, Md. and Oxford, U.K.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001. xii + 500 pp. \$62.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7425-0019-8; \$114.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7425-0018-1.

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## Spatial Lessons for Historians

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Places matter. So do the relationships between them. This fundamental truth is an article of faith among geographers, but historians have largely neglected this lesson. While professors often bemoan the geographic ignorance of our students, few books work to remedy the problem. *North America* is an exception. Edited by Thomas F. McIlwraith and Edward K. Muller, this book demonstrates the vital role North American places played in shaping historical forces.

*North America* is organized in four broad chronological sections: "Colonization: 1490s-1770s," "Expansion: 1780s-1860s," "Consolidation: 1860s-1920s," and "Reorganization: 1930s and Onward." Each part consists of multiple essays. The historical geographers in this volume proceed from the assumption that "the history of a place or of a population is embedded in its geography; that spatial structures and patterns are both a condition and a result of social and biophysical situations; and that the geography of change needs to be viewed in terms of both processes and effects" (p. 10). This intellectual foundation implicitly frames most of the essays. In addition, geographers have been concerned with the following themes: acquisition of geographical knowledge, cultural transfer and acculturation, frontier expansion, spatial organization of society, resource exploitation, regional and national integration, and landscape change (pp. 15-20). Surely these themes overlap with some traditional and some new historical subjects and can be prof-

itably adapted to teaching the American history survey.

Because there are nearly two dozens essays in *North America*, it is unwieldy to examine each study's argument here, so broad statements must suffice. The first section, "Colonization," makes clear the unique cultural geographies that developed in the colonial North Americas of France, Spain, and England. In "Expansion," several authors explore the expansion of the newly independent United States. Since, in many ways, expansion defined the United States in this era, geography influenced most of the major political issues of the day, including slavery and empire, internal improvements, and industrialization. Expansion led to regional differentiation and required geographic, economic, cultural, and political integration. Between the 1860s and 1920s, migrants and immigrants continued moving to and developing Western regions, and they fundamentally transformed their spatial relationships with the advent of industrialization and urbanization. The essays in "Consolidation" reflect the tremendous spatial changes in American society that resulted in the United States becoming the world's leading industrial power and an urban nation. Transportation and communication developments provoked much of this change, which affected not only the nation's geography but also its economy, politics, and culture. The final section, "Reorganization," analyzes the growth of cities and changing dynamics of rural North America. Of particular importance to cities has been the increased role of the federal government, race, and technology-induced sprawl. Meanwhile rural America faced an overall

decline in small towns and an increase in capital requirements.[1]

These examples, of course, are but the broadest of strokes of the book. Within the various well-written essays, you may also find details about freight rates in the nineteenth century, gendered labor in twentieth-century rural America, or racial and spatial components of cities from the colonial age to the present. There is a remarkable balance of broad trends and specific details.

*North America* is not meant for nor is it suited for the U.S. history survey. In the preface, the editors explain that the volume is student-centered; and indeed, the authors deliberately write in a teacherly tone, making *North America* especially useful and clear. However, the envisioned students are “upper-division undergraduate and beginning graduate students” in geography (p. xi). Despite its inappropriateness for assigning in the survey course, professors may profit significantly by carefully considering the lessons contained within the fine syntheses contained here.

A generation ago, historians helped re-vision American history. By researching and including people of color, working-class Americans, and women, social historians challenged the prevailing narrative of the American past and transformed how professors taught the American survey. While more modest (and less intentional perhaps), *North America* can help interested teachers further re-center the survey narrative by considering unfamiliar topics or familiar topics in unfamiliar approaches. Most surveys take seriously regional differences only in a lesson or two about the West in both halves of the survey and with the South over issues of slavery and civil rights. Moreover, despite the increased

sophistication and prevalence of environmental history, few survey texts take the landscape seriously. By focusing on the development of regions, the movement of people and goods within and between regions, and the spatial and economic relationship of regions, *North America* forces historians to ask different questions and to emphasize different parts of the past. For example, the centerpiece of the American survey—the Civil War—merits only four index entries in this volume. Introducing spatial knowledge and relations, thus, will require creative thinking and teaching for most historians.

In some ways, reading *North America* as a historian is like going to a high-school reunion. The familiar faces are present but with radically different roles. The class wallflower is now a successful computer engineer earning a six-digit salary, and the class clown is a minister. In *North America* such fundamental forces and personalities as the Constitution or Franklin D. Roosevelt fade into the background, while the development of railroads, the introduction of automobiles, and enforcement of federal land policies occupy center stage. The result of this not-quite-familiar- but-not-yet-strange narrative is enlightening and frequently eye-opening. Teachers of the American history survey would do well to integrate geographical scholarship into their courses, and *North America* furnishes a useful guide to begin that process.

#### Note

[1]. Each section includes an essay about Canada that I have not highlighted here. Although their inclusion is an important aspect of the book and encourages American readers to think beyond their usual parochialism, the essays and their content are less likely to find an audience in most survey courses.

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