

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Sara E. Quay. *Westward Expansion*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002. xx + 301 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-313-31235-9.

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Published on H-USA (December, 2002)



## The Nineteenth-Century West, Popular Culture, and the Ubiquity of the Frontier

The Nineteenth-Century West, Popular Culture, and the Ubiquity of the Frontier

There are few eras that resonate so powerfully throughout a country's history as do the heydays of the westward movement of European settlers across North America in American history. Even before the frontier was considered closed, people had begun to attach a strong mythical element to the realities of expansion and the West in general. Thus, attitudes, behavior, beliefs, customs, and tastes—i.e. the icons, rituals, and actions of the everyday world in the nineteenth-century West or its popular culture as defined by Ray B. Browne in the foreword to this book—were already part of daily life as well as a part of myth. This myth has made itself felt, with strong repercussions, well into the twenty-first century. Sara Quay's intriguing overview—the fourth and thematically most self-contained volume in the series *American Popular Culture through History*—presents the most prominent elements of popular culture such as fashion fads and architectural styles in the West. They are shown as embedded in the everyday settings of frontier existence, and traced throughout the history of twentieth-century popular culture.

The book focuses on the years between 1849 and 1890 as the most crucial period of westward expansion, which was a period possessing many of the cultural motifs and agendas that were to become the icons of the frontier as they prevail today. Rather than attempting a definitive encyclopedia—which would be a monumental undertaking—Sara Quay wisely concentrates on cer-

tain key aspects, presenting a book which is, at once, a general survey, a starting-point for further exploration of western symbols in American society, and a multifaceted and readable handbook. It opens with a short introductory section, a first chapter on everyday life and another on youth during westward expansion. The second part is dedicated to specific areas of western life including architecture, fashion, food, leisure activities, literature, music, performing arts, travel, and visual arts. The exposition of each topic opens with a scan for the features and fads that affected life on the frontier in the second half of the nineteenth century. What started out as a condition of hardship during westward expansion could soon turn into a metaphor to be evoked for commercial, social, or political reasons. Functional clothing, adapted to the environment, was a necessity on a trek crossing territories of great climatic variation. Among other fashions, this brought forth the blue jeans, which today are not only sold and worn worldwide, but which represent clothing insolubly linked to the West and American values, and stylized as the most democratic of American fashions. This is but one example illustrating the transformations certain elements of western popular culture underwent as they were absorbed into American life after the closing of the frontier. To have combined the culture of westward expansion with the ways in which they reverberate in twentieth-century American culture is the greatest asset of this survey full of valuable and entertaining information—even if readers may occasionally disagree with a particular association.

Despite the abundance of information, there is some-

thing conspicuously lacking. Whereas there is no need to account for an initiatory discussion of the term “everyday life,” the close look at children and young people living in the West in the late-nineteenth century and dealing with western icons as consumers in the twentieth and early twenty-first seems a bit odd. The author offers no explanation as to why she singles out this group, excluding others who deserve equal attention. Nor is there an explanation as to which topics typify western life, in

the second part of the book. This is not to say that the overview is not well structured, rather that it would have added to the book’s value as a resource as well as its readability if the reasons for including particular topics had been expounded upon. Nonetheless, it is a fascinating book, as it brings to life the nineteenth-century West and the ways in which we have integrated some of its features into our lives today.

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**Citation:** Angela Schwarz. Review of Quay, Sara E., *Westward Expansion*. H-USA, H-Net Reviews. December, 2002.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=6994>

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