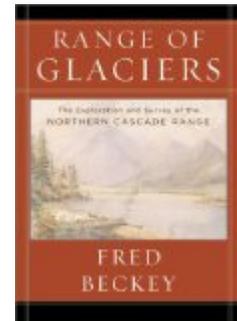


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Fred Beckey. *Range of Glaciers: The Exploration and Survey of the Northern Cascade Range*. Portland: Oregon Historical Society Press, 2003. xvi + 527 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87595-243-7.

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Why write a book about the northern Cascades—a range of forested foothills and glacier-clad peaks stretching from the Columbia River Gorge to the Fraser River in southern British Columbia? Because they are there, and because the Pacific Northwest would be a very different place without the towering, cloud-catching peaks of the Cascade range. *Range of Glaciers: The Exploration and Survey of the Northern Cascade Range* recounts the story of the imposing, but often overlooked, mountains of the Pacific Northwest. For four hundred pages, Fred Beckey, a mountain climber and author, follows the faint tracks of nearly forgotten trappers and mountain men, the cairns of survey expeditions, and the icy footsteps of the first intrepid Cascade mountaineers as they worked to remove the label “unexplored” from the maps and minds of men.

Beckey divides *Range of Glaciers* into three chronological sections. Part 1, “First Inhabitants and Early Settlers,” focuses mostly on the settlers—especially the Hudson’s Bay Company and the railroad survey of Capt. George McClellan in 1853-1854. Part 2, “Surveyors and Railroad Engineers,” discusses the efforts of the Northwest Boundary Surveys of 1857-1862, the army exploration of Lake Chelan on the eastern edge of the north Cascades, and the Great Northern Railway’s exploration. Part 3, “Miners, Mountaineers, and Tourists,” takes Beckey’s narrative through the early expeditions on Mt. Rainer and other volcanoes of the range, the mining boom, the second Northwest Boundary Survey of 1901-1908, and the rise of tourism in the national forests and national parks in the first half of the twentieth century.

Beckey’s work is a very traditional historical narrative, which is both its greatest strength and its greatest

weakness. The story flows in strict chronological fashion, without the benefit of an over-arching thesis beyond that suggested by the subtitle. The lack of a thesis makes it hard to distinguish between the significance of an expedition like McClellan’s railroad survey and the interesting, but ultimately far less important, ramblings of a trapper like Alexander Ross, who crossed the northern Cascades at an unknown pass in 1814. Beckey does attempt to explain the underlying motivations of the various expeditions, but sometimes the reader is lost in the litany of explorers, trappers, and climbers related here. The desire to enumerate seemingly every known event in the history of the Cascades, along with a lack of discussion on the significance of those events, is the work’s greatest flaw.

Many scholars will also object to the lack of discussion of the role of women and native peoples in the book. Indians, for the most part, are relegated to roles as guides and porters for these expeditions—excusable, perhaps, since the diaries, journals, and reports of the expeditions are invariably written by the white leaders of the surveys and explorations. However, more discussion of Indian views and uses of the mountains would be helpful and would provide a nice counterpoint to the beliefs of the white men featured here. The issue of women, also, would seem to be excusable. After all, from trappers to mountain climbers, this is a story of tough men in a tough environment. Indeed, women never turn up as important figures in the narrative, but, interestingly, they gaze out from many of the photographs in the book. Several women, clothed in proper Victorian dresses, peer out over Stephens Glacier on Mt. Rainer in a 1905 photo on the title page. Three weatherworn women are shown standing in front of a hardscabble

cabin in an 1895 photo, and another pauses for a photograph while leading horses along a truly frightening “road” on the Skagit River in the 1890s. From the photographs readers must conclude that this rugged landscape was also home to some truly rugged women as well, women whose voices do not appear in the pages of Beckey’s work.

The strengths of the traditional narrative shine through, however, in other respects. *Range of Glaciers* provides detail that is almost encyclopedic in its comprehensiveness and reflects Beckey’s dogged determination to explore all the primary material he could find. Appropriate for a study that straddles an international boundary, his sources come from two continents and numer-

ous countries. His narrative, though sometimes daunting in its detail, does relate some enjoyable and fascinating exploits, and it points toward further areas of study for those interested in the exploration of the Pacific Northwest, and mountaineering and recreation.

Beckey, like the best explorers in his tale, has blazed a trail into an unknown country and left enough signs behind for others to follow. The intent of his work is to erase the label “unexplored” from the history of the region, and he does an admirable job. It will be the work of others to follow in his footsteps. Despite seeming somewhat old-fashioned, *Range of Glaciers* may become the primary reference and starting point for others interested in this imposing piece of Pacific Northwest geography.

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