French Fur Traders and Voyageurs in the American West: Twenty-Five Biographical Sketches
LeRoy R. Hafen

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3w37x4bz

Journal
Pacific Historical Review, 65(4)

ISSN
0030-8684

Author
Thorne, Tanis C

Publication Date
1996-11-01

DOI
10.2307/3640304

License
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/ 4.0

Peer reviewed
Review
Reviewed Work(s): French Fur Traders and Voyageurs in the American West: Twenty-Five Biographical Sketches by LeRoy R. Hafen
Review by: Tanis C. Thorne
Published by: University of California Press
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/3640304
Accessed: 12-12-2019 23:18 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

University of California Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to Pacific Historical Review
nomic and social historians have searched for and constructed statistical "proletariats" on the North American frontier. Their work has very often proven polemical and tedious. Dunaway veers away from the worst excesses of this kind of politicized scholarship, and in specific cases her data and arguments are strong. Yet in countering the Turnerian yeoman myth with her own neo-Marxist myth, she tells only part of the story. First, more common folk (including Appalachian folk) owned land in antebellum America than in any other place on the planet. Moreover, while material well-being was undoubtedly of great importance to these Appalachian folk, so too were their immediate and extended families, neighbors, religion, oral traditions, folk medicine, drink and floodways, recreation, material culture, music, and much, much more. Since Dunaway does not aim to address these folkways in this book, her economic determinism inevitably overlooks the heart and soul of southern Appalachian folk culture.

Like much of the new social history, The First American Frontier will find its audience among a few hundred specialists. Had the "new" western historians not eliminated colonial America and the concept of a "frontier" from their purview, this book might have served them well in training fresh troops. All graduate libraries should possess a copy. As an antidote, readers should keep close at hand the works of Frederick Jackson Turner, Frank L. Owsley, Thomas D. Clark, Arthur K. Moore, Malcom J. Rohrbough, Grady McWhiney, and John Mack Faragher.

University of Washington, Tacoma

MICHAEL ALLEN


This is a collection of twenty-two unrevised biographies by fifteen different authors, originally published between 1965 and 1972 in LeRoy Hafen's ten-volume series, The Mountain Men and the Fur Trade of the Far West. In the introduction, the volume's editor, Janet Lecompte, identifies the stereotypes which have idealized, denigrated, and otherwise misrepresented the understudied Frenchmen, French creoles, French-Canadians and métis who constituted an estimated four-fifths of the fur trade labor force; these essays, she writes, were chosen for their "quality of writing, strength of sources and richness of context" (p. 9). Challenging these stereotypes, these biographies are a compelling representa-
tive sampling, ranging from wealthy and powerful entrepreneurs to illiterate and lowly boatmen. Mainly represented are members of the St. Louis-born trading families who were pioneers, explorers, and early settlers in New Mexico and elsewhere in the Far West in the first half of the nineteenth century. The volume is a mosaic, rich in nuances about the varied life paths, character traits, and fortunes of resourceful individuals who led lives of great adventure and mobility, frequently marrying Indian women and settling down in the Indian country with their families upon retirement.

One value of the volume is the explanation provided for the under-representation of the French in western American history: high illiteracy rates, the scarcity and ambiguity of existing records, geographic mobility, and changing employers and business associations. For a new student, this book provides a good introduction to the French role in the American fur trade. The essays by Janet Lecompte and Abraham Nasatir are particularly well-researched and written, and have stood the test of time.

However, it is debatable whether these biographies merited a reprinting. Why were the authors not encouraged to revise these essays in light of more recent scholarship? Or failing this, why has the editor not prefaced each selection with comments or edited the essays to reduce redundancy? Most troublesome, perhaps, is the dated language: the frequent allusion to “savages” and the alleged reversion to sub-human behavior on the frontier. There are several indications that the volume was hastily and carelessly put together. A sampling of the index reveals many mistakes of omission and other errors. Most glaringly, the volume’s subtitle promises twenty-five biographies and only twenty-two are in the book!

University of California, Irvine

TANIS C. THORNE


The author of this biography has fashioned a narrative which, from beginning to end, displays genuine competence. Although the volume is not a lengthy one, Robert Ryal Miller’s familiarity with manuscript sources helps to fill out details about a lesser known figure in California’s past. In 1822, William Richardson, the first officer on the Orion, an English whaling vessel, jumped ship near the presidio of San Francisco. He soon fell in