Title
The Fur Trade of the American West, 1807-1840: A Geographical Synthesis David J. Wishart

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/68k202m8

Journal
Pacific Historical Review, 51(3)

ISSN
0030-8684

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Publication Date
1982-08-01

DOI
10.2307/3638606

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Peer reviewed

Here at last is a book which provides an overview of fur trade operations in the trans-Mississippi West. Using an interdisciplinary approach, David Wishart successfully distills a vast amount of information in a few pages. The result is a convenient compendium of fur trade material which is broad in scope, readable, and rich in detail. The Fur Trade of the American West is destined to become a standard reference work and should be required reading for all students of the American West.
Wishart presents the fur trade as a "spatial" system of resource exploitation and focuses on two dominant production systems which, he says, had attained a stability between the mid-1820s and mid-1830s: the Rocky Mountain Trapping System and the Upper Missouri Fur Trade (p. 10). The heart of the book is the section on the strategy and the annual cycle of operations of these two systems. The thread which provides unity to the narrative is the progressive concentration of economic power in the hands of the American Fur Company.

The book is a synthesis, and its weaknesses are primarily a reflection of omissions and overemphases of the sources on which Wishart draws. Wishart does not successfully integrate the cultural and social aspects of fur trade life into his synthesis, for American historians have tended to overlook the multi-ethnic identity of fur trade participants and to leave underdeveloped the perspective of French-Canadians, Indians, mixed-bloods, and women. This failing is excusable given the limitations in the literature and Wishart's modest claim that the book is a "geographical synthesis."

What Wishart may legitimately be criticized for are the few occasions when, in his effort to describe general patterns, he oversimplifies or fails to see precedents set by British and French traders. Examples of this occur on page 64 regarding the establishment of trading huts and on page 125 in his discussion of free trapping. One may also question Wishart's tendency to treat the American Fur Company as a monolithic entity. A serious typographical error appears on page 51 where the date for Ashley's trip to the Yellowstone is set at 1832 instead of 1822.

One may disagree with Wishart's interpretive framework, but the book is clear, concise, and accurate in detail. It is recommended to specialists and non-specialists alike.

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