

Writing the History of the American West

Preface

MY WEST, and welcome to it' could easily be the theme of this special collection of papers on writing the history of the American West, which also includes the catalogue of an exhibition of guides to traveling to and living in the West drawn from the Society's wonderful, even surprising, collections of Western Americana. So wide open are the western spaces, so diverse the experiences of those who have inhabited them, so fertile a ground for the imagination, so rich and varied the documentary resources for studying the region that there have been—and are—many Wests for historians to write about.

The larger part of this collection is comprised of three papers given at a symposium entitled 'Writing the History of the American West' that was held at the University of California, Berkeley, on April 19, 1991, in connection with the semiannual meeting of the American Antiquarian Society, along with comments given by two other historians. The rest is the catalogue of an exhibition prepared by George Miles, curator of Western Americana at Yale's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, and on display in Antiquarian Hall May 13 – June 28, 1991.

In the first paper given at the Berkeley symposium, Martin Ridge, director of research at the Huntington Library, reexamines the legacy of Frederick Jackson Turner, who hypothesized the view that the frontier experience principally shaped American uniqueness, at a time when the Turner Thesis has been strongly challenged by revisionist historians. Elizabeth A. H. John, an independent scholar and the giver of the second paper, draws our attention to the rich ethnic and archival legacy of the Spanish Borderlands, and urges that the region be fully incorporated 'into

this nation's knowledge of itself.' Alvin M. Josephy, Jr., screenwriter, editor, and historian of American Indians, then provides a highly personal view of the continuity between the Old West and the New. Two comments follow. Yale's Howard R. Lamar, a leading trainer of Ph.D. students in the field of western history, acknowledges the diverse and often personal nature of the historical view of the West and looks forward to an eventual synthesis, drawn from the best work past and present. Kevin Starr, author of a multivolume history of California (still in progress), urges the incorporation of the urban dimensions of western history, the West's links with the rest of the Pacific Rim, and of the whole twentieth century in a comprehensive view of the history of the West.

Western history is of keen interest to AAS, America's first historical society to be national in its collecting scope and membership. As Miles emphasizes in his catalogue preface, the Society's collection of western Americana is rich indeed, yet, like the AAS holdings of nineteenth-century materials in general, not as well known as they deserve to be. One purpose of the symposium and exhibition, therefore, was to call attention to these underappreciated resources. In doing so, the Society also marks the approximate centennial of Frederick Jackson Turner's pioneering historical work: from the 1890 census came the determination that the frontier was 'closed,' which led to the paper Turner delivered in 1893 arguing for 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History.' Like all the speakers at the symposium, Turner was a member of the Society, from his election in 1907 to his death in 1932.

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