

Legacy of conflict



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A Book Review: The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West" The " Legacy of Conflict", a collection of observations written by Patricia Nelson Limerick, is best viewed as a continuation of scholarship rather than a wholesale refutation of prior work by Old West scholars such as Frederick Jackson Turner (1976: np). To be sure, Limerick takes issue with many of the conclusions and characterizations commonly associated with the West in both American history books and in the media. She does, for instance, argue that the frontier process did not terminate, that many of the myths associated with the West were simply not true, and that the West remains a fertile area of study to this day. Because of these scholarly positions, Limerick has been propped up as a prophet of the New West or what some have labeled the New American History (Larson, 1999: np). This paper will argue that, in the " Legacy of Conquest", Limerick functions more as a revisionist than a prophet. More specifically, this book review will argue that her approach to the American West, in terms of invasion, conquest, and development, is a valuable contribution to the study of American history regardless of academic debates regarding the efficacy of her writings as a larger foundation for a more generalized theoretical model.

As an initial matter, Limerick takes great pains to define the American West as a place rather than as an abstract process. The frontier was, in her view, a stage of development. The American West exists no less today than it did a thousand or two hundred years ago. This is a valuable continuation; it is valuable because the frontier is no more the American West than the Silicon Valley, Hollywood, or tourist-packed Yosemite National Park. Students and citizens alike are better served by viewing the American West as a place, and they are also better served by viewing the American West as a place

which has changed and developed over time. This is not to suggest that the frontier envisioned by Turner did not function as a set of processes, there were identifiable patterns, but that these processes were not larger than the place. By revising the approach to the American West, by including broader social, political, environmental, and cultural focuses of inquiry, Limerick's work explains the past and the present much more comprehensively than a romantic frontier image of the West.

In addition, Limerick is able to identify and criticize the mythology associated with standard perceptions of America's development of the West. She does not sugarcoat previous conflicts by subscribing to the self-serving notion that America was civilizing the savages; quite the contrary, she identifies patterns of invasion, motivations, self-serving justifications, and the consequences of conquest. Her treatment of the Indians may be a bit too soft at times, for they were certainly no nobler than other men. To cast the white man as destructive and the native peoples as victims is too harsh. Such a characterization is no less mythological and romantic than Turner's view of the frontier. That said, Limerick does attempt to explain the variety of the people inhabiting the West, their different developmental priorities and techniques, and the conflict which arose between and among the Americans and the native populations is well-served by her attention to detail and her attention to the nuances of peoples and groups.

In the final analysis, Limerick's book offers new ideas and new approaches to the study of the American West. Her essays are valuable not because they refute prior historians, though some people certainly take this approach, but because her work compels us to consider other factors and other conclusions. History is written by the victors and revision may certainly be in

order in many history books and in the media. " The Legacy of Conquest" is valuable for what it adds to our understanding of this region of the United States of America.

Works Cited

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