

Many modern United States travelers, much to the chagrin of the Kansas department of tourism, are used to viewing Kansas as a place to drive through on the way to somewhere else. And so it was, author Elliott West skillfully relates in *The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, & the Rush to Colorado*, in the mid-nineteenth century. Prior to the Colorado gold rush of 1858 the "ocean of land" separating east and west was simply the "Great American Desert," a haven for Indians and other "items" of curious interest, but of little perceived worth.

This erroneous perception changed, West asserts, because of the discovery of gold in Colorado, an event that was "quite possibly the defining moment in the history of the territory, and perhaps in the history of the American frontier." Fueled by the desperation of the Panic of 1857, pioneers set out across Kansas to find their fortune beneath the Rocky Mountains. Within a few months, what West calls an "economy of transit" resulted from this migration. Suddenly, Kansas became more than a wasteland. Towns incorporated. Farmers and ranchers profited from the "desert" land. And finally, military posts protected the new vision of the plains.

The new vision did not include Native Americans as players. As West makes clear, the white settlers did not begin their journey intent on the destruction of the Indians. They were simply "following a script that had no Indians in it." Members of every culture that lived on the plains saw the country as obviously meant for them and their lifestyles. The difficulty lies when two cultures meet, one superior in numbers, technology, military, and large reserves of capital, that had dashing visions for the land.

The explanation of the consequences of conflicting visions, not only on people, but on the land itself, turns *The Contested Plains* into a unique, revealing, and fascinating history. For example, the author uses a small but documented occurrence--a wagon marked

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"Resturant" [sic] sitting in the middle of the prairie--as a symbol of the changes taking place on the land. The result is both creative and effective. The reader understands when West notes that in the future of the prairie, "restaurants are ordained."

The effective fusion of ecology and history is the most notable strength in this readable and scholarly addition to western studies. West makes a significant, yet relatively unexplored assertion when he notes that the Indians did not move to reservations because soldiers defeated or butchered them. Instead, they were relegated there because they lost control of the resources of the land that they needed to live as they wished. In the end, West maintains, use, control, and vision for the land was the prize. It was even a substance found in the land, gold, that began a chain of events and led to recognition of the "vital center" of the country.

Although some readers might note a partial overlapping of material from the author's previous book, *The Way to the West*, the current publication adds a new spin to an old topic, and, as is noted in the introduction, reveals a history of what the gold rushers went over rather than what they went to. It takes the author, however, approximately one-hundred pages to get to the actual "Rush to Colorado" that the subtitle promises. West overwhelms the reader with context, which, while fascinating, leaves him or her wondering when the goldseekers will appear. Likewise, after developing the gold rush topic, West leaves the subject and delves into its effects. While this is admirable and desired, a stronger tie to remind the reader of the important link to the gold rush is needed. Nevertheless, significant criticism of West's work is negligible, and the final result is a fast paced yet thought-provoking book that does not disappoint.

In a politically correct age bent on imagining that the two cultures, Native and Euro-American, could have existed peacefully if things had been done differently, West tells things as they were, and correctly points out that "we shouldn't waste time wishing frogs had wings." Instead, we should wish to see history as it truly was. *The Contested Plains* is a giant step in the right direction.

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