CONTENTS

Preface ix

I TRAILS:
The New Western History

1 Beyond the Agrarian Myth, Donald Worster 3
2 Trashing the Trails, Richard White 26
3 Western Women at the Cultural Crossroads, Peggy Pascoe 40
4 The Trail to Santa Fe: The Unleashing of the Western Public Intellectual, Patricia Nelson Limerick 59

II APPRAISING THE TERRITORIES:
Old and New Western Histories

5 What on Earth Is the New Western History? Patricia Nelson Limerick 81
6 Another Look at Frontier/Western Historiography, Gerald Thompson 89
7 The “New Western History,” an Assessment, Michael P. Malone 97
8 A Longer, Grimmer, but More Interesting Story, Elliott West 103
9 American Wests: Historiographical Perspectives, Brian W. Dippie 112
CONTENTS

III THE GLOBAL WEST

10 Beyond the Last Frontier: Toward a New Approach to Western American History, Michael P. Malone 139
11 Frontiers and Empires in the Late Nineteenth Century, Walter Nugent 161
12 Laying Siege to Western History: The Emergence of New Paradigms, William G. Robbins 182

Notes 215
The Contributors 279
Index 283
PREFACE

This collection of essays originated in a project cosponsored by the Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming State Endowments or Councils for the Humanities and funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. The project centered on a twenty-four-panel exhibit called "Trails through Time." In September 1989, the exhibit was launched on its travels by a symposium called "Trails: Toward a New Western History." The first three essays in this collection were originally given at the Trails symposium: Donald Worster, "Beyond the Agrarian Myth"; Richard White, "Trashing the Trails"; and Peggy Pascoe, "Western Women at the Cultural Crossroads." The fourth essay, Patricia Nelson Limerick's "The Trail to Santa Fe: The Unleashing of the Western Public Intellectual" is new, written for this collection, to explain the genesis of the Trails symposium and to reflect on the reactions and responses that followed it.

By the original plan for this collection, the presentations from Santa Fe were to form their own provocative, if slim, volume. Happily, the chance to join forces, by adding a number of other discussions of recent changes in the writing and teaching of western American history, came to the attention of the editors of the University Press of Kansas. This longer and more thorough set of reflections is the result.

The second set of essays was commissioned by
Charles Rankin, editor of *Montana The Magazine of Western History*. Rankin asked four scholars of western history to consider what the “New Western History” is, what its impact on western history has been thus far, and where it might lead as we move into the 1990s and beyond. Originally published in the summer 1990 issue of *Montana*, this second section includes Limerick’s “What on Earth is the New Western History?”; Gerald Thompson’s “Another Look at Frontier/Western Historiography”; Michael P. Malone’s “The ‘New Western History,’ an Assessment”; and Elliott West’s “A Longer, Grimmer, but More Interesting Story.” The authors provide a range of views that clarify the changes in western history. Western history is getting its full share of the constructive tension of dissent, disagreement, and ferment. Scholars are subjecting the old and familiar to new assessments and exploring new and different horizons in all directions. As some scholars reevaluate the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century western experience, others lay the foundations for understanding the twentieth-century West.

The influence of perspectives originating in the 1960s is unmistakable. The new emphasis on ethnic and racial diversity in the past not only reflects the rejection of melting pot homogeneity, but also represents the logical extension of notions of social and cultural pluralism that first emerged to full political power in the decade of Kennedy and Johnson. Similarly, the new emphasis on humanity’s historic interaction with the physical environment follows on the concern for ecological fragility and environmental exploitation that first surfaced in its contemporary form a quarter century ago. Likewise, the explosion of work in western women’s history, which began in the late 1970s and gained momentum in the 1980s, can be linked to feminism’s insistence since the late 1960s that women be recognized as active players in all facets of
society. Consider the results. Women have become an essential part of the western story, as have ethnic and racial groups. Viewing the past from their perspectives, we find cultural and social complexity in place of archetypal white male simplicity. In fact, with this enriched and deepened perspective, that unitary term “the white man” dissolves, revealing a wide range of people with various ethnic origins, occupations, values, and characters. Rather than seeing a single Anglo wave moving west across a continent, we see one set of waves, predominantly but not wholly Anglo, encountering other waves: one Hispanic from the South, another Asian from the Far West, and amid it all, we find enduring yet dynamic Native American cultures. The environment, meanwhile, is no longer a resistant barrier to be overcome, but a vital historical component that itself changes with human interaction even as it shapes western economic and social patterns, not to mention the western imagination.

Perhaps most important, the New Western History offers a more balanced view of the western past. It includes failure as well as success; defeat as well as victory; sympathy, grace, villainy, and despair as well as danger, courage, and heroism; women as well as men; varied ethnic groups and their differing perspectives as well as white Anglo-Saxon Protestants; an environment that is limiting, interactive, and sometimes ruined as well as mastered and made to bloom; a parochial economy alternately fueled and abandoned by an interlocking national and world order; and, finally, a regional identity as well as a frontier ethic. Frederick Jackson Turner, father of the frontier thesis, comes in for hard criticism for having bequeathed what many historians regard as an interpretive straitjacket. We should remember not only that Turner was a man of his times but that he realized that fact. It was Turner, after all, who said that each genera-
tion interprets history anew, according to its own need for understanding. History thus can never be static, set down once and for all. One of history’s highest goals is to make the past usable. If the New Western History does nothing else, it helps us consider the old and familiar in new ways. And, if we are fortunate, these new perspectives will be relevant to our times.

This second section concludes with Brian W. Dippie’s “American Wests: Historiographical Perspectives.” Originally published in the October 1989 issue of American Studies International, Dippie’s essay has been included here with the Montana articles because, with its greater length, it adds depth to many of the issues raised in the shorter essays.

The third set of articles was originally brought together by Clyde A. Milner II, editor of the Western Historical Quarterly (WHQ). For nearly twenty years, much that was new in the historical study of the American West crossed the desk of Charles S. Peterson. In 1971 Peterson joined the faculty of Utah State University as professor of history and associate editor of the Western Historical Quarterly, the newly founded scholarly journal of the Western History Association. In 1979 he became its editor. Peterson retired in July 1989, but his name remained on the masthead of the WHQ through the volume year. The November 1989 issue displayed his name for the last time. That issue attempted to capture the generous outlook toward western history that Chas Peterson had brought to the field in both his editing and writing. The WHQ staff called it informally the “Global West” issue, and the three essays published in it amply fulfilled their purpose. The essays honored Peterson, who had regularly advocated vital new directions in the study of the American West.

The writing of all three authors from the November
1989 *WHQ* is represented in this collection. Two of the original essays are republished here: Walter Nugent’s “Frontiers and Empires in the Late Nineteenth Century” and Michael P. Malone’s “Beyond the Last Frontier: Toward a New Approach to Western American History.” William G. Robbins’s essay for this book expands on some of the ideas he presented in his *WHQ* piece “Western History: A Dialectic on the Modern Condition.” All three authors have built their essays from their own earlier works and from the give-and-take that characterizes scholarly inquiry. Walter Nugent’s mastery of demography is evident in his examination of different forms of settlement across the planet. His essay first began to take shape as a major address that he delivered in Jerusalem. In similar fashion, Michael Malone’s essay began as a paper presented at the national conference of the Organization of American Historians. Like Nugent, Malone has a global vision for western history. Malone encourages western historians to consider the ideas of “world historians” such as William H. McNeill, L. S. Stavrianos, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Theodore von Laue. In several essays, including his piece for the *WHQ*, William G. Robbins has advocated the end of the exceptionalist conviction in the “uniqueness” of the West’s history. He has been especially perceptive about the dynamics of modern capitalism as it affects this region and the world. In his essay for this book, Robbins demonstrates how some scholars are expanding the understanding of the West’s international connections through the study of subregions such as the Pacific Northwest and the Hispanic Southwest, areas where borders with Canada and Mexico are of vital importance.

Nugent, Malone, and Robbins are moving the intellectual boundaries of western history outward to a global perspective. Their provocative ideas remain a fitting trib-
PREFACE

ute to the vision, at once inclusive and expansive, of Charles S. Peterson.

As readers will soon notice, this collection does not represent a new orthodoxy in the writing of western American history. The essays presented in the first section come the closest to agreement, but there are nonetheless subjects of hearty and productive disagreement among those four authors. The second and third sections include writers who are maintaining some cynical distance between themselves and the New Western History, while also keeping their ties to earlier schools of thought. What all the authors, as well as the editors, would agree on is this: The current disagreements and debates are not occasions for distress but are instead evidence of an era of great vitality in the writing of western American history.

We would like, most of all, to thank the authors whose work is assembled here. For their hard work on the Trails project, we are also in debt to Dan Shilling and Diane Facinelli of the Arizona Humanities Council, Jim Pierce and Jean Sharer of the Colorado Endowment for the Humanities, John Lucas and Valencia de la Vega of the New Mexico Endowment for the Humanities, Delmont Oswald and Brian Crockett of the Utah Endowment for the Humanities, Robert Young and Kelley Pellesier of the Wyoming Council for the Humanities, and John Meredith, program officer at the National Endowment for the Humanities. James Byrkit, Adrian Bustamente, Michael Cassity, Kathryn MacKay, and Charles Polzer, S.J., served as project scholars for the exhibit. In the preparation of the exhibit and at the symposium in Santa Fe, Cathy Lavender-Teliha played a key role in keeping things running smoothly. At the University of Colorado, Kim Gruenwald and Cathy Lavender-Teliha capably managed the manuscript, and Kenneth M. Orona tracked and corralled photo-

xiv
graphs. At the University Press of Kansas, Fred Woodward and Cynthia Miller expressed an early interest in this project, attending the conference in Santa Fe and remaining good-natured—and properly and helpfully impatient—through the process of getting this text assembled. Thanks also to the copy editor, Michele Kendall.

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PART I

TRAILS

The New Western History
COMING DOWN the Santa Fe Trail in the summer of 1831, a young merchant named Josiah Gregg brought a vision of the American West that must have seemed the only one there would ever be. Raddled by years of consumption, he was rapidly restored by the bracing air and outdoor life. By the time he reached the vicinity of Council Grove, Kansas, he was able to ride a horse again, and it was about then that he was ready to raise his eyes to the surrounding countryside and contemplate its future. "All who have traversed these delightful regions," he writes in The Commerce of the Prairies, "look forward to the day when the Indian title to the land shall be extinguished and flourishing white settlements dispel the gloom which at present prevails over this uninhabited region." That may seem a strange sentiment for a man whose life in the white settlements had been so sickly, but, feeling better the farther he got from home, Gregg became positively eager to forward the cause of United States expansion. Like so many other merchants and travelers of his day, all taking trails westward in search of profit or adventure, he expected to find more than the shabby little foreign town of Santa Fe lying at the end of his journey. The prospect of a bigger and broader America would be there too, of a na-
tion extending the blessings of its free institutions to the benighted Mexican and Indian peoples that it would conquer and subdue.

In his brief book on Gregg, the novelist Paul Horgan faulted him for being at times a humorless, cranky misanthrope and for showing little sympathy toward the Hispanic and Catholic civilization he encountered in the Southwest. But Horgan also admired in Gregg’s narrative the great redeeming spirit of the western frontier—the work of a “great conquest” and the expansion of personal freedom that it was supposed to make possible. I, on the other hand, representing a new generation of western historians, find it harder to take such a favorable view of Gregg’s vision of conquest. That almost transcendental faith in American growth seems far from justified by the subsequent facts of history. At the same time, Gregg’s misanthropy becomes a little more excusable with time, and I often nod in agreement at his acerbic comments on his fellow humans. In this reversal of assessment I am not alone. A growing number of citizens have become skeptical of where some of our national trails and ambitions have led.

For instance, a contemporary traveler to the West, Ian Frazier of New York City, expresses well our disenchanted mood toward the region, though he loves it as we all do. In his *Great Plains* (1989), Frazier recalls his rambles up and down the landscape but can summon none of the firm linear confidence of Josiah Gregg. His trail jumps distantly from Glacier National Park in Montana to the black pioneer settlement of Nicodemus, Kansas, to the home of Lawrence Welk in North Dakota and then back to western Kansas and the home of the murdered Clutter family. Along the way he is sometimes filled with joy by the region’s vistas—the “still empty land beyond newsstands and malls and velvet restaurant ropes”—but
BEYOND THE AGRARIAN MYTH

it is a happiness edged with regret for the defeat of the Indian peoples, who finally for him are the lost essence of the land. The plains “are the place where Crazy Horse will always remain uncaptured. They are the lodge of Crazy Horse.”

And then after so many miles on the road, so many roadside markers, so many sodbusters’ tales, so many fields of cattle, dust, sorghum, finding himself at last standing before an ominous MX missile site in Montana, Frazier writes what he calls the “punch line of our two hundred years on the Great Plains” (actually more of a punch paragraph):

[We] trap out the beaver, subtract the Mandan, infect the Blackfeet and the Hidatsa and the Assiniboin, overdose the Arikara; call the land a desert and hurry across it to get to California and Oregon; suck up the buffalo, bones and all; kill off nations of elk and wolves and cranes and prairie chickens and prairie dogs; dig up the gold and rebury it in vaults somewhere else; ruin the Sioux and Cheyenne and Arapaho and Crow and Kiowa and Comanche; kill Crazy Horse, kill Sitting Bull; harvest wave after wave of immigrants’ dreams and send the wised-up dreamers on their way; plow the topsoil until it blows to the ocean; ship out the wheat, ship out the cattle; dig up the earth itself and burn it in power plants and send the power down the line; dissmis the small farmers, empty the little towns; drill the oil and natural gas and pipe it away; dry up the rivers and springs, deep-drill for irrigation water as the aq-uifer retreats. And in return we condense unimaginable amounts of treasure into weapons buried beneath the land which so much treasure came from—weapons for which our best hope might be
that we will someday take them apart and throw them away, and for which our next-best hope certainly is that they remain humming away under the prairie, absorbing fear and maintenance, unused, forever.  

And with that Frazier's trail of adventure abruptly ends, not at the enlightened rule of peace, prosperity, reason, and liberty that Gregg envisioned but at the nightmare of institutionalized madness—the doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction preached by today's military strategists, implanted in a West that now stands at the dead center of modern warfare. Of course, there are other roads and destinies in this region too, including more positive and optimistic ones; but Frazier feels compelled to end his journey with a dark vision of a people imprisoned in their own aggressive fear. It is a conclusion that other writers, including historians, share and that the public too is gradually coming to terms with.  

A century and a half after Josiah Gregg's first exhilarating trip along a barely rutted path, the West looks unlike anything he could have foreseen. In the process of becoming what it is, the region has emerged from the old clouds of myth and romance and now seems for the first time honestly revealed. Today it looks a little smaller than it once did, though it is still notable for its amplitude of space and light. Now and then it can stir up the old indeterminate hopefulness in newcomers, but generally what people want out of the region is more practical and limited—a job, a home, a vacation. Liberty has turned out to be an ambiguous achievement and, in too many cases and mouths, is only a hollow phrase; westerners are more aware of that fact than ever before. Clearly, the grandiose history that white Americans once thought they were making out here in this land beyond the Missis-
sippi River has come apart and does not compel belief as it once did. I think I know how that happened and want to claim some small credit for historians. For this region that was once so lost in dreams and idealization, we have been creating a new history, clear-eyed, demythologized, and critical. We have been rewriting the story from page one and watching it be accepted. That has been a slow, hard-won victory, and I think it is time we acknowledged the achievement.

The first bona fide revisionist, in a sense the prophet of a New Western History, was Henry Nash Smith, for it was he who first told us what was wrong with the old history and dared to call it myth. That was in 1950 with the publication of Virgin Land. By myth Smith referred to the grand archetypal stories of heroic origins and events that all peoples create for themselves, a kind of folk history written by anonymous minds. Myths tell us how things came to be, how they are and why they are, and, if the real world does not quite correspond to them, it may come closer to the ideal as time goes on; myths can mightily affect the course of events. In later years Smith admitted he had been a little too quick to dismiss myth as simple falsehood, when in truth popular belief and historical reality are joined together in a continuous circle, moving back and forth in a long, halting, jerky interplay. Still, it must be added that there is a lot of falsity in any myth, not excepting the one about the West, and such falsity can lead people into difficult, even tragic, situations.

We have had many myths about the West, but the principal one was a story about a simple, rural people coming into a western country—an ordinary people moving into an extraordinary land, as Robert G. Athearn has put it—and creating there a peaceful, productive life. In this great, good place, human nature was supposed to rise out of its old turpitude and depravity to a new dignity: