

A Review of

***THE CONTESTED PLAINS: INDIANS, GOLDSEEKERS,
AND THE RUSH TO COLORADO***

Elliot West, Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1998

by David Vail

There are many visions that construct the history of the American West. One popular myth consists of the American nation's expansion from east to west and includes romantic stories of goldseekers and mining towns, cowboys and gunslingers, and a Jeffersonian perspective toward land. Other visions tell a different story—one of American Indian peoples and their use of landscapes and pre-contact trade networks in shaping the region long before Euro-American settlement. These groups maintained intricate inter-tribal and intra-tribal relationships, adapted to environmental challenges, and dwelled within a complex socio-economic and cultural world—a perspective looking east from the west.

Yet, these two narratives converge under a third ecological vision where interactions with geography, animals, insects, weather, climate, and other forces worked to shape and dictate the experiences of both Euro-Americans and American Indian peoples. All of these visions are, according to Elliot West, important in understanding the Great Plains' past and are quite familiar to the more recent works of plains historians. But as settlers expanded west looking for gold, God, or land, and as American Indian peoples worked to exploit these relationships through visions of their own, a greater story emerges, one about power and energy that incorporates 1850s visions of Euro-American conquest and indigenous agency and resistance with an "old world" of the Pleistocene era and Clovis societies.

Thus, for Elliot West, professor of history at the University of Arkansas, the history of the Great Plains is more than "chasing the story of Indians and the gold rush".¹ Rather, he argues "nowhere else on the continent can we see more dramatically the human envisioning of new lifeways and routes to power, the effects of that search on physical and social environments, and the dilemmas and disasters that so often follow."²

In the beginning chapters, West traces these lifeways and energy networks through visions of power. The central plains in pre-contact North America were experiencing myriad changes in social, economic, and ecological relationships long before Anglo-Europeans arrived. Clovis societies hunted megafauna, specifically *Bison Antiquus*, participated in and maintained trade networks throughout the plains, and battled increasingly drastic climate and environmental changes. These groups did exploit resources, but ultimately proved to be remarkably successful in establishing "a sustaining way of life".³ However, these diverse cultures living in an equally complex ecological community would meet competing visions toward the plains with the intrusion of Europeans. Thus, the plains "as a system of users and used and as

¹ Elliot West, *The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, and the Rush to Colorado* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1998), xxii.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, 21.

perceived living space became a different place".⁴

For Indian peoples, contact meant new technologies such as horses and guns, new diseases like smallpox, and increased competition for natural resources. For Anglo-Europeans, lucrative trade routes and mission work reinforced visions of destiny and wilderness, all of which "transformed the world as people saw it inside their heads".⁵ However, horses and firearms, specifically, represented new forms of power and energy for all, increasing the ability for humans to harness these forces for individual or collective advantage. The adverse ecological impact of these technologies worked together with climatic changes to encourage distance trading and allowed the Cheyenne to rise as the dominant "middlemen" in this network and view themselves as "the called out people".⁶

In Part II, West follows the role of energy and power in the context of the Colorado Gold Rush. As reports of gold emerged from western Kansas and eastern Colorado, bonanza settlements emerged with emigrants bound for a chance at the precious metal. West suggests that this move *en masse* represented a new vision of the plains, one of intense and violent exchange for personal wealth. Also, a growing desire for community as illustrated by mining and river towns and farms demonstrated a new value of ownership attributed to the heartland by Anglo-Americans. Those in the east continued to venture west to "gather" and find their fortunes.

Wooed by advertisements from mountain outfitters, newspaper reports, and travelers' accounts, these groups changed the social, economic, and ecological dynamics of the prairies. The increase in animal traffic alone meant a drastic reduction in seasonal grasses and changed the ecological relationships of all involved. American Indian groups such as the Cheyenne or Arapahos became more mobile with horse and firearm technologies, allowing for distance hunts and favorable trade relationships. Yet, these forces would not escape the problems of expansionism and the overall move of the plains toward an Anglo-European dominated empire.

Finally, in Part III, West explores the path to this empire with the synonymous development of Anglo-American communities, specifically the growth of Colorado and the resulting move of American Indian peoples to marginal dwellings. Indeed, this story carries a historical familiarity—with increasing settlers came new perceptions of place, land ownership, resource use and management, and technologies. These elements impacted the plains' socio-economic relationships between American Indian peoples and Anglo-American traders, between human desires and environmental realities. Townmaking, ranching and farming enterprises, and freighting were among the many enterprises that West suggests represent this vision of power. Also, increasing conflict between Cheyenne, Arapahos, and other Indian peoples and government soldiers, as evident in the militant dogsoldier movement, are important to understanding the Great Plains' final vision of power and energy: struggle.

Contested Plains explores the interdependent relationships between humans and the nonhuman world that are so crucial in understanding the Great Plains' past. American Indian peoples were at work influencing landscapes, cultivating trade networks, and forming communities long before Europeans discovered the continent. These groups carried with them certain perspectives, visions, and stories that helped define place.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 70-71.

However, with the Anglo-European intrusion, disease, horses, guns, and new perspectives, all entered this region challenging ecological relationships, redefining cultures, and creating new socio-economic networks of American Indian peoples as well as Anglo-Americans. In his superb prose and engaging narrative, West articulates this story in a new and refreshing way. He combines the familiar social, economic, and political histories with those of an ecological and environmental past wherein visions and cultures are tempered and changed by power and energy.

West pursues a vast amount of sources including a combination of diaries, government reports, and journals of the period. Certainly, this work has weaknesses, such as West's description of Plains' Indian groups as nomadic without dispelling the term's inherent negative connotations. Nevertheless, West's work fits nicely with James Sherow's *A Sense of the American West* or Dan Flores's *Horizontal Yellow*, and it provides an important look at the role of environment and ecology in understanding Colorado's Gold Rush, expansion into the American West, and the ability of American Indian peoples to shape and dictate their histories.