

High Grade Yield:

An Essay of Recent Writing on the Mining West

Elliott West

Tom Morrison. *Hardrock Gold: A Miner's Tale*. Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992. Pp. vii, 296. Acknowledgements, prologue, illustrations.

Duane A. Smith. *Rocky Mountain West: Colorado, Wyoming, and Montana, 1859-1915*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1992. Pp. xiv, 290. Acknowledgements, foreword, preface, illustrations, notes, bibliographical essay, index.

William G. Robbins. *Colony and Empire: The Capitalist Transformation of the American West*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994. Pp. xvi, 255. Acknowledgements, preface, notes, index.

Sally Zanjani. *Goldfield: The Last Gold Rush on the Western Frontier*. Athens, Ohio: Swallow Press/Ohio University Press, 1992. Pp. xi, 289. Acknowledgements, preface, notes, bibliography, index.

Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp. *Religion and Society in Frontier California*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994. Pp. x, 241. Acknowledgements, introductions, notes, bibliography, index.

Reading through books on the mining West published during the past few years, it's tempting to fall into predictable metaphors--rich veins of ideas, scholarly mother lodes, bonanzas in them thar literary hills. The diggings and shafts have always drawn vigorous attention from good historians, but some of the most recent work has been especially innovative. If there is a common theme to it, it is the continuities between mining history of the previous century and that of our own. And as a corollary, these books remind us of the impossibility of understanding national history and that of the frontier apart from one another.

Among the perennial favorites from the mining West are first-hand accounts of life in the camps in past generations. Besides literary travelers like Ross Browne and Dame Shirley, muckers and double jackers

wrote about life underground in memoirs like Frank Crampton's *Deep Enough*. The tradition continues. Anyone who doubts that gold mining remains something of an adventure, and sometimes an ordeal, can spend a couple of evenings reading Tom Morrison's *Hardrock Gold: A Miner's Tale*. Morrison entered the guild nearly twenty-five years ago, working the tin mines in Cornwall. Like so many "Cousin Jacks" in the last century, he brought his skills to North America. His road brought him to remote mines in Canada and to Colorado's Cripple Creek district. *Hardrock Gold* is partly an autobiographical account of those years and partly an evocation of contemporary mining life seen literally from the bottom up--from down in the shafts and inside the bunkhouses.

Through the short chapters we follow Morrison's travels and experiences while learning much about the current state of western mining, including many of its technical particulars, but the information comes by way of carloads of stories, often about appealing and strange characters who are heirs in spirit to miners of earlier generations. There are stories of life in boarding houses, of haunted mines, of the accidents and the long-term physical grind that keeps hardrock mining one of the most dangerous occupations in the country.

An emphasis on continuity between western past and western present, of course, has also become a dominant refrain at professional historical meetings and at university presses. Two recent books, both part of respected series, play different variations on this common theme.

Duane A. Smith's *The Rocky Mountain West: Colorado, Wyoming, and Montana, 1859-1915* is one of the most recent volumes in the *Histories of the American Frontier Series*, one of the longest-running in the profession. Years ago well established western historians could recall reading its early volumes while in graduate school. Today there are tenured faculty who had not been born when Ray Allen Billington founded the series in 1961. The series has remained vital and influential by moving with changes in the field while still offering books on broad topics that are accessible to the general reader. This one is no exception. It was conceived as a regional history of

the Rockies (with Idaho and New Mexico kept outside the boundary). Although it neglects some questions raised in recent scholarship, it still takes a fresh look at one of the most diverse parts of the American West.

Smith is among the most familiar historians of the American West. Somehow he has managed to publish prolifically (more than twenty books) while always writing in an easy, approachable style. Much of his work has focused on the Rockies and on mining history, from a biography of Horace Tabor and *Mining America*, an overview of mining and the environment, to several works on his beloved San Juan Mountains and southwestern Colorado. *Rocky Mountain West* might be seen as something of a culmination for him, coming twenty-five years after *Rocky Mountain Mining Camps: The Urban Frontier*, his first book, an outgrowth of a dissertation written under Robert Athearn at the University of Colorado. Like *Mining Camps*, this recent work emphasizes the interrelationships among the region's economic parts and it makes social history, including daily life and amusements, a vital part of the story. The main difference, obviously, is that *Rocky Mountain West* keeps its focus much broader, on the histories of Colorado, Wyoming and Montana from the Pikes Peak gold rush until the eve of World War I. Mining remains one--but only one--unifying theme.

After opening surveys of early developments in Colorado, Wyoming and Montana, Smith organizes the rest of his book topically, with chapters on the federal presence, politics, agriculture, labor organization and radicalism, investment and economic development, tourism and other topics. Even sticking to three states, any historian would be hard-pressed to cover these subjects, not to mention such familiar episodes as Clark and Daly slugging it out in Butte and the Populist bid for power, in less than 250 pages of text.

And in fact some of the story inevitably is given only a glancing blow. Fewer than ten pages are given to ranching, for instance, and as is too often the case, Indians seem to have had a "history" only when they were fighting white folks. The Latino presence is barely detectable. Hispanics may have been largely "isolated" in southern Colorado (119), but their story and enduring patterns of life might have been given more of a place. The ethnic dimension in general is underplayed more than it ought to be, given that this area, especially Montana, had some of the highest percentages of foreign-born persons in the nation during these years. Nonetheless Smith covers a remarkable range of material and time. It is an admirable survey of an intimidating time and place in

western history.

One of Smith's interpretive threads is interesting for a volume in the Histories of the Frontier Series. The frontier stage, he writes, passed so quickly in much of the Rockies that it would have been easy to miss. This is a useful and commonsensical insight, one not well developed in such earlier regional histories as Athearn's *High Country Empire*, and it should remind us of the important contingencies of geography, timing, and historical circumstance among mining frontiers. The Rockies were, most obviously, closer to the centers of power and population than the mines and placers of the Pacific coast and Great Basin. Discovery of gold and silver came later than those farther west, at a time when the web of steel rails had spread to towns along the Missouri River where immigrants could pause briefly before taking the short jaunt to the gold fields. Wealth was tied up more in lodes than in placers, and so was less accessible to small-time operations than to the grand clout of modern corporate America. All these factors combined to send the frontier stage into a fast-forward mode. Especially in Colorado, Smith writes, the frontier in all meaningful ways was over within five years or so. Towns either busted fast or, like Georgetown and Central City, quickly sported the trappings and refinements of eastern culture. With big money came rigid class stratification and a withering of individual opportunity; what had seemed a luscious pie to hungry men-on-the-make quickly became a layered cake.

Part of this rapid transition, an essential feature of the frontier's passing, was the remaking of the region into a nostalgic playground for outsiders in love with the remembered frontier. One of Smith's most intriguing contributions here is to make the emergence of the mythic West and the modern tourist industry an essential part of the rest of the story, not merely a whimsical epilogue. By 1915 Yellowstone, Glacier and Mesa Verde National Parks already were standing tall as holy places in America's image of itself--and they were starting to loom large in the regional economy, too. The Rocky Mountain West was integrated swiftly into both the national economy and the national imagination.

In *Colony and Empire: The Capitalist Transformation of the American West*, William G. Robbins also plays the theme of integration and the tightening grip of outside institutions and power during the second half of the 19th century and the first years of the 20th. Robbins's view is much more pointed, however. This book, too, is part of a series--this one on Development of Western Resources--that is meant to "ex-

plore the interplay between resource exploitation and economic, social, and political experiences." (ii)

To many readers Robbins will be as familiar as Smith. Over nearly fifteen years he has published extensively, mainly on the history of the Pacific Northwest and especially its working people and its lumber industry. As in his study of Coos Bay, Oregon, *Hard Times in Paradise*, he typically combines narrative history with larger themes of economic systems and how they have shaped historical development. In *Colony and Empire* he takes this approach into the larger arena of the West as a whole.

As he has written elsewhere, most directly in an article in the *Western Historical Quarterly*, Robbins here takes aim at the tendency to remember the West as a unique historical experience. Such an "exclusivist" approach, of course, is part of our mythic tradition. We Americans are different, we say. And we are what we are because of our peculiar historical encounter with the West. Every historical experience is unlike any other, of course, and no one, certainly not Robbins, would deny the obvious distinctiveness of our western story. What he challenges, however, is our mythic need to see western history as not just distinct but as an historical force somehow apart from tides of change in the larger world.

The dominant forces he sees at work in the West were the same ones reshaping much of the world during the frontier era—the rise of a capitalist economy and a global marketplace, industrialization, and the commodification of virtually all resources, a mental and spiritual shift in which all things came to be equated with their monetary value and potential profit. There is nothing inherently new in saying this, of course. Scholars from Eric Hobsbawm to Eric Wolf have written of western development in the context of capitalist expansion. Among contemporary western historians Donald Worster, too, urges us to rethink the western story less in terms of our own national tune and more as a particularly revealing stanza in a song heard from Chile to Indonesia. The great value of *Colony and Empire* is not so much in the originality of the overall thesis as in two other virtues. First, Robbins writes in uncommonly clean, straightforward prose that is, thank goodness, 99 percent jargon-free and therefore perfectly safe for those who cannot read murky theorizing without breaking out in hives or going dead asleep. Second, unlike Hobsbawm and many others writing from a global perspective, Robbins is grounded in western history and knows the region very, very well. This gives his work a surehandedness, richness of detail and verve that makes *Colony and Empire* even more

pleasurable to read.

A straightforward organization makes the book's points well. An opening section considers contemporaneous developments in northern Mexico and western Canada, arguing for common patterns overlapping both our southern and northern borders. Those common patterns are laid out in the next section, "Forces of Transformation," with chapters on investment, industrialization and corporate style. The third section, "Forces of Integration," returns to the theme of the first, tracing parallels between southern and western history in an age of capitalist transformation and describing the reciprocal bonds between country and city in the modern West. A final essay on the "Recycling of the Old West" briefly plays with the continuing dance between these powerful, integrative trends and the public's mythic need for a romanticized West.

All this brings together many aspects of western, national, and international history—establishing such common ground is, after all, the books' main point—but predictably some of the best and most revealing material focuses on mining. The chapters on the West as "investment arena" and industrialization draw again and again on examples from the mining regions, and the excellent chapter on evolving corporate style and the managerial revolution uses as its central case study the Montana magnate Samuel T. Hauser and his web of interests in silver and copper mining as well as railroads and banking.

Colony and Empire is a landmark among the recent books recasting western history. Like Patricia Nelson Limerick's influential *Legacy of Conquest*, it calls for a fundamental rethinking of the western past that stresses continuities between the last century and our own. Contrary to what some of Limerick's critics have claimed, however, her book has nothing close to a thoroughgoing analysis and critique of capitalism in the West; between the covers of *Legacy*, in fact, the word "capitalism" is as rare a sight as a Butte bartender in a tutu. Robbins, by contrast, has made the "capitalist transformation" the central western story of the past century and a half, and whether you agree with his thesis or not, his book must stand on that small shelf of readable and provocative new interpretations of the region's history.

A book like Robbins's, however, with its overarching treatment of a long sweep of regional history, must necessarily lose something that always has attracted many readers to our field. Some of the most alluring works of western history, and certainly of the hard rock country, have reconstructed the stories of one mining town or another in all its fascinating peculiar-

ity. Thankfully, that tradition has survived, and a superb recent example is Sally Zanjani's *Goldfield: The Last Gold Rush on the Western Frontier*. Goldfield sits along Nevada's border with California, roughly halfway between Virginia City and Las Vegas. Chronologically, its boomtime, 1900-1910, came midway between the former's silver rush in 1859 and the latter's rise as a modern get-rich-quick mecca in the 1940s. It's a particularly appropriate choice, then, as study in transitions between the older and newer Wests.

Zanjani begins with a history of Goldfield's rise and fall, starting with the discovery of gold not far south of Tonopah, moving through expansion and boom and the coming of big money, and ending with the labor wars and crash of 1907-10. Even this narrative is colorfully humanized by centering each stage on an individual--Tom Fisherman, the Shoshone Indian who stumbled across the first color, the prospector and miner Al Myers, "father of Goldfield," the labor organizer Vincent St. John, and George Wingfield, the ruthless, high rolling gambler and speculator. It is an effective way to tell this variation on the familiar cycle in a promising town that in the end could not make it.

The rest of the book, more than two thirds of the text, is a social history of this late-blooming camp. There are chapters on the setting, demographics, entertainment, "Love and Death," business, politics, and two chapters on crime, one on highgrading and other misbehavior and a separate look at homicide. The material here is deliciously dense, full of details nicely chosen both to illustrate larger points and to give the story blood and bone. An Independence Day baseball game in 1907 pitted the Original Order of Abbreviated Runts, all under five and a half feet and wearing straw hats, against the Ancient Order of Elongated Giraffes, none under five-foot-ten and all wearing sunbonnets and mother hubbards. A local editor, reflecting the gnawing need for certain types of skilled labor, wrote that plumbers would be given a house and lot for a day's wage, an automobile for a finished job, and a share of the richest mine for staying the winter. "Come, and be of good cheer," he advised the world's plumbers, "for the earth is yours." (163)

While Smith and Robbins naturally rely for their surveys almost wholly on secondary works, Zanjani has mined a rich lode of primary sources, from business records, correspondence and other manuscripts to oral histories, published reminiscences, interviews and the files of nearly two dozen newspapers. She is clearly in command of her material and

uses it deftly. Her presentation will please fans fond of the most entertaining traditional histories of the mining frontier. She has an eye for the colorful quote, and she brings onto the stage a large cast that includes an array of blackguards, dudes, sourdoughs, toughs, fools, and even a few heroes. She takes us on tours of the town and includes asides and commentaries, such as news on the fortunes and private lives of leading saloonkeepers (Carl Feutch's wife could visit the folks back in Austria and Shanghai Larry Sullivan rose to president of a brokerage firm). What makes *Goldfield* especially welcome is Zanjani's use of these actors in a story informed by an equally impressive array of new questions and approaches in western history.

Women now are in the picture, for instance, and not merely as gold-hearted hussies and saintly schoolmarmes. They were represented in the professions, working as lawyers, dentists and in one case a mining engineer, and they quickly formed clubs and social groups that helped knit the unraveled populace into the start of a community. Zanjani considers the dimension of gender in other parts of town life. Unlike many earlier historians of violence, such as Roger McGrath on California mining towns, she goes beyond gunslingers and bar fights to include domestic abuse in assessing Goldfield's uglier side. Not surprisingly, she finds plenty of spousal violence, as well as desertions, and far more often than not it was men doing the battering and the deserting. The suicide rate, similarly, was high in general but three times as frequent among females. Violence was both common and sexually imbalanced. (There were exceptions, of course. In a property dispute, a wife shot an attorney while her husband crouched to the rear in a "go-get-him-honey" pose.) Zanjani pays much attention as well to questions of community and how they are built. Politics and the turbulent rise of unions are considered, as in more recent scholarship, within the broader context of community and demographics.

Hopefully, in fact, *Goldfield* is a hint of a most welcome larger development--a synthesis of older and newer styles in writing the history of the mining West. Like Paula Mitchell Marks's recent history of the great rushes, *Precious Dust*, Zanjani's book combines new scholarship and new questions with literary skill and an unembarrassed appreciation for straightforward narrative, colorful stories, and the deep strangeness of this chapter of American history. We can only hope that this urban biography, like *Goldfield* itself, proves to be both a reflection of the past and a portent of what's ahead.

Much of the best of those new approaches has concerned the social interior of mining town life.

Earlier histories tended to focus on the discovery of fat veins, the technological wonders underground, the financial tangles, the soar and smash of bonanza kings. The little attention given to mining town society usually went to its protean political life and the most bizarre idiosyncracies of its citizens. That left plenty of room for historians of the past fifteen years or so to take a closer and more serious look at the social townscape and its institutions, from the family and fraternal lodges to ethnic identity and the sexual politics of prostitution. In that scholarly rush, however, remarkably little was done on a vital and revealing part of life on the mining frontier and in the pioneer West generally--religion.

Now, however, Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp has taken a large stride toward opening this neglected area of investigation. Her *Religion and Society in Frontier California*, in fact, goes far beyond the study of churchgoing and formal religious life and ventures into some most formidable terrain, the moral geography of the mountain West.

The neglect of religion among western historians is puzzling. As Maffly-Kipp points out, the great burst of westward expansion, from the age of Jackson to the early 20th century, coincided with one of the most eventful eras of our national religious life and a time of extraordinarily vigorous missionary work, both abroad and on the frontiers of the far West. No one would deny that these developments were tangled together, and an earlier generation made a promising start along this line of study. But during the fifty-seven years since Turner's student Colin Goodykoontz published *Home Missions on the American Frontier*, very few have looked closely at religion and spiritual life in the changing West, apart from the study of Mormonism and a few biographies of prominent figures. Even the best new histories keep religion far to the edge of the picture; Smith writes of it mainly in the context of women's social life and Zanjani devotes a few paragraphs to Goldfield's more colorful men of the cloth. The subject remains one of the most slighted and inviting in our field.

Although her book is brief, under two hundred pages of text, Maffly-Kipp's theses cannot really be summed up succinctly. The strenuous evangelical enterprise in the West, emanating mostly out of the northeast, was self-consciously patterned on the Puritan experience. And yet, in crucial ways, the 19th century impulse was an inversion of that earlier one. The Puritans saw themselves as leaving a corrupted society in order to create a perfected Christian commonwealth; home missionaries set out to implant a superior moral community into an unenlightened,

often degraded spiritual wilderness. If the Puritans found the first task difficult, it was nothing compared to the preachers who labored at the other in the camps of the Sierra.

The barriers went well beyond the grosser vices and ready temptations emphasized in the usual "Paint Your Wagon" portrait of the mining frontier. The Puritan model assumed a convented community, while society in the camps was a slumgullion stew of humanity with little in common apart from another enemy of moral rigor--a hot-eyed pursuit of material success. Exposure to hispanics and Native Americans worked a dual mischief with the missionary impulse. Blue-eyed Protestants would project their awareness of sin outward on the racial and religious Other, rather than looking for it inside themselves; at the same time they were often intrigued by those different moral world-views, and thus, in spite of themselves, drawn into a spiritual complexity fatal to the sureties of their earlier faith.

Maffly-Kipp is at her best, however, not at posing the difficulties of the missionary enterprise but in tracing the consequences of the struggle and its failures. Especially in a long chapter on "The Moral World of the California Miner," she tries to chart the movement within the values of those who spent time in the diggings. She finds, for one thing, that miners were far more concerned over their moral condition than the familiar hell-bent image would have us believe, and in letters and journals argonauts often invoked religious teachings in reminding themselves of the virtues of self-discipline, frugality, sobriety, restraint, and the integrity of one's word. It would appear, then, that evangelicals should have found California a fertile ground. But not so. Essential to the evangelical tradition was the primacy of conversion--that instant of inner transformation and the granting of divine grace from which everything else followed. The converted man or woman naturally tended toward proper behavior because he or she lived by the fires of that inner light. The men on the mining frontier, however, did not embrace those values because they considered themselves transformed by grace; they wanted self-control, honesty, and the rest because they saw that those virtues were personally and socially helpful. They saw their society as a kind of "moral barter economy" (142) in which men of vastly different origins and beliefs had to find some common ethical ground, however narrow. Those values gave them that place to stand together.

The distinction is subtle but full of implications. The materialistic, turbulent, transient conditions in Grass Valley and Hangtown in the 1850s anticipated

American life as a whole a few generations ahead. And so did, perhaps, the argonauts' spiritual adjustments. Maffly-Kipp suggests that what she finds in California was a precursor to the story of evangelism and national values in the age of the social gospel and the outwardly oriented religious trends of the progressive era that usually are associated with the urban East. Certainly those miners' attitudes seem more closely akin to our modern moral temperament--situational, personalized, denominationally blurred, fully at peace with making big bucks--than to the teachings of Charles Finney.

If Maffly-Kipp's suggestions are correct, then the case of the California frontier offers us a lovely irony, especially in light of the insights of scholars like Smith and Robbins. Those two historians remind us how quickly and how much the opening West fell under

the sway of outside institutions and forces. But when we move from the westerners' material life to their inner world, the West may have led the way. *Religion and Society in Frontier California* ends by invoking Rodman Paul, who reminded us that veterans of the Sierra mines, the "old Californians," spread out over the mountain West and became a ubiquitous influence on the craft of mining and on regional life generally. And from that, the nation felt the pull of the West. Perhaps Paul's observation applies to the moral realm as well. It may be, then, that Frederick Jackson Turner still has something to tell us about the frontier's power to shape the American spirit.

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