

How to Read the American West: A Field Guide. WILLIAM WYCKOFF. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014. Pp. xvi+422, color maps, color figures, chronology, further readings, index. \$44.95 paperback. ISBN: 978-0-295-99351-5.

Having spent many summers of my youth in Colorado's San Juan mountains, published my own research on the proliferation of exurbia in the state's Front Range, and made additional travels to Arizona, Utah, New Mexico and various cities within the region, I have become quite familiar with the American West's landscapes. Thus, it was with great anticipation that I received William Wyckoff's *How to Read the American West: A Field Guide* and I will not hide my fandom of this book. I initially believed that the term "field guide" in the title would be more metaphoric in its use. It is, and it is not. Take your favorite wildlife guide for birds or mammals and turn it into a how-to book about reading the cultural and natural landscapes of a particular region, and that is what Wyckoff has accomplished here. The text is clear, descriptive, and appropriately analytical for a wide audience, thus making it equally useful in the classroom. The full color pictures are gorgeous. Wyckoff's scholarly experience, along with his skills behind both the keyboard and the lens, is on display here.

Despite the compliments owed to the book's meat-and-potatoes investigation of the West, the first major chapter, "Navigating Western Landscapes" perhaps steals the show as a how-to about reading the cultural landscape. Though the chapter is logically directed towards the book's American West focus, you could apply this guide to nearly any region of North America with few tweaks. It is a primer for human geography that deftly uses both traditional and more modern (read: critical) analytical methods, referencing the works of scholars ranging from Carl Sauer, Wilbur Zelinsky, and Donald Meinig, to Don Mitchell, Steven Pile, and Nigel Thrift.

Also in the front matter is a spot-on foreword by environmental historian William Cronon, who also serves as editor of the Weyerhaeuser Environmental Books series at the University of Washington Press, within which this book is published. Cronon of course praises Wyckoff's efforts while also displaying his own love of landscape assessment. In doing so he reminds us that scholars and non-scholars of all types and abilities appreciate the very same places and landscapes that we do as geographers. Wyckoff follows through on this promise with the book's focus: a topic-by-topic exploration of half of the United States, one which only a scholar native to the region could accomplish with such precision.

How to Read the American West is divided into eight sections, I suppose you could call them chapters, covering themes ranging from "Nature's Fundament" to "Landscapes of Extraction" to "Playgrounds." Essays start each section and provide a greater historical and national-scale context to the theme being explored. With a bit of expansion, these essays alone would be worthy of their own guide on the geographies of the American West.

The centerpiece of the book, however, is the collection of 100 topical profiles—on topics such as sagebrush, bypassed highways, farmworker settlements, and Spanish colonial revival architecture—covered within each of the eight sections and ranging from two to six pages. Within these topics reside weighty empirical evidence, specific case studies of places, and a lion's share of Wyckoff's photography. Flipping pages from one topic to another is easy, and even encouraged by Wyckoff, Cronon, and myself.

There are two potential criticisms one could have with this book. Firstly, its breadth prevents it from having a unifying message or theme, other than the cultural, environmental, and economic diversity of this region, which is a perfectly valid focus considering the book's goal. But Wyckoff leaves us without any concluding statement that wraps up and binds the pressing topics that this book presents. (Drought and agricultural labor are just two.) Consequently, there is no discussion of how geographers or others with the ability to read the landscape can help

bring about a better sense of environmental and social justice in this region, that in many ways is coming to a tipping point.

Second is this book's definition of where the American West exists. It is unfortunate that the portion of the eastern Great Plains in the Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas, are not included in this analysis. It would not require many additional case studies, but would treat the Plains in a more holistic way. It would have required more travel and photography for Wyckoff. But, as we all know, spatial phenomena of any type—cultural or natural—have little regard for political boundaries. For example, seeing the Permian Basin oil field in New Mexico stop suddenly at that state's border with Texas (p. 155) is odd at best and misleading at worst. However, having covered this question before in my own classroom—Where are the Great Plains?—I appreciate that trying to explain that eastern line of division can become a fool's errand. (The 20-inch isohyet? 100 degrees West? 98 degrees West?) For a book of this type that maintains a streamlined organization which allows the empirical information to take flight, getting bogged down in such a rhetorical debate would likely be worse than excluding the eastern plains. *C'est la vie.*

As for purpose, and to conclude, this book is clearly directed toward a general audience. However this would also make the perfect textbook to accompany a series of academic articles in a class about the American West. In fact, this book, in addition to my affinity for the region, makes me want to teach a course on the region. Any book that can do that certainly belongs on the shelf of any scholar, amateur or professional, with interests in the western half of this country.

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