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THE DISPOSSESSION OF THE AMERICAN-INDIAN, 1887-1934 - MCDONNELL,JA

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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The Dispossession of the American Indian, 1887-1934* by Janet A. McDonnell

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*Bonanza Rich: Lifestyles of the Western Mining Entrepreneurs.* By RICHARD H. PETERSON. (Moscow: University of Idaho Press, 1991. xiv, 192 pp. Notes, appendix, bibliography, index. \$21.95)

In *Bonanza Rich*, Richard H. Peterson provides a glimpse of the lives of wealthy miners. The book is a sequel to his earlier work *The Bonanza Kings* (1977), in which he delineated the social origins and business practices of 50 western mining leaders. *Bonanza Rich* looks at the same men but assesses "the consequences—rather than the causes" (p. x) of their success. Specifically, the author examines their ideologies and their patterns of philanthropy and consumption as a way to deflate myths about robber barons and western nabobs.

Peterson argues that wealthy miners were not stereotypically western in their behavior. His group of entrepreneurs did not gamble away their riches, nor did they ruthlessly make and hoard their profits. In fact, the mining elite behaved very much like the elite in other places. While they built opulent houses, trav-

eled to Europe, and collected books and works of art, they also took philanthropy seriously. At least half of Peterson's mining leaders gave consequential sums to educational institutions, and others provided their communities with libraries and museums. Clearly, these miners "sought to give something back to the region that had made them prosperous" (p. 63). Though Peterson's argument that wealthy miners were not selfish robber barons is not new, it does provide a corrective to popular imagery.

*Bonanza Rich* also gives us some insight into why rich people spent money the way they did. Much like nouveaux riches in other parts of the United States, western miners wanted to prove their sophistication by collecting books, furniture, art, and clothing and displaying them in splendid mansions. Wealthy miners took their cues from eastern businessmen about how rich people lived instead of developing a distinctive western life-style. Peterson uses this evidence to knock holes in the long-dead Turner thesis about the frontier's creative power in a rather unsatisfying conclusion to a useful book.

Other parts of the analysis are more troubling. Though the book purports to examine lifestyles, Peterson never defines this term. More important, while he argues that western magnates behaved like eastern magnates, Peterson tells us little about the role these elites played in building communities that turned out to be quite different from their eastern counterparts. We also need to know more about the significance of mining entrepreneurs as a group. How many mining moguls were there? Were Peterson's 50 representative? Were miners the only rich people in the West? Were they different from or more important than other elites? Peterson could have provided more context.

In all, however, Richard Peterson has exhumed an important group of people from the burial ground of western popular imagery. His discussions of ideology and philanthropy are particularly useful in revising our views of the bonanza kings and in placing them in the wider context of American culture. □

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*The Dispossession of the American Indian, 1887-1934.* By JANET A. McDONNELL. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991. viii, 163 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, selected bibliography, index. \$20)

In this study of the deterioration of the Indian estate following passage of the Dawes Allotment Act, Janet McDonnell's overall findings are hardly pathbreaking: the federal government's maladministration of Indian affairs was responsible in large part for the "disastrous" effect of the legislation, which was intended to make Indians self-sufficient farmers but instead further pauperized the nation's wards. The book does make a valuable contribution in its analysis of the actual implementation and impact of the government's land policies during the first decades of the 20th century. Drawing upon government documents, it includes fresh information on such poorly understood and controversial issues as allotment of timber and mineral lands and the leasing program.

McDonnell's analysis contextualizes—while not apologizing for—the government's failure to meet its trust responsibilities. The progressive era's emphasis on progress and efficient

management of resources rationalized policies that subverted the purposes of the Dawes Act. Getting the land into productive use became a primary objective; leasing and land sales were condoned because they theoretically provided Indians with the necessary capital to develop their remaining holdings. McDonnell's thesis is that the government's overriding concern was to put the land to use rather than to promote Indian self-support.

That objective was given added impetus by the high prices of crops and livestock during World War I. McDonnell's sixth chapter, "Land and Water: Federal Irrigation Projects on Indian Reservations," discloses that the construction of reservation irrigation projects that mainly benefited white farmers—like the lifting of restrictions on leases to whites and the initiation of livestock programs—coincided with rising prices. What progress Indians made in self-support from agriculture, stock raising, and leasing and land sales during the boom years collapsed in the postwar recession. The wholesale issuing of patents between 1917 and 1920, followed by the awarding of citizenship, released Indian lands from federal trust status and left Indians subject to taxation just when they were econom-

ically most vulnerable. McDonnell's work thus helps explain how the combined impact and timing of various policies culminated in impoverishment and demoralization during the 1920s and spurred subsequent reforms.

While the government documents reveal examples of Indians' active resistance to programs not in their best economic interests, McDonnell disclaims any need to go beyond government sources for the "Indian response." In a book that purports to assess the impact of land allotment on Indian people, this is a serious omission. McDonnell occasionally adopts the patronizing tone of her sources, declaring repeatedly, for instance, that Indians "squandered" the money they received from land sales.

To produce a more thorough and balanced analysis, the author should have researched Indian sources. The addition of charts or graphs would also have improved her book, as would have a reorganization of the poorly written early chapters. □

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