

D. Hayes: Historical Atlas of the American West

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Derek Hayes: Historical Atlas of the American West. University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles 2009, 288 pp. ISBN 978-0-520-25652-1

Although I disagree somewhat with the title of Derek Hayes' Historical Atlas of the American West, I was very impressed with the content and quality of the book as a whole. In my opinion, the term "historical atlas" should describe a collection of maps and cartograms created with the intention of visually describing the spatial and temporal characteristics of historical events. Accordingly, Hayes' book would perhaps be better described as a history of the American West through period maps, which comprise his primary means of telling the story of a unique region. This is an interesting approach, which took a little getting used to on my part as a reader. However, the more I immersed myself in the book, the more I appreciated this methodological choice. In a hermeneutical sense, it effectively places the reader in the time period and circumstances of the map makers and users, allowing one to feel something of the local issues and zeitgeist that could easily be overlooked in a conventional history or historical atlas.

Hayes' history is well organized and very readable. In particular, I appreciate his choice to organize maps and information, first thematically and then chronologically. This means, for example, that Hayes tells the story of Spanish exploration of what is now the American West, from its beginning to a logical conclusion, before he details French, Russian and English explorations – in their own respective chapters; in spite of the fact that this means departing from a strict chronological order. Such a structure enables the reader to follow one story through to a conclusion of sorts, before encountering other stories and without being burdened with the task of simultaneously comprehending a number of tangentially connected events.

After portraying the beginnings of "western" knowledge of what we now refer to as the American West and presenting a number of interesting maps from the explorations of the empires listed above, Hayes continues his thematic presentation of interesting antiquated maps. Subsequent chapters describe American explorations of its expanding western frontier, the pull factors motivating early EuroAmerican settlers to move west, transportation conquests and expansion, further settlement and its associated irrigation, scientific surveys, political developments (boundaries), urban areas, regional marketing, modern transportation, impacts of the Great Depression, large-scale water projects, World War II and various aspects of the postwar West.

The maps and stories presented by Hayes succeed in bringing the history of the American West to life. They continually demonstrate the significance of location and physical geographical attributes and, to a lesser degree, chance and choice in constructing the region's settlement and transportation networks. The book is a fascinating read for anyone interested in American history or geography and is sure to captivate connoisseurs of historic maps.