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Three Frontiers: Family, Land, and Society in the American West, 1850-1900 by Dean L. May

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Book Reviews

DEAN L. MAY. *Three Frontiers: Family, Land, and Society in the American West, 1850-1900*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994. xii; 313 pp. Footnotes, graphs, tables, maps, photographs, notes on sources, appendix, index. \$44.95.

Reviewed by Walter Nugent, Tackes Professor of History at the University of Notre Dame.

Any lingering notions that the settlement of the American West happened according to a fixed pattern will not survive a reading of Dean May's new book. By describing and comparing the founding and development of three mid-nineteenth-century settlements, all quite different, May presents a convincing portrait of frontier diversity. Only when the communities reached their third generation did the three places start to converge in their social life and mores, and in ways that May finds regrettable. In their early years, however, these settlements reveal how different frontiers could be. In this well-researched and well-written history, May carries to new and complex lengths the idea that western settlements were more different than alike.

Dean May is professor of history at the University of Utah and has already authored many books and essays on the history of the New Deal, on Mormon history, on historical demography, and on the history of the West. This volume will further enhance his scholarly reputation. As a founder of the Center for Historical Population Studies at Utah, he pioneered in the use of manuscript census sources, and he employs them exhaustively here, together with tax and probate records, newspapers, business credit reports, and the somewhat elusive diaries and journals of individuals, as well as records of the settlements' schools, clubs, churches, and other associations. Photographs of settlers and their homes add flesh and blood to the written sources.

The three settlements May examines are Sublimity, Oregon, about fifteen miles southeast of Salem, founded by people from the upland South and Ohio Valley in the late 1840s; Alpine, Utah, an early 1850s Mormon settlement fifteen miles north of Provo; and Middleton, Idaho, initially the creation in the mid-1860s of gold seekers who were in some sense escaping the Civil War and who quickly became “profoundly agrarian and rural” (9).

Each of the book’s seven chapters is truly comparative, discussing all three communities with regard to some key aspect of the settlement process. Chapter one focuses on the overland migration and the land the settlers found at the end of it. The chapter’s descriptions are vivid. May contrasts the communitarian search of the Mormons, the gold rush mentality of the Middleton people, and the land-seeking “Oregon craze” that led people from good Midwestern land to even more and better land in the Northwest. From their first days, these places differed from each other. The Middletonians’ “fixation on material well-being would do as much to shape their society as did the Mormons’ quest for community and the Oregonians’ quest for family continuity” (38). Here May opens up his major subtext (or is it a supertext?), that Sublimity and Alpine would eventually adopt much of the materialistic individualism of Middleton, a shift which grieves him. But that is his ultimate story and lesson: “Were [Frederick Jackson] Turner to know of this work, he would object to the darkness of my perception of the outcome” (7).

Different motives for settling led to the establishment of different towns, as did the different backgrounds and demographic shapes of the settlers. Chapter two describes these in detail: Sublimity’s people were bound by strong Southern kinship relationships; Alpine’s Mormons were two-thirds English Midlanders partially seared by the Industrial Revolution and eager to regain peace of mind; and Middleton’s settlers were adventurers, enticed by the lure of the Boise Basin gold strike of 1862, as well as refugees from the turmoil of the divided families and traumatic battles of the Civil War. Middleton initially had the bizarre sex ratio and age structure (very male and young) common to mining booms. Although these gradually became more normal, May wonders

whether “the role and meaning of the family in the society remain[ed] the same” (76).

The demographic context appears in chapter three—a composite picture of the 667 towns that existed in the West in 1870. For context, May contrasts Sublimity, Alpine, and Middleton with this composite. Many migrants who came to Middleton to strike gold soon turned to farming, but they were already capitalists in attitude and behavior compared to the settlers of Sublimity and Alpine. Nearly half—280— of the towns of 1870 were founded in the 1860s, which “were thus the formative decade for the Rocky Mountain region”; settlement and population patterns were “barely evident in 1860” but “recognizably in place by 1870” (93).

May describes the West’s in-migration of the 1860s as young, male, rootless, and disrupted. This is a new view of the region’s settlement, and I am sure he is right. My own numbers show that the 1860s brought a sudden, steep decline in the proportion of young people to total population in many Midwestern states, decisively ending the Midwest’s frontier phase. Civil War casualties account for surprisingly little of this drop. Most of these young Midwesterners migrated somewhere out of their home state. It appears from May’s account that the Middletons of the West became the new homes of many of them.

May believes that the Civil War was responsible for this population shift in a much broader sense than its battles—because it fractured families and social value systems. The War killed its legions, but it uprooted many more. The point is possibly more asserted than firmly proved, but it is very compelling and deserves serious investigation, both as to how the context of the Civil War abruptly drove young people from the Midwest and why they created places like Middleton.

The fourth chapter explores the strength of kin relations in Sublimity, community in Alpine, and individualism in Middleton, and includes a substantial section on the differing roles of women in these towns. Chapters five, six, and seven deal with land inheritance (strongest in Sublimity), community institutions (strongest in Alpine), and a commercial, individualistic outlook on land and living (strongest in Middleton). By the 1890s, May finds, the farms

of Sublimity had become smaller and Alpine's larger, more like Middleton's, and the two had begun to resemble Middleton in other ways as well.

At the start of the book, May states that he is interested not only in the comparative description of three western settlements, but also in how they "might shed light" on the roots of what Tocqueville observed and Robert Bellah and Christopher Lasch have recently discussed in widely read books: Americans' "extreme" individualism and lack of a sense of community obligation (6). May sees these three stories as revealing "the meaning for our time of the rural past within us" (8). By the end of the book, the reader must agree that May has gone a long way to achieving this aim. Bellah and Lasch have lamented how Americans "have become narcissistic and selfish, obsessively devoted to material well-being . . . incapable of the long view . . . [or] the good of a broader community" (282). May concludes, "The founders of Sublimity and Alpine in their own ways fought that tide. Those of Middleton swept it along" (283).

Seldom is monographic history presented as a morality tale; rarer still has it also kept faithful to the evidence. But May has achieved both ends. His tale is one of decline, of the convergence of the more Edenic Sublimity and Alpine with the more worldly Middleton. The evidence he amasses persuade us gently that he may have a point, however dismaying it is.