

PARAMETERS AND PURPOSES

Yet, the West is truly, in broad definition, a region with certain common characteristics. What are these characteristics that form the region that is the subject of this book? The West, as here defined, is the United States west of the ninety-eighth meridian, a line passing through the eastern Dakotas down the Great Plains through central Texas. Actually, this book will address the entirety of that tier of states embracing the ninety-eighth meridian, including their eastern portions, since state boundaries do not coincide with geographic boundaries and since it makes no sense to speak only of the western and less populous portions of those states, states that are truly a part of the West.

The significance of the ninety-eighth meridian is that it forms, generally speaking, the dividing line between the humid plains to the east and the increasingly arid plains to the west. And it is aridity, as historian Walter Webb so forcefully argued, that constitutes the most basic regional characteristic of the American West. Although the region has expanses of humid lands along its eastern and western peripheries—the green eastern zones of the Great Plains tier of states from North Dakota to Texas and the lush western reaches of the three Pacific Coast states—most of the West is dry, and water is the key factor to life and society. The West is, as Webb aptly said, an "oasis civilization."

Aridity as a core feature of western regionalism is one reason this volume does not group the noncontiguous "western" states of Alaska and Hawaii as part of the region. These states are not arid, nor do they exhibit another key factor of western regionalism: a commonly shared history. All of the West shared a frontier experience; in fact, the frontier did not end in a wave-like movement on the Pacific Coast but, rather, on the long-avoided western Great Plains and in the forbidding deserts of the interior Southwest. A primary aspect of the West's history as a region has been an exploitation of its resources and a relationship toward the East often spoken of as "colonialism." Some states, such as California,

Washington, or Texas, escaped the bonds of economic and political colonialism long ago. Others, such as Montana and Wyoming, still live in its shadow.

Still other bonds, related to these, serve to unite the West-as-region. Outside of Alaska, the West holds the great majority of federally owned lands in the United States; and this federal custodianship, which mandates a twin reliance on and resentment of Uncle Sam at the same time, underscores the truth that this region is and long has been more dependent on federal spending and management than are any of its sisters. In the realms of memory and mythology, the subregions of the West share a common attachment to the mystique of the "Wild" frontier past, with its romanticized cowboys, Indians, and other noble frontiersmen fighting out their struggles of good versus evil against a larger-than-life backdrop. In fact, this mystique, more than any other factor, has hindered coming to terms with the real past and present of this large part of the United States.

In the following pages, we attempt to move beyond the West-as-frontier, and beyond the West-as-wild too. In so doing, we also attempt to avoid the errors incumbent on a directly opposite approach, namely, interpreting the modern West simply by reading national trends and events into a regional application. For, just as much as it was during the frontier period of the nineteenth century, the modern West of the twentieth century is a dynamic and fascinating place, similar to yet different from other parts of the country—a place that cries out for the serious historical study that our many colleagues in the field are now directing to it. Drawing on their scholarship and support, we proceed.