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The Atomic West (review)

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### The Atomic West.

Edited by Bruce Hevly and John M. Findlay. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998. Pp. x+286; index. \$19.95.

This book explores “how the atom and the West have affected one another” over the past fifty years (p. 9). Eleven essays address the atomic West in varied ways, from biographical portraits of key individuals and descriptions of important moments to discussions of fallout and analyses of contemporary nuclear protest movements. The result is a fine, albeit somewhat disparate, collection of well-crafted essays addressing the region and its intimate relationship with atomic energy from the era of the Manhattan Project forward.

In their helpful introductory essay, Bruce Hevly and John Findlay cover much of the chronological and topical terrain of both the book and the atomic West. Thematic balance is one of the book’s strong suits. Biographies of important individuals are nicely counterweighted by institutional explorations. Stanley Goldberg’s portrait of the Manhattan Project’s General Leslie Groves, the impatient martinet who knew how to get things done, makes a good companion piece to Gregg Herken’s thorough discussion of the federal partnership forged with the University of California during the cold war. Ferenc Szasz contributes a thoughtful essay on English physicist James Tuck, suggesting that Los Alamos and the West in general provided a more egalitarian social and intellectual environment to this eccentric scientist than his rigidly stratified homeland. Dan O’Neill offers an essay on Edward Teller’s hubristic plans to blow a thermonuclear hole in the Alaskan coastline. Wishing to demonstrate peacetime applications of atomic energy, Teller and his “firecracker boys” expected that atomic harbor-making would yield converts as well as economic gain. He was wrong, ridiculously wrong, and O’Neill’s essay discusses the groundswell of opposition to Teller’s Strangelovian designs. Carl Abbott’s richly suggestive piece on the suburban planning of atomic facilities suggests the degree to which the ideal of archetypal model towns and model planning seduced federal officials and their atomic employees throughout the West.

The volume closes with examinations of the contemporary West through the prism of the anti-nuclear-power movement. Thomas Wellock analyzes the varied and shifting coalitions that emerged in California in the mid-1970s. In doing so, he makes a strong case for seeing opposing viewpoints as fundamentally estranged: apart on worldview, apart on ideology, apart on beliefs about technology. Daniel Pope explores the rise, and semi-fall, of the Washington Public Power Supply System (WPPSS), a super-jurisdictional entity that went nuclear in the late 1960s amid grand designs for more reactors and cheap energy. Pope’s conclusion, that the antinuclear movement could often depend on the WPPSS itself to bungle its affairs (through flawed leadership, planning, and execution), reminds us again of

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the sheer complexity of the issues brought to the fore in the mid-1970s. A concluding essay by Matthew Glass examines the controversies surrounding the Carter administration's MX missile sites in Utah and Nevada. Though brief, this piece reiterates insights regarding the cultural complexity of the West; federal agencies wanting to bury MX missiles in wide open western spaces had to contend with, at the least, Mormon and Shoshone histories and traditions.

*The Atomic West* emerged from a conference held at the University of Washington in 1992 that attempted to foster a hybrid nuclear history of the American West, one incorporating many disciplines and perspectives into some kind of synthetic perspective. According to the organizers of the conference and the editors of this volume, that goal was not fully realized. Disciplinary boundaries prevailed, and the atomic West is thus analyzed from the discrete perspectives dictated by discipline. Yet I suspect that the editors are being too hard on themselves. While the book does have some unfortunate gaps—one wishes for a bit more, for instance, on the social or political history of atomic energy in the contemporary West apart from important protest movements—it does suggest important themes for historians of the West and historians of technology. A vantage on the atomic West offers critical insight into periodization. It can be argued that the stock periods of New Deal, World War II, and cold war ought to be reconsidered and rendered less rigid.

Federal expenditures and federal presence have of course long been recognized as threads that can be pulled through the history of the West from the depression forward. But the atomic West is a more specific, and more telling, theme for such continuity. As this volume's essay by Robert Ficken demonstrates, the Grand Coulee Dam, a child of the New Deal, was quickly adopted by the Manhattan Project's demands for massive hydroelectric power. Such guardianship simply continued through the cold war. The same was true for other western sites and installations. The New Deal laid the groundwork in terms of federal expenditures, engineering or technological infrastructure, and bureaucratic management. The Second World War upped the ante, with federal expenditures in the West topping forty billion dollars. The atomic West, with its profound western roots at sites such as Los Alamos and Hanford, added yet another layer atop what had already become a tried and true partnership between science, government, and region. For insights into this partnership's many and complex facets, this volume is an important place to begin.

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