America’s West

The American West has influenced important national developments throughout the twentieth century, not only in the cultural arena but also in economic development, in political ideology and action, and in natural resource conservation and preservation. Using regionalism as a lens for illuminating these national trends, America’s West: A History, 1890–1950 explores this region’s history and its influence on the rest of America. Moving chronologically from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, David Wrobel examines turn-of-the-century expansion, the Progressive Era, the 1920s, the Great Depression and the New Deal, World War II, and early Cold War years. He emphasizes cultural and political history, showing how developments in the West frequently indicated the future direction of the country.

David M. Wrobel is a native Londoner who came to the United States for graduate school in 1985 and never left. He is the author of Global West, American Frontier (2013, winner of the Western Heritage Award for nonfiction), Promised Lands (2002), and The End of American Exceptionalism (1993) and is currently working on “John Steinbeck’s America: A Cultural History, 1930–1968.” David is a past president of the Pacific Coast Branch of the American Historical Association and of Phi Alpha Theta, the National History Honor Society, and is a frequent collaborator with K–12 teachers across the country.
Cambridge Essential Histories

Cambridge Essential Histories is devoted to introducing critical events, periods, or individuals in history to students. Volumes in this series emphasize narrative as a means of familiarizing students with historical analysis. In this series, leading scholars focus on topics in European, American, Asian, Latin American, Middle Eastern, African, and World History through thesis-driven, concise volumes designed for survey and upper-division undergraduate history courses. The books contain an introduction that acquaints readers with the historical event and reveals the book’s thesis; narrative chapters that cover the chronology of the event or problem; and a concluding summary that provides the historical interpretation and analysis.

Editors
General Editor: Donald T. Critchlow, Arizona State University

Other Books in the Series:
Edward D. Berkowitz, Mass Appeal: The Formative Age of the Movies, Radio, and TV
Howard Brick and Christopher Phelps, Radicals in America: The U.S. Left since the Second World War
Sean P. Cunningham, American Politics in the Postwar Sunbelt
Ian Dowbiggin, The Quest for Mental Health: A Tale of Science, Medicine, Scandal, Sorrow, and Mass Society
John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr, Early Cold War Spies: The Espionage Trials that Shaped American Politics
James H. Hutson, Church and State in America: The First Two Centuries
Maury Klein, The Genesis of Industrial America, 1870–1920
Wilson D. Miscamble, The Most Controversial Decision: Truman, the Atomic Bombs, and the Defeat of Japan
Charles H. Parker, Global Interactions in the Early Modern Age, 1400–1800
Stanley G. Payne, The Spanish Civil War
W. J. Rorabaugh, American Hippies
Smith, Jason Scott, A Concise History of the New Deal
America’s West

A History, 1890–1950

DAVID M. WROBEL

University of Oklahoma
For my mother, Evelyn, with everlasting love and gratitude, from
the Southern Great Plains to Southwest London
Contents

List of Figures  ix
List of Maps  xi
Acknowledgments  xiii

Introduction: The West and America  1

1 Frontier, Region, Nation, and Crisis  8
   At the Wake of the Frontier  8
   Expansion and Exceptionalism  22
   Visions of Regional Diversity and Homogeneity  25

2 The Rise of a Leader and a Region  29
   A Western President  29
   The New West  37
   The Western Environment  46

3 Progressive Reform, Progressive Intolerance  55
   Progressive Motivations and Variations  55
   The Democratic West  59
   Western Social Justice  67
   Western Injustice  72
   World War I and the American West  82
   Coda: TR Returns  85

4 Regional Growth and Cultural Conflict  89
   Retraction and Growth  89
   Cultural Fault Lines  99
   The Antiradical Crusade  102
   Race Riots and Racial Policies  106
   The Second Klan in the West  114
Contents

5  From Safety Valve to Safety Net  129
   In the Frontier’s Shadow  129
   Building Western Regions  135
   Restoring and Developing Western Lands  143
   Reaction, Reform, and Overreach  151

6  Exposing the Promised Land  163
   Racial Fault Lines in the Depression West  163
   Depicting the Migrants’ Plight  175
   Depression and Demography  185

7  The Landscape of War  191
   The Arsenal of Democracy  191
   The Demography and Economy of War  196
   Wartime and Postwar Party Politics  208

8  The Good War?  214
   War and Social Dislocation  214
   Race Relations on the Western Home Front  217
   The Cold War, the West, and the Rebirth of American Exceptionalism  236
   Coda: The West at Mid-Century  240

Bibliography  247
Index  269
Figures

1.1 Population of the western states and territories, 1850–1900  
2.1 Population of western cities, 1850–1900  
4.1 Population of the western states, 1900–1950  
4.2 Western urban growth, 1900–1950  
4.3 Native American population in the United States, 1850–1950  
6.1 Dorothea Lange, “Destitute pea pickers in California,” 1936
Maps

1.1 Electoral map, 1892 page 19
1.2 Electoral map, 1896 21
2.1 Electoral map, 1900 32
2.2 Electoral map, 1904 36
2.3 Electoral map, 1908 51
2.4 Electoral map, 1912 54
3.1 Women’s suffrage, 1919 60
3.2 Electoral map, 1916 87
4.1 Electoral map, 1920 106
4.2 Electoral map, 1924 125
4.3 Electoral map, 1928 127
5.1 Electoral map, 1932 132
5.2 Electoral map, 1936 159
7.1 Electoral map, 1940 192
7.2 Major military bases and new industries, World War II 207
7.3 Electoral map, 1944 209
7.4 Electoral map, 1948 212
8.1 World War II Japanese American internment camps 232
I am grateful to Donald Critchlow for inviting me to write a book for Cambridge’s Essential Histories series, to Deborah Gershenowitz and Lew Bateman for their editorial guidance, and to Eric Crahan, who, with Don, shepherded the work through the initial proposal stage. The formal readers of the proposal – along with Robert Johnston and Andy Fry – all provided helpful feedback; Andy was kind enough to read a draft of the whole manuscript. Many thanks to David Chappell, Bill Deverell, Janet Fireman, Keith Gaddie, Robert Goldberg, Rob Griswold, Anne Hyde, Robert Johnston, Paula Petrik, Greg Schneider, David Tanenhaus, and Jay Taylor, who each read portions of the manuscript. Their feedback was invaluable.

While working on America’s West, I benefited from supportive institutional colleagues and administrators at two universities. My thanks go to the History Departments – faculty, staff, and students – at the University of Nevada Las Vegas (UNLV) and the University of Oklahoma (OU), and especially to my OU department chair, James S. Hart. I am grateful to the faculty and staff of the OU Libraries, including the Western History Collections, for their support. I am also indebted to another group of excellent scholars and staff, and especially to Peter Blodgett, the H. Russell Smith Foundation Curator of Western Manuscripts, at my periodic intellectual home away from home, the Huntington Library, where much of the work on the book was done.

I have had the good fortune in recent years to teach a graduate readings colloquium titled The West and America both at UNLV and at OU and another titled West, Nation, World at OU. I am grateful to the historians who kindly agreed to conference call or videoconference with us, and
to the students for their contributions to those courses, and thus to my thinking about this book. In addition, a number of outstanding OU History graduate students provided research support: Courtney Buchkoski, Derek Donwerth, Jeff Fortney, Alistair Fortson, Dustin Mack, Alexandra Mogan, and Jesus Perez – my deepest thanks to you all.

At OU, I have the time and resources to research, reflect, and write, and to balance the responsibilities of scholarship with those of teaching and service, in no small part because of the generosity of the Merrick Family Foundation in funding my position; I am deeply appreciative of the Merricks’ support for and interest in my work.

Most importantly, as I worked on America’s West, I have had the love and support of my wife, Janet, my children, Davey, Ethan, and Miranda, and my mother, Evelyn.