

Book Reviews

the vast material written about the areas described as the Mojave (including Death Valley), the Colorado (including Borrego, Imperial, and Coachella Valleys) and the High Desert country (embracing Morongo and Yucca Valleys, the Joshua Tree regions and Twentynine Palms.) Occasionally Edwards is content with a spare listing — title, author, date of publication, publisher, number of pages, and a thumbnail account of the contents — when he feels that is all the item requires or deserves. Frequently, in his enthusiasm, he writes a review, somewhat lengthy, commenting in detail, expressing authoritative and candid approval or disapproval, and noting the format. This makes the book uneven but adds to the pleasure of the reader. Edwards' appraisals are apt to be on the favorable side, for the whole subject matter of the desert fills him with relish and each book adds something to the rich fare.

Desert Voices, with its huge coverage and its personal treatment, is entertaining and immensely useful. Read it carefully if you want, thumb it through with casual pauses, or save it for reference — however it is used, *Desert Voices* is an invaluable addition to anyone's library of Western Americana.

While excluding newspaper items and most magazine articles — though four pages are devoted to Philip Johnston's contributions to *Touring Topics* and *Westways* — this bibliography has an important and extended appendix. Here Edwards offers a checklist of books containing only casual reference to California deserts; enumerates diaries and journals of pioneer desert crossings; and itemizes a grouping of scientific and technical books and publications.

There is an understanding *Foreword* by Harold O. Weight, desert authority and writer, who also contributes photographic illustrations.

No small part of the attractiveness of the volume is due to Paul Bailey's effective design.—*W. W. Robinson.*

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF THE WEST, by Oscar Lewis (New York, Henry Holt and Company, 1958.) 306 pp. \$5.00

Oscar Lewis is one of those facile writers who have become purveyors of "western history" to the masses. Their writing seldom lacks excitement, color, or romance. They possess the basic skills of the best professional writers. They often stress the heroic, the exotic, and the bizarre and their works occasionally reach real dramatic intensity. Only rarely, however, do they focus the reader's attention upon those wearing and routine processes of daily life that

made the West tedious and enervating to the pioneers who actually peopled it.

As Lucius Beebe put it in a recent review, "the Old West has become big business . . ." The professional writer has been shrewd enough to capitalize upon the fact that each year thousands of new western fans come of age. For these readers he parades all the time-worn symbols of his craft: the gunslingers, the varmints, the villains, the noble Indians, the brave trappers, the gallant cowboys, the dashing cavalymen, the red-shirted miners. In a sense, such writers have done the course of history considerable service by providing delectating accounts of the past. The juicy tidbits with which their books are freighted have sometimes made history "come alive" for large reading audiences. This, incidentally, is an achievement that few historians have matched. But to equate such writing with critical historical craftsmanship is basically wrong.

Like Trevelyan, one's interest in such history "collapses like a pricked balloon" whenever he detects uncritical acceptance of legend or the sacrificing of interpretation for the sake of narrative story. It seems to me that we have had enough intellectually-thin books designed primarily to sell rather than to create basic understanding of a West that is not merely symbol, myth, and cliché.

In fairness to Mr. Lewis, it should be stated that in the past he has made conscientious contributions to the history of the West. His *Bonanza Inn* and *The Big Four* are praiseworthy books. With Robert Glass Cleland he edited a series of Gold Rush volumes for Alfred Knopf that were first-rate.

The Autobiography of the West, however, is something less than that. What Lewis has done is to piece together a series of chopped-up "personal narratives" by such persons as Pedro de Castaneda (who was on the Coronado Expedition), Cabeza de Vaca, Jedediah Smith, John C. Frémont, William T. Sherman, Hubert Howe Bancroft, and J. Ross Browne. Essentially the book represents the mining of several dozen disparate diaries, memoirs, articles, and letters, interlarded with a sprightly commentary designed to place them in historical perspective. There is not a footnote in the book nor is there a bibliography of sources. About this effort the publisher states:

This is the stirring saga of the American West told in the words of those intrepid spirits — some famous, some totally obscure — who discovered, explored, and developed it . . . *The Autobiography of the West* is a delightful and rewarding tale of history, of fabulous adventure, comedy, and tragedy . . . This is the romance of our nation — the exciting personal narratives of women captured by Indians, of children isolated in mountain cabins for months at a

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time, of face-to-face encounters with wild animals. Here are the experiences of a pony-express rider, a pioneer cowhand, and a hundred other autobiographical accounts of the adventures and dangers our forefathers met.

Yes, all the symbols and cliches are in this book. But if this fragmented and stylized potpourri is indeed "history," it is the kind that finds its origin in the works of other men. In the original sources will be found, uncut and unmaimed, the complete narratives out of which this book has been fabricated.—*Andrew F. Rolle.*

THE HISTORY OF MISSION SAN JOSE CALIFORNIA, 1797-1835, by the Rev. Francis Florence McCarthy, *illustrated*, (Academy Library Guild, Fresno, 1958, Pp. 285, Cloth Binding, \$5.95.

Books on the Missions of California are either very good or extremely terrible; there is seemingly, no middle ground. In the case of Father McCarthy's volume on San Jose, it is definitely in the former group — that of the "very good." Although books dealing with the missions fill shelves in most California libraries, this is the first separate volume to appear on that northerly mission of San Jose. Published posthumously, its author brought the experiences of a life-time as a priest to bear on the historical data anent the mission — a union which not only produced an historical volume, but one of great beauty as well.

In this history, Father McCarthy opens with the Costanoan Indians themselves, moves into the founding of the mission in 1797 on their domain, tells of its active years and closes his narrative with the coming of secularization. Writing at times with a light sense of humor, at other times with profoundness, his chronical of the mission glows with the touch of a man who loved his work. With such chapter headings as "Economy of Mission San José," "A Day with Fathers Barcenilla and Merino," or "Kit Carson at Mission San José, 1830," he unfolds the many and diverse sides of a mission's history. A history peopled with amazingly real persons who emerge from his pages with clarity and a sense of purpose.

Perhaps the highlight of the writing is his telling of the dedication of the mission's church. Using large quotations from existing records, and filling in with his own experience, we follow the building to completion, through the ceremonies of the Blessing, the Vigil, and then the Dedication itself. Father McCarthy describes in detail the vestments of the officiating fathers, the general appearance of the new church on its festive day of dedication, the processional, the music.

Unlike so many volumes which deal with mission history, this