
"... We are not dealing with Western history," writes Bernard DeVoto about this, his latest book. But he is incorrect, for The Year of Decision is for all intents and purposes the story of the acquisition and occupation of much of our country that lies to the west of the Mississippi River. It is an account of Manifest Destiny on the march. It presents in the best of narrative form the story of that day so astutely foretold by Timothy Flint: "When the tide of advancing backwoodsmen shall have met the surge of the Pacific," or what George Tucker of Virginia once called the unstoppable "progress of our civilization to the West."

The opening chapter, "Build Thee More Stately Mansions," is, however, nationwide in its scope. Into it are compressed the major American diplomatic crises involving Mexico and the Oregon country. In it is given a vivid glimpse of the life and thinking at Brook Farm. Here, too, march upon the stage the principal characters of the truly decisive middle period of our national history. The artistry of these first fifty pages will command respect from all who read them.

In no other book on western history is the narrative so ingeniously arranged as in The Year of Decision. The author performs the phenomenal acrobatic feat of juggling at least ten balls in mid-air while he goes constantly forward at a lusty trot. The reader has before him Jim Clyman, John C. Fremont (dubbed "Childe Harold" by the author), Francis Parkman, Susan Magoffin, Jesse Applegate, and many other colorful and history-making personalities, each going his own circuitous path. Simultaneously, he has trekking westward or south by west those "peculiar people" called the Saints, the Donners, the Mormon Battalion, the Oregon immigrant trains, and the armies of Kearny, Doniphan, Taylor, and Scott. Everybody and everything moves in typical, "get-aheaditive" western fashion. The reader is given a choice seat at the "Biggest Show on Earth" where all features, sideshows, and parades are staged under the main tent and where even the sharpers and campfollowers perform in public view.

Logical as this manner of presentation is, those interested in a single narrative—for example, the perambulations
of pathmarker Fremont—will have to piece together, with the aid of the index, the numerous segments given over to this vainglorious figure. The Donner episode, to use another example, is divided into twenty-six installments between pages 122 and 526.

While never losing sight of the central action, the author does have a special theme in each of his seventeen chapters. Chapter two, entitled “Mountain Man,” is self-explanatory; three, “Pillar of Cloud,” focuses attention on the Saints; eight, “Solstice,” is largely concerned with California; nine, “The Image on the Sun,” is mainly Kearny’s march; and twelve, “Atomization,” is the story of the disintegration of the Donner party.

Critics will disagree, and rightly so, with the apportionment of the subject matter. So far as page allotments go, Jim Clyman receives more space than Thomas Hart Benton; Lansford W. Hastings is listed in the index thirty-nine times, whereas the Great Compromiser is listed six times. James Frazier Reed receives twenty-eight citations; Mariana Vallecjo, four. Emphasis is, in the last analysis, an author’s privilege; and in this book special emphasis has been placed on certain case studies.

It is, however, difficult to understand certain omissions. For example, Mr. DeVoto emphasizes Jesse Applegate’s efforts to establish for Oregon-bound immigrants the South Road through the Humboldt Valley as a substitute for the perilous last-leg journey down the treacherous Columbia River. He writes that such a road into the Willamette Valley was “both a physical and psychological necessity.” He is apparently oblivious to the fact that during this very year of decision—1846—Captain Samuel K. Barlow, with the aid of forty men, completed the much more famous and much more practical Barlow Road which extended south from The Dalles, then crossed the Cascades south of Mt. Hood, and pushed westward to the Sandy River and on to Oregon City. During the year 1846 there passed over this road into the Willamette Valley no less than 145 wagons, 1559 horses, mules, and cattle, and an unspecified number of sheep (see Oregon Spectator, February 4, 1847). The Barlow Road, which is not even mentioned by Mr. DeVoto, and not the Applegate Road, turned out to be the practical solution to the problem of getting wagons into the Willamette Valley.
It was Captain Barlow who said: "God never made a mountain that did not make a place for some man to go over it—or under it," and he proved his contention by building a route that served successfully as a toll road until 1912. And while on this subject of Oregon geography, it would be more correct for the author to refer to Grant's Pass as on the Rogue River rather than in the Umpqua Canyon (page 376).

This attractively printed book has been in preparation about seventeen years. Taken in its entirety, Mr. DeVoto presents a masterful synthesis of the momentous events that transpired in 1846 and adheres closely to the generally accepted facts of American history. He gives many strikingly new and different interpretations to men and incidents of that year and offers ample evidence that 1846 was the year of decision. The language of this volume is vigorous and earthy; the style is beautiful and happily free from dripping sentimentality. It is easily the best book written on the West since the publication of Webb's *The Great Plains* a dozen years ago.

Oscar O. Winther


Theodore Maynard is his own apologist for his biography of Simon Gabriel Brûté, first Roman Catholic Bishop of the diocese of Vincennes (1834-1839). "This is a personal portrait of the man, . . . rather than a formal biography." The author extends his defense: " . . . whatever value it may have is in sympathetic understanding. . . ." Accepting these premises, stated in Maynard's prefatory note, *The Reed and the Rock* manages to convey what Mr. Maynard feels is the essence of the earthly career of Simon Brûté. There is a lingering feeling, however, that the author has selected his materials to achieve the desired picture; the Sulpician priest who became Vincennes' first bishop might prove of another nature had the author been more detailed and exacting, rather than impressionistic, in the delineation of his subject.

The book is divided into three main sections. There is a vivid description of boyhood home and youth in Rennes, the background for which is the Terror of the French Revolu-