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Old Blue’s Road: A Historian’s Motorcycle Journeys in the American West. By James Whiteside.

Judith Austin

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Old Blue’s Road: A Historian’s Motorcycle Journeys in the American West. By James Whiteside. (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2015. xi+282 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, index. \$19.95, paper.)

“Old Blue” is a Harley-Davidson Heritage Softail motorcycle and James Whiteside is retired from the History Department at the University of Colorado Denver. Beginning in the summer of 2006, the two—sometimes accompanied by Whiteside’s friend Phineas—traveled together across and around the American West. *Old Blue’s Road* is an account of four trips: the first, to Victoria, BC, north through the Great Basin and south along the Rockies; the second, eastward from Denver to Dodge City, Kansas, then back along the Santa Fe Trail and north from Santa Fe home; the third, to the Four Corners area; and the last, across Wyoming to southeastern Montana, then into South Dakota and Nebraska, and back to Denver.

Whiteside’s narrative interweaves landscape—which, he learned on his first trip with Old Blue (from Denver to Fairplay and back), is far more immediate on a motorcycle than on a bicycle or in a car—with the people who presently occupy that landscape and the history that lies on it. His adventures both broadened and deepened his sense of what the West is and what it has been and why. “The place,” he writes, “the processes, the diverse people, and the ideas of the West were all there for me to see and to think about on Old Blue’s Road” (p. 7).

That thinking led Whiteside to undertake serious research in primary and secondary sources, both printed and online. He explores and cites both standard historical materials and contemporary documents, giving him an understanding of the country he had ridden through and some examples of how its residents and managers view it. Citations to the Websites of government agencies and interest groups are interwoven

with citations to hard-copy books and articles, leading me to wonder if perhaps some of that online material could be regarded (with care) as the modern equivalent of the journal or diary.

Old Blue’s Road has some irritating and distracting problems. Obvious misspellings occur, and, in some cases, the notes contain murky citations. But those do not diminish the challenges that Whiteside offers to historians of the West. We need to make an effort to really *see* the landscape in which we live and through which we travel, whether actually or on paper. Who were the people who lived on or passed through the country; how did they shape it for the people who do so now; how has that landscape shaped the generations who have crossed, occupied, and used it—as Whiteside puts it, “the West’s history rubbing up against the western present” (p. 267)?

More important: How do all those factors shape those of us who study the landscape and its various peoples?

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