

J. Robert Oppenheimer, the Cold War, and the Atomic West. By Jon Hunner. (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 2009. xvi + 248 pp. \$24.95)

In the summer of 1922 J. Robert Oppenheimer, a recent high school graduate in New York awaiting enrollment at Harvard University and recovering from a severe case of dysentery and colitis, went west for a tour of New Mexico, accompanied by his favorite English teacher, Herbert Smith. The journey, especially his interactions with local people, not only helped cure him physically but also lifted his spirits and self-confidence in a way that started Oppenheimer's lasting love affair with the American Southwest and West. More fatefully, it brought him to Los Alamos, where he would return twenty years later to preside over the assembly of the first nuclear weapons in the world.

Many historical studies of Oppenheimer, the atomic bomb, or the West have mentioned the physicist's connection with the West, but Jon Hunner places it at the center of his book. Hunner argues persuasively not only that the American West changed Oppenheimer, but also that "what Oppie had started at Los Alamos helped transform the region even more dramatically" (p. 146). Yet, as part of the Oklahoma Western Biographies series of the University of Oklahoma Press, intended for "students and general readers" (book jacket), the book follows a format that contributes both to its strengths and considerable weaknesses.

Written in a lively manner, the book presents more a succinct biography of Oppenheimer than a serious study of the rise of the atomic West. While there is little new in terms of either topic, it does help to highlight Oppenheimer's strong connections with the emergence of the scientific West, with his conscious choice of the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena and the University of California at Berkeley as sites to begin his teaching career, and, of course, with his selection of Los Alamos as the nuclear weapons laboratory during World War II. Once we get to the postwar period, however, when Oppenheimer returned to the East Coast as the director of the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, New Jersey, the West pretty much disappears from view and the Cold War takes center stage in the subject's tumultuous last years.

What is most frustrating about the book as a scholarly study is the complete lack of footnotes (apparently dictated by the format of the book series). It is almost impossible to distinguish the author's original research and insights from what is summarized from other secondary sources. The efforts to fit the book into the series' mold of "life stories of significant westerners" also tends to exaggerate the role of the individual—in this case Oppenheimer—rather than that of larger historical forces in the rise of the West in the areas of scientific research and industrial-military-nuclear activities. Some of the latter, which are explored in *The Atomic West* (1998), edited by Bruce Hevly and John M. Findlay, are absent from the useful but all too sketchy bibliographical essay in the volume under review. Not surprisingly, Hunner, as the author of *Inventing Los Alamos: The Growth of an Atomic Community* (2004), is at his best when covering Oppenheimer during World War II, but there are a number of glaring errors outside of this period. For example, when Oppenheimer became director of the Princeton Institute, he did not replace Albert Einstein, who, although certainly its most famous faculty member, was never its head (p. 161).

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