

BOOK REVIEWS

The Reno Court of Inquiry. Edited by Colonel W. A. Graham. (The Stackpole Company, 1954. Pp. 303. \$5.00)

Nothing in its generation captured the attention of the American people as did the "facts" surrounding the Custer Battle of June 25, 1876, on the Little Big Horn. Investigations and inquiries are not unique to our own times; and like the famous General Billy Mitchell trial of the 1920's, the Court of Inquiry convened to investigate the conduct of Major Marcus A. Reno, Custer's second in command, was its counterpart for that era.

As soon as the news of the fiasco broke upon the public, partisans rushed to the support of the various participants. Defenders of Custer were of course the most vociferous, and they lost little time in a concerted effort to fix the blame on someone other than their hero. At the time of the disaster, Custer's command had been divided by him into two segments. Custer assumed personal command of one and turned command of the other to Major Reno. Both elements were engaged simultaneously and the fact that Reno was unable to re-unite with Custer provided the excuse for the forthcoming din. At Major Reno's own request a Court of Inquiry was convened in January of 1879. Extended testimony was produced and 23 witnesses were heard. Many exhibits, charts and maps were received in evidence. The official transcript of the testimony remained confidential until it was turned to the National Archives in 1941.

Much credit must go to Colonel Graham for his work in editing and making this official document available. Now historians and amateur tacticians, through the means of verbatim testimony of the participants who survived, can live this debacle again. The interpolations by the editor are excellent and he has exercised great discretion in the difficult job of editing out of the transcript repetition and unessential details. Interest in the work is heightened by the discovery in May 1954 of a map hand drawn by Capt. F. W. Benteen, also an actual participant, which was added as the back end paper. One of the book's most unique features is its table of contents. Instead of using it to show the order of presentation of the material in the conventional manner, Colonel Graham has it arranged similar to a timetable, keyed to each word of testimony regardless of where in the book the same may appear. This "table of events" gives an instant guide to any portion of the testimony.

The volume belongs to the library shelf of every amateur historian and all students of American military history.

Oklahoma City

—W. R. Withington

Oklahoma: A History of the Sooner State. By Edwin C. McReynolds. (University of Oklahoma Press, 1954, Norman, Oklahoma. Pp. 461. \$4.95.)

Oliver Goldsmith once wrote: "One writer, for example, excels at a plan or a title page, another works away at the body of the book, and a third is a dab at an index". So it is also with the writer of a book of history. However, such is the author's prerogative and we should agree that the author of a story of Oklahoma may select those portions of its history at which he is a dab or to which his interest and fancy are more naturally directed. If he does, however, he must not expect or consider that the finished volume will be "A History of the Sooner State" in the sense that the sub-title would indicate.

Dr. McReynolds has given us an interesting and readable volume covering portions of the history of our state; and it is meet and good that the volume could be published at our own University of Oklahoma Press. It belongs in every library of Oklahoma material or reference.

Considerable prologue and background are included and some seventy pages elapse before the reader actually reaches the Sooner State. By and large the strongest aspect of the book and the greatest contribution made by Dr. McReynolds is his brilliant and detailed analysis of the social and economic conditions within each of the Five Tribes both prior to removal and immediately after the immigrants arrived at their new home. These chapters, roughly the middle third of the volume, are superior and they alone would make the volume worth while.

However, to assign approximately equal space to the entire history and survey of the various missions and the work of the many churches in establishing schools and missions as that used in recording a 1915 tank car explosion at Ardmore, would hardly appear as a balanced presentation of material. Likewise, author McReynolds is obviously not too interested in the contribution of the military, as the chronicle of the army's effort is rewarded with a total of two pages of text, yet a synopsis of Washington Irving's Journal of the 1832 expedition merits six.

Oklahoma City

—George H. Shirk

Commerce of the Prairies. Edited by Max L. Moorhead. (University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, Oklahoma, 1954. Pp. 469. Ill. Index. \$7.50.)

Since most historians are acquainted with the importance of Josiah Gregg's contribution in the field of western Americana, the Moorhead edition of *Commerce of the Prairies* is most welcome from

the standpoints of readability and availability. Earlier editions have become collector's items and as such make their use by laymen or in classrooms almost impossible. Now every school and amateur historian have the opportunity of keeping this informative classic on a near-by bookshelf for easy and interesting reference.

Josiah Gregg, doctor, teacher, and lawyer, began his prairie experience in 1831 when he was advised that a sojourn in the great out-of-doors might provide the cure for his physical infirmities. Such proved to be the case for within a few weeks time Gregg was no longer traveling as an invalid, but riding a pony, standing watch, and relishing the buffalo meat and other game that was an essential part of the westerners' diet. Until 1849 Josiah Gregg traversed the trails of the southwest all the while continuing a fortunate habit that he had developed as a lad—jotting down locations and landmarks, personal observations and comments upon fauna and flora of a region. Those notes became the basis for his book, the first authentic account of life and conditions in an almost unknown territory. His last venture, ending with his death in February of 1850, began in 1848 when he joined an expedition for botanical research in Mexico and California. Though the trip was a tragic one for Gregg it was rewarding to posterity for it provided field notes, letters, and two herbariums to be used in future study.

The book is one of those rare combinations of information and description that leaves one impatient to continue the next chapter. Perhaps it is the wholly personal approach to writing, the ability to narrate his adventures in a way that makes the reader imagine himself sitting at grandfather's knee and hearing first hand the exciting stories of the "old west", that makes *Commerce of the Prairies* an adventure in itself. It is a detailed adventure, yes, but each small incident becomes a vital part of the whole rather than a mass of burdensome trivialities.

Beginning with the organization of a Santa Fe trade caravan and its departure from the rendezvous point we are introduced to a continually changing scene in which traders, Mexicans and Indians play their respective roles. When Gregg's party is endangered by a prairie fire, we can almost feel the heat of the flames; when Josiah buys mules from the Comanches, we practically see the brilliance of the vermillion beads included as payment; when he visits the mining districts of northern Mexico, we are there in Chihuahua admiring the classic elegance of the adobe buildings. The spirit of the west, the excitement of prairie life, the beauty of nature are all here, and the Moorhead edition makes it possible for us to sit back in a favorite armchair and enjoy them all.

Oklahoma City

—Lucyl Shirk

Rendezvous With Chance. By Walter Hart Blumenthal. (Exposition Press, New York, 1954. Pp. 154.)

One would not need to know that the author of this volume is a distinguished collector of unusual books to appreciate his dexterity and familiarity in dealing with the elusive caprices of Lady Luck, but it is perhaps no chance in the light of this knowledge that he, of all people, should undertake a venture such as the history of Fortune through the ages. Mr. Blumenthal, whose library swells with oddities as books bound in human skin, is indeed qualified to invade that other worldly region, that mysterious and inexplicable fringe of Destiny where speculation is as powerful as fact.

One of the most delightful features of *Rendezvous With Chance* is the free use of quotation. Although Walter Blumenthal's analysis of "the qualifying If", as he defines Fortune, would be treat enough for his readers, he gives more than his own opinion on the subject. In the course of this history, we hear from Anatole France: "Chance is perhaps the pseudonym of God when He did not want to sign"; and from Napoleon: ". . . . Chance plays a leading part in all the affairs of men"; and even from Shakespeare: "There's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow" and, again, "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will". These testimonials to the dominance of Chance enliven the text in a fortunate blend of historical event and literary surmise.

But is there really a case for Chance, or is this a frivolous device to stem the current fashion for free will? This question is left entirely up to you, the reader and the judge. It is for you to decide whether the famous Chicago fire would have raged if the hobos in Mrs. O'Leery's barn had not wanted cream for their coffee. The option is yours whether George Washington would have attained heights politically had his brother lived, since the laws of Virginia at that time provided that the second son had no voice in state affairs. Similarly, is it chance that Robert Lincoln, son of the assassinated President, was absent from his theatre box the night his Father was killed, for if he had been in his place at the rear of the box, Booth would have had no clear opportunity to fire the fatal shot. Mr. Blumenthal calls it Chance. Deem it coincidence if you will.

The fact remains that this is an exceedingly informative and imaginative study, fluently written, historically intact and whimsically contrived. The author states in his Foreword that "this trifling book was written to be entertaining". In the judgment of this critic he has succeeded. Whether or not he has gone beyond that aim to prove the role of Destiny conclusively is left, like the whole question of Chance, up to the individual.

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

—M. G. Denison