

# Reviews

**A Clash of Interests: Interior Department and the Mountain West, 1863-1896**

Thomas G. Alexander  
Brigham Young University Press, 1977  
256 pages, \$11.95



*A Clash of Interests* was written originally as a doctoral dissertation by Dr. Alexander at the University of California at Berkeley in 1965. Although traces of the academic paper remain, the book is a

well-written, abundantly documented discussion of the relationship between the U.S Congress and the states of the

Mountain West from the time of the Civil War to the turn of the century. The points of issue in the *Clash*, are the hopes of exploitive interests, Indian saviors, inept and/or corrupt congressman and bureaucrats—the same conflicts which are with us today in increasing intensity. In fact, *A Clash of Interests* would be valuable reading for present day advocates of the Sagebrush Rebellion.

One persistent theme in the book is the awful misunderstandings upon which congressmen based decisions regarding Indian and public land responsibilities. The author argues for decentralization and reflects his regional bias with statements about freedom and rights to the land. The truth of his statements is real enough, but most of the rights of the nation are illusory and transient; and

only when the subjects of government demand their rights, do they get them. After 1877, efforts in Utah to demand those rights seem pitiful and fruitless. It is difficult to quarrel with the evidence of government high-handedness amassed from an impressive variety of sources.

Dr. Alexander organizes his discussion both chronologically and developmentally. Government agencies fit comfortably into this format. The final chapter is entitled "The Peak of Cultural Imperialism," referring to the blind and insensitive approach the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) took in dealing with Indian treaties and tribal policy. In fact, the BIA's high-handedness is shown to be a reflection of the majority culture's true feelings about its Indian neighbors, even if the author is too much of a

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gentleman to say so openly.

Another theme in the book is the lack of understanding all parties had regarding the land—the intensity with which land could be used and still be in harmony with long-term management of natural resources. For example, settlers did not foresee the disastrous floods and fires which resulted when watersheds were over-grazed and over-cut.

The harsh environment of the West imposes an economy of scarcity upon those who choose to live here. A survival orientation can be identified in people who live in small towns and rural areas as contrasted with urban dwellers. The belief that “we live on the edge of culture and have only ourselves to rely on” is often heard expressed. The people with this frame of reference live close to the land and have difficulty thinking of long-term economic considerations such as conservation of water and land resources or scientific planning of land use.

Members of Congress knew little about the relationship between water and land in arid climates. The agents acting to implement the policies legislated by Congress knew little more and thus much mismanagement and many bad feelings occurred on both sides.

The West was ultimately made over into a string of model states resembling Illinois, Ohio, and Pennsylvania, Dr. Alexander informs his readers.

Apparently laws must be passed to fit the norm. Even if this all sounds familiar, one wonders if the situation today is still the same. Are local users justifiably indignant or are they looking for a cheap way to compensate for lack of planning? Are federal employees as unfeeling as they are made out to be, or have they been trying conscientiously to do their jobs and have only caught avaricious local politicians and developers with their hands in the cookie jar? Is Congress really as stupid as it seems, or are they trying to encourage us to do what we should have been doing all along—considering the long-term implications of wasteful use of natural resources. All of these questions occurred as I read *A Clash of Interests* by Thomas G. Alexander.

*Jay Haymond*

JAY HAYMOND is a librarian-historian employed by the Utah State Historical Society. He is active in numerous historical and archival professional organizations and is currently chairman of the Conference of Intermountain Archivists. Dr. Haymond is a graduate of Brigham Young University and the University of Utah.



## WHATEVER WAS (a villanelle)

Dawn Baker Brimley

I move alone among the rooms today  
Deciding nothing darkly in the light;  
The best, the worst, were never meant to stay.

How far away the sound of childrens' play,  
How long ago we reached the sweetest height.  
I move alone among the rooms today.

How close against the house late roses lay,  
Young in the last of summer, and still bright;  
The best, the worst, were never meant to stay.

The briefest sorrowing rain came yesterday  
Colliding with the flower-blooming night;  
I move alone among the rooms today.

The splash of summer slides, then slides away,  
An aspen by the gate is stark and white.  
The best, the worst, were never meant to stay.

In darkness like the wind you eased away;  
Whatever was went with you in the night.  
I move alone among the rooms today;  
The best, the worst, were never meant to stay.

DAWN BAKER BRIMLEY studied at BYU and has published poetry in *Dialogue*, *the Ensign*, and *Mountainwest*. She teaches Children's Literature part-time at BYU.

**Nothing Very Important and other stories**  
 Bela Petsco  
 Meservydale Publishing Company, 1979  
 209 pages, \$7.95



I haven't been on a mission. And I don't feel bad (momentary foot shuffling, only) when I say that I never wanted to go on a mission. But Bela Petsco's *Nothing Very Important and other stories* makes it clear that a

mission presents peculiar opportunities, not only for spreading the word but also for thinking about it.

The questions Petsco's characters think about aren't all that new. Bob Elliot's *Fires of the Mind* and Christy Ackerson's *Tales from a Tracting Book*, for example, explore more thoroughly dilemmas of faith and fact, obedience and integrity, love and labels. And other LDS fiction writers have also confronted the particular problems of mission politics, seduction, dishonesty, homosexuality, and insensitivity.

What, then, is my delight in *Nothing Very Important*? It has little to do with plot and a lot to do with feeling. A reader's feelings about himself, his friends, and his beliefs when he's through with a book are not an irrelevant standard,

despite their subjectivity. And by that standard, this is an unusual book. The mood that emerges from Petsco's understated, almost off-hand prose allows me to face—without guilt—the cultural vagaries I assume by virtue of my membership in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. And that's a major accomplishment. There is no Mormon past haunting Petsco's characters—no lingering odor of blood atonement or decaying hometowns or unacknowledged indiscretions. Through Elder Mihaly Agyar, Hungarian convert from Brooklyn, we have in each day a refreshing present reality. He shows it's possible to be committed but also free of the Mormon self-consciousness, collective or personal.

Sufficient to the day are the problems Agyar encounters, of course. A fellow missionary—a friend—who commits suicide. A single woman he admires with her own particular tragedy, "overly ordered," like her front yard. The young Utah mother of five who escapes to California. Her husband, who sends flyers (complete with photograph) through the wards there to locate her.

But eighty-two-year-old Lena Gill knits her way into Agyar's missionary life, too, as, while visiting with him, she

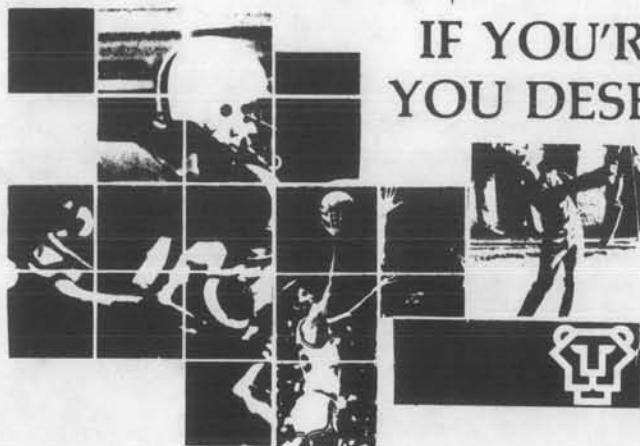
recollects her past without rancor. And there is the Mormon woman who stands by her man. And the little, fortunate coincidences. "A mission is a mixture," says Agyar in his homecoming report, "something to be experienced. . . ."

I guess what I'm saying is that this is a book about converts—about perpetual rebirths. Even the missionary is a convert. And liberally laced throughout the book are characters who keep us hoping.

What Petsco makes of the mission is kind of a second second-estate, with ambiguity and sensitivity the lessons to be learned—or, in gospel terms, faith and love. But there is no Sunday School epigram. From the title to the last line of the last story, the book modestly eludes simplification.

Despite its title, despite its understated style and tone, despite its impressionistic vignette structure, *Nothing Very Important and other stories* accumulates an intensity that is almost cathartic by the book's end. Like a Bartok folk song, it is quick and clear and complex and renewing. In the words of Elder Agyar's mother, "I feel ever so better today because of it."

ELIZABETH SHAW is a magazine editor in Salt Lake City.



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