
Book Reviews

Ronald M. James *The Roar and the Silence: A History of Virginia City and the Comstock Lode*, Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1998, 384 pp., illus., maps, notes, bib., index, paper, \$27.95.

This is an admirable book. Ron James has brought together all of the existing literature on the history of Virginia City and the mines and miners of the Comstock Lode, dissected and extended it from his own research, and produced what must now be regarded as the definitive volume on the history of the district which briefly made Nevada the mining capital of the world. In the manner of its construction and writing, he has also produced a volume which skillfully bridges the difficult terrain between popular and academic history and will no doubt serve as a starting point for much future work on the many faceted history of his subject. The approach is a chronological one, starting with the discovery and first working of the mines in the 1850s and tracing their development through a series of booms, depressions and bonanzas into the 1870s. Particular attention is given to the changing size and character of Virginia City, the economic and social centre of the mining district, and James skilfully reconstructs its evolving social structure from a wide range of statistical and qualitative sources. Many authors might have stopped with the declining fortunes of the district in the last quarter of the century, but here we are given two further chapters which take its story on through "post-mining" history and its role in the film and television culture of the 1960s and 1970s to the current transition from resource "exploitation" to tourist "cultivation" as the new economic base of the district. Throughout the book, James frequently enlivens and colours his narrative with personal insights and observations on the district — sometimes almost poetic in their style and content — and in this last section he writes very much as a "local", defending

local traditions in the modern presentation of the Comstock's heritage.

The principal contribution of this book is in the corrections and detail that it provides for an already well rehearsed story. The opening chapters look closely at the discovery and early exploitation of the Comstock, paying particular attention to unraveling the "marbled mixture of myth and reality" which surround many of the key events, while later sections deploy a wide range of new material on all aspects of the economic, legal and social history of the district. Of particular interest is the unraveling of the complex relationship between the development of the industry, the interpretation of mining law, and the political events surrounding Nevada's progress to statehood, together with a wealth of material on the ethnic and social structure of the mining community. But herein also lies one of the few weaknesses of the book. Cultural and urban history are clearly the main focus of James' own interests and are an area in which he demonstrates great expertise—but his emphasis on this subject material does tend to unbalance the book. It is more of a history of Virginia City and its citizens than a rounded industrial history of the district as a whole—but thereagain, the title does imply that. Clearly much further work needs to be done on the economic, technical and archaeological history of the Comstock mines themselves—but here too James has rendered considerable service in bringing together the existing literature and setting a convenient general agenda for that research. Overall this book will establish itself not only as the principal text for the history of this relatively small district of Nevada, but as a major contribution to western history as a whole and an inspiration to mining historians everywhere.

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