



PROJECT MUSE®

In Pursuit of Alaska: An Anthology of Travelers' Tales,
1879–1909 ed. by Jean Morgan Meaux (review)

Eric Heyne

Western American Literature, Volume 49, Number 3, Fall 2014, pp.
313–314 (Review)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/wal.2014.0066>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/556021>

Jean Morgan Meaux, ed., *In Pursuit of Alaska: An Anthology of Travelers' Tales, 1879–1909*. Seattle: U of Washington P, 2013. 284 pp. \$26.95.

This is an odd and attractive little book. At its core are twenty-seven very short firsthand accounts by tourists, explorers, and miners traveling in Alaska between 1879 and 1909. Around this core Meaux has built up layers of context and commentary, including preface and epilogue, individual introductions and afterwords for each of the accounts, a chronology, a note on original sources, a bibliography, photographs, and more. It's all wound together into a coherent package, but not quite like any other book package I've read. There's plenty of scholarship, but this is not exactly a scholarly work. All of the primary materials were previously published, and most are currently available online, so no new ground is broken. The selections have been heavily but invisibly edited; for instance, as Meaux explains, "While cutting, I attempted to delete only unnecessary facts and confusing asides, and, to increase readability, have not interrupted with ellipses" (xxviii). Each section is tantalizingly brief, with the result that I was especially grateful for the context provided by Meaux's before-and-after comments, which sometimes run a third or more the length of the actual primary entries. The preface begins with historical background but then transitions into personal experience. The photographs are fascinating but don't have any specific connections to the readings. So much of the book seems designed for the very casual reader, but every selection footnotes its sources. In every element of its construction this book displays competing urges toward the scholarly and the popular.

Nevertheless, *In Pursuit of Alaska* provides exactly what Meaux promises and is clearly a labor of love beautifully realized by the University of Washington Press. As an introduction to the formative years of Alaska, when the remarkably enduring clichés that currently fuel one Alaska reality TV show after another were first coalescing in the minds of Americans, this book is very handy. Insofar as Meaux's goal is to make us want to read more by these interesting writers, she certainly succeeds. Some of the authors Meaux includes—John Muir, Robert Dunn, Hudson Stuck—are well known, whereas many names were entirely new to me, and there

is a wide range of experience documented, from starving miners and explorers to rich tourists and well-supplied officials. Despite not knowing how exactly I might make future use of this book or to whom exactly I would recommend it, I enjoyed reading it. The individual voices of these twenty-seven authors come through clearly, as does a sense of the style readers expected from their travel writers during this period. I could not help wondering sometimes what sorts of “unnecessary facts and confusing asides” were quietly expunged, not to mention how Meaux cleaned up the more racist and sexist passages associated with what she calls “a xenophobic attitude that was typical of the day” (xxviii). But if it really bothers me, I can always go find the original—and I suspect that’s exactly what Meaux wants me to do.

Eric Heyne
University of Alaska, Fairbanks

R. Mark Liebenow, *Mountains of Light: Seasons of Reflection in Yosemite*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2012. 192 pp. \$16.95.

Like most books about Yosemite National Park *Mountains of Light* is a reworking of John Muir, most obviously *My First Summer in the Sierra* and *The Mountains of California*. Liebenow’s book, however, has an edge missing from nearly everything Muir wrote: Liebenow’s wife has died tragically young, and he turns to the park for solace. I had an unprecedented reaction as I started reading: my stomach turned over. The previous year I had suffered a loss remarkably similar and equally devastating and had turned to the same place for relief.

That place is a big one. I wanted to be alone and so went to relatively obscure Wawona and started climbing until the nearest human was miles away and I had no idea where I was. Liebenow rarely leaves Yosemite Valley itself, and its walls. Still, he and I ended up at approximately the same place. Like the Camino de Santiago and its symbol the scallop shell, with its converging ridges, there are many roads to the spiritual home Liebenow finds but only one destination. I of course cannot describe the destination here. Read the book. Much of what he finds will be unsurprising, simply described