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Book Review: "Yellowstone Place Names: Mirrors of History" by Aubrey Haines

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Publication Information
Yellowstone Place Names, Mirrors of History.

Aubrey Haines is considered to be the preeminent historian of Yellowstone National Park. His Yellowstone Story, first published in 1977 and revised in 1996, is the most comprehensive history written about the first national park. However, Yellowstone Place Names, Mirrors of History comes several years after the comprehensive publication Wonderland Nomenclature (1968) and eight years after Yellowstone Place Names (1988), both by Lee Whittlesey.

In the introduction, Haines discusses various individuals who were responsible for compiling the first inventories of the Park's features and their names. In 1957, Haines was asked to review a place names manuscript by Dr. Max Bauer but nothing more was done with it. He concludes "With passage of more than three decades, a wealth of additional information has been accumulated and this - with the legacy of past efforts - is now presented in a form that should make Yellowstone's place names both useful and interesting." Haines makes no mention of the existence of Wonderland Nomenclature nor does he even cite it in his bibliography. This oversight is a major concern.

The introduction also provides background on how names are applied to geographic features. With personal knowledge of how the naming of features in Yellowstone has worked and how names are applied today, I found this section convoluted and confusing. Again, Whittlesey's publications provide a clearer explanation of this process.

As stated, the focus of this place names book is the "story content of the place names of Yellowstone." Haines goes on to say that an attempt to include all the places names "would result in a meaningless clutter." It bothers me that a historian would not see the importance of discussing all of the names in a region. His decision results in a weaker publication.

Haines has selected what he considers to be the most significant names bestowed upon Yellowstone's features and discusses them in great detail. Each chapter covers names from a particular source: Native Americans, fur traders, prospectors, explorers, surveyors, National Park Service officials, concessionaires, and visitors. While such an arrangement works for a history book, it is not useful as a guidebook. Perhaps that was not the goal. There is a comprehensive index in the back of the book, but that requires flipping continually through the book when you are trying to find out about all the names in one vicinity.

While I found the history interesting, I did not find this work terribly useful. In looking up names of interest to me, there was little information provided, if the name was even listed. The book is also fraught with inconsistencies and either outright mistakes or typographical errors. For example, on page 89 Haines says there are three active names remaining with "devil" in them. Then on page 192, he says there are six. Which is it? Another example if from page 115. Here Haines states that "A.C. Hamilton built his new bathhouse in 1916." This is incorrect in two ways. First, it should be C.A. Hamilton, and second, the Henry Brothers built the bathhouse in 1914.

This book is a disappointment. It will be useful to the tourist who spends a minimal amount of time in the Park. It is a pleasant read for someone who wants...
a broad overview of Yellowstone’s history and does not want to read the two volumes of The Yellowstone Story. However, for the serious scholar studying Yellowstone, it is redundant, hard to use, and full of errors.

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