

WRITERS OF THE PURPLE SAGE

Origins of a National Myth

An Editorial Preface

"In America, the 'West' is not a place. It is an idea. It is the hope for a better time to come, a dream, an impossible fancy...." So begins the introduction to a photographic exhibition by a modern-day Westerner for Italians. The writer goes on to say that "there are, in reality, two Wests. One is that which is the product of European expansion into America, a result of man's restless longing to improve his state of being. A second is the indigenous West, the frontier of aborigines whose ancestors walked to a new continent out of Asia 12,000 years ago."¹

It is in the Southwest that the two blend most clearly. Here the unities of spectacular landscape and "the presence of the past" are obvious, and they continue to inspire visitors and inhabitants alike.

This study of literature centers on images of Arizona and New Mexico around 1900. It includes ideas about California, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, as well as Sonora and Chihuahua in northern Mexico, as they were related to one another by history, climate, landscape, culture, natural resources, finance, and transportation routes.

In the period just after the Civil War the pace of industrialization in America accelerated. The nation gloried in the building up of great cities and in the accomplishments of business and science. With factories to populate, farms to develop and railroads to build, America opened its doors—at least in theory—to immigrants. Pushed, pulled, or enticed, first a few, then a flood of people made the West their home.

When Henry Adams saw the West as "the land of the future" in 1871, cartographers and surveyors were already marking the last prominent features of the wilderness on United States maps. By 1890, considering the shift of population, it seemed the frontier was closed. In 1894, a young writer looking for "material" in Arizona