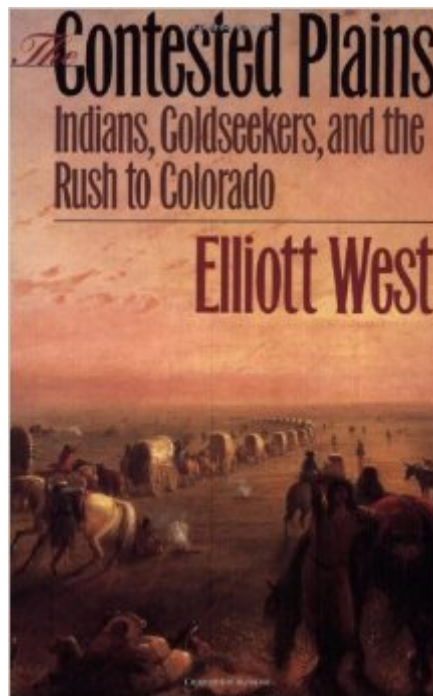


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# The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, And The Rush To Colorado



## Synopsis

Deftly retracing a pivotal chapter in one of America's most dramatic stories, Elliott West chronicles the struggles, triumphs, and defeats of both Indians and whites as they pursued their clashing dreams of greatness in the heart of the continent. The Contested Plains recounts the rise of the Native American horse culture, white Americans' discovery and pursuit of gold in the Rocky Mountains, and the wrenching changes and bitter conflicts that ensued. After centuries of many peoples fashioning many cultures on the plains, the Cheyennes and other tribes found in the horse the power to create a heroic way of life that dominated one of the world's great grasslands. Then the discovery of gold challenged that way of life and led finally to the infamous massacre at Sand Creek and the Indian Wars of the late 1860s. Illuminating both the ancient and more recent history of the plains and eastern Rocky Mountains, West weaves together a brilliant tapestry interlaced with environmental, social, and military history. He treats the "frontier" not as a morally loaded term either in the traditional celebratory sense or the more recent critical sense but as a powerfully unsettling process that shattered an old world. He shows how Indians, goldseekers, haulers, merchants, ranchers, and farmers all contributed to and in turn were consumed by this process, even as the plains themselves were utterly transformed by the clash of cultures and competing visions. Exciting and enormously engaging, The Contested Plains is the first book to examine the Colorado gold rush as the key event in the modern transformation of the central great plains. It also exemplifies a kind of history that respects more fully our rich and ambiguous past a past in which there are many actors but no simple lessons.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Elliott West is an intriguing author and this expansive history of the Plains Indians and the Colorado gold rush is fascinating. He begins by relating the story of the peopling of the central High Plains, how the Spanish-introduced horses thrived on the grasses found there and how the Indians, especially the Cheyenne, made the horses the central aspect of their way of life. He describes next the earliest contacts with Europeans, the early fur trappers and traders along the Santa Fe and other trails. Then he reaches what will be the main thrust of his book: the discovery of gold along Cherry and Dry Creeks near today's Denver by a group of Georgian prospectors in the summer of 1858. Word of their finds reached Kansas City by late August, the rest of the eastern United States by September, and California by October (via the Isthmus of Panama). The rush was on. He tells of the three main river routes open to the gold seekers: the Platte (northern), the Arkansas (southern), and the Smoky Hill (central), the riskiest route because of a shortage of water and deadly weather storms. He explains how the Front Range prospered quickly and towns grew. And he traces how all of this activity devastated the way of life for the Indians, resulting, if not exactly ending, most disgracefully at Sand Creek. The field covered by West's book has been mined often, but rarely with the flair and style he brings to his study. The book combines scholarship and anecdotal reports magnificently, and is a pleasure to read. Highly recommended.

This is a truly outstanding work. In a microcosmic study, West has written a new synthesis of Western American history. Beginning with the the High Plains environment and the resources it provided, West begins with the story of the American Indian tribes who migrated to this area and how the Plains environment affected their society and lifestyle. Then, focusing on the Gold Rush years of 1858 and 1859, he discusses how the mineral resources of the territory attracted the hordes of white settlers to the plains, as well as the nature of the people who came here and the cultural expectations they carried with them. Finally, he discusses how the Native American and white American cultures clashed with each other and the role the environment played in that conflict. West details the power struggle that took place on the Plains and the reasons for the eventual white triumph. This book is an important work in the history of the Overland experience of the 19th century. Alongside works such as John Unruh's "The Plains Across" (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976), it fills in some important pieces of the puzzle for one of the most crucial periods in the history of American nationbuilding.

Professor West's outstanding book finally brings some balance to the discussion of conflicts between Native Americans and white settlers in the 19th Century American West. Using the Colorado Gold Rush as a singularly transforming event, West has documented both camps' accomplishments and depredations in interesting and impeccable detail. His analysis of the detrimental environmental impacts of Indians and settlers alike on the High Plains' limited resources is brilliant. As a native Coloradoan, I believe that *Contested Plains* should be mandatory reading for all students of Colorado history. His settings, characters, conflicts and outcomes are more compelling than any fictional account of Western settlement. *Contested Plains* is an important reminder that Colorado's history was played out in its sparse plains and not in the mountains for which it is best known. Elliot West's book is a triumph and must reading for students of the history of the American West.

The title, *The Contested Plains*, relays Elliot West's desire to tell the story of the 1858 Colorado Gold Rush not from the perspective of the destination, but from the tale of the journey. West is determined to understand the environmental history of the plains as well as the perspective of the Indians who long inhabited them. He not only attempts to understand the land itself, but also how the indigenous peoples, and ultimately the gold seekers, used it. Clearly defined within the story are the concepts of imagination, impact, and power and the story itself is in fact divided into these three subsections: Vision, Gold Rush, and Power. West relates the tale through multiple scopes as he attempts anthropological, geological, economic, cultural, topographical, and biological interpretations of the 19th century transformation of the western Plains environment. West begins by taking the reader back to the land before time in what he calls the "Old World." His clever play on the general Euro centric application of the world is all the more poignant when it is understood that this truly is the Indians' "Old World," and that a new and generally inhospitable future awaits them. After this short introduction, introduced is Spanish explorer Coronado and offers the foreshadowing of the encounter, exchange, and exclusion of the next four centuries. The staples of the Western encounter remain the same. Disease, trade, firearms, and the horse are the four major players in the transformation of Indian lives. This is where West's biological angle emerges. He constructs the interdependence of life between the Indians and the Plains and the fundamental impact that the introduction of the horse levied upon their lifestyle. While horse and firearm prove beneficial and disease fatal, trade has been cast in a more complex light. The same trading systems that permitted the general rise of the Plains Indian became its downfall as settlers pushed westward in search of

increased capital through a marginal gold rush or a now expanded trade system. The encroachment of settlers onto the Plains found fundamentally different uses for the land. While the Cheyenne, or Tsistsistas, had managed a sustainable lifestyle consisting of hunting, grazing, movement, and trade, the relatively static farming productions of the white settler not only consumed valuable land space needed for the Indians, it levied substantial tolls upon the environment itself, particularly in times of drought. Accompanied by a population explosion wholly untenable with the nature of the land, it wasn't long before bloody conflicts between the two groups would arise, with the ultimate victor being the white settler. West has written a comprehensive narrative consisting of several different vantage points, the most emotive being the ultimate transformation and decline of the life of the Plains Indian tribes. Voice has also been given to the land in this account. West is careful to make no judgments on the Indians or the gold seekers and settlers. He is pragmatic when he exclaims that "two cultures acted out compelling visions in a land that could support only one."

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