

## Healy's West: The Life and Times of John J. Healy

**Gordon E. Tolton**

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*Tolton excels at providing a balanced portrayal of Healy, not hesitating to point out shortcomings or exaggerations in personal accounts or historical records.*

In *Healy's West*, Gordon E. Tolton superbly chronicles the many facets of frontiersman John J. Healy's dramatic and often mesmerizing biography. Tolton faces a monumental task to condense Healy's life story into one volume, and his superb writing produces a well-rounded, captivating overview of Healy, revealing both his many grand accomplishments and his trail of shadowy dealings.

John Healy was born in Ireland in 1840, and his boyhood was indelibly marked by the devastation he witnessed during Ireland's Great Famine in the mid-1800s. His family eventually immigrated to New York, and when John turned eighteen, he enlisted in the army and was stationed in Kansas, beginning his lifelong relationship with the land west of the Missouri River.

Tolton's narrative conveys a seemingly nonstop string of Healy's head-shaking adventures, and there is an abundance of favorable and unfavorable episodes from which to select. Healy compiled a lengthy list of business adventures ranging through Montana, Idaho, Canada's Alberta and Yukon regions, and Alaska. Besides his early soldiering, Healy experienced numerous other careers: as a prospector, fur trapper, trader, horse dealer, lawman, editor, merchant, politician, and journalist.

Despite such a diverse range of Healy's ventures, Tolton smoothly transitions from one series of escapades to another without interrupting the flow of the story and always maintaining balance in his portrayal of the man. He appropriately points out those places where the facts are sketchy or missing, and he gives knowledgeable possibilities when trying to bridge informational gaps.

Perhaps Tolton's greatest accomplishment is keeping the story believable. Many incidents in Healy's life sometimes seem fictional—such as the many narrow escapes from seemingly certain death in situations with natives, business competitors, lawmen, and scores of other people—but Tolton is always able to pull the reader back to reality just before the story gets too unbelievable.

Tolton's vast knowledge of the regions where Healy operated gives interesting historical background and perspective. *Healy's West* is a must-read for anyone interested in 1800s Alaskan life or early frontier history of the United States and Canada, or for someone just wanting a compelling, engrossing biography of a relatively obscure figure who had a large impact on local, regional, and national affairs.

JEFF FRIEND (Winter 2015)

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