

The Mullan Road: Carving a Passage through the Frontier Northwest, 1859-62

Paul D. McDermott

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This is a meticulously researched and beautifully illustrated biography of a key player in the settlement of the Pacific Northwest.

In the annals of American frontier exploration, John Mullan (1830-1909), is a largely forgotten figure. Editors Paul McDermott, Ronald E. Grim, and Philip Mobley have, along with nine other contributors, taken on the mission of restoring him to history as the man behind construction of the Mullan Road, which connected the Missouri River with the Columbia River across the northern Rockies.

Meant originally to serve as a 624-mile military wagon road (though that never came to pass), the Mullan Road proved instrumental in the settlement and development of the Pacific Northwest. In decades and centuries to come, railroads and interstate highways occupied much of the same route Mullan himself mapped in the 1850s.

This meticulous and comprehensive study is divided into three sections. Part 1 focuses on John Mullan's biography, including his years as a West Point cadet and his exploration of the Flathead Lake region of Montana. Part 2 examines the building of the "new Northwest Passage," with eloquent essays accompanied by historical maps, original sketches, lithographs, and diagrams, many in full color. The essays that comprise part 3 look at various facets of the expedition and Mullan's relationship with Pacific Northwest Native Americans, along with a new look at his 1863 report to Congress.

To say that this lavishly illustrated book is an homage to John Mullan is to understate the amount of effort and analysis the editors and contributors have brought to this task. By their own admission, Mullan lived a "full, if oftentimes contentious life" with "often unsavory and disappointing career paths." In exhaustive detail, the book informs us about the many hardships Mullan and his exploring crew experienced in previously uncharted territory; it also offers a considerable amount of information concerning the history and geography of the American Northwest.

Thanks to the tireless efforts of this band of amateur and professional historians, those with a special interest in the chronicles of American exploration can delight in the story of a man who remembered the years spent in the northwestern United States as the happiest of his life, "with his saddle as a pillow and pine needles as his mattress."

LEE POLEVOI (Winter 2016)

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