



Mount Rushmore: An Icon Reconsidered (Nation Books)

Jesse Lerner

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In 1877, the U.S. government expropriated the Lakota tribal lands in the Black Hills—the site of Mount Rushmore—by abrogating a major treaty. This injustice rehearsed the choice of Mount Rushmore's sculptor and chief ideologue, Gutzon Borglum, a high-ranking figure in the Ku Klux Klan, who quickly recast the monument, originally conceived as a tourist attraction meant to bolster South Dakota's economy, as a celebration of manifest destiny—the expansion of European settlement across the American West in fulfillment of white racial identity. Mount Rushmore pursues the connection between and among General Custer's defeat in the Black Hills, subsequent Custer battle commemorations, the killings at Wounded Knee, the Lakotas' dispossession of the Black Hill, and Rushmore itself. Larner examines how Rushmore has attained semireligious status as a shrine for pilgrims of Democracy, and contrasts this understanding of the monument with the government's political restrictions on the practice of American Indian religions in the Black Hills. Rushmore's history, Larner argues, is one that has ignored the monument's message of conquest to present a simplistic narrative of national glory. Moreover, even the tour guides at Rushmore don't understand that the land from which it rises belongs to somebody else.



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