



Gila Monsters and Red-Eyed Rattlesnakes: Don Maguire's Arizona Expeditions, 1876-1879

Don Maguire

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Don Maguire's narratives of his three remarkable trading expeditions through Utah, Nevada, California, Arizona, and Mexico during the years 1876-1879 are original and colorful contributions to the literature of the American West. While we know a good deal about other types of Western traders - such as the great fur companies or the settled Indian traders - the life of a wandering peddler among the mining camps and Indian tribes of the Southwest is largely a historiographical blank. Now, this book opens a large window into the experiences of an itinerant peddler. It was Maguire's genius to recognize a brief window of opportunity for trading in the Southwest. He realized that Arizona's mining districts - and those of a good part of Nevada and eastern California - were well populated, yet poorly supplied. And he saw that the barrier presented by hostile Indians, while still significant, had lowered enough to admit with reasonable risk a cautious and well-armed party of traders. This opportunity would only last a few years, for the railroads also perceived the economic potential of the region and were moving in. But Maguire was much more than just an entrepreneur with an eye for the main chance. He obviously enjoyed cutting profitable deals, but he also considered himself a student and used his trading as a way to help facilitate and pay for archaeological and anthropological investigations. Above all, though, Maguire is an eloquent and entertaining reporter. Colorful expressions, unsentimental assessments of the people encountered, the toils and dangers of the journey with its lurking bandits and red-eyed rattlesnakes, and the joys of a warm campfire on a starry Arizona night all emerge memorably from Maguire's pen. His unwavering sense of humor is a constant source of delight.

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