Patricia Nelson Limerick’s book, *Legacy of Conquest*,¹ turned many things upside down in the field of the history of the American West. Among her contributions to our understanding was the revelation that many traditional Western ‘folk heroes’ were very flawed individuals. Her more recent work, *Something in the Soil: Legacies and Reckonings in the New West*, is a stimulating, provocative series of essays. One of them, “Believing in the West”, continues the theme of the first work while exploring the place of religion throughout western history. In that essay Limerick proposes a ‘different kind of Western hero’. She puts it this way:

“It is time for . . . (a) sustainable hero who can replace the old, exhausted and depleted Western heroes. Sustainability in a hero means, very concretely, providing inspiration that sustains the spirit and the soul. While inconsistency can disqualify a conventional hero, a degree of inconsistency is one of the essential qualifications of a sustainable hero. Models of sustainable heroism are drawn from the record of people doing the right thing *some of the time* (italics in the original). Sustainable heroism comes only in moments and glimpses, but they are moments and glimpses in which the universe lights up.”²

Since her essay is about religion in the West, Limerick gives examples of Western clergy who were sustainable heroes. Among them is Episcopal
Bishop Daniel Tuttle, assigned in 1867 to oversee his church’s work in Idaho, Montana, and Utah.

This work portrays another minister who belongs on the list of sustainable Western heroes, George Henry Atkinson. He, we will contend, also “did the right thing some of the time.” How much, and how wrong he was at other times, is what this work is all about. Atkinson was a man of his time, and some of his principles and prejudices present themselves to us in uncomfortable, even offensive ways. Nevertheless, the range of his vision, the scope of his achievements and his unrelenting dedication to his values will call forth admiration and even amazement, if not always agreement.

And, lest it be assumed that he was fully different than the generation of Western heroes whose stories were once in dime novels and still fill our bookshelves, cinemas and television screens, we will even find him confronted by a drunken, pistol-wielding sheriff on a saloon-lined street in a frontier town. Armed only with ‘weapons of the spirit’, he maintained his dignity in the encounter, and prevailed.

Born in Massachusetts in 1819, Atkinson’s values and goals were shaped in New England culture. At the age of twenty-eight, in 1847, he and the former Nancy Bates, his bride of one year, left those familiar surroundings for Oregon. Life in Oregon changed George Atkinson’s outlook and behavior. He soon moved beyond strong attachments to New England ways to become an enthusiastic participant in and advocate for life on the Pacific slope. He played an important role in shaping the life and culture of the Pacific Northwest, even as that life and culture reshaped him.

Home missions had begun as a way of starting churches among easterners as they moved west. Before sending the Atkinsons to Oregon the American Home Missionary Society (AHMS) had already placed agents in northern New England, the Great Lakes states, and Iowa. Their strategies for planting churches, placing missionaries, and creating educational institutions had been tested in those places. Oregon was much farther away than any place where they were at work.

George Atkinson, as he prepared for mission work, was full of hopes, expectations and excitement. As a young Christian influenced by the Second Great Awakening he believed fervently that no one, anywhere, should be beyond the hearing of the Gospel and the reading of the Word of God in the Bible. Raised in Massachusetts and Vermont and educated in those two states and in New Hampshire, he shared “a sense of the responsibility
of religiously strong New England to the whole nation.” He saw universal education as the key to accomplishing that goal.

Things in Oregon did not turn out as George Atkinson, or the AHMS, anticipated. Problems were numerous. Mining mania often drew the attention of the newcomers who were in the Willamette Valley. They had made the difficult six month journey on the Oregon Trail, lured by stories of fabulous opportunity. Whenever or wherever brighter prospects beckoned many were ready to move again. That high level of instability left many communities uncertain about the future.

Atkinson quickly learned that a commission from the AHMS did not carry much weight with new neighbors in Oregon. Most people there were from the Midwest or mid-south, inclined toward the frontier religion of Baptists, Methodists, and Cumberland Presbyterians. Although a few Congregational and Presbyterian ministers and wives greeted the Atkinsons upon their arrival, none had been commissioned, as Atkinson was, by the AHMS. Several had come to the area, early in the 1840s, as independent Congregational and Presbyterian missionaries. In the spring of 1848 the missionaries that had been sent to Indians by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) also arrived in the Willamette Valley. The U.S. Army had compelled them to leave their mission fields because of Indian wars. Thus Atkinson was but one missionary among several, and there was little unity among them about strategies or goals.

It was a new experience for the AHMS to have missionaries deployed so far from their New York office. Atkinson did not receive a reply to his first letter to the Society’s secretaries until nineteen months after reaching Oregon. Facing a situation quite unlike what he and his sponsors had anticipated, he made many important decisions on his own. He branched out beyond his church responsibilities. He designed a system of public education while also starting private academies to train teachers. By mid-career he had become respected leader in the broader community, voicing his views from coast to coast on matters as diverse as railroads, agriculture and Indian policy.

Not all apostles of New England’s ‘Christian civilization’ were clergy. Frederick Billings was a Vermont native. His biographer states that upon arriving in San Francisco in 1849, Billings quickly saw that
“People should be putting down roots more quickly than they were, especially where social services were concerned. His interest in schools, churches, hospitals, orphan asylums, and the like stemmed from a conviction that only through family life would San Francisco prosper.”

The same writer adds that “these were, perhaps, somewhat conventional views, at least for a young man of his background, but they were not widely held (in San Francisco). As one examines the history of San Francisco from 1849 to about 1856 . . . one encounters perhaps two hundred individuals who worked for the common good as Billings defined it.”

Atkinson, like Billings, found his neighbors in the West very different from those he had known in his earlier years, yet he knew that Oregon was going to be his home. This book is about his life in, struggles with, and contributions to that new home.

1. Limerick, *Legacy of Conquest*.
2. -, *Something in the Soil*, 315.
4. See Appendix for a description of the AHMS and other Congregational mission societies.
6. Among the independent home missionaries were Harvey and Emeline Clark, William and Elizabeth Geiger, John Smith Griffin and Desire Griffin, and P.B. and Adelaide Littlejohn. For details on their journey to Oregon see Buan, *A Changing Mission*, 1-35.
7. ABCFM missionaries forced to leave reservations were Henry and Eliza Spalding, Elkanah and Mary Walker, and Cushing and Myra Eells.