

Review: Rethinking Manifest Destiny Expansionism

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BOOK REVIEW

Rethinking Manifest Destiny Expansionism

Aims McGuinness. *Path of Empire: Panama and the California Gold Rush*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008. xiii + 249 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00.

The concept of Manifest Destiny is increasingly invoked by scholars and public commentators to explain the recent surge in U.S. “liberal imperialism”—that is, U.S. efforts to impose free markets and democracy on subjugated nations. Nevertheless, most historians do not link the so-called age of Manifest Destiny (circa 1820s–1850s) with overseas liberal imperialism or even with the history of U.S. foreign relations. Instead, they situate Manifest Destiny expansion within the confines of U.S. “domestic” history, and thus equate it with the conquest of the American West. The few historians who do acknowledge the overseas dimension of Manifest Destiny expansion usually associate it with the efforts of the U.S. South to extend the anti-liberal institution of slavery into the Caribbean basin. That Manifest Destiny expansionism in fact had stronger ties with overseas liberal imperialism than commonly perceived is neatly revealed by Aims McGuinness’s path-breaking study of Panama during the California Gold Rush. McGuinness is able to illuminate these obscure ties not only because *Path of Empire* explores Manifest Destiny expansionism from a fresh, non-U.S. standpoint but because it focuses on a little-studied case of antebellum expansion that entailed the creation of a U.S. commercial empire.

Panama’s importance both to the Gold Rush and to the making of the United States as a continental empire lies in its propitious location: until the 1869 completion of the U.S. transcontinental railroad, it was at the center of the most popular route between the U.S. coasts. Some scholars have explored the rise of the Panama route during the Gold Rush, yet none have examined its local impact with such detail and nuance as McGuinness, who worked in U.S., Panamanian, and Colombian archives. But the contributions of *Path of Empire* go well beyond the fields of Panamanian and Gold Rush history. The book greatly enhances our understanding of the link between U.S. territorial expansion and U.S. liberal imperialism abroad; of the rise of a Pan-Latin American ideal constructed against U.S. expansionism; and of the role that both democratic and racial politics played in shaping Latin America’s encounter with Manifest Destiny expansionism.

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At the center of McGuinness's compelling account stands the Watermelon Slice Incident of 15 April 1856—an event that Panamanians celebrate today as the beginning of their nation's lengthy resistance to U.S. intervention (even though Panama did not become independent from Colombia until 1903). Occurring in Panama City, the incident began as a brawl between local inhabitants and four drunken U.S. transients when one of the transients refused to pay for a slice of watermelon. The incident culminated in an attack by a crowd of poorer city dwellers against hundreds of U.S. transients who were waiting for the California-bound steamer. The attack cost the lives of at least two Panamanians and fifteen transients. The few existing studies of this event tend to view it as a defense of local traditions against the imposition of modern U.S. ways. McGuinness, by contrast, stresses the revolutionary nature of poorer Panamanians' resistance to U.S. expansion. Above all, he roots the incident in two liberal revolutions.

The first was the economic revolution triggered by the influx of California-bound gold rushers. The transit's rise enriched native boatmen, muleteers, porters, and countless other men and women who sold food, alcohol, lodging, and sex to the transients. Like much of the isthmus's population, transit entrepreneurs tended to be working people of African descent (*gente de color*). McGuinness breaks important new ground by showing how the growing economic independence of these small-scale entrepreneurs undermined elite power. He also implies that the transit eroded elite authority by enabling non-elite sectors to adopt transients' cultural practices—practices that challenged the patriarchal ways of local elites.

The transit's democratizing socioeconomic effects were brutally undone when U.S. transportation companies industrialized the transit—first by replacing native dugout canoes with river steamers, then by constructing a transisthmian railroad. As McGuinness shows, the transit's transformation into one of the earliest U.S.-dominated economic enclaves in Latin America was hardly a seamless process, for local inhabitants fiercely defended their economy autonomy. Ultimately, however, they could not prevent the railroad from being completed in 1855. This completion put most local transit entrepreneurs out of business. It also led to the firing of thousands of railroad construction workers (mostly Jamaican immigrants). The economic resentments of poorer inhabitants that underlay the Watermelon Slice Incident thus resulted not from the transit-induced “market revolution” but from the “industrial revolution” that turned the transit zone into what McGuinness calls a “U.S. commercial empire.”

In the end, however, McGuinness views the 1856 incident primarily as an attempt by Panama's *gente de color* to prevent U.S. expansionism from destroying a second liberal revolution that coincided with the Gold Rush: the democratic political revolution driven by the Liberal party. This revolution, which overtook Colombia as a whole, resulted not only in the 1852 abolition of slavery but in the 1853 ratification of what was then the world's perhaps most radical constitution, “one that established universal suffrage with no exclusions based on either

property or color" (p. 86). McGuinness provides an extraordinarily nuanced and detailed analysis of the course of this revolution in Panama City. He excels in describing how the rise of "black political power" in the city's poorer neighborhoods challenged not only elite interests but U.S. efforts to control the transit. His analysis confirms key findings on "popular liberalism" elsewhere in Latin America, such as the seemingly paradoxical role that the liberal language of individual rights could play in the defense of communal interests.

Panama's unique place in the continental U.S. empire also allows McGuinness to illuminate the little-known role of antebellum expansion in shaping Latin American popular liberalism. To be sure, Panama's democratic revolution would have occurred without any U.S. intervention. Still, *Path of Empire* suggests that the rise of the U.S.-controlled transit empowered Panama's popular liberals in inadvertent ways. In particular, the ability of state officials to control popular mobilization was weakened by their efforts to accommodate U.S. interests, by the political meddling of U.S. companies, and by Panama's transformation into a free-trade zone. In addition, the racism of U.S. transients and the U.S. companies' massive hiring of foreign workers created "a more universal sense of rights" (p. 196) that likely strengthened the legitimacy of popular demands and the *gente de color*'s electability to local offices. What is unclear from McGuinness's account is whether Panama's popular liberals were also connected with and perhaps influenced by U.S. residents who held politically progressive views, such as the hundreds of white U.S. workers who struck repeatedly against the railroad company and whose leader was deemed by company officials "a rodman of the red republican school" (p. 63).

On the other hand, *Path of Empire* leaves no doubt that Manifest Destiny expansionism ultimately curbed the revolution's course. The revolution, however, was not blocked by U.S. filibusters seeking to spread southern slavery to Latin America. True, local fears of filibusterism sparked the Watermelon Slice Incident, for the crowd attacked the transients in the false belief that they were pro-slavery filibusters. But *Path of Empire* convincingly shows that Panama's democratic revolution was mainly stymied by the brief U.S. military occupation of Panama City in September 1856. This little-known intervention was requested by both U.S. transportation companies and local elites who feared that the city's *gente de color*, empowered by the April 15 incident, were about to rise up in order to prevent state officials from undoing recent electoral gains made by popular liberals. If local elites feared for their lives and their power, U.S. transportation companies were mainly concerned that such an uprising would destabilize their commercial empire.

In a fascinating analysis, McGuinness traces how anti-U.S. elite Liberals who were outspoken advocates of an incipient Pan-Latin Americanism ended up supporting the first U.S. military intervention in Panamanian history. He also explains how this support exposed the elitism and racism underlying the concepts of "Latin America" and the "Latin race" that were then being developed by anti-U.S. elites throughout the continent. By splintering the Liberal party along

lines of class and color, the U.S. military intervention gravely weakened the main force propelling Panama's democratic revolution. It also allowed state officials to pursue popular Liberals and suppress black political power. Not surprisingly, the intervention reinforced Panama's status as a quasi-U.S. protectorate—a form of domination that would mark the U.S. “informal” empire in the Caribbean basin during the early twentieth century.

In sum, *Path of Empire* forcefully reveals how U.S. continental expansion hinged on the hitherto ignored commercial empire built by U.S. companies in Panama. In so doing, it shows that antebellum U.S. expansion into Latin America cannot simply be equated with territorial conquest and the extension of southern slavery. But we still do not fully understand the precise relationship between these different forms of antebellum expansion, especially between the “informal” imperialism of economic enclaves and the “formal” imperialism of filibusterism. According to McGuinness, U.S. transportation companies in Panama adamantly opposed filibusterism, preferring instead a nonterritorial form of domination. Yet the case of Nicaragua—where William Walker built his short-lived “empire” (1855–1857)—reveals that such companies, after creating economic enclaves, could become willing and indispensable instruments of U.S. filibusters bent on territorial conquest. So even if Panama was spared a filibuster invasion, McGuinness correctly stresses that Panamanians—like many other Latin Americans of the era—had every reason to fear that antebellum U.S. commercial expansion would entail territorial conquest. By exposing this fear and its underlying causes, *Path of Empire* sheds important new light on the origins of anti-Americanism in Latin America. It also reveals that liberal imperialism is more deeply embedded in U.S. national identity than is often imagined.