

Society for Historians of the Early American Republic

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Path of Empire: Panama and the California Gold Rush by Aims McGuinness; Habits of Empire: A History of American Expansion by Walter Nugent

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Source: *Journal of the Early Republic*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (Fall, 2009), pp. 546-551

Published by: University of Pennsylvania Press on behalf of the Society for Historians of the Early American Republic

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40541867>

Accessed: 08-05-2020 21:28 UTC

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Southern History, Vol. 3, Aug. 1937, 259–88). McClintock's anger at Republicans and sympathy for "conciliationists" prevents him from sufficiently addressing the critical issues or assessing events and people fairly. His aim was admirable, however, and it is only through such books that we can begin to come to a new, fresher understanding of the origins of the Civil War and the role of northerners in that contest.

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Path of Empire: Panama and the California Gold Rush. By Aims McGuinness. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008. Pp. 249. Cloth, \$35.00; Paper, \$19.95.)

Habits of Empire: A History of American Expansion. By Walter Nugent. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008. Pp. 387. Maps. Cloth, \$30.00.)

Reviewed by Amy S. Greenberg

Whither the course of empire. Thomas Cole transfixed the American art world in the mid 1830s with a series of allegorical paintings that suggested that the course of empire was inexorable, a cyclical decline from the idyllic pastoral state into ruin. The historiography of empire has not followed this neat linear trajectory. Only slowly has empire crept back into the history of the early American republic from the more immediate past. For decades, diplomatic historians treated America's imperialism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as an unfortunate digression from an otherwise noble history of idealistic settlement-driven expansionism. The idea that antebellum Americans pursued empire was openly rejected by scholars: Didn't the United States incorporate the Spanish, French, British, and Mexican settlers in newly acquired territories into the polity? Weren't politicians and citizens of the period openly disdainful of England's empire? If the United States was imperialist, why didn't it annex all of Mexico when it had the opportunity? Why did it wait until 1898 to annex Hawai'i? Why didn't it grab Cuba in the 1850s?

All these questions have answers, and none of them includes altruism on the part of American politicians. Were it not for sectional tensions in the 1850s, the United States would certainly have pursued further territorial acquisitions, and extending full citizenship rights to the peoples of those territories was hardly the only option politicians debated. Indeed the Mexicans of America's new Southwest never enjoyed the full citizenship rights promised them in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.

The fact that antebellum America was imperialistic is not only acknowledged but also central to the theses of two recent publications. *Path of Empire* is an innovative transnational history of Panama during the U.S. Gold Rush, and *Habits of Empire* is a traditional narrative history of American foreign relations published by a trade press. Vastly different, both adopt a perspective that would have been unthinkable twenty years ago.

Aims McGuinness's *Path of Empire: Panama and the California Gold Rush* is a remarkable first book, a revised University of Michigan dissertation that quite literally approaches an old topic from a new direction. Utilizing a wide array of sources, many unearthed at great pains from archives in Colombia and Panama, McGuinness asks a provocative question: What did the Gold Rush look like from the perspective of Panama? Panama was a key transit route for Gold Rush travelers from the eastern United States, and the site of the first transcontinental railroad, built decades before the Panama Canal. Like other Latin American countries, it was also targeted by filibusters in the 1850s. Thus a very small country took on outsized international significance in the 1850s.

Not surprisingly this transformation had profound internal ramifications for Panama. The railroad, which was originally embraced by the ruling elite as a panacea, instead destroyed the local economy by quickly transporting travelers from one coast to another, completely undermining the indigenous transit system. Growing tensions between Panamanians and Americans ultimately exploded in an 1856 incident over a slice of watermelon that left seventeen people dead outside the Panama City railroad station. In Panama the *Tajada de Sandía*, as it is known, is embraced as a heroic act of resistance against an occupying force. McGuinness uses the incident as a framing device for a complex history in which the meanings of events of international significance were actively contested on both sides of Panama's borders.

This book's virtues are many and varied. McGuinness does a remarkable job charting the effects of American imperialism in Panama, showing

through concrete examples the profound effect of the American presence on the everyday life of average Panamanians, from female cooks to boatmen to the business owners who profited from the American trade. He makes an important contribution to the growing literature on Latin American nation building, and in particular on the role of race in that process, with his detailed account of the creation of a federal state in Panama. McGuinness also links political and social developments in Panama to those in California, proving that imperialism in Panama had effects in both directions, that the informal empire in 1850s Latin America also had an impact on the United States. This is very good transnational history, and a sophisticated “empire study,” that also happens to be excellent Latin American social and political history.

Path of Empire is also notable for being the first modern history of Isthmus travel during the Gold Rush. Scholars studying the Isthmus routes have previously been dependent on flawed works written early in the twentieth century. Although McGuinness unfortunately discounts the Nicaragua route in his account (it rivaled Panama in importance for part of the period considered here), the description of the mechanics and history of Isthmus travel otherwise offers a very fine synthesis and updating of earlier works.

McGuinness makes it clear that he is not writing from the “Panamanian perspective,” not only because he himself is a U.S. citizen, but also because there was no single Panamanian perspective on the chaotic effects of the 1850s. However, what will seem clear to most “Americanists” (another problematic term given the context of inter-American relations) is that he is *not* writing from a U.S. perspective, at least not from the perspective on the Gold Rush with which they are familiar.

McGuinness’s liminal perspective is both a strength and weakness of this book. On one hand, the author’s facility with Panamanian sources and mastery of Latin American historiography makes this an unparalleled resource on developments in the Isthmus. On the other hand, scholars primarily interested in the Gold Rush in the United States may not be engaged by McGuinness’s lengthy discussions of Panamanian politics or the construction of the railroad. More to the point, there is some distance between the main currents of the historiography of the U.S. West and that of Latin America. The author never fully reconciles the competing demands of the two (one of the main challenges of transnational history), and the literatures he engages tend to fall on the Latin American side of the division. As a result *Path of Empire* may not be embraced by more

traditional scholars of the Gold Rush in the manner it certainly deserves. To dismiss a work as irrelevant to U.S. history because it focuses on Latin America is, of course, perfectly in keeping with the very relationship between the United States and Panama charted here, and McGuinness will no doubt appreciate the irony. But any scholar of expansionism who ignores this work does so at his or her own expense.

McGuinness draws a direct line from U.S. continental expansion to the imperialism of the later nineteenth century, and makes a convincing argument that the line travels through Panama. A similar observation is at the heart of another 2008 publication. The thesis of Walter Nugent's *Habits of Empire: A History of American Expansion*, is that each and every transcontinental territorial acquisition before the Civil War taught "well-learned lessons of empire building" (xiv), and that settlement and empire were intimately connected. This book, written for a popular audience, firmly grounds the empire of today in the empire of the antebellum era without otherwise notably diverging from the familiar model of chronologically told diplomatic history focusing on the words and deeds of great statesmen. No Panamanian boatmen here; this is strictly history from the top down.

Nugent's narrative contains some good maps and compelling details, such as the Nipissing Line, one possible boundary between the United States and Canada that was considered and rejected by diplomats during the Revolution and would have given Ontario to the United States. He emphasizes the virulent expansionism of Jefferson and his supporters more than other popular accounts have, makes much of the fact that France sold Louisiana without clear title to the region, and does an excellent job showing the role of the War of 1812 in developing Canadian nationalism, and the U.S.-Mexico War in developing Mexican nationalism.

But scholars looking for an original thesis or new research should look elsewhere. Nugent's argument has the virtue of clarity. He divides the history of American foreign relations into three parts, "Empire I," from the Revolution to the Civil War, in which settlement and expansion advanced hand in hand; "Empire II," from the acquisition of Alaska (Seward's Folly) in 1867 to 1917; and "Empire III" ("Global Empire"), covering the rest of the twentieth century. Because his primary interest is in showing the imperialistic nature of the first stage of empire, "Empire I" takes up the vast majority of the book (236 out of 317 pages of text), and "Empire III" merits only a postscript.

Nugent's thesis that demographic imbalance played a key role in the creation of empire doesn't always hold together. In the case of Texas the claim is clearly merited, but in some cases, as with Florida in the second decade of the nineteenth century, settlement seems to have been of minor importance. Similarly, settlement seems to have played no role at all in the acquisition of 1840s California. Nor is his political account fully realized. Although he notes the expansionist impulse of the Whigs in his detailed discussion of William Seward in the 1860s, he fails to discuss Whig notions of expansionism during the antebellum decades, in other words, when the Whig party actually existed.

Because this is a synthesis, perhaps it is unfair to critique his use of other secondary sources, but much of the material Nugent covers in early chapters will be familiar to readers of Frank Owsley and Gene Smith's *Filibusters and Expansionists: Jeffersonian Manifest Destiny, 1800–1821* (Tuscaloosa, AL, 1997). In a few cases he relies heavily on secondary sources written in the first half of the twentieth century, not all of which could be considered classics. In other cases, recent works appear in footnotes, but the arguments of those works seem to have made little if any impact on Nugent's text. *Habits of Empire* would be suitable for use as a textbook in a course on international relations or American expansionism. But it is less engagingly written and ultimately less persuasive than two competing works that cover much of this same material: Lars Schoultz's *Beneath the United States: A History of U.S. Policy Towards Latin America* (Cambridge, MA, 1998) and Fred Anderson and Andrew Cayton's *The Dominion of War: Empire and Liberty in North America, 1500–2000* (New York, 2005).

Some of the author's claims may also confuse rather than enlighten undergraduates. Nugent states that most of the early settlers of the Oregon territory were southerners who for some unexplained reason "refused to bring slavery to Oregon" (158). But some pages later detailed statistics seem to contradict this fact, and suggest instead that the majority of the "southern" settlers actually listed Missouri as their previous home because it was a key point of embarkation for the Oregon Trail. Robert J. Walker is presented in one chapter as a representative southerner who supported Manifest Destiny, but in a later chapter Nugent explains that Walker was in fact born and raised in Pennsylvania, and didn't move to Mississippi until his mid twenties. One could also differ with his claim that annexing Canada was "rarely more than wistful rhetoric" after 1815 (74).

Habits of Empire certainly has its strengths. Nugent's many decades of work in the field of international relations has given him an undeniable expertise and comfort with the words and actions of generations of diplomats. He makes ample use of sources in Spanish, and gives attention to many non-U.S. perspectives. Most significantly, Nugent highlights the fact that imperialism was central to the foreign policy of the antebellum period. In this he shows his intellectual kinship with McGuinness, and proves that despite their many differences, *Habits of Empire* and *Path of Empire* share far more than similar titles.

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Freedom's Prophet: Bishop Richard Allen, the AME Church, and the Black Founding Fathers. By Richard S. Newman. (New York: New York University Press, 2008. Pp. 359. Cloth, \$34.99.)

Reviewed by Patrick Rael

In the pantheon of black heroes, Richard Allen looms large. He was a man of “firsts,” founding the first independent black church, coauthoring the first black protest pamphlet, and organizing the first black national convention. Yet despite these accomplishments, Allen is difficult to know. He belonged to—indeed, heralded—the very first generation of free African Americans to step into American public life. As such, his traces in the historical record pale in comparison to the giants who followed him. Among luminaries such as Douglass, Washington, Du Bois, and King, Allen's name is rarely mentioned. Recent works have resuscitated the memories of figures such as James Forten and Mary Ann Shadd Cary, but Allen, perhaps first among firsts, has gone without a champion.

This quintessential modern biography of an important African American is thus timely. In narrating the black founder's life, Richard Newman sets Allen in his time and place, engaging many critical debates animating the field. Newman tells Allen's story in passionate and lively prose, start-