

The American Elsewhere: Adventure and Manliness in the Age of Expansion

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Review

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Taking aim at men who ventured west from the War of 1812 to the Mexican War, and then wrote about their experiences, Jimmy Bryan uncovers a world of romance and sentiment seemingly at odds with the rough and tumble world these men explored. The contrast, however, makes sense in the context of the “elsewhere,” and it’s here that Bryan’s analysis of adventuring men in the first half of the 19th century shines. The “elsewhere” is not necessarily a single, geographic place; instead it is an imagining of the west that tied adventurism to the growth of the United States. By tracing the escapades of these adventurers, Bryan categorizes them in three different ways. First, some of these men were explorers—though not transcendentalists seeking the sublime—who sought a type of masculine freedom free from the confines of domesticity. Next, the patriot warrior sought adventure not only to shape his own future, but that of the nation too. Last, the man of enterprise imagined the elsewhere as the future location of his success, a veritable wilderness brimming with opportunity.

These adventurelogues allowed men to do two things. First, the growing importance of print culture permitted them to read examples of other men who traveled into the west. Second, it allowed them to copy their emotion-laden prose when they wrote accounts of their own. This loop reinforced the style of the adventure narrative and made it one of the most popular form of writing in the first half of the nineteenth century. These texts reinforced ideas about manliness, in particular the ties between men, the wilderness, and violence. Frequently, though, men loosed from the bounds of civility strayed too near “savagery” for their own good. Charles W. Webber, for example, filled his novels with characters that abandoned civilized restraints to fulfill their violent desires. This “unrestraint” likewise allowed adventurers to appropriate Native forms of manliness, that, in the end, rendered them exceptional (156). What resulted was a style of writing that became popular not just among non-fiction writers, but novelists as well. Familiar writers like Francis Parkman, whose uneventful journey west nevertheless sparked his imagination, and Washington Irving modeled how men could use western experiences to hone an image, a lesson that came to fruition with John C. Frémont.

Although adventurers seemed to revel in the more violent aspects of the elsewhere, Bryan notes that sentimentality and companionship worked in tandem to soften a man’s rough edges. Though it seemed that not everyone appreciated the overtures. On an expedition to Santa Fe, James J. Webb, for example, implored his friends to restrain themselves from singing additional

renditions of “Home, Sweet Home,” and in the true spirit of individualism and unrestraint, proposed a resolution that would prevent further outbreaks of “feelings of tenderness” (164-165). Yet such feelings permeated the interactions between manly adventurers and women in the elsewhere. For young men used to the constrained and controlled dictates of nineteenth century courtship, the “dark-eyed señoritas” lulled lonely men from their ethnocentrism with their immodesty (178). Adventuring men in the southwest saw these women as the “reward for achieving their superior manliness and as the bounty to the land that they would liberate” (190). As a type of damsel-in-distress trope, American men shrugged off concerns about racial superiority, at least when sex was at stake.

Bryan’s analysis of men in the elsewhere is informed not just by accounts written by men who went on adventures, but also by novels and paintings. This complex set of sources allows him to engage with multiple historiographies and modes of criticism. Yet he does an expert job of locating his work within those debates and likewise informs readers about where he is making unique contributions and where he is following the work of others. This work also builds on the author’s previous publications, which deal with men, violence, and the west. It is also a model for young scholars on how to expand a narrow dissertation topic and, over the course of a career, explore alternative facets of the original project as a way of moving beyond one’s original ideas and making more significant and lasting historiographical contributions. In this work, Bryan does just that, and for it, he should be commended.

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