

American Aristocrats: A Family, a Fortune, and the Making of American Capitalism

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Review

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In 1834, William Marshall Anderson, a young lawyer from Louisville, decided to join a fur-trading expedition to the Rocky Mountains. Only twenty-seven years old and from a wealthy and prominent family, William seemed an unlikely addition to the venture. He hoped the rigors of the trail would strengthen him after a bout with yellow fever but perhaps he also sought connection to family traditions. His father was a Revolutionary War hero who crossed the Appalachians and acquired vast landholdings in Kentucky and Ohio, while his uncle, William Clark, garnered fame for his own western explorations with his partner Meriwether Lewis. A few days into the journey William wrote in his journal: “We are finally up and off for the west, the far west. Where is that? I had always believed I had been born in the West; but no, here we go in search of it, farther on, farther on.” (179-80) William’s reflection on the meaning of the term “west,” part of a voluminous collection of Anderson family papers spanning the Revolution to Reconstruction, points to the heart of Harry S. Stout’s *American Aristocrats*. Stout uses several generations of the Andersons as a lens through which to view the nation’s remarkable expansion, arguing on p. 25 that the “vast movement” of settlers west “was the greatest single fact of nineteenth-century American history.” The acquisition of land became the driving force for both the family and the nation.

The family’s patriarch, Richard Anderson, Sr. set the template when he accepted the position of Surveyor-General for the newly opened Virginia Military District soon after the Revolutionary War. He settled with his slaves near Louisville in a fortified home named Soldier’s Retreat and began surveying the millions of acres of Ohio Valley land set aside for veterans, or the speculators who had purchased their claims. Anderson himself purchased a vast quantity of land, establishing a privileged foothold for a growing family that would ultimately include sixteen children with his two wives. Stout devotes the bulk of his attention to those children, especially Richard Jr., Robert, William, and Charles, tracing how their efforts to establish independent and prosperous lives intersected with major events and themes in early republic and antebellum history.

As they came of age, the Anderson children pursued both public service and personal wealth. Robert was the least engaged in the latter since he devoted his life to military service, retiring a hero in the North after his courageous command of Fort Sumter in 1861. His brothers, though, restlessly sought advancement. Richard Jr. served

as a congressman from Kentucky but struggled to make ends meet. His nationalist perspective and admiration for Monroe's doctrine of assertive diplomacy in Central and South America drew him to the diplomatic field, but so too did the chance to make money. An impressive salary led him to the post as America's envoy to Columbia in the early 1830s, where he fell ill and died. Charles and William both practiced law and became involved in Whig and Democratic politics, respectively, and Charles eventually became governor of Ohio. Most of the male Andersons sought wealth through the acquisition of land, through either marriage or a constant process of buying and selling, just as their father had done.

Stout connects the Andersons' restless pursuit of landed wealth to the energies that drove America's westward expansion but is quick to leaven this triumphal tale with reminders of the costs that accompanied the expansion of the nation and the rise of one family. Land acquisition dispossessed the Native Americans and westward expansion strengthened the institution of slavery. Robert Anderson was a reluctant participant in the former, serving first as an officer in the Black Hawk War and then helping to supervise the Cherokee removal. On p. 197, Stout quotes Robert's letter to his mother from the Cherokee Agency: "They go, not by their own free will and choice. . . . They go, compelled by stern unyielding necessity. Their homes are required by the whites—and they must seek others in a distant and strange land." The family's relationship to slavery was more complicated. Born and raised within a slaveholding family in Kentucky, most of the second generation moved into Ohio and away from slavery, although some remained entangled in the virulent racism that defined much of Jacksonian and antebellum America. All stayed loyal to the Union when the South seceded but William, in particular, felt alienated from northern political culture in the war years. He was Catholic and a Democrat—an outlier in his family—and was deeply suspicious of the Republican agenda. On p. 295 Stout notes that William called emancipation "a campaign to 'Africanize the South and make the whites the serfs and vassals of the negro population.'" He even flirted with the idea of joining a possible colony of ex-Confederates after being hired to scout out land in Mexico.

Stout argues that the beneficiaries of America's expansion, not just the marginalized, paid a price for their pursuit of wealth. On p. 18 he claims that the abundance of land "all too easily tempted Americans to trade security for excessive risk—until the costs of insecurity became so steep that anxieties set in that could prove crushing." Anxiety then, Stout notes on p. xvi, is "the controlling interpretive theme" of *American Aristocrats*. But the evidence for that assertion does not follow. Certainly many of the Andersons avidly bought and sold land and discussed their fears of reversals of fortune in their many letters to one another, especially during the economic busts that inevitably followed boom periods. However, for long stretches of the book the subject of land recedes far into the background, especially as various family members reached a more settled maturity. Stout asserts the centrality of anxiety but does not prove it.

That discrepancy points to the strengths and weaknesses of *American Aristocrats*. This is a book built off a voluminous collection of family papers, augmented with pertinent secondary sources. However, there is little research in other primary sources,

such as newspapers, land records and other government documents, or contemporaries' correspondence. That limits Stout's ability to draw larger arguments out of the Andersons' experiences. Still, he has done a masterful job of crafting a narrative, stitching together a fascinating and sprawling story of one family that witnessed and participated in America's rapid expansion across a continent.

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