

Review Essay

Custer's Trials: A Life on the Frontier of a New America. By *T. J. Stiles*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015. xxi + 582 pp. Photographs, maps, illustrations, notes, index. Cloth, \$30.00 ISBN: 978-0-307-59264-4.

Civil War Wests: Testing the Limits of the United States. Edited by *Adam Arenson and Andrew R. Graybill*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2015. x + 321 pp. Photographs, maps, illustrations, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$29.95. ISBN: 978-0-520-28379-4.

Empire and Liberty: The Civil War and the West. Edited by *Virginia Scharff*. Oakland: University of California Press in association with Autry National Center of the American West, 2015. xv + 224 pp. Photographs, maps, illustrations, notes, index. Cloth, \$34.95. ISBN: 978-0-520-28126-4.

Reviewed by Michael S. Green

In 1861, the North and South went to war for the West. Although that statement may seem oversimplified and extreme, it goes to the heart of the matter: Southerners wanted to spread slavery into the new western territories, and Northerners had used their clout in the electoral college to elect Abraham Lincoln, whose party had committed itself to stopping the growth of the peculiar institution. The rest of that story is well known, but the same cannot be said for how the West shaped the war and how the war shaped the West.

That omission finally is being remedied. In particular, the writings of Elliott West and Heather Cox Richardson have inspired other scholars to look more closely at how the “Reconstruction” of the North and South encouraged and required a “Greater Reconstruction” of the North, South, and West. The Civil War influenced the West in innumerable ways: it fostered industrialization and a more expansive government; it led to such transformative legislation as the Homestead Act and the Pacific Railroad Act; and it altered the federal government’s relationship to the states and the general public. That relationship then framed the debate that ensued over Reconstruction in the South. But that debate over federal power, and the discourse and violence over race and civil rights that accompanied it, also affected and reflected the trans-

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Mississippi West. Scholars know a great deal about the Civil War and Reconstruction, and a great deal about the West, but less about where the twain has met.

These three books contribute significantly to changing that state of affairs. Directly and indirectly, they link the events, ideas, and themes of the Civil War era, including the antebellum and postbellum periods, with the West. How they do so varies considerably, mainly because their formats differ. One book is a biography that limns the era through one of its most fascinating characters, and the other two works are essay collections, with the usual variety of approaches to be expected in such volumes. But all three books address how the Civil War and the West affected American society, economics, politics, and each other.

Stiles's Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of Custer examines those topics in the context of a mythic, complicated figure, a romantic in an increasingly unromantic time. Stiles manages to be critical and sympathetic in helping us better understand Custer as a bridge between an earlier America and the new world the Civil War made. The Custer who emerges from Stiles's study is an enormous bundle of contradictions: honest in some ways but philandering and deceitful in others, loving but self-centered, dedicated to causes he believed in but dedicated even more to himself, a brave fighter but increasingly unwilling to fight in the way that changing times demanded. In a supporting role to which he managed to draw great attention, Custer had a hand in the Civil War, the event that triggered a more modern nation-state (certainly more modern than Custer preferred) that sought to take control of the West from those who had lived on it for generations in order to feed, literally and figuratively, what would become an American empire. "I want to explain why his celebrity, and notoriety, spanned both the Civil War and his years on the frontier, resting on neither exclusively but incorporating both," Stiles writes, because Custer "lived on a chronological frontier even more than a geographical one. He and his contemporaries experienced the greatest wave of change ever to strike American society. . . . This moment is when the modern came. The emerging new order was industrial, corporate, scientific, and legal—diminishing the individualistic, the romantic, and the heroic in American culture" (p. xvi). That new order also diminished Custer, but his participation in making it meant that he helped to render himself obsolete: as a Civil War officer, seeking to maintain the Union and then end slavery, he aided the more industrial North in establishing its economic primacy over the more agricultural South; as a frontier Indian fighter, trying to clear the land, he contributed to making possible the development of a trans-Mississippi West in which his type of individualism and romanticism would be unlikely to survive in a new industrial

order of railroads and large-scale capitalism. As Stiles writes, “Custer lived his entire adult life on the crest of this transformation—yet he was personally unreconciled to it. Of the many contradictions in his life and personality, this is the overarching theme: he never adapted to the very modernity he helped to create” (p. xviii).

Yet, while Custer fulfilled his goals of making history and earning fame, Stiles makes the case that Custer’s place in our history has been misunderstood. He has received too much attention for his biggest failure (Little Bighorn) and failings (pride and arrogance), and too little for who and what else he was: a representative of one country that was dying and another that was being born. Stiles breaks down Custer’s “trials” mostly chronologically, but also topically, with chapters ranging from “The Accused” and “The Victor” to “The Indian Killer” and “The Accuser.” Those trials included disciplinary issues caused by his high-spiritedness at West Point and his courts-martial while in the military, troubles in his marriage and his financial peccadilloes, his failed efforts as a writer and his successes and failures as a warrior.

Ultimately, though, Stiles argues that for Custer, the biggest trial was how he would adapt to the new world he helped to create. His solution was not to do so. Part of his problem was, as Stiles writes, that “he refused to let go of the past” (p. 363). He involved himself in politics, but opposed Reconstruction and civil rights for African Americans. He continued to fight, and often fought well, but as the army increasingly needed administrative talent in dealing with people, materiel, and diplomacy, Custer proved unsuccessful or inept at managing all of these, as well as at managing himself. His impulsiveness and his pride fit the image of the “cavalier in buckskin,” as Robert Utley’s earlier biography of him was called, but not with the needs of a modernizing army and nation. “The relationship between the United States and the high-plains nations was one of an industrializing, rapidly growing, and aggressive society overwhelming far smaller and less powerful peoples who relied on hunting, gathering, and trade,” Stiles writes. Custer did well at being aggressive and overwhelming the less powerful people, but anything involving a “relationship” and the “industrializing” country proved to be another matter entirely (p. 325).

In this way, Custer reflected the dichotomy between the West as it existed and was evolving, and the West as popular thought depicted it in the twentieth century. He fit the incorrect image of the heroic cowboy fighting a strange people and clearing the land of savagery so that civilization could progress. In reality, the West was a highly urbanized place with a great deal of social diversity and societal discrimination, with an economy based on new technologies and corporate approaches in mining and farming. Stiles notes that as an Indian fighter who derided

and denigrated Native Americans, Custer “was no outlier,” and thus the irony of his image and its formation: “From the Civil War through his two battles on the Yellowstone, he proved decisive, not reckless; shrewd, not foolish. In every other regard, he danced along the emerging modern world, unable to adapt to it. He failed in the new sphere of finance, rejected new thinking about equality, and wrote antiquated prose. He offended his military superiors, mismanaged subordinates, alienated civilian authorities, meddled inappropriately in politics, endangered his marriage, and gambled away his estate. Again and again he saved himself through his ability to fight. And yet, ironically, we now remember him as a bad commander” when he might be best remembered as exemplifying the transition of the West and the connections between that transition and the Civil War—and how not to adapt to them (pp. 455–56).

While similarly depicting an uncertain West on the cusp of a new industrial order, the two collections contrast with Stiles’s work in focusing directly on the Civil War and the West. But because they comprise essays by a diverse group of authors, they too provide a variety of approaches and analytical frameworks. *Civil War Wests* (the plural serving as a reminder of the danger of defining any region, era, or group monolithically) fits a more traditional mold: Adam Arenson, now of Manhattan College, and Andrew Graybill, codirector of the Clements Center for Southwestern Studies at Southern Methodist University, gathered scholars for conferences, with these chapters being among the results. In *Empire and Liberty*, a title that suggests the breadth and depth of the issues linked to the Civil War and the West, editor Virginia Scharff of the University of New Mexico worked with several authors to write historical essays based on artifacts in a superb exhibit at the Autry National Center in Los Angeles. But both volumes ultimately provide information and analysis that help us understand how the Civil War, the trans-Mississippi West, and changes in American society reinforced one another.

The three sections of *Civil War Wests* suggest the diversity of peoples and places in the American West, and thus the difficulty of making overarching interpretations. The first part, “Borderlands in Conflict,” considers the war’s geopolitical implications beyond the traditional military theaters or even the West. The essays, including James Jewell’s on the Pacific Northwest and Megan Kate Nelson’s on the Confederate quest for New Mexico, underscore the importance of understanding borderlands—not only in terms of the increasingly popular study of the southwestern United States and Mexico, but along other borders—and thus might inspire useful comparisons with the Civil War border states teetering between North and South. “The Civil War Is Not Over” focuses mainly on Reconstruction and the war’s long-term impact on

individual lives. The chapters in this section detail how the war and its aftermath affected people of color, as well as veterans who moved west for a new beginning—a subject that has been part of the literature on several other major American wars, but not so much on the Civil War. The final section, “Borders of Citizenship,” probes citizenship debates not only for African Americans, but also for women and Native Americans, and how these groups all influenced one another. Steven Hahn’s epilogue builds on these essays, and on the earlier work of West and Richardson, to suggest how these studies can help us “reposition ourselves in relation to the course of American development. We may, that is, be able to look at the unfolding of U.S. history as much from West to East and South to North as from East to West and North to South, interrogating centers and peripheries as well as nations and regions” (p. 272).

Empire and Liberty focuses on both traditional and less expected subjects, often with a twist. One such twist is how the exhibition drives the narrative and analysis: the authors build their essays around such artifacts as wedding dresses, John Gast’s painting *American Progress*, a bill of sale for slaves, and a sword that belonged to a Mexican native of California. Also, as in Stiles’s study, Native Americans receive attention of the sort they have too frequently lacked in works on the Civil War and Reconstruction, although *Empire and Liberty* tends to pay more attention to how the Civil War affected Hispanic people than does *Civil War Wests*. As Scharff’s introduction notes, “Throughout our nation’s history, every lunge toward the west carried with it the question of how to deal with the people already in place, as well as how to negotiate the humanity of Americans held in slavery” (p. 3). Several chapters take into account the violence and discrimination that Native Americans and Hispanics suffered, separately from and in common with African Americans, forcing readers to reckon with how racism shaped perception and policy throughout the nation.

Indeed, one of the benefits of this attention to the Civil War and the West is that more traditional subjects get a fresh look—and some interesting connections emerge. Stiles’s depiction of Custer comes to mind in John Mack Faragher’s study in *Empire and Liberty* of “the checkered careers of John Charles and Jessie Benton Frémont, characters who were simultaneously larger than life and less than they claimed.” Faragher examines how, like Custer, they “track the similarly checkered career of that unique American construction, an empire for liberty,” meaning liberty for slaves but also the liberty to make money—or, as in their cases, to try to make money and to fail (p. 28). In the same work, Jonathan Earle’s chapter on Kansas begins, “The long Civil War in the American West began with a stolen election”: the first election

in that territory, which presaged violence that had a connection to New England and its industrial base—a reminder of the origins of the war and its widespread economic effects (p. 50). Diane Mutti Burke's essay in *Civil War Wests* on forced evictions in the Kansas-Missouri borderlands invites comparison with several essays in both books on treatment of people of color and white Southerners, with Stiles's assessment of Custer's and the army's efforts to force Native Americans to move, and with other such forced exoduses throughout history.

Scharff points out that the chapters in *Empire and Liberty* cannot “encompass the entire history of the long struggle over land and freedom, nationhood and citizenship, justice and power, diversity and unity. They cannot tell the tangled tale of continental conquest that spawned a national cataclysm” (p. 8). In so doing, she reminds us that in fact all of these subjects are strands that form the whole, both coherent and incoherent, of American history—and not just that of the Civil War or the West—and thus why the Civil War *and* the West are connected and well worth studying. These three works, in alternately exciting and moving and thought-provoking ways, help us understand that fact and whet our appetites to learn more about a topic that has long needed attention and at long last is receiving it.

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