

### Empire and Liberty: The Civil War and the West

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## Review

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**Scharff, Virginia** *Empire and Liberty: The Civil War and the West*. University of California Press, \$34.95 ISBN 9780520281264

### The Inseparable Histories of the Civil War and the American West

Virginia Scharff has put together in *Empire and Liberty* a book that joins together two epic stories in American History; its westward expansion and the Civil War. The writers within this edited work, remind us, that many events surrounding the Civil War played out west of the Mississippi River. In fact after reading *Empire and Liberty*, readers will see that the history of America's westward expansion and the Civil War are intertwined to the point it is impossible to separate the two. As a Distinguished Professor of History at the University of New Mexico and Director of the Center for Southwest, she is more than qualified to edit a book on the American West.

In addition to being an edited work, *Empire and Liberty* is a companion volume to "The Civil War and the West," a museum exhibit at the Aury National Museum in Los Angeles, California, which Scharff co-curated. Scharff also wrote the introduction and chapter eight, "Empire and Liberty in the Middle of Nowhere." As a companion volume, the book is filled with photographs of exhibit objects, which include a bill of sales for slaves held in bondage in Texas, a flag that once belonged to John Fremont, made by his wife, maps of western states, an assortment of weapons, and works of art. Seventeen objects from the exhibit are reproduced in the book in color plates.

The chapters in the book are loosely organized into events that took place in the west before the Civil War, during the war, and events following the war, even many decades later. All the chapters deal in some way with issues of slavery as it was practiced in the west whether it was African American slavery in Texas, Mexican-American peonage in New Mexico, or Chinese Coolie labor in California. The chapters are arranged loosely in chronological order.

Chapters one, two, and three deal with African slavery in Texas, the effort by many to keep the peculiar institution out of the west, and the violence along the Kansas Missouri border. Some fighting in the west did occur during the Civil War as chapters four, five, and six relate. Westerners took part in major battles in Missouri, Arkansas, and east of the Mississippi. Military actions in the west tended to be smaller affairs, mostly skirmishes and campaigns against Native Americans, which intensified during the war. Chapter five "When the Stars Fell From the Sky: The Cherokee Nation and Autonomy in the Civil War" by Kent Blansett is especially poignant and well written. Blansett carefully explains how the Cherokee under Stand Watie came to fight with Confederate forces, and how the Cherokee persisted in protecting their status as a sovereign nation.

Adam Arenson, in "John Gast's American Progress: Using Manifest Destiny to Forget the Civil War and Reconstruction," writes persuasively that the idea of progress, especially the building of railroads, was used to gloss over the violence and broken promises of the conflict and its aftermath. Railroads, Arenson contends, became symbols of progress that forged a union bound by bands of iron, which promised a better life for all.

Chapters nine, ten, and eleven concern the aftermath of the war and how it affected the west. In "The Not-So-Free Labor in the American Southwest," Maria E. Montoya, in chapter nine, writes about the lingering problems of peonage in New Mexico and how, despite the end of the war and the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, slavery persisted in the American Southwest.

In each chapter the authors use the objects from the exhibit as a starting point of their respective essay. For example Chapter One "The Price of Slavery Across Empire," includes several photographs of several bill of sales for groups of slaves sold in Texas. The essay by Brenda E. Stevenson, in part, examines the bill of sales, demonstrating how they document the dividing up and selling off of slave families, some family members being sold to Texans, to work in its expanding cotton culture, while others remained in the older slave states.

In a book of this sort, one often finds the writing to be weak, laudatory, and not very scholarly, but this is not the case with *Empire and Liberty*, for the writing is scholarly, well documented, and thought provoking. Some might argue that it is the strong point of the book. Chapters by John Mack Faragher, Durwood Ball, and Maria E. Montoya come to mind.

One finishes reading this book wishing to see the exhibit at the Autry National Museum (it ends January 3, 2016) and convinced that the study of physical objects (and their curation) is just as legitimate a way to study history as reading or writing monographs. The book includes a bibliography and a list of illustrations; footnotes are at the end of every chapter. In *Empire and Liberty*, Civil War enthusiasts will find a well written, well documented, and thought provoking book. Many readers will be surprised how important a role the west and the story of America's westward expansion played in the Civil War. The many photographs found within the pages of this fine book only enhance its value.

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