

Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire

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Review

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Greenberg, Amy S. *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire*. Cambridge University Press, \$25.99 ISBN 521600804

Gendered Expansion

American Empire and types of Manhood

Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire is a complex study of American expansionism -- both westward (indeed, as far west as Hawaii) and southward -- in the years before the Civil War. Among other things, historian Amy S. Greenberg challenges the theory that antebellum expansionists were engaged in something different from the sort of imperialism we have tended to associate with the end of the nineteenth century, in other words, something other than conquest. Rather, Greenberg argues, this was conquest pure and simple, even if it masqueraded under terms such as "national consolidation." More central to the book's purpose, however, is Greenberg's examination of the ways in which expansionism was "gendered," which is to say that the language antebellum expansionists used to describe their agendas, their experiences, and the people whose lands they targeted, was inflected with, and also profoundly influenced, Victorian notions about womanhood and manhood (as well as race and class).

Greenberg hones in specifically on two distinct visions of manhood, which in turn undergirded two distinct types of expansionist project and process. Martial manhood, favored by those who felt that Victorian men were becoming too soft, yielded what Greenberg calls "aggressive expansionism": the employment of arms and warfare to claim new lands -- and their presumably weaker, lazier, less "manly" (or in the case of the women, cheerfully submissive) native inhabitants -- for the American nation. (Here, it should be noted, Greenberg offers a challenge to historians who have argued that cultural anxiety about Victorian men's increasing "feminization" and domestication arose only in the post-Civil War period.) Restrained manhood, in contrast, was the ideal of the

pious, the temperate, and the self-controlled, and it fostered not military expansionism but expansionism by means of commercial and missionary activity. In *Manifest Manhood*, we witness these two notions of manhood competing for dominance on the battlefield of "manifest destiny," with martial manhood gaining the advantage, helping in turn to set the stage for the great martial drama of the Civil War itself.

Manifest Manhood is richly researched and gracefully written, full of fascinating accounts of individual (and sometimes stunningly delusional) filibusters and their adventures; entertaining tales of "boosters" and other travelers, both men and women; careful delineations of the sort of "logic" expansionists devised (e. g., what Greenberg calls "geographical determinism," as in the idea that Cuba would not exist but for the accumulated silt from the outflow of the Mississippi River) to justify their claims, and to thwart opponents' concerns about the assimilability of targeted places and peoples into an enlarged American landscape and population (e. g., "the climate in Cuba is too tropical!" "the Cuban people are too dark skinned!"). The many images Greenberg has included in the book -- lithographs, paintings, maps, cartoons -- are both illuminating and delightful, and she has taken great care to explain them in detail and to clarify aspects that might be difficult for readers to grasp or, speaking for myopic myself, even see! Indeed, sometimes Greenberg provides almost too much detail to accompany the images, a complaint one might also make in connection with some of her anecdotes, or her footnotes, which are occasionally overly discursive. But these are minor quibbles indeed. Historians of nineteenth-century America specializing in expansionism/imperialism and the frontier; gender, masculinity, and manhood; and antebellum conditions and tensions will all benefit from a careful reading of *Manifest Manhood*.

Elizabeth D. Leonard is the John J. and Cornelia V. Gibson Professor of History at Colby College, and the author of three books on the Civil War era: Yankee Women: Gender Battles in the Civil War (1994); All the Daring of the Soldier: Women of the Civil War Armies (1999); and Lincoln's Avengers: Justice, Revenge, and Reunion after the Civil War (2004). She is currently at work on two different book-length projects: a biography of the Civil War era judge advocate general, Joseph Holt, and a study of the post-1865 U. S. army in the Indian wars.