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Interview

THE AMERICAN ELSEWHERE: ADVENTURE AND MANLINESS IN THE AGE OF EXPANSION

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Interview with Jimmy L. Bryan Jr., author of *The American Elsewhere: Adventure and Manliness in the Age of Expansion* Interviewed by Tom Barber

Civil War Book Review (CWBR): Today the Civil War Book Review is pleased to speak with Jimmy L. Bryan Jr., Associate Professor of History at Lamar University and author of *More Zeal Than Discretion: The Westward Adventures of Walter P. Lane*. Today we are here to talk with him about his new book, *The American Elsewhere: Adventure and Manliness in the Age of Expansion*. Professor Bryan, thank you for joining us today.

Jimmy L. Bryan Jr. (JB): Thank you.

CWBR: A lot of books come across my desk. Your book's cover and title immediately grabbed my attention. And for everyone listening the cover features a white man clad in brilliant red shirt, wearing buckskin pants and holding a long rifle. I also found the title striking too. I had no idea what an elsewhere was.

Let's begin with the title, and if you could describe, or just answer the question: what was an elsewhere?

JB: Well it's a romantic idea. In the early nineteenth century, as many of your readers know, this was an era in which romanticism was very much discussed and thought about, and celebrated. One of the key components of romanticism is this notion of being unsettled in their current place and current time. Romantics very much celebrated the past, they always seem to be preoccupied with the future, and they are certainly preoccupied with other places. With the florescence of Romanticism during this period, which coincided with U.S. expansion--we are talking the 1810s, 20s, 30s, and 40s--it seemed to

capture that notion that Americans, at least a significant number of Americans, were looking to other places. In this case looking across the continent and imagining what the continent might be. In a nutshell where the idea of the American elsewhere comes from.

CWBR: Right, and so it is both this imagined and real place. Let's look at the figure here. How would he—"Long Jakes" the figure in the portrait on the front of your book--described his motives for becoming a quote mountain man, a frontiersperson, and adventurer?

JB: Well, if you are talking about the model himself, or the type that he represents, it may be two different questions. It is an interesting portrait. One it raises a number of layered questions. It is a portrait by an artist named Charles Deas who had made his way to St. Louis about this period—the 1840s—he encountered these trappers that made their way into the interiors and found them as these romantic figures and certainly worthy of the artist's attention. The reason why I mention the contradictions that this painting seems to incorporate is that the adventurer—the men I study—and that this portrait would later come to represent, was very much an Anglo-American idea. And that it was very much men who created stories that developed the notion of their racial superiority and their ethnic exceptionalism. I suppose that is a redundant idea, but the model himself, was actually part Native-American and part French. He was among the French trappers that were very much part of this experience and the fur trading industry in the interiors of the continent. The actual title was Long Jacques, it was a French name, and when they sent this portrait to New York to the Union Gallery—I believe was the name of the association—the cataloguer there decided to change the name to Long Jakes, make it an Anglo name rather than a French name. So in terms of what his motivations are, obviously if he's a member of the French and Indian, descendants of the French and Indian along the Mississippi, his motivations would have been quite a bit different than these Anglo-Americans the portrait would later represent.

CWBR: Right, and this disconnect between this image and the actual experience of the West is something your book takes seriously. Unlike other historians, you take the stories that folks like Deas told through their portraits or through their written works seriously, because you argue that they influenced a generation of Americans to travel west either on their feet or in their imagination throughout the 1820s, 30s, and 40s. How did these adventurers themselves encourage territorial expansion through their written works?

JB: They made it personal. To put it simply. They showed ways in which the average American reader could personally connect with this national mission. Whether vicariously through the reading of this genre of literature, I refer to as the adventurelogue, or in some cases of men, in particular they could physically make their way to the territories. This was a time where the spaces of an adventure were accessible to many different classes, and many different classes took part in adventure and certainly many different ethnicities. But the stories that were published primarily, were stories that reinforced the notion that this was an ethnically white experience and primarily a masculine experience. So by making the connection personal, the reader and the individual, becomes personally invested in this mission to extend the territories through a number of narrative techniques, but primarily to show that this was an exceptionally American space because these were exceptionally men who were coming from this space. I'm not sure if that makes any sense.

CWBR: It does. It does. So you are talking about the adventurelogues and the people in the East who are going to be lured to the West, what kind of social groups in the more settled parts of the United States in the early nineteenth century did these adventurelogues appeal to? Who was their primary readership, what were they looking for?

JB: I'm not sure I can specify a group. My general argument is that is appealed to everyone. Now there are those who certainly were already quite wealthy and comfortable in their stations who might have been less inclined to go west, so I guess you could refer to them as middle-class and lower middle class, if you wanted to put a class spin to this. But in terms of sections of the nation, they seem to have come equally from both sections. Although there tended to be a greater level of literacy from the north and northeast, and that may explain some of the bias in the source material that I referenced. They come from the city; they come from the farms; they come from the very poor working class; they come from a fairly wealthy middle class if not the more wealthy class. So I'm not sure there is one specific group.

CWBR: Right, in the book you talk about some of these push forces that made the elsewhere described in adventurelogues appealing. What were these folks interested in finding? Why did they leave the safety and comfort of the east to go west to these real and imagined places that were both dangerous and unknown?

JB: Exactly. This was of course what some historians refer to the Market Revolution in the United States, where the economy is changing rapidly and more to the point, at least our point, is that the position of middle class and workers within that economy is changing rapidly. There is a great deal of emphasis placed on personal success, personal wealth, a great deal of emphasis placed on impersonal and materialistic matters, and this alienated a number of men, primarily, in the east in the city, for that matter on the farm. They felt a sense of disconnection, if you will. And by making their way out west to go on these adventures, not only would they have the opportunity to feel emotion--and that's where the Romanticism comes in--the very intense emotional experience, but there is also the opportunity to perhaps obtain wealth and fame. These were certainly individuals who were interested in becoming famous and becoming wealthy. But also a significant draw, was the comradery with other men and forging these very strong, personal, affectionate relationships between men that would go out and experience these adventures together, and I think it was a way of finding a connection they were not able to find back home, which at least in their minds was an impersonal world that tore apart those personal connections.

CWBR: What I really enjoyed, and what you mentioned several times in the book, is that what this generation of men are doing in the 20s, 30s, and 40s isn't necessarily new. Americans in the Jeffersonian era, most famously I suppose with Lewis and Clark, had explored and written about the west, the territory that was unknown to these folks in the east. The adventurelogue does something different and it thinks about the west in different ways. Can you describe the differences between what you looking at, and what you found, in the adventurelogues that thousands of Americans were reading in the east and previous attempts to imagine the west and imagine the United States' place in this world?

JB: Thomas Jefferson, after the Louisiana Purchase, was certainly interested in understanding what he had just bought from the French, and sent explorers—Lewis and Clark, Zebulon Pike among others—to catalogue the west, to determine what's there. Of course, I'm talking in general terms. But the idea was to create an empirical catalogue of the west, and those were typically Army officers as William Clark was and Zebulon Pike. They tended to have a more Whiggish outlook, a more rational outlook, a more sober outlook of the world. When they travelled across the Great Plains, for example, they saw a world that did not quite fit this idea of agrarian empire that was so much a part of the

Jeffersonian idea. So when they wrote about those expeditions, they were very cautious, and the prospect of future generations of Americans making use of that land in that way. What happens is that these adventurers, these romantics, making their way west, saw a different use for that territory. Part of that was a need to try and come up for a justification for acquiring that land. Of course, as far as Europe was concerned, the U.S. had already confirmed their title to that territory, but there were many hundreds of Native American groups who still contested that terrain, and it would require conquest. And of course Americans, they do not like to view themselves as conquerors, they don't like to see themselves as the bad guy, and so they had to come up with stories in order to dismiss the more negative aspects of that conquest, and that's where these adventurers and their adventurelogues, using the Romantic toolkit, if you will, to re-inscribe, to reimagine what this terrain was useful for. And primarily it was about evoking an emotional connection. Not only in terms of this sense of monumentalism of the mountains, the expansiveness of the Great Plains, but the idea of this personal experience and that this land was already and naturally and inevitably an American space, and that it had generated these exceptional American men.

CWBR: Now, as you and many other historians noted, violence played a definitive role in territorial expansion and so how did many of the writer-adventurers in your book reconcile the violence and peril that regularly punctuated their lives with their personal questions for independence in these elsewheres?

JB: Well, they created stories to obscure the violence or make that violence noble in some way. One of the key tactics that I actually get into more in an article that I wrote in an anthology that I edited called the "Martial Imagination." I look specifically at Texas Rangers, and how the press and outside observers try to make sense of these rangers, many of whom were part of this adventurist idea and this is at the time of the U.S.-Mexican War. And the argument that I make is that they could not ignore the violence, the brutality that the Texas Ranger represented, so in order to deal with that and recognizing that violence and brutality was necessary in this project of conquest, was that they created this idea of the Texas Ranger, and I suppose by analogy we could say more generally the adventurer, as this agent of violence but yet is somehow excused because he's exoticized it somehow, he's an exaggerated version of the American and because of his experiences out west. I suppose I do get into this when I talk about this philosophy of a savage life, which was an idea presented by a short story writer,

who was also a Texas Ranger by the name of Charles Webber, who tried to explain this in a way that the average, typically the reader back east, could not understand the harsh world and the kinds of travails and dangers that these adventurers faced and therefore were not worthy of judging or assisting the morality of those who had to inflict this violence. So in some ways, it's kind of blaming the victim for creating the violence and the victim then becomes deserving of having violence inflicted back on them. It is very much--I'm kind of rambling here--it reminds me of the argument Richard Slotkin makes about the Alamo. And the reason the Alamo is so large in our imagination, we celebrate the Alamo and Little Bighorn much more than we do the actual victories out west. But it is these tremendous losses, these so called massacres, that allow these culture makers to spin the story and present the Anglo-American conquest as the just cause of vengeance. In many ways it victimizes, it creates victims out of the conquerors, if that makes any sense. And so it is a way of insulating the violence, making the argument that readers who have not experienced this, who are simply comfortable back home, at the fire, reading this book could not understand the reality of this extraordinary world and this extraordinarily violent world.

CWBR: Absolutely, so you are saying that peril and danger in a way helps legitimize violence. Can you comment a little about how that same peril creates a sort of, you called it, alternative masculinity? How do those two things work? How does the same peril that legitimizes violence also help create a new masculinity?

JB: I'm a little cautious in calling it a new masculinity, and you mentioned alternative masculinity and I think that's a good way of putting it. One of the things I try to remind myself, and hopefully remind my readers, is that when we are talking about these shifts in idea they are very often rehashing older ideas, they're just building upon something that is already established. In the case of this violence, in particularly violence on the frontier, those were stories that were already being told in the U.S. since at least the eighteenth century. Go back to at least Daniel Boone, if not further than that with John Filson's biography of Daniel Boone, and that's the story of the frontiersmen and that the frontier and the violence of the frontier, and the hardships of the frontier, created these transformations of these exceptional men. So when adventurers come along, in the 20s, 30s, and 40s, they borrow from that narrative and make it their own and they emphasize the role that danger plays. Not only for its emotional response, but also in terms of the hardship that you overcome, which according to their

views, creates a much more vital man. Of course this anticipates the idea of Social Darwinism--survival of the fittest--those stories that would emerge in another imperial era in the late nineteenth century. What this is running counter to is again the idea back east, I guess we can refer to as Whiggish masculinity, that certainly from the northeast and New England and along the Atlantic coast, that emphasizes sobriety, that emphasizes restraint and defining in what makes a proper man. It is a man who is responsible to their community and to their family. So these adventurers, when they go out west, they create, or reinvent this idea, of the vital frontiersmen that counters that notion of the seriousness, the sobriety, the restraint of the eastern man. Of course that's where Romanticism comes into play as well, and it very much celebrates unrestraint, it celebrates irrationally over rationalism, it certainly very emotionally linked to the sentimental man of the nineteenth century that also runs counter to the rational, industrious male, I think is a term that we use to describe this Whiggish mentality back east.

CWBR: Right, and so part of this alternative masculinity that is developed by these adventurers relies on cultural appropriation. and can you talk about how material culture both in reality and in these adventurelogues, helped a lot of these folks reading, and going to these elsewheres appropriate masculinity from various they encountered in the west, but ultimately leave out or marginalize in the adventurelogues that are produced?

JB: Yeah, there is certainly a lot of literature on the way that Anglo-men, and Anglo-Americans in general, viewed Native America, in particular how they the imagery of Native America some of that was an appropriation of actual Native American traits and material culture, but mostly it was an apparition of something that was equally invented. So when these adventurers made their way to the west, they made their way with preconceived ideas of Native American men, and of course would come and encounter them and would associate with them, and they were fascinated with Native American men in particular and their masculine aspect. And they certainly saw Native American men, and their masculine culture of many Native American groups, as something they wanted to emulate, and that in itself becomes a model of manliness they wanted to adopt for themselves. And in many ways, it becomes a way of not only appropriating, but it becomes a way of conquest, it is a way of usurping those emblems and taking them away from Native American men and adopting that for themselves. Some of the material aspects of course, one of the very powerful emblems was the buckskin. Adventurers, that I look into, adopted the buckskin outfit as an

emblem of attaining the exceptionalism they were looking for, and that comes directly from their perception of Native America. So you would have these upstarts or these greenhorns--the term they used at the time--these amateurs that would make their way west for the first time, and they would immediately go out and buy themselves a buckskin outfit to show that they had attained this veteran-hood that they are pretending to claim. And even those who would eventually what they would perceive as an authentic veteran status, that buckskin would play an important role signifying that attainment of this type of manliness they were looking for. Certainly, there were other aspects of Native American culture and Native American men that they certainly admired. One of the interesting aspects is this perception that Native American were both stoic and able to contain their emotions, but yet they were extraordinarily passionate individuals. And somehow these two ideas that seem contradictory to each other but they in a strange degree reinforce each other; the notion that Native American men would have such depth of passion that it creates a greater idea of manliness that he has the ability to control those emotions until the appropriate moment. And that's the notion of this Romantic savagery that views the idea of passion, of violence that was associated with Native Americans, and often erroneously associated with Native Americans, as something itself worthy of emulation. It was, again, of contrasting themselves with the industrious male back east.

CWBR: As you note in the book, these adventurers reach their crescendo by the 1840s, many of them will participate in the war with Mexico, and find their place in the elsewhere in Texas, how was the American victory the beginning of the end for these adventurers?

JB: One argument I could make, and I hope I didn't make, but I may have alluded to it, was that the end of the U.S.-Mexican War with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, that the project of territorial expansion was over and therefore there was less need for these adventurers to justify that conquest. And we do see a lessening of interest in those adventuristic ideas in the 1850s, but I want to make sure to be understood that we're not talking about a beginning or an end, but it's more of a waxing and waning. The interest in adventure is still there. You certainly have artists that follow, the adventure artists I talk about in the book like George Catlin, Alfred Jacob Miller, and Charles Deas whose painting we used for the cover of the book. And then others like Tate...who in the 1850s are still creating painting of buckskin clad trappers, and they were still quite popular. But the idea begins to wane especially as the nation is moving

more and more toward dealing with this crisis with slavery in the new territories and becoming much more sectional. And so, this idea of this western man, this adventurer, it takes a backseat, if you will, to a more north and south orientation, and so it is not so much an end but a diminishing. And as I point out in the conclusion to the book, that idea is eventually resurrected once again in the 1880s and 1890s when the United States is once again looking toward expanding. In this case expanding overseas into the Caribbean and the South Pacific, of course with the Spanish American War, and certainly Theodore Roosevelt was famous for resurrecting these ideas of the strenuous life and himself donning the buckskin outfit famously in those photographs. And so, these ideas were not new when adventurers were talking about them in the 1820s and 1830s and 40s, and they would persist and in many ways they are still with us today. It is just a kind of waxing and waning idea.

CWBR: Right, and that's what I really appreciated about the book. My last question is: where is the elsewhere today? Would the Internet count as an elsewhere? It is a really fascinating idea, and like you said, it has a lot of traction in American history and the American imagination. Any thoughts on that?

JB: You could make an argument. I think it is an interesting notion. Certainly if you view the elsewhere as this place where fictions are generated and bought into the internet, you can certainly make that analogy. One of the larger lessons, I suppose, that I certainly learned from the work I put into the book, is just understanding groups of people willingly fool themselves--how should I put this--eager they are to buy into stories that mitigate or obscure the ugly side of history or the ugly side of policy making. We certainly can--how would put this--condemn those who create these stories, but certainly we have to be mindful of those who buy into those stories. What the *American Elsewhere* does I hope, at least in a general way, is to illustrate in a case and point how groups of people create stories to further their agendas if you will.

CWBR: Right, and I think you illustrated that point very well. Professor Bryan I appreciate you taking the time to sit and discuss your most recent work *The American Elsewhere: Adventure and Manliness in the Age of Expansion*.

JB: I appreciate it. It was fun.

CWBR: Thank you.