

# West of Slavery: The Southern Dream of a Transcontinental Empire

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## Review

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**Waite, Kevin.** *West of Slavery: The Southern Dream of a Transcontinental Empire*. University of North Carolina Press, 2021. PAPERBACK. \$29.95 ISBN 9781469663197 pp. 372

This marvelous study makes a convincing case for the transcontinental aspirations and reach of southern slaveholders across the long Civil War Era while providing a powerful counternarrative to Western exceptionalism. The first section of the chronological volume argues that pro-slavery Southerners shaped virtually every aspect of western expansion, including efforts in the 1840s to gain a hold in the China trade. The second section uncovers the prevalence of southern beliefs and practices in the far West, while the final section reveals the extent to which those beliefs and practices shaped both the western response to the Civil War and subsequent resistance to federal reconstruction. *West of Slavery* synthesizes some of the most important recent interventions in North American historiography. The Southerners in *West of Slavery* are economically sophisticated actors, overrepresented in U.S. foreign policy in the decades before the Civil War, wise to the connections between chattel slavery and other forms of labor coercion in the U.S. West and knowingly engaged in a three-cornered war in the 1860s. The influence of Matthew Karp, Stacey L. Smith, Andrés Reséndez, Megan Kate Nelson, scholars of the history of capitalism, and earlier generations of scholarship on southern expansionism is evident and acknowledged, but there is nothing derivative about this volume. Topics covered by these authors are newly illuminating when placed in conversation with seemingly unrelated events and phenomena, including slavery in the Church of Latter-Day Saints, Jefferson Davis's camels, the Butterfield Overland Mailroute, and confederate monuments in present-day Los Angeles.

Perhaps the greatest strength of *West of Slavery* is Kevin Waite's ability to restore contingency to the seemingly foregone conclusion that southern ambitions would fail. The author's investigation into the seemingly stolid topic of western infrastructure reveals both the breadth of his vision and skill as a writer. Scholars conversant in the minutia of the seemingly

quixotic efforts of Southern senators for a southern transcontinental railroad will find his reading of this material within the framework of a “Continental South” novel, while readers with little knowledge (or even interest) in infrastructure will gain a clear picture of what was at stake while enjoying Waite’s nimble prose (2). Not all the contentions here are equally convincing. Given the lack of enthusiasm among southern senators for an American Hawaii in the 1850s it’s difficult to equate southern dreams of a Pacific empire with the better documented dreams of a Caribbean one. But the volume vary rarely overreaches. Waite’s careful documentation of California’s pro-slavery proclivities after 1850 is utterly devastating to the state’s historical memory as an entity born into freedom.

Although *West of Slavery* appears in the University of North Carolina’s “David J. Weber Series in the New Borderlands History,” its most important contribution is to the history of the Civil War. Waite both reframes the continental nature of the war and provides abundant evidence that Republicans’ fears of a voracious, expansionist South were on point. This book will be of great interest to scholars of slavery, territorial expansion, the Civil War and its memory, and the West, and will make an excellent addition to undergraduate syllabi on these topics.

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