

BOOK REVIEW

Review of *The American Elsewhere*

Jimmy L. Bryan Jr. *The American Elsewhere: Adventure and Manliness in the Age of Expansion*.
Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas. 2017. 408pp. \$39.95 (hardcover).

The term “adventurer” did not always have positive connotations. Through the eighteenth century, it connoted crassness and vulgar opportunism. But according to Jimmy L. Bryan in *The American Elsewhere: Adventure and Manliness in the Age of Expansion*, the adventurer came in the early years of the nineteenth century to connote more positive attributes: expressiveness, sentiment, vitality, self-reliance, extravagance, daring, heroism, muscle, and sinew. Adventurers struck their admirers as remarkable, heroic, commanding, conquering, and masculine; as “hardened imperative men” (121).

The adventurers who headed for the backwoods were also in many cases violent, destructive, and lawless: vicious Indian removers, killers, and scalpers. As Bryan puts it: “Whether they arrived as wilderness explorers, patriot-warriors, or visionary enterprisers, they came to take this world away from those who already inhabited it” (245).

Bryan tracks the rise of the adventurer as an ideal type, attributing the appeal of this persona to romanticism, with its emphasis on emotion, imagination, “elsewheres,” individuality, sensation, escapism, and inwardness. A desire to earn the approbation of fathers amidst the disruptions of the market revolution also played a significant role, as did print culture, which exposed broad audiences to stories of adventure and helped set the type.

Exemplars of this type could be found both in fictive and ostensibly fact-based stories that Bryan terms *adventurelogues*. Daniel Boone, Natty Bumppo, George Catlin, Alfred Jacob Miller, Meriwether Lewis, Zebulon Pike, William Walker, Texas Rangers, and a wide array of less celebrated literary characters, expedition members, and footloose letter writers, published authors, and artists people Bryan’s account, notable not so much for their individual attainments as for the insights they provide into type.

These adventurers stood out in contrast to other male types. They were not transcendentalists or empiricists, not rational or restrained. As they appear in Bryan’s account, they are certainly not ethnologists, for they seem more inclined

to project their own fantasies than to understand others. Neither were they farmers, town-builders, or family men, though Bryan admits that the line between adventurers and domesticators could be blurry. They may have at one point been clerks, tellers, and agents, but becoming an adventurer meant turning away from the steady industriousness that promised success. (Bryan does not pursue the attractions of adventuring to plantation owners and slave drivers.) Adventurers were not Whiggish, insofar as the Whigs valued self-control, frugality, and hard work. They were the antithesis of the “slack-shouldered dandy” and the materialist male (113). In rare cases, *métis* might rank among their number, but they were definitely not Mexican, Indian, Black, or enslaved (indeed, whereas freedom figures largely in this book, the counterpoint of slavery does not).

Adventurers were in sum white male archetypes: “super-Americans” as Bryan puts it (242). In tracking their rise, Bryan walks in the long-trodden footsteps of other scholars of national myth and mythology, some leaning more toward literary criticism and others rooted more solidly in History. In opposition to those who have cast explorers as sober men of science, Bryan emphasizes romantic adventure. Though arguing against claims that such men were anarchists and primitivists, Bryan calls them unrestrained savages; though disagreeing with those who characterize them as businessmen at heart, Bryan agrees they sought profit. In response to the work of scholars such as Richard Slotkin, Shelly Streeby, and Amy Greenberg, Bryan in essence says yes: adventurers perpetrated brutality, furthered a masculinist vein of white supremacy, and advanced American empire.¹

The main payoff from his textual analysis is rich insight into antebellum masculinity. Bryan insightfully tracks “emotional geographies” (40). His book is peppered with references to restlessness, dissatisfaction, daydreaming, egoism, curiosity, narcissism, emotionality, entrepreneurialism, risk-taking, capriciousness, prolonged adolescence, a lack of restraint, and depravity. Bryan makes it clear that the adventurer was not just a hardened fighter: he could be gender flexible while on the trail, whether nursing comrades or weeping for home. Whereas some professed longing for dark-eyed señoritas or comely Cheyenne maidens, others swooned over the “arrow-straight physiques” of their male associates (193). Some were campy, posing in buckskins and moccasins for their audiences; others performed masculinity through narrating incidents of peril and struggle. Many expressed admiration for Native American forms of masculinity even as they worked to destroy them. Bryan alludes to “the expansionist generation” and “the reckless generation,” which he dates to the 1820s and

1. On science, see William H. Goetzman, *Exploration and Empire: The Explorer and the Scientist in the Winning of the American West* (New York, 1966); on anarchists, see Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (reprint, Cambridge, MA, 1970 [1950]); on businessmen, see John T. Coleman, *Here Lie Hugh Glass: A Mountain Man, a Bear, and the Rise of the American Nation* (New York, 2012); Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (Middletown, CT, 1973); Shelley Streeby, *American Sensations: Class, Empire, and the Production of Popular Culture* (Berkeley, CA, 2002); Amy S. Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire* (Cambridge, UK, 2005).

1830s (34, 40). He expands the chronology in his epilogue, acknowledging that men such as Theodore Roosevelt sought a “new, global elsewhere” at the turn of the twentieth century (285).

All this attention to masculinity is more than an end in itself—it shines light on empire building. The cultural production of the adventurer as an idealized type prompted an indeterminate number of men (and at least a few women) to pursue their inward longings beyond the nation’s established boundaries as explorers, filibusters, and military recruits. Although Bryan does not really prove his point that “Individual preference, informed by caprice, sentimentality, and yearning, drove territorial expansion as meaningfully as social, economic, and political imperatives,” he convincingly argues that adventurers played a notable role in generating desire and providing justification (6). The adventurers of this account advanced expansionist ideologies by celebrating both the pristine and its exploitation. They naturalized frontiers and wildernesses as American spaces. They ennobled greed as enterprise and chauvinism as virtue; they “mitigated the unjustness and violence of territorial acquisition” by focusing attention relentlessly on themselves (16).

So where was the elsewhere referenced by the title? Bryan cites accounts of adventure seeking in such places as Spanish Louisiana, Wisconsin Territory, Mandan villages, the Rocky Mountains, Florida, the Great Plains, Texas, the Santa Fe Trail, and the goldfields of California. Although Bryan seems bent on capturing an emotional type, he excludes seafarers from his account. Washington Irving’s travels on the North American prairie count but not his rambles in Spain. Even as Bryan critically appraises the tendency to present the continent as “inevitably American,” he helps reproduce this line of thought (18). His adventurers are not so much expatriates as resolute empire builders in soon-to-be U.S. spaces. In defining the elsewhere as a coherent place beyond the line of settlement, Bryan makes it harder to grasp the elsewhere as a variety of Indian domains, with significant parts claimed by Mexico.

The elsewhere, at base, is a stage set for rambling white men. Bryan maintains that he “seeks to muddy, rather than clarify, the definition of ‘frontier,’ ‘borderland,’ ‘middle ground,’ and others by equating them as imagined ‘elsewheres’” (296). And muddy he does, with the ironic takeaway being the muddier the story, the whiter it becomes.

doi: 10.1093/dh/dhy094