

## Managing Editor's Introduction

We are happy to present the first special issue of *Pacific Historical Review* since I have taken over as the managing editor of this august publication. From time to time, we hope that our special issues will present new research, challenge accepted understandings, and expand upon or reconsider emerging and established fields. Much as my predecessor editors have done for nearly one hundred years, it is my goal to seek out special issues that consider important issues in historical understanding. The hard work of our coordinating editor, Dr. Brenda D. Frink, and our graduate editorial fellows, Taylor Bailey and Heather Viets, are central to the production of our journal and the continued high quality of the finished product. I want to thank them for their service in bringing this first special issue to our readers.

In this special issue, *Alternative Wests: Rethinking Manifest Destiny*, guest editor Andrew C. Isenberg invites our readers to reconsider a term that has long been used to explain the intellectual motivations that supported an often inevitable-seeming expansion of the United States from “sea to shining sea,” to borrow a line from “America the Beautiful.” In the introduction from Isenberg and Thomas Richards, Jr., and across the chapters presented here, our readers are asked not only to reconsider the use of the term “manifest destiny,” but also to understand its place historically. In these reconsiderations, the westward movement of the United States is cast as a tentative process of expansion that many feared would undermine the very threads of democracy and culture that were to tie the American people together. Thus, in moments of expansion—from the movement to Ohio or Kentucky (when those places were considered the West) through the incorporation of the Louisiana Purchase and a focus on the importance of the Mississippi River—we see that there was very little destiny in the things that manifest themselves in the process of expansion. Certainly some spoke of a United States that could incorporate all of the Americas or could extend from Canada to present-day Panama. But many more worried that places distant from so-called civilization, such as Oregon, might never be incorporated into the nation but rather

might eventually join together to become an independent republic. In this light, this reconsideration of manifest destiny is not only timely, but needed.

The articles that follow further challenge accepted notions of what was meant by manifest destiny and ask us to consider alternative conceptualizations when seeking to understand what motivated expansionist ideology and actions. By looking to geographical understandings of nation-building and the way that expansionists saw river systems, mountain ranges, and other aspects of the physical terrain as often determinative when it came to economics, nationalism, and culture, Rachel St. John shows how a fixation on the transcontinental United States was not always as prevalent as historians have often presumed. For many Americans, river systems made sense as key geographical features to bind a nation together in the era before rail transit, and mountain ranges were seen as natural dividing lines between places, people, and nations. Many different things determined the shape of future projections of what the United States might and should look like, and very few of these took form as a clearly defined commitment to a continental nation.

Of course, other nations and empires occupied and vied for a foothold in North America in the nineteenth century. Not only were Native Americans as the indigenous peoples of North America present and important, France, Spain, England, Russia, and other nations were also in contestation for territory in North America and had their own visions of nation and empire, ones that pivoted north to south, or west to east, rather than east to west. By looking to late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Mexico, we see that North America was a place with a long Spanish (and newly independent Mexican) imprint and that nation building in the Americas was for many centuries something that flowed both north and south from Central Mexico and was about the spread of a Spanish European culture rather than that of Anglo and Anglo American territorial growth. From this point of departure, Sarah Rodriguez situates early nineteenth-century Anglo American settlers in Texas within the complex social and political milieu of the times. Rather than one-dimensional agents of manifest destiny, the forces that would later support the Texas Revolution were not merely those of a simple vanguard of Americans seeking to extend the United States by force but rather pragmatists willing to support federalism under Spanish and later Mexican sovereignty. When federalism fell to centralism in Mexico, these Americans, along with several important Tejanos, supported revolution in Texas—not on behalf of the United States but out of pragmatic self-interest and a dedication to the federalism they bargained for when entering Texas. While Anglo

Texans often moved west from the United States to Texas, they did so not on behalf of an undefined manifest destiny, but often, as Rodriguez shows, in rejection of what they considered the centralizing forces in the United States. Likewise, Thomas Richards, Jr., shows how Californios rejected Mexican authority while John Sutter and Anglo immigrants to California joined a Mexican centralist army in the waning days of Mexican California. Migrant overlanders to Mexican California (and the Oregon Territory) very much knew they were leaving the United States. Rather than serving as a vanguard for U.S. conquest, they often immigrated as part of a rejection of U.S. authority, even as they mimicked U.S. institutions and embraced an often racist Anglo American worldview toward Mexican and Native peoples. While migrants west from the United States brought many things with them that seemed uniquely American, they also brought a dedication to pragmatism and personal freedom. As such, they often had little allegiance to the United States.

The near constant state of warfare between the United States and the Native peoples of the North American continent is now often part of the standard narrative of national expansion. By turning the focus to a little-known health policy, Andrew Isenberg shows how presumptions about U.S.–Native American warfare and its aims do not explain the policy of saving Native American lives through a significant vaccination program for Natives, one that developed just as Mexico, Canada, and other nations were seeking to vaccinate indigenous populations against a scourge that killed indigenous and European ancestry people alike. What Isenberg terms “medical diplomacy” was far more extensive than historians have thought, and it shows how the United States embraced a complex policy toward Native Americans that included more than a mere focus on warfare, conquest, and removal. Rather, a variety of motivations led to a rather pragmatic approach to Native relations during the period of westward expansion.

This special issue offers an insightful corrective to a long-accepted narrative of U.S. expansion westward, one that too easily accepted a consensus view among U.S. policymakers, migrants, and settlers. This narrative, known as manifest destiny, did not always have wide currency but became useful as a heuristic device for generations of historians, teachers, and others seeking a simple national mythology for understanding the growth of the United States across the North American continent. These essays, by offering a counter narrative, provide scholars and general readers alike with a long overdue corrective.

*Marc S. Rodriguez*