

***Dreams of El Dorado: A History of the American West.* By H.W. Brands (New York: Basic Books, 2019), xvi+524pp.**

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In his monograph *Dreams of El Dorado: A History of the American West*, H.W. Brands explores one of the greatest myths in the history of the modern world—the “winning of the west,” to draw on the title of Theodore Roosevelt’s saga about the settlement of the American West. Brands, who holds the Jack S. Blanton Sr. Chair in History at the University of Texas at Austin, tackles this colossal topic through the prism of individual (hi)stories.

The first part of the book centers on the Lewis and Clark expedition, a key component of President Jefferson’s plan “to write the federal will” (10) on the Trans-Mississippi landscape’s *tabula rasa*, and the entrepreneurial endeavors of John Jacob Astor, an ambitious man who “endured sub-Arctic winter weather, hostile Indians and cut-throat . . . competitors” (42). This description of Astor is paradigmatic of a perspective that privileges a White actor locked in battle with nature. Meanwhile, Indigenous people function as little more than props for these narratives of white “heroics.” Brands repeats this pattern in depictions of fur trader Joseph Meek and other frontiersmen.

Brands’s focus then switches to the Rio Grande region. The story of Texas and the Alamo are regurgitated with little regard to the economic, political, and structural contexts of the events. Catchy phrases such as “Sam Houston did his best to ensure that Texas would be lost” (101) do not even try to mask their biases, while details of Davy Crockett’s grim end at the hands of Mexican officers provide spectacular anecdotes. The exodus of European families fleeing from Texas was, without any doubt, “most heart-wrenching” (121); even so, the prose produces an image of (Anglo-)Americans as perpetually victimized people who seldomly resorted to the use of lethal force (and even less so to “brutality”).

The fate of missionaries such as Marcus and Narcissa Whitman in the “Oregon country” also makes for a great story and Brands excels in describing it. While the migrants’ religious zeal is depicted in detail, there is almost no information about the societies that they tried to convert. Indigenous groups are reduced to extras in the grand drama of Euro-American interests. Telling the fate of immigrants caught in a profiteering scheme, the chapter “Business of the Trail” (184–97) is one of the strongest parts of the book. Although Brands, for example, mentions the Nez Percé (Nimi’ipuu) wife of fur trader Joseph Meek in this chapter, he does not discuss the couple as an example of North America’s Métis culture; rather, he uses their relationship as part-amusing, part-tragic anecdote.

While providing valuable information on issues such as technology and institutional racism, Brands's remarks about the post-1848 California gold rush and the building of the trans-continental railroad privilege individual experiences. Even though Mexicans, Chinese, and Irish play more important roles in this part of the book, Native Americans are (again) primarily depicted as anonymous victims without agency. This approach also permeates the chapter on the Mormon presence in the Trans-Mississippi West: "so good were Mormon relations with the Indians that Brigham Young could credibly threaten to unleash the tribes against westbound emigrant trains" (314). When Mormons and Paiute massacre a settler train in 1857, the White attackers "dispatch" the migrants, while the Paiute "kill brutally" (315). While employing such different terminologies may have been accidental, their use is inappropriate and arguably reveals the author's (and/or editor's) biases. The chapters on the histories of the Oglala and the Modoc tribes are replete with more descriptions of massacres. Brands's elaborations on the "treacherous" killing of General Edward Canby by the Modoc in 1873 stand as one of the book's most spectacular (and least informative) passages.

The history of cattle ranching focuses on legendary cattle baron Joseph McCoy. While Brands acknowledges the Spanish background of the western hemisphere's cattle industry, he does so in the briefest manner possible. His notes on Spanish traditions take up about as much space as one quote by an anonymous cowboy. Chapters 44 to 46, which deal primarily with John Wesley Powell's Colorado Expedition of 1869, the story of the Yosemite region, the "Buffalo Soldiers," and the Dawes Act, finally reveal the potential of this book—a synergy of structural and individual perspectives, enriched with quotes such as those of Powell, which, after 150 years, are still captivating: "the great river shrinks into insignificance as it dashes its angry waves against the walls and cliffs that rise to the world above; they are but puny ripples and we but pigmies" (403).

Brands then turns to one of his long-time heroes, Theodore Roosevelt. *Dreams of El Dorado* highlights the performance of the 1st Volunteer Cavalry ("Rough Riders"), in which Roosevelt served during the invasion of Cuba in 1898, but the critical commentary on this episode of history is rather underdeveloped. Brands celebrates the myths of Roosevelt and his glorious military success while ignoring facts about the massive logistical and organizational shortcomings of U.S. Army operations. Although the "Rough Riders" came to embody the victory, the unit was saved by regular army units (most of which were majority African American). Whereas "Teddy and company basked in the public spotlight,"³¹ the actual heroes were too ignored to be forgotten.

Dreams of El Dorado proffers two important strengths: it is an easy-to-read book that succeeds in drawing readers into the individual stories of both well- and little-known historical characters. However, Brands's glib word choices and incon-

siderate ways of telling stories make it difficult to differentiate between his viewpoints and the attitudes of the people he writes about. Several chapters are missing key information on their historical contexts. He all but ignores the pertinent work of ethnohistorians who have included Indigenous and other minority traditions (written, oral, material) in their work for decades; Indigenous names for places and/or persons are absent. While claiming that myths of the “West” tend to focus on individuals instead of recognizing the important structural processes such as federal land policy, the author, in most of the chapters, in fact does the same: time and again, individuals (or small groups of individuals) are at the narrative core of his epos. Thus, the very strategy that makes *Dreams of El Dorado* so readable and intelligible undermines one of its basic assumptions. Most of the historical figures Brands focuses on are White and male. The book’s index (seventeen pages) shows only about twenty names of women, Native Americans, and ladinos/Hispanics. While the Oglala chief Black Elk (Hehaka Sapa) features quite prominently as a source, historians have questioned the reliability of the chief’s autobiography. As Donald Fixico notes, “American Indian communities possess internal histories of relations defined according to their separate cultures,” which need to be adapted in order to make them comprehensible to White audiences, arguably rendering them inauthentic in the process.² However, Brands offers little to no information on this matter. Similarly, readers familiar with the history of Spanish America will likely be simultaneously amazed and dismayed by the fact that Brands uses the term “El Dorado” in the book’s title without explaining this particular myth. Indeed, while he does mention the Mexica (“Aztecs”) and Maya, the Muisca of Colombia—from whom the story of the “golden man” (*el dorado*) originated—do not appear in the book. In addition, the way Brands comments on nature and natural phenomena is reminiscent of Turnerian views of an Anglo-American westward expansion and the “rapid conquest of the wilderness.”³ Although White settlers encounter some obstacles on their westward journey, there can be little doubt about the final success of the new nation-state—a state whose historiographers were among the people defining “success” in the first place.

Dreams of El Dorado is masterfully told. Unfortunately, it also fails to promote new and critical perspectives on historical sources, United States expansionism, multi-ethnic societies, and cultural contact in the long nineteenth century.

Notes

- 1 Dan Gagliasso, “Rough Riders, Moviemakers, and History: Hollywood Images of Theodore Roosevelt and the First U.S. Volunteer Cavalry,” *The Journal of Arizona History* 41, no. 3 (2000): 310.
- 2 Donald L. Fixico, “Ethics and Responsibilities in Writing American Indian History,” *American Indian Quarterly* 20, no. 1 (1996): 34, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1184939>.

- 3 Frederick J. Turner, "The West and American Ideals," *The Washington Historical Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (1914): 246.

Commemorating Abraham Lincoln and the Transnational Way: Lincoln Monuments in Great Britain. By Liv Birte Buchmann (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2020), 311pp.

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Buchmann's monograph *Commemorating Abraham Lincoln and the Transnational Way*, which lays out a long history of Lincoln studies and iconographic studies of the United States' sixteenth president, focuses on three public monuments to Lincoln erected in Edinburgh, Manchester, and London, presented to the British people by U.S. private initiatives. The sculptures, erected in 1893, 1919, and 1921, respectively, highlight the Anglo-American "special relationship" period of the early twentieth century, but are of particular interest today, as radical "conservatives" in America attempt to co-opt Lincoln's legacy as a Republican politician, while Black Lives Matter activists seek to reframe his image as the great emancipator to instead stress nineteenth-century African Americans' work in liberating themselves.

The volume begins by queering the essential ambiguity of such iconography with a quote from Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), then goes on to untangle the sculptures' complex histories, through research in the Manuscript Division of the U.S. Library of Congress, the Smithsonian Archives, the New York Public Library, Columbia University's Rare Book and Manuscript Library, the British National Archives at Kew, Manchester's Central Library, and the Edinburgh City Archives.

The Edinburgh monument's tale began when a U.S. consul, approached by the Scottish widow of a Union soldier for support, discovered the late veteran had fought in a regiment of mainly Scottish descent, and was among others buried on Calton Hill, the "Scottish Valhalla," a space already charged with significance, since the mausoleum of David Hume (a key figure of the Scottish Enlightenment) and the Scottish Political Martyrs' Monument (commemorating an exiled group of Scottish reformist "Friends of the People" who lobbied for universal suffrage) are located there. Lincoln's addition to this space boosted these other monuments' "still unfulfilled desire for political reforms" (122). But the Lincoln monument itself is not without its contradictions: like New York's now much-contested statue of Theodore Roosevelt leading (while towering above) an African American and a Native American figure, still standing on the steps of New York's Museum of Natural History, or Washington DC's Lincoln Park sculpture showing Lincoln looming over a cowering slave, Edinburgh's Lincoln depicts the "god-like" (109) president towering placidly above a ragged, barefoot freedman who seems to appeal from below, holding a book and embellished with sculpted this-