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*The Great Heart of the Republic* is both a local and national history and Adam Arenson’s style is balanced and exhaustively researched. The work commences with the Great Fire of 1849 which, despite the significant loss to property, heralded something of a reinvention for the city of St Louis thus providing a natural starting point for Arenson’s narrative. This milestone is mirrored in the closing of the book wherein Arenson discusses the significance of the opening of Forest Park in 1879. Although Arenson deploys these two events to frame his narrative there are frequent excursions to the city pre-1849 and to some extent post-1879.

Arenson situates St Louis at the centre of a cultural civil war which was fought not just between the North and South but also by those advocates for the, “the distinctive economic, political, and cultural agenda of the West” (3). How the West should be settled and its the political and cultural influence that it wielded figure heavily in Arenson’s narrative with these questions intersecting with the agendas of both pro-slavery advocates and abolitionists. The practice and effects of slavery in St Louis are not cast in simple oppositional positions and Arenson avoids any easy distinctions to engage with the local effects of an inhumane practice, both on its perpetrators, victims and opponents.

The book references many individuals both familiar and not so well-known but it is the Missouri Senator and great compromiser Thomas Hart Benton who Arenson singles out as St Louis’s most significant politician. Arenson engages with the liminal positions Benton occupied and the gradual evolution of his political ideals. Benton’s initial opposition to a transcontinental railroad as, “competition for St Louis’s river boats” (32) evolves following the Mexican Cession and the opening of new Government land to position him as campaigner and architect of a

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transcontinental railroad. Benton’s pragmatic advocacy of a grand transcontinental railroad sought to establish St Louis as a gateway to the West. Arenson argues that in the transcontinental railroad Benton saw “a full political program”, (32) which would position St Louis as the central hub for Western expansion. Arenson champions Benton at the expense of more conspicuous figures of Civil War history such as Abraham Lincoln and Walt Whitman, who exist almost in the periphery of the book. The foresight that Arenson attributes to Benton in both this pursuit and his political manoeuvring remains insightful without becoming reverential. Benton’s vision though did not come to pass as, just as the Great Fire transformed St Louis, an equally disastrous turn of events, the Gasconade train disaster, stalled the city’s ambitions in forging a transcontinental railway.

William Greenleaf Eliot stands alongside Benton in Arenson’s narrative as an integral figure in St Louis history. While Benton as a politician reflects the local interests in the national theatre, the ostensibly a-political Eliot represents the beneficence of local organisation as a promoter of civil responsibility, education, and relief efforts. Quite apart from the larger personalities of Eliot and Benton, Arenson interprets and interrogates St Louis via two of its greatest institutions: Washington University and the Mercantile Library Association. Eliot, whilst closely associated with the University, is kept separate from it by Arenson in order to provide a history of the evolving institution not overshadowed by one of St Louis’s more prominent citizens. Perhaps more so than the University it is the Mercantile Library which provides Arenson with a point to which to connect local and national politics, being as it was “an institution of national significance” (61).

The significant contribution by German émigrés to the city’s growth, prosperity and politics is interesting. In drawing attention to this Arenson also elucidates on the distinctly European nature of the city. From the early French settlers to the influx of German nationals following failed revolutions in Europe, the city’s ethnic tensions are demonstrated by its sporadic outbursts of reactionary nationalism.

Arenson draws on an abundance of census data, along with a wealth of newspapers written in both German and English to identify the cultural and political evolution of the city. Arenson does not filter the narrative of the cultural civil war through a nominal local point of view; the result is much more refined. At times St Louis is swept along by national events, such as the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, and at others St Louis is positioned to shape the course of continental
expansion. This book will be of use to scholars of the Civil War, Manifest Destiny and certainly of local and regional histories.