

**David M. Wrobel, *Global West, American Frontier: Travel, Empire and Exceptionalism from Manifest Destiny to the Great Depression*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2013. xv + 297pp.**

**ALESSANDRA MAGRIN – THE UNIVERSITY OF STRATHCLYDE\***

In *Global West, American Frontier*, David Wrobel embraces a far-reaching approach which blends critical regionalism with transnationalism and post-colonial critique. Central to his thesis is the understanding of the West and the Frontier as global phenomena, rather than quintessentially American ones. This argument is supported by evidence from a survey of nineteenth and twentieth century foreign travellers to the American West, as well as a number of notable American commentators who searched for ‘frontiers of adventure well beyond the geographic borders of their newly frontier-less nation’ (86). This combination effectively covers the intersections between history and literature and manages to give a new span of life to Frontier history and travel writing.

The first part of the book showcases the ‘neglected voices’ of travellers who challenged ‘the common notion of American West as an exceptional place’ (22). Wrobel restricted his study to independently published texts and as such he omits manuscripts, promotional pieces and the abundant material from religious missions. This rather narrow spectrum reflects the author’s primary interests, which lie in the ‘interplay’ of ideas on the American West among liberal thinkers. Accordingly, Wrobel’s perceptive analysis juxtaposes contributions from nineteenth century ‘globetrotters’ of enduring notoriety with other less familiar ones, such as: George Catlin, German novelist Frederick Gerstäcker, Mark Twain and Isabella Bird. These travellers employed their experiences in the American West as an interpretive lens to assess colonial enterprises comparatively and often to critique them. Their ‘global views’, Wrobel maintains, reminded ‘Americans that they were thoroughly connected to the world of empire building and that their western frontier served as the primary stage for imperial endeavours’ (67). In this section, Wrobel’s merging of

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\* Alessandra Magrin is a PhD Student in American History at the University of Strathclyde, where she researches the influence of American Western culture in Italy between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. She collaborates in a research project about Buffalo Bill, “The Papers of W.F. Cody”, led by the Buffalo Bill Center of the West (Cody, USA).

significant evidence from understudied sources is remarkable, and reveals a network of inter-textual references and transnational connections unknown to many.

In the second part of *Global West, American Frontier*, Wrobel furthers the relations between the American West and imperial frontiers by interweaving the accounts of three twentieth century ‘frontiersmen’: Jack London’s cruise on *The Cruise of the Snark* (1911), naturalist John Muir’s South American travels (1912) and Theodore Roosevelt’s expeditions to Africa and Brazil (1914). Their points of view are presented in a ‘compare and contrast’ fashion which proves to be particularly thought-provoking. Wrobel unveils that while London’s global travels allowed him to develop a compassionate eye for colonized tribes and therefore to strongly question imperialism, Muir and Roosevelt instead embraced an American-centred attitude, finding in their frontier exploits the utmost confirmation of the necessity of colonial expansion.

This latter analysis enables Wrobel to locate the discourse on American exceptionalism as a markedly post-frontier feature, a point which he expands in the chapter on transcontinental automobile journeys, where he gives voice to a set of disenchanted travellers. The accounts of Emily Post and Winifred Dixon, two female pioneer car-drivers, reflected how their romantic ideals of an earlier West inevitably clashed with the modern reality of post-frontier America. Yet the most pervasive critique of the modern West is voiced by a virtually unknown Italian journalist, Antonio Scarfoglio, who took part in the 1908 ‘Great Automobile Race’. Wrobel uncovers Scarfoglio’s blunt condemnation of American frontier heritage and his view of the American character as ‘a gold-seeker’, who ‘does not care for the land, does not care for (...) regular labor’ and therefore his ‘well-being must be the outcome of conquest and strife’ (120). Such vitriolic remarks serve the author’s purpose well by drawing a radically de-exceptionalised portrayal of Western American identity.

Some credit must be given to Wrobel for incorporating in his study the perspective of an Italian, an ethnic group whose contributions are frequently ignored in critical works of Western history/travel writing in America, despite the abundance of primary sources. Yet, several other commentators of the American West, in particular from southern and eastern Europe, regrettably remain largely unexplored to English-speaking scholarship. In this respect, *Global West, American Frontier*, could have fared better. Wrobel’s retrieval of ‘old voices that deserve another hearing’ (4) is ultimately conditioned by his decision to analyse works only published in English. This choice, apt at captivating a wide readership if it had been enhanced by a further culturally diversified opus, would have offered fresher evidence and a broader outlook to a study which aims to present global perspectives.

The closing chapter about Regional Travel Guides in the Great Depression era brings the focus back to exceptionalist discourse, explaining how the fear of the loss of ‘regional distinctiveness’ brought about by modernity allowed for the

resurgence of ideals of ‘a quintessentially American frontier’ (180). This evidence comes across as somewhat ill-fitting due to Wrobel’s failure to relate it to the international framework that he had developed earlier in the book, and eventually provides a rather anticlimactic end to a study which otherwise stands out for its solid analysis and cogent arguments.

Overall, *Global West, American Frontier* is a well-written work which illuminates an overlooked side of the debate on American exceptionalism, namely the anti-exceptionalist position. Moreover, Wrobel’s recovery of miscellaneous and lesser-known sources renders his book an insightful yet concise reference for researchers approaching the subject of travel writing from a cross-disciplinary angle.