Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire

The U.S.-Mexico War (1846–8) brought two centuries of dramatic territorial expansionism to a close, seemingly fulfilling America’s Manifest Destiny. Or did it? As politicians schemed to annex new lands in Latin America and the Pacific, some Americans took expansionism into their own hands. Between 1848 and 1860, there was an epidemic of unsanctioned attacks by private American mercenaries (known as filibusters) throughout the Western Hemisphere. This book documents the potency of Manifest Destiny in the antebellum era and situates imperial lust in the context of social and economic transformations that were changing the meaning of manhood and womanhood in the United States. Easy victory over Mexico in 1848 led many American men to embrace both an aggressive vision of expansionism and an equally martial vision of manhood. Debates about the propriety of aggression abroad polarized the public at home, shaping antebellum presidential elections, foreign policies, gender relations, and, ultimately, the failure of sectional compromise before the Civil War.

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For Rich and Jackson
The reputations of the nineteenth century will one day be quoted, to prove its barbarism.

– Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1850

Time will decide whether they were pirates and cutthroats, or heroes and patriots.

– Cora Montgomery, 1851
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Abbreviations Used in the Notes

AH Hawaii State Archives
AHR American Historical Review
BL Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley, Berkeley, CA
DBR De Bow’s Review
HL Manuscripts Collection, Huntington Library, San Marino, CA
HNMM Harper’s New Monthly Magazine
JAH Journal of American History
LOC Library of Congress, Washington, DC
NEYR New Englander and Yale Review
NYH New York Herald
NYT New York Tribune
PMM Putnam’s Monthly Magazine
SLM Southern Literary Messenger
SQR Southern Quarterly Review
USDR United States Magazine and Democratic Review
WWP Callender I. Fayssoux Collection of William Walker Papers, Latin American Collection, Howard Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA
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