

Christopher Herbert. *Gold Rush Manliness: Race and Gender on the Pacific Slope*. Emil and Kathleen Sick Book Series in Western History and Biography. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018. Maps. 288 pp. \$95.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-295-74413-1.

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Commissioned by Khal Schneider

The American West has often been perceived as the crucible that forged the American identity, particularly a strong masculine identity. Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis essentially canonized this notion until a variety of historians challenged the frontier thesis in the last few decades. Despite the demise of Turner's thesis as the cornerstone of western history, the association of the West with a rugged, tough, entrepreneurial masculinity remains in American society. Famous American novels like James Fenimore Cooper's *The Deerslayer* (1841), Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1902), and A. B. Guthrie Jr.'s *The Big Sky* (1947) portray male characters made rugged, hard, and masculine by their experiences in the West. Novels like these were based on a mythical understanding of the West that historians have assailed as inaccurate. Nonetheless, it is worth asking what role western expansion did play in identity formation and masculinity. Did nineteenth-century settlers perceive themselves as passing through a crucible of masculinity?

Christopher Herbert's *Gold Rush Manliness* examines this question. *Gold Rush Manliness* addresses both the more familiar gold rush in California in 1849 and the less-known gold rush in British Columbia in 1858. The later rush to British Columbia consisted of mostly former forty-niners

when it first began but eventually was made up mostly of British immigrants seeking their fortune in the New World. The different ethnic backgrounds of the miners facilitate for Herbert different discussions and ideas about masculinity and race, making the two gold rushes interesting fodder for comparative analysis.

As historian Brian Roberts has pointed out in *American Alchemy: The California Gold Rush and Middle-Class Culture* (2000), most gold rushers came from the eastern middle class. They were usually not paupers, searching for any means to make a living. Why then would they travel across the country, enduring a litany of hardships, to take their chance at finding gold? Herbert builds on Roberts's analysis to suggest that at least one reason was the perception of a western adventure as masculine and exciting.

"Getting to the Gold," Herbert's first chapter, discusses the trip rushers had to take to the goldfields. He groups rushers into two categories: "overlanders" who made the trip across the United States and "argonauts" who arrived in the goldfields by way of the sea. The trek removed rushers from the East or England, where they had been accustomed to a comfortable middle-class identity buttressed by family and social connections, and led many of them to encounter large

numbers of non-whites, such as Latin Americans or Native Americans, for the first time. This unfamiliar setting prompted questions about their race and masculinity. Overlanders and argonauts typically developed a racialized disdain for the Native Americans and Latin Americans they encountered. Chapter 2 discusses white immigrants' attempt to create a virtuous republican society in California. Significantly, white men were to sit atop this society. Chapter 3 discusses the tension between British and American rushers in British Columbia. Chapter 4, "Pursuing Dame Fortune: Risk and Reward during the Gold Rushes," is one of the most interesting in the book. Herbert argues that since work in the goldfields required the same types of hard, physical, dirty work that lower-class whites and blacks engaged in in the East, miners from a middle-class background had to find a way to assert the whiteness and manliness of their work. Rushers did so by pointing to the fearless way they engaged with risk in the goldfields. Even knowing that striking it rich was no sure thing, they courageously plunged ahead. This was somewhat different from the typical eastern ideals of restrained manhood that did not approve of risk-taking, but it allowed rushers to assert their courage and ruggedness, two essential components of whiteness and manliness. Chapter 5 closes the book with a discussion of the importance of clothing and bodily appearance to the ideals of manliness created by gold rushers.

While *Gold Rush Manliness* draws on a variety of sources, Herbert's best analysis is usually based on the accounts of the rushes penned by actual miners. He skillfully analyzes how they chose to represent themselves. Of course, rushers' accounts and letters home do not always present a realistic portrait of the gold rushes in California and British Columbia, but Herbert is interested in more than the cold hard facts. He is interested in how miners mythicized the West even as they lived in it. *Gold Rush Manliness* is a good reminder that the western myth did not emerge

only in the nineteenth century. Western migration was romanticized even as it occurred.

Herbert's book prompts a few questions. In Herbert's usage, masculinity and race are amorphous terms that are often interchangeable. Whiteness does not always refer simply to the color of one's skin. Herbert often uses "off-white" to describe people with white complexions who may not have been considered fully white, such as eastern Europeans, Australians, or the poor. Masculinity is similarly not just about "maleness." Herbert asserts that in the nineteenth century, most Americans believed that the only true form of masculinity was white masculinity. Thus, masculinity or manliness was just as much a racial concept as it was a gendered one. Herbert does well to engage with the complexity and interconnected nature of American ideas about gender and race in the nineteenth century, but it would have added clarity to the book if he had more clearly defined what exactly white masculinity entailed. The rushers' perceptions of off-white classes of people is interesting because it opened poor working-class people up to categorization as non-white and unmanly. Herbert does not really address these poor whites. While his focus on the middle class is understandable given the prevalence of middle-class men among the miners in both the California and British Columbia gold rushes, it would have been helpful to see some analysis of the lower class's ideas about race and masculinity. David R. Roediger has argued in *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (1996) that a working-class white identity was emerging in the United States in precisely the same time period that Herbert writes about. *Gold Rush Manliness* does not address how working-class men's understanding of themselves as white fit with the middle class's perception of middle-class status and whiteness as inherently connected or how middle-class whites felt about working-class ideas of whiteness. It would also have been interesting to see some analysis of how masculinity fit into poor

whites' ideas of whiteness. While some of these questions go undiscussed in *Gold Rush Manliness*, the book provides readers with a deeper understanding of the connection between the gold rush and American identity.

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