

**Steve Inskeep.** *Imperfect Union: How Jessie and John Frémont Mapped the West, Invented Celebrity, and Helped Cause the Civil War.* New York: Penguin Press, 2020. Illustrations. xxix + 449 pp. \$32.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7352-2435-3.

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Recent efforts to reconsider the causation of the American Civil War have begun to reveal a much more complex story about the relationship between politics, geography, and conflict. The Frémont name often surfaces throughout this tumultuous period, first through western exploration and then in politics. John C. Frémont, best known for his famous treks to chart newly acquired US territory and his influential role in shaping the nascent Republican Party, serves as an ideal protagonist to examine these many facets of the late antebellum period. Frémont's rise to fame, however, could not have been possible without the close advisement of his wife, Jessie Benton Frémont, an ambitious female politician and strategist. Steve Inskeep's *Imperfect Union: How Jessie and John Frémont Mapped the West, Invented Celebrity, and Helped Cause the Civil War* offers a comprehensive yet thoughtful view of the Frémonts' rise to national stardom. Unlike many biographical works, *Imperfect Union* centers the lives of Jessie and John Frémont as a lens to examine key historical moments and themes. In a form that is both accessible and well researched, this portrait of the Frémonts convincingly argues that there were many "imperfect unions" that "disrupted the old political order"—the union of Jessie and John, the union of

North and South, and the union of East and West (p. xxvi).

Inskeep organizes *Imperfect Union* with sixteen distinct chapters that build a chronological narrative from 1813 to the immediate post-Civil War period, although the majority of the book traces the years 1842 to 1856. The book integrates four major events that contributed to the growing political crisis: Texas annexation (1845), Mexican-American War (1846-48), the gold rush in California (1849), and the 1856 presidential election. John's early career in the US Army Corps of Topographical Engineers attracted the notice of Missouri senator Thomas Hart Benton, who shared a keen interest in the mapping of the West. John often visited Benton's home and quickly fell in love with Benton's second daughter, Jessie. From an early age, Jessie shared a close bond with her father who inspired her to become "assertive and self-confident ... and politically astute" (pp. 20-21). Once Jessie and John were married, the couple spent most of their time independent of one another; John traveled thousands of miles away for months at a time, while Jessie worked to manage their growing family and to strategize John's access to public fame and high political circles. In addition to letters, Jessie had to rely on newspapers to learn updates about her husband while he traversed

overland routes to the Pacific and maneuvered throughout California. Inskeep's background as a journalist brings a profound perspective to the importance of news media in this history and also demonstrates his masterful ability to piece together fragmentary evidence from newspapers, letters of correspondence, and personal writings to reconstruct the way Jessie and John interacted with each other and the world around them.

One of *Imperfect Union*'s strongest contributions is the treatment of the Republican Party's dueling antislavery and nativist platforms, which complicated party cohesion over race, citizenship, and belonging in the mid-nineteenth century. Inskeep traces the evolution of nativist sentiment among predominantly white Protestant politicians from fears of Catholic immigration to Chinese exclusion in California, all while paired with increased activism against slavery. In so doing, *Imperfect Union* contributes to a well-established body of literature that identifies a recurring paradox throughout American history: that the freedom of some would be defined according to the exclusion and oppression of others.[1] Although Inskeep alludes to such issues like racial prejudice and the consequences of manifest destiny, he is careful not to be too critical of the Frémonts throughout this work. Consequently, themes like conquest and empire building are portrayed in a more positive light than deserved. For example, while Inskeep acknowledges the preexisting diversity, economy, and global connections of the American West, he also eschews any discussion of John Frémont's participation in the violence and exploitation of resources and Indigenous communities, especially in California. Additionally, one wishes that Jessie Frémont's experience as a female politician was distributed more evenly throughout the book. Inskeep attributes her personal success within the context of women's political activism in the 1840s, although other studies have shown that there was a much longer tradition of women participating in politics during the early republic.[2] Due to the scant availability of

sources about or from Jessie, Inskeep heavily relies on discussions about the latest happenings in newspapers to infer Jessie's reactions and thoughts. There are a few intriguing moments when Jessie vigilantly asserts power, such as the time she advocated on her husband's behalf to President Abraham Lincoln. Given the apparent challenges of piecing together the fragments of Jessie's life, *Imperfect Union* resolves a significant vacancy to develop Jessie as a major historical force.

Despite these minor critiques, *Imperfect Union* offers an engaging and insightful look into the lives of two people who shared a stake in so many unique facets of American history. Inskeep's clear writing makes this narrative of complex stories and people intriguing while also being sensitive to historical issues of exceptionalism, racism, and prejudice in the nineteenth century. Although designed to reach a broad readership, *Imperfect Union* equally demonstrates Inskeep's ability to carefully glean the historical record and envision the lives of the Frémonts in a rapidly changing America.

#### Notes

[1]. See Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1975).

[2]. See Rosemarie Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); and Mary Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America's Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

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