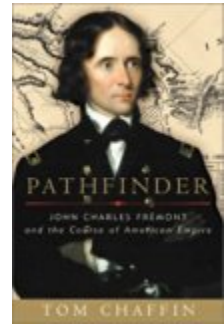


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Tom Chaffin. *Pathfinder: John Charles Frémont and the Course of American Empire*. New York: Hill & Wang, 2002. xxx + 559 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8090-7557-7.

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Pathfinder: John C. Frémont and the West

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It is most refreshing to read *Pathfinder*, a new and well researched biography of John C. Frémont, an outstanding explorer whose monumental exploits have largely gone undocumented except by California-based historians. As an independent researcher, this reviewer always spends time absorbing the depth of the author's research by looking over the lists of works consulted. Tom Chaffin has done a masterful job of drawing on extremely diverse primary materials, both in manuscript and in published formats. This must have been a labor of love.

Chaffin describes Frémont's activities from the beginnings of his exploring expeditions between 1838 and 1854 to his work as an abolitionist who, while commanding the Department of the West in 1861, emancipated the slaves in Missouri, to his experiences as a Civil War general, presidential candidate, husband of Jessie Benton Frémont, and a Gilded Age aristocrat. The author divides Frémont's life into three distinct phases: the explorations, 1842-1854; California and the Bear Flag Republic, 1846-1854; and the last period, "Free Soil, Free Men, Frémont", 1854-1887 (the latter section, of course, deals with his Civil War experiences and subsequent years).

Frémont is described as relentless and extremely focused on his view of empire. His work as Major General in the Department of the West before the Civil War has been largely ignored and/or underrated. Chaffin asserts that, "by forcing Americans ... to reimagine the American West, [Frémont] also compelled them to reimagine

America itself—to conceive of their nation, for the first time, as a sea-to-sea empire" (p. xxiv). This is the first comprehensive biography of Frémont since Andrew Rolle's *John Charles Frémont* (1991), a far more analytical and less sympathetic study. Chaffin is at least as sympathetic to his subject as was Allan Nevins in his lengthy work on Frémont which is subtitled *The West's Greatest Adventurer* (1928), and certainly much more appreciative of Frémont's efforts than the treatment accorded by Rodolfo Acuna in his *Occupied America* (1988). A more recent study by David Roberts, *A Newer World: Kit Carson, John C. Frémont and the Claiming of the American West* (2000), attempts to compare and contrast Frémont with Kit Carson. Roberts calls Frémont "something of a hero." The present work locates Frémont squarely within the historiography of the American Frontier—as an explorer, an army officer, and a dedicated, but controversial, American.

Having just reviewed a new book on the Mountain Meadows Massacre (1858), I was particularly interested in re-reading Frémont's activities in Utah and his relations with the Mormons in Salt Lake City. Frémont visited that area twice, once while on the expedition through South Pass in 1842, and again in the 1843-45 expedition when he explored the region around the Great Salt Lake. Frémont actually camped at the site of the Massacre, albeit several years before it occurred (p. 234). Frémont was quite disposed to think favorably of the Mormons, based on the activities of the Mormon Battalion during the War with Mexico and his experience during the 1853-54 expedition. His party had become weather-bound

while crossing through southern Utah and had been rescued by Mormons from the settlement at Parowan. According to Chaffin, “[t]he Mormons, in Fr=mont’s mind, had saved the lives of him and his men, and so won his everlasting gratitude. Indeed, years later at a lecture in Los Angeles, he refused to introduce the anti-Mormon crusader and writer Kate Field” (p. 429). The gratitude was well deserved, but was not in common with other officers with whom he served and others whose activities took them through Utah (for example, Philip St. George Cooke, Edward R. S. Canby, Clifton Wharton, and James H. Carleton), who generally mistrusted the Mormons.

A major strength of the book is the excellent treatment of Fr=mont’s post-Civil War years. There are a number of vignettes describing his activities and, in particular, his inability to earn a decent living. He was constantly in debt. In later years, his daughter said that “my father should have been called Moses, instead of John, for like the biblical character, he was led up to the hilltop and permitted to view the promised land below, though he was never permitted to enter” (p. 479). The family suffered a good deal because of their money problems. President Rutherford B. Hayes appointed him Territorial Governor of Arizona in 1878. This looked to be the opportunity that Fr=mont needed, but railroad issues and failed business ventures continued to haunt him. He and his wife, Jesse Benton, wrote the first of what was supposed to be a two-volume memoir of his life. He had seen the success of fellow Civil War General U. S. Grant’s autobiography and how it raised sufficient funds to support

President Grant’s family after his death. The Fr=monts published *Memoirs of My Life* in 1887, almost all of it from already published materials. The book failed to sell and the second volume was never written.

Pathfinder is a very satisfying book. The research is outstanding; the photographs are germane and well done. The narrative reads well. The various historical periods that are covered are done so in a way that ties Fr=mont’s life together, particularly in the epilogue. Fr=mont was granted the status of a retired general early in 1890. His pension was to be \$6,000 per year, a sum that the family desperately needed. By July of that year, Fr=mont’s health had so deteriorated that the family physician, fearing the General’s impending death, called for his son, Charles (then living in Ossining, New York), to come immediately to the city. Thus it was that an American icon passed into history.

The notes concerning place names and textual sources were of great value to me and I hope that others will pay close attention to those pages. *Pathfinder* provides useful supplementary information for those who wish to delve into Fr=mont’s life and activities on their own.

This book should become a part of frontier historians’ libraries. When placed together with biographies of the frontier army’s officers, this work shares a heritage that is well deserved and situates John Charles Fr=mont in the proper historical setting; his appellation of “Pathfinder” is safely secured.

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