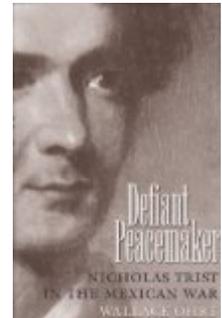




**Wallace Ohrt.** *Defiant Peacemaker: Nicholas Trist in the Mexican War.* College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1997. xi + 190 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-89096-778-2.



**Reviewed by** Richard Bruce Winders

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Nicholas Trist. The name is well-known but the man is not. Wallace Orht seeks to correct this oversight on the part of historians with this biography and succeeds in his attempt. Trist emerges from the pages of *Defiant Peacemaker* as a talented individual capable of shaping international events. Orht's chronicle of Trist's rise and fall has much to offer scholars and students of the early republic.

The first half of the book explains who Trist was and establishes his credentials as a diplomat, thereby laying the groundwork for his mission to Mexico. Born in Virginia in 1800, he was the son of Mary and Hore Browse Trist. His grandmother, an important person in his life, was a close friend of Thomas Jefferson. Through Jefferson's influence, Trist's father was appointed revenue collector at Natchez, Mississippi. With the acquisition of Louisiana, the elder Trist was transferred to New Orleans where he soon died of yellow fever. His attractive widow had no trouble finding another husband, a New York lawyer named Philip Jones. He, too, died, and Mary then wed St. Julien Tourmillon, a Louisiana planter. Mary and her

husband wanted her sons to have the best education possible and enrolled the boys at Orleans College. In 1817, the Jefferson connection came into play when the former president invited twenty-year-old Nicholas and his brother, Browse, to visit him at Monticello. The following year, Nicholas Trist entered West Point after Jefferson arranged for an appointment as a way for the young man to continue his education.

An excellent student, Trist left the academy in 1821 at the end of his third year, a decision that shaped the course of his subsequent career and life. It appears he had decided that the military profession was not for him. More importantly, he had fallen in love with Virginia Randolph, Jefferson's granddaughter, and desperately wanted to marry her. Needing a way to support his future wife, Trist headed to Louisiana to study law. In 1824, Trist returned east to finish his legal training under Jefferson. The agreement allowed Virginia and Nicholas to marry and actually live at Monticello. For the next two years, Trist served as Jefferson's private secretary and was present at his mentor's bedside when the former presi-

dent died on July 4, 1826. Trist even settled the disposition of Jefferson's estate. In 1828, Trist, who needed work again, accepted an appointment as a clerk in the State Department. He quickly earned a reputation as an intelligent young man with a bright future. His ease with languages made him extremely valuable to the department. He was well known among Washington's inter-circle and traveled easily within the ranks of bureaucrats, congressmen, and even presidents.

Andrew Jackson selected Trist to be his personal secretary in 1831, rewarding him with the post of U.S. Consul to Cuba in 1833. The stay at Havana was disappointing as Trist was forced to spend time away from his growing family. Even worse, charges that he neglected his duties surfaced, threatening to erupt into a scandal. From 1841, when Trist was turned out of office by the incoming Whig administration, until 1845, Trist and his family lived in Cuba, subsisting on what could be produced on their small farm. Jackson once more intervened when he heard of Trist's plight and he was again offered a position in the State Department, this time as deputy to the new secretary of state, James Buchanan. The two men worked well together, with Trist acting in Buchanan's stead during his chief's frequent absences.

At this point in the story, Ohrt's book changes style. The early chapters utilize Trist's personal papers, making for interesting reading that really fleshes out Trist's life and career. One indication of the transition is that personal events begin to be covered in much less detail. For example, Trist's four years of self-imposed exile in Cuba are condensed into two short paragraphs where similar periods had previously received chapter-length examination. This is unfortunate because it diminishes the effectiveness of what had been a thoroughly engrossing biography.

The second half of the book--the portion that deals with the Mexican War, Trist, and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo--lacks the clarity present in

the first. The author's scope broadens in these later chapters as he relates both a history of the war and Trist's participation in it. Although Ohrt uses Trist's papers to tell about his early life, the author relies heavily on secondary sources for information on Trist's activities in Mexico. As sometimes happens when authors follow this path, errors of fact and interpretation appear. For example, he contends that Polk "had no intention of waging a vigorous war" against Mexico (p. 101). Had Ohrt consulted Polk's wartime diary, he would have seen that Polk's fight with the army high command was in part over not pressing the war forward vigorously enough to his satisfaction. Other similar errors can be found in these chapters but it serves no purpose to catalog them as only those intimately familiar with the war will realize they exist.

Trist's involvement in the war came at the suggestion of Secretary of State James Buchanan after Polk expressed the desire to have a representative in Mexico who could present his administration's demands once military operations created a situation where the Mexican government would be forced to negotiate a peace treaty. As Ohrt says, Trist seemed to be the perfect candidate as he was an experienced diplomat who carried himself well, spoke Spanish fluently, and was a loyal Democrat. He was sent to Mexico as an executive agent in order to keep his mission secret and told by Polk to call on General Gideon Pillow, a trusted confidant of the president, for advice. Trist, whose cover story explaining his absence from Washington was that he was visiting family in Louisiana, stopped over in New Orleans on his way to Vera Cruz only to learn that news of his trip had already been leaked to the press.

Once in Mexico, Trist quickly ran afoul of General Winfield Scott, the commander of U.S. forces in central Mexico, when he asked him to forward his peace proposal to Mexican officials. "Old Fuss and Feathers," as the general was known, was sometimes spoken of as a candidate

on the Whig ticket for president. He and Polk disliked each other to the point of pure hatred. Scott was incensed that the fate of the war had apparently been turned over to a state department official. Scott complained to Secretary of War Marcy while Trist complained to Buchanan and the negotiations stood still. In an odd turn of events, the general and the diplomat formed a powerful friendship after Scott sent a box of guava marmalade to an ailing Trist. Upon finally meeting, the two discovered that they shared many interests. Thereafter, Trist and Scott became allies, much to the astonishment of an angry Polk. In addition to Trist's apparent betrayal, Polk was frustrated by Mexico's unwillingness to negotiate and decided to scrap the mission and call Trist home. The diplomat, backed by Scott, further dismayed the president by refusing to leave Mexico when recalled. Trist and others closer to the front reasoned that the administration was unaware of the true situation. The Mexican capital had fallen and for once a negotiated peace seemed possible. So volatile were Mexican politics that any delay caused by a change in U.S. negotiators might mean this opportunity to secure peace would be lost. Trist hoped Polk would understand and forgive his insubordination—the president did neither.

Trist and his Mexican counterparts placed their signatures on the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo on February 2, 1848. Polk's first reaction upon receiving the document was to set it aside as the work of a rogue diplomat, but he and his Cabinet realized that Trist had fulfilled his original mission and given Polk everything he had wanted. Polk sent the treaty to the Senate for ratification on February 23; it was approved on March 10 and ratified by the Mexican Congress on May 25. U.S. forces began leaving Mexico in June and by the end of July all were gone from Mexican soil.

Trist returned home, as Ohrt says, to slowly sink into oblivion. Many were angry that he had not acquired more territory from Mexico and had

almost single-handedly squashed the All of Mexico Movement. While not punished directly for his disobedience, Trist suffered financially when Polk denied him payment for his service and reimbursement for the expenses he incurred. His once promising diplomatic career over, he left the State Department and began a series of low-paying, unsatisfying jobs. During the 1850s, Trist switched political allegiance to the new Republican Party, gaining important allies such as Charles Sumner and Simon Cameron. Sumner pushed the Senate to pay his outstanding claim, and Cameron secured for him the office of postmaster general for Alexandria, Virginia. While his circle of friends still included many American notables, the public quickly forgot him. And although Trist had earned a place in history, he often is represented as a mediocre man who challenged a president while negotiating a treaty which "robbed" Mexico of its northern territories.

Two other recent works on Trist should be mentioned: Robert W. Drexler's *Guilty of Making Peace: A Biography of Nicholas P. Trist* (New York: University Press of America, 1991) and Dean B. Mahin's *Olive Branch and Sword: The United States and Mexico, 1845-1848* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, Publishers, 1997). Drexler's book is a brief, straightforward biography of Trist and is cited by Ohrt a number of times. Although Drexler explains Trist's Havana interlude more clearly, Ohrt makes better use of Trist's papers and overall is the more scholarly of the two. Mahin's work, as the title suggests, deals almost exclusively with Trist's activities in Mexico in gaining a treaty.

While many historians might ignore Ohrt's *Defiant Peacemaker*, thinking they already know this story, they shouldn't. Trist, as the author reveals, was an extremely important figure in the great drama of Jacksonian politics. This book gives insight into a critical facet of antebellum America and reading it is time well spent.

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