

Wired into Nature: The Telegraph and the North American Frontier

Roy Alden Atwood

Nehemiah Gateway University, Bucimas, Pogradec, Albania

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political stage, and the early legal history of one of America's most populous states. For Iowans who know a bit about their own state's past, reading *Creating the Land of Lincoln* is akin to touring a house that sits a block or two from your own: you become better sensitized to the hallmarks of homes in your neighborhood and to the range of options that their builders believed they possessed.

One area in which Cicero might have done more to help readers draw interjurisdictional comparisons is in his treatment of financial institutions. When discussing the 1848 convention, he describes Illinois Democrats' fierce opposition to banks. Their opposition is easier to fathom if one knows about the regional and national circumstances that helped provoke it. President Andrew Jackson, a Democrat, successfully blocked congressional efforts to extend the charter of the Second Bank of the United States beyond 1836 even though the bank's notes had provided the nation with a fairly reliable form of paper currency. After the bank closed its doors, state and private banks proliferated, flooding the market with notes—many of them worthless or of questionable value. In Iowa, Illinois, and other states, citizens heatedly debated whether banks brought them more evil than good.

When judged in light of what Cicero *has* put between his book's covers, however, this is a mere quibble. *Creating the Land of Lincoln* is wonderfully rewarding. And who knows? Some of its sentences might inspire at least a few readers to launch new writing projects of their own.

Wired into Nature: The Telegraph and the North American Frontier, by James Schwoch. The History of Communication Series. Urbana and Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2018. ix, 248 pp. Maps, illustrations, graphs, notes, bibliographical references, index. \$99.00 hardcover, \$24.95 paperback, \$22.46 ebook.

Reviewer Roy Alden Atwood is Distinguished Professor and Vice Rector at Nehemiah Gateway University, Bucimas, Pogradec, Albania. He is the author of "Interlocking Newspapers and Telephone Directories in Iowa, 1900-1917" (*Annals of Iowa*, 1984) and "Routes of Rural Discontent: Rural Free Delivery in Southeastern Iowa, 1899-1917" (*Annals of Iowa*, 1986).

The ambiguous title of this ambitious history of the telegraph is intentional. It traces across five densely packed chapters the interwoven threads that linked the new electrical communication technology to its natural and social environments on the western frontier and the political, military, commercial, and cultural forces and fortunes that motivated it through nineteenth-century North America.

Drawing on nearly 100 years' worth of government documents and other primary sources, the author describes initially how the construction of the early telegraph networks "wired into nature" in the simple sense of *extending* the new electrical communication systems *across* the vast plains, deserts, forests, and mountains of the western frontier. He probes more deeply, below this "thin" or surface description, to show how the telegraph also "wired into nature" in the sense of *exerting significant influences directly into and upon the natural and social environments* it touched. He adds some helpful new insights into the familiar (e.g., how the telegraph contributed to the building of the railroads and aided the western gold rushes) and reveals new insights into the less familiar (e.g., the telegraph's role in starting the Great Prairie Fire of 1865 and its use as an early weather reporting system). Perhaps most significantly, the author explains how the telegraph "wired into nature" in the sense that *it became a key instrument for the advancement of military, political, and commercial control over the frontier*. He describes how the U.S. Army used the telegraph as a weapon in the Civil War and for the suppression or extermination of the Plains Indians during and after the infamous Sand Creek Massacre of 1864.

One of the first telegraph lines to cross the Mississippi on the technology's westward march linked Rock Island, Illinois, with Davenport, Iowa, in 1851. An underwater cable eventually reached St. Louis in 1852. While St. Louis was a major commercial hub and an obvious center for the Trans-Mississippi network in the first decade of its development, the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861 forced planners of the Transcontinental Telegraph to move the line north for strategic reasons from Chicago through Iowa instead of Missouri, a border state with divided political loyalties. The transcontinental line was thus rerouted through Cedar Rapids and Des Moines in 1862. That move introduced those Iowa communities to the new communication system.

The vision for expanding the nascent communications network westward in the mid-1860s was not limited to North America, however. It included building a Western Union line from Seattle through Canada and Alaska to Czarist Russia along a Trans-Bering Strait telegraph cable. The herculean effort required to build that international line between 1865 and 1867 ultimately failed because of the subarctic's overwhelming environmental and logistical challenges and the completion of the rival Trans-Atlantic cable in late 1866. To this day, no cable connects the two continents, but the project did bring the new electrical communication network to one of the remotest corners of the continent and the new Alaska Territory purchased from Russia in 1867 for \$7 million.

The military controlled telegraphy during the Civil War and the Indian Wars. The end of those conflicts spawned a national debate about turning the telegraph over to civilian and commercial interests during peacetime. Schwoch follows that debate through Iowa Senator William Boyd Allison's joint congressional Commission to Consider the Present Organizations of the Signal Service, Geological Survey, Coast and Geodetic Survey, and the Hydrographic Office of the Navy Department, which he chaired in the late 1880s. While the Allison Commission eventually split on the telegraph question, the government's abiding interest in the telegraph for monitoring weather and the environment was handed over to the Department of Agriculture's Weather Bureau, later the National Weather Service, and eventually the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

Wired into Nature is a carefully documented and compelling read. While generally well written, its chapters and narrative threads are not always as seamlessly connected as the communication system it describes. Unfortunately, its ambitious reach also ends by overreaching. The conclusion, while highlighting some of the work's significant findings, lunges for—but misses—contemporary political relevance with a gratuitous attempt at comparing Al Gore's politicized global warming machinations with the historical significance of Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier hypothesis. It is a weak finish to an otherwise interesting and insightful history of the telegraph.

Iowa and the Civil War, volume 1, Free Child of the Missouri Compromise, 1850–1862, by Kenneth L. Lyftogt. Iowa City: Camp Pope Publishing, 2018. xvi, 416 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$40.00 hardcover.

Reviewer William B. Feis is professor of history at Buena Vista University. He is the author of *“Essentially American”: General Grenville M. Dodge and Family* (2017) and is working on an anthology of interpretive work on Iowa's role in the Civil War.

Since the publication of Benjamin F. Gue's four-volume *History of Iowa: From the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the Twentieth Century* (1903) and Olynthus B. Clark's *The Politics of Iowa during the Civil War and Reconstruction* (1911), many books and articles focusing on Iowa during the Middle Period have rolled off the presses. The recent Civil War sesquicentennial (2011–2015) spurred new interest in the conflict and resulted in a spate of new books coming out on the Hawkeye State, including the masterful *Necessary Courage: Iowa's Underground Railroad in the Struggle against Slavery* (2013) and *Busy in the Cause: Iowa, the Free-State Struggle in*