

Populism and Imperialism: Politics, Culture, and Foreign Policy in the American West, 1890-1900

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ISSN 0003-4827

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Recommended Citation

Offenburger, Andrew. "Populism and Imperialism: Politics, Culture, and Foreign Policy in the American West, 1890-1900." *The Annals of Iowa* 77 (2018), 431-433.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.12531>

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Consolidation exacted a price not only on workers, but on the entire circus business. As the number of circus companies dwindled, large circus companies became monopolistic and less innovative. No longer spurred by competition, circus managers contented themselves with rolling out the same show season after season; the circus, which had formerly been regarded as a daring form of amusement, became “increasingly stagnant” (179) until it began to be considered an entertainment principally for children. The heyday of the circus ended nearly a century ago, as the advent of the automobile, motion picture, and radio crowded out the big top, which began to seem old-fashioned by the 1920s.

Childress’s account of the show business focuses exclusively on the circus, neglecting the role that fairs, carnivals, and vaudeville played in creating the show business. But, as Childress writes, the traveling circus, as America’s “first popular amusement on a truly national scale,” contributed enormously to the rise of the show business and helped persuade Americans to accept a role for commercial entertainment in their lives and in their society (179). Other books offer more detail about the acrobats, clowns, daredevils, and animals that performed under the big top, but *Circus Life* presents an informative and interesting analysis of the workers and managers who created the circus and helped make the show business into big business.

Populism and Imperialism: Politics, Culture, and Foreign Policy in the American West, 1890–1900, by Nathan Jessen. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2017. x, 331 pp. Map, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Andrew Offenburger is assistant professor of history at Miami University. His forthcoming book (2019) examines how the Mexican North became “the next frontier” for many Americans between 1880 and 1920, while at the same time the region constituted an international borderland with global ties to southern Africa and beyond.

In *Populism and Imperialism*, Nathan Jessen examines two conflicting currents in U.S. history during the 1890s: the push for reform among western Populists (and others), and the extension of American power beyond the nation’s shores. Defined as a coalition of Populists, silver Republicans, and Democrats, these reformers in trans-Missouri states have been long misunderstood by historians, the author suggests. Far from being eagle-screaming imperialists and jingoists, these farmers and laborers saw how capitalism had shaped the American West and distrusted its expansion to Hawaii, Cuba, and the Philippines. As a result,

reformers were stridently anti-imperial and critical of the global capitalism exhibited by the British Empire and, they feared, an American empire to follow.

How did this ideology develop between 1890 and 1900? That question guides this book's main contribution to the field, revealing how domestic and foreign politics intertwined in a decade of key political developments and the making of the modern American state. The first two chapters outline Populist ideology and give the local context of the three states under study (Nebraska, Colorado, and Washington). Chapters three, four, and five analyze western reformers' contributions in Congress as well as developments in their own states. Finally, chapters six, seven, and eight examine the debates "over empire and political economy as they played out between the reformers and conservatives in Congress and at the polls in 1899 and 1900" (8). Despite the book's inclusion of "culture" in its subtitle, make no mistake: this is old-school political history based in deep research.

Beyond the admirable historiographical contribution of connecting empire to domestic reform, though, *Populism and Imperialism* suffers from some oversights. How tight was this coalition of western reformers, for example? While the author persuasively argues for his choice of case studies (trans-Missouri states of varied sub-regions), he does not clearly define what constitutes a reformer among the general population. This is a well-known challenge for any Populist historian, given the ever shifting coalitions determined by region, race, gender, and class. As a result, one has a clearer sense of the organizations, publications, and ideologies driving reformers, but students and scholars unfamiliar with the era will wonder how (and how many) Americans counted themselves among the subjects of this study. In other words, for non-political actors of the era without a designation of "P" (Populist) or "D" (Democrat), or without an explicit identity as a silver Republican, how does the author decide who's in and who's out of the reform coalition?

The book's illustrations exemplify its payoffs and its frustrations. One map and 15 images accompany the text. Of these, four are political cartoons from the usual suspects (including *Judge* and *Harper's Weekly*); the remaining 11 are pictures of elected officials, all of them men, poised in suits, sitting for formal portraits with stern countenances common to the era. As with the study's textual analysis, this approach makes sense on one level. Studies that focus on political history in the Gilded Age are going to deal with a similar cast of characters, and rightly so. But such methodological decisions can easily lead to antiquated political histories limited to white men and their views of others, a perspective inconsonant with current practices and, I would argue, the actual past.

This hampers the study's breadth. For example, if this book connects domestic and foreign issues, focusing on three western states, why is there no mention of the temperance movement? And what of suffrage, which receives a paragraph (37) set within a section on gender (read: masculinity) and brief attention on three other pages out of a total 252? Its minimal treatment is inversely proportional to its importance in the 1890s; the question of suffrage—African American and female—often overlapped with the question of citizenship, especially in the age of U.S. empire. In the case of Colorado, it takes but a sentence: "The Populists' one substantial achievement involved their decisive support of a women's suffrage amendment that ultimately appeared on the 1893 ballot" (50). Major female leaders like Carrie Chapman Catt receive passing acknowledgment: "Populists joined state and national women's suffrage leaders (including Carrie Chapman Catt) in promoting the measure, but they did so using explicitly economic arguments. . . . Even Catt—by no means an economic radical—contended that women would vote for free silver and economic equality" (37). Two sentences later, the reader is back to more familiar territory: Populist ideology, the economy, and capitalism. Indeed, in the entire study, only one woman is quoted: Sarah Emery, author of *Seven Financial Conspiracies Which Have Enslaved the American People* (1887).

Although the paucity of women and nonpolitical figures may tempt one to dismiss the study entirely, *Populism and Imperialism* does contribute to the field by exploring how reformers wrangled with the subject of empire overseas at a time when so much was on the line at home.

Grave Marker Symbols: A Field Guide, by Loren N. Horton and Michael D. Zahs. Ottumwa: PBL Limited, 2018. 116 pp. Illustrations (many in color), glossary, bibliography, worksheet. \$24.99 paperback.

Reviewer Thomas Connors is associate professor of history at the University of Northern Iowa. He served as the principal historian and writer for the National Cemetery Administration's Veterans Legacy Program in 2014–2016 and has published on Washington Irving, Sleepy Hollow, and the rural cemetery movement.

Anyone walking around a Victorian cemetery will notice the wealth of symbolism represented on its markers. Some, like crosses and flags, remain familiar, but many others have become obscure, a forgotten vocabulary of flowers, crowns, and fraternal orders. We can connect a willow to mourning and perhaps a lamb to innocence but will more likely mistake an anchor for naval service than interpret it as a symbol of Christian hope.