
At first, it seems strange that Stephen J. Mexal prefaces *Reading for Liberalism: The Overland Monthly and the Writing of the Modern American West* with a correlation between the American Wild West and hawkish, American political rhetoric of the early twenty-first century. His conclusion is no different. Mexal again returns to contemporary American military action. He analyzes the 2011 raid on Osama Bin Laden, and the accompanying code word *Geronimo*. Military action – and its choice of code word – conjures up the Wild West, although ironically.

In Mexal’s argument, the cultural memory of the “lawless” West demonstrates that the United States’ construction of liberal selfhood – and the imperial promotion of this ideal – retains a “relationship to the language of the wilderness and ideologies of conquest” (x). He situates this relationship in the American West because it provides a contact zone for these themes, and chooses *The Overland Monthly*, a San Francisco–based literary magazine which ran from 1868 to 1875 and 1883 to 1935, as a convergence site. In the *Overland*, Mexal finds a periodical “equipped to examine liberalism not only as an apparatus of rule but as an apparatus of Californian political selfhood” (13).

The *Overland* follows two broad criteria. One, the magazine’s content, whether fiction, poetry, or nonfiction, participated in the articulation of liberal selfhood. This articulation, however, is not univocal, but the magazine’s contributors speak to “a multiplicity of liberalism” (xi). This multiplicity organizes Mexal’s chapters around certain liberal constructions, and the manner in which authors interrogate these assumptions. Two, the *Overland* became a jumping point for many authors to receive national recognition. This speaks to the regional magazine’s national presence, in that it helped launch the careers of several major and minor canonical writers.

Mexal’s introduction provides the theoretical foundation for his investigation of liberalism, although the *Overland* and its Western regionalism are the foundation of the analysis. “Liberalism and the Language of Wilderness” moves readers through the history of liberalism, and shows its interdependence with the language of wilderness. Political philosophers such as Hobbes and Locke borrow dichotomies of “nature” to construct their theories about individuals,
community, and nature. Peoples become savages or civilized, depending upon the liberal observer’s viewpoint. The American West becomes an explicit space for these considerations of land, inclusion/exclusion of individuals, and community, and a move from classic liberalism to a liberal republicanism, and finally towards a pluralist liberal society. The *Overland* presents case studies for this movement. With its emphasis on being “Devoted to the Development of the Country” the literary journal included a wide variety of genres and topics. Additionally, the *Overland* did not include author bylines until the volume was complete, and it did not reveal a contribution’s genre. A work of fiction could easily be misconstrued as nonfiction. All of these promoted a liberal republican identity for the Western United States, and could allow authors the anonymity to discuss their opinions without fear of immediate repercussions to their reputations.

This liberal republican identity was never unifying, and Mexal organizes his chapters as a means of investigating the multiplicity of liberal thought for the *Overland* writers. For the most part, Mexal’s chapters place an author or authors into conversation with their articulation of liberalism. As such, Mexal pairs authors like Bret Harte, Noah Brooks, Ina Coolbrith, John Muir, Jack London, and Frank Norris with different formulations of individualism and an individual’s responsibilities to community and/or nature. Each chapter presents substantial literary analysis to support Mexal’s readings. While some of the analyzed texts come from later in an author’s career, the majority were published first in the *Overland*. This further reinforces how the Western journal could allow for a multiplicity of perspectives, in a format that allowed for exploration of liberal selfhood in the diminishing American frontier.

Of particular interest is the fourth chapter, because it deviates from the book’s main organizational style. Instead of linking a topic to a specific author, “The Limits of Liberalism: Chinese, Indians, and the Politics of Cosmopolitanism in the West” focuses exclusively on a theme, with some literary analysis. This chapter discusses the incongruent cultural and political discourse concerning Native American tribes and Chinese immigrants. Although both peoples were considered “savages” outside of the “civilized” society, American policy for Native American people was assimilation, while discriminatory policies against Chinese immigrants ultimately led to the 1882 Exclusion Act and 1888 Scott Act. The chapter’s moments of textual evidence mostly come from nonfiction essays, and narrate changing American perceptions that paradoxically promoted liberalism through
illiberal practices. This choice seems disjunctive, considering the opening text is Ambrose Bierce’s “The Haunted Valley.”

Embedded within Mexal’s investigation of liberalism and its articulations in *The Overland Monthly* are moments of promoting overlooked or forgotten Western authors. Chapters 2 and 3 involve Noah Brooks and Ina Coolbrith, respectively. Mexal discusses at length how these authors are largely ignored in contemporary criticism about the American West. He gives Brooks a convincing case for inclusion in more critical studies, especially those interested in the intersections of politics, narrative, and imperialism. Coolbrith, he argues, deserves more attention than her relationship with male Western authors. Instead, critics of Coolbrith should consider her supportive role in promoting and encouraging multiple Western authors, male and female. This lends credence to his discussion of positive liberty through support groups.

Mexal presents his scholarship in an approachable tone. The ample use of endnotes and textual evidence makes the book accessible to both scholar and student. His focus on a major regional periodical of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century should excite readers who are interested in mass media and its influence on political mythmaking. Finally, as his conclusion and preface demonstrate, the discourse of liberalism and its imperial undertakings is still relevant today.

MICHAEL LEMON

*Texas Tech University*


Le xixe siècle aura été, selon un mot célèbre de Pierre Larousse, « le siècle des dictionnaires ». La production de ce type d’ouvrage a en effet connu en France à cette époque un essor sans précédent. Elle a été, comme il se devait, amplement étudiée par les lexicographes modernes. En revanche, l’apparition parallèle durant cette même période d’une quantité massive de dictionnaires comiques, n’a presque pas suscité d’attention critique. C’est cette lacune que Denis Saint-Amand se propose de combler dans son livre, *Le dictionnaire...*