Autobiography of John Russell Bartlett (1805-1886) (review)

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During this period, life on the Great Plains was backbreaking, lonely, and frequently tragic. Yet many found the landscape, the solitude, and the wide-open sky captivating. Those who made a go of it did so through "hard work, perseverance, and frugality" (p. 191). For thousands of European immigrants, the land represented a new start in life and an opportunity to acquire their own farm. Survival on the plains forced homesteaders to rely on one another. Because there were so few people in the region, residents were generally friendly and helpful. Through shared work and social events, neighbors created a strong sense of community.

Echoing Frederick Jackson Turner, author Steven R. Kinsella argues that this shared community and austere, disciplined lifestyle created a special type of person. Those who survived and settled the Great Plains embodied the true essence of the American spirit. The region serves as a "touchstone" for the nation, "a metaphor for all that Americans believe to be good about their character" (p. 16). Kinsella, the great-grandson of Great Plains homesteaders, is a media consultant and public affairs strategist for conservation organizations.

900 Miles from Nowhere succeeds marvelously in creating a rich and authentic overview of non-Indian settlement of the Great Plains. Kinsella skillfully weaves historic commentary, homesteaders' poignant letters, and diaries with captivating period photographs of frontier families, farms, and dugouts to create a vibrant tapestry of plains life. The author demonstrates an intuitive feeling for the land, writing with authority on the region's environmental history and man's interaction with Mother Nature. This book is also notable for its excellent production values, which set a high bar for other academic presses. Most notable are the attractive jacket design, stylish binding, high-quality page stock, and well-reproduced photographs.

Many of the images and primary sources used in this work come from historical societies in South Dakota, Nebraska, Colorado, and Minnesota. While the author provides an engrossing account of the 1893 land rush in Enid, Oklahoma, he omits all discussion of the southern plains of Texas. To provide a more representative overview of the entire region, Kinsella should have included some of the excellent photographs and primary accounts available at the Southwest Collection in Lubbock and Panhandle Plains Historical Museum in Canyon, Texas. That being said, *900 Miles from Nowhere* ably captures the essence of the Great Plains, a place where even today "you are constantly tested and never in control" (p. 185).

Texas Christian University GLEN SAMPLE ELY

Autobiography of John Russell Bartlett (1805–1886). Edited by Jerry E. Mueller. (Providence: The John Carter Brown Library, 2006. Pp. 252. Illustrations, appendices, notes, index. ISBN 0916617661. $50.00, cloth.)

John Russell Bartlett enjoys a prominent place in the history of the Southwest. As an influential member of the Whig Party in the 1840s, and as a widely recognized expert in ethnography and painting, he became the Taylor administration's logical choice to serve as the U.S. Boundary Commissioner for the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Bartlett, who shared the wanderlust of his manifest destiny generation, eagerly accepted the post, left his native Rhode Island, performed his professional

duties competently, and painted prolifically. His gripping account of the Southwest and its peoples, *Personal Narrative of Explorations and Incidents in Texas, New Mexico, California, Sonora, and Chihuahua* (1854), made a distant land seem less foreign. Bartlett's work has been explored in several useful contemporary works, including Robert V. Hine's *Bartlett's West* and William Goetzmann's *West of the Imagination.*

For all the emphasis on Bartlett's experience as a naturalist, boundary commissioner, and formidable painter, however, it is easy to forget that Bartlett spent only four years of a very long and productive life in the Southwest. One benefit to come from Jerry E. Mueller's decision to edit the *Autobiography of John Bartlett* is the illumination of Bartlett as an integral figure of the East Coast political and cultural establishment. Bartlett's autobiography was not much of one. In fact, it was little more than a brief compilation of anecdotes, few of them especially revealing, about his experience as a politician (governor of Rhode Island), bibliographer, and European traveler. At times the account reads more like a daybook, a kind of "I-was-doing-this-here-then" collection rather than a sustained set of personal insights and opinions. Nonetheless, what emerges from this string of sterile autobiographical recollections is a man whose identity—whatever it may have been—took shape in the crucible of elite Rhode Island society. And thus, to Mueller's credit, Bartlett quietly becomes a man whose life achieves historical relevance not against the backdrop of an exotic locale—the Wild West—but rather in the familiar context of a place he knew like the back of his hand—the civilized East.

How this refreshed, if poorly developed, perspective will interest anyone other than the most dedicated student of Bartlett is hard to say. Mueller, a scientist who specializes in landform evolution, does very little to make the account historiographically relevant. The arrangement of the text is such that Mueller's annotations—often necessary to understanding the entries—are relegated to back matter, leaving the reader to frantically flip the pages to and fro in order to approximate anything resembling a coherent narrative. While Mueller (and, presumably, his editors) saw fit to banish the notes, they curiously chose to litter the main text with fifteen sometimes very odd portraits of Bartlett—"the largest assemblage . . . ever published in a single volume"—from various stages of his life. One might not learn much about Bartlett's personal life or his views, but one certainly has an opportunity to trace the progression of his facial hair, complexion, sartorial tastes, graying mop of hair, and even the softening of a youthful cleft chin.

In fact, one of the only times Mueller routinely interrupts the text with an interpretive twist is when he writes about, well, hair. "It is clear," he explains, "that Bartlett's hair has receded much further; his beard is considerably less full; and both are much grayer on the photo than on the painting." About another portrait he writes, "His hair on the original painting is light reddish brown with some gray on the temples." And in yet another: "Although Bartlett's hair and beard are distinctly whiter than they appear on earlier photos and drawings, his hairline had remained virtually unchanged since 1850." I suppose that it is distinctly possible for a historian of the utmost ability to locate historical significance in the contours of a hairline. But historical interpretation is not Mueller's bailiwick, a drawback that will neither mean much to Bartlett devotees, who should value the book for its lump of unprocessed information, nor professional historians, who will quickly

realize that they are perfectly content to stick with the old Bartlett, the one they already know, the man of the Southwest.

Texas State University–San Marcos JAMES MCWILLIAMS

The First Texas Navy. By John Powers. (Austin: Woodmont Books, 2006. Pp. 320. Maps, appendices, notes, bibliography, index. ISBN 0966962222. $49.00, cloth.)

Before the appearance of air power, Annapolis lecturer Capt. Alfred Thayer Mahan argued that prosperity rested on security afforded by a strong navy. Fifty-five years before publication of Mahan's strategic treatise, the Texas Committee of Naval Affairs recommended the establishment of a naval force. Texas's lifeline, stretched between New Orleans and the Texas coast, was vulnerable to Mexican war vessels. In a determination to slough off Mexican rule, Texas had to create its own navy in order to keep open the supply lanes between Texas and the sympathetic world at large (or at least enterprising merchants willing to supply the cash-strapped revolutionaries).

In *The First Texas Navy,* former Texas Court of Appeals judge and retired naval captain John Powers has focused on the formation and exploits of Texas's first combat fleet, beginning with the acquisition of the schooner *Liberty* in New Orleans in January 1836 and ending with the loss of its last fleet vessel in an October 1837 storm. It is a turbulent history of a small navy imperiled by inadequate funding, insufficient staffing and supplies, and personality clashes, but never wanting for courage.

By the end of January 1836, Texas could boast of a four-schooner fleet, two of which were direct purchases in New Orleans (the *Liberty* and the *Independence*). One (the *Brutus*) entered service through letters of marque while another (the *Invincible*) came by purchase from a coastal merchandise import firm. Disposition of this fleet provoked controversy and quarrels within the struggling government. Broadside exchanges between the men serving aboard the *Liberty* and two other vessels presented disagreements over issues of pride and protocol. Ship commanders feuded with each other and in one instance, delayed a change of command. In May 1837 Pres. Sam Houston vetoed a congressional resolution to order Texas's remaining two vessels into Mexican waters on a diplomatic mission. Rejecting congressional intrusion on his commander-in-chief prerogatives, Houston then ordered the fleet on an extended campaign off the Yucatán accompanied by Sec. of the Navy S. Rhoads Fisher. Although both vessels returned, Fisher's career was over following a senate trial at the behest of Houston, prompted by matters arising out of a personal quarrel. Adding to these difficulties were problems of outfitting and maintaining war vessels. While private subscriptions saved the *Brutus* and the *Invincible* from fatal attachments for repairs in New York, Texas lost the *Liberty* in 1836 to creditors for repairs in New Orleans. "Navies, then as now, are notoriously expensive" (p. 4), Powers reminds us.

The First Texas Navy is a well-researched, straightforward history augmenting traditional landlocked studies of the revolution in Texas. Beginning with a concise