
BOOK REVIEWS



The Good Country: A History of the American Midwest, 1800–1900

by Jon K. Lauck

xii + 350 pages, notes, index.

Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2022, paper, \$26.95.

Turn to chapter 3 of *The Good Country*, “The Attitude of a Section Itself: The Formation of Midwestern Regional Identity,” for a model of historical exposition. Jon Lauck explains how even in antebellum times, the country “northwest of the river Ohio” distinguished itself from the Northeast (p. 87); how “the deep divide between the Midwest and the South” (p. 87) opened and endured; how midwestern agriculture exhibited ideals of yeoman farming and diversification; how the region absorbed and benefited from the influx of immigrants; how evangelical religion and reforming women chastened and improved the country; how the rise of Republicanism and the sacrifice of young manhood in the Civil War

imprinted the adolescent region; and how arts, letters, science, and historical consciousness worthy of regional aspirations emerged. All this by midcentury—a foundation on which William Dean Howells, Theodore Dreiser, James Whitcomb Riley, Richard Wright, Hamlin Garland, and Frederick Jackson Turner might build a seedbed from which bearded presidents might spring. “By the turn of the twentieth century,” we read, “the region had reached Peak Midwest” (p. 118). Its citizens “could rightly boast a long history of progress, region building, and democratic gains” (p. 119). This is the core argument of the book, and it is well made.

Not all aspects of the book are this satisfying. The discussion of Indigenous affairs and Native-white conflict has a hole in it. The displacement of the Natives comes off as too benign. Is not Minnesota in the Midwest? How is it that the events of 1862, the killing of hundreds of settlers, along with the genuinely genocidal reaction of Minnesota authorities, has no place in the narrative? This omission exposes one of the defining differences in historical memory between the Midwest and the Great Plains: to the West, Indigenous affairs own the foreground. Here is another distinction: the book’s scant notice of nature, the environment, and changes in the land. Is this not the Corn Belt of Allan Bogue? Considering the regionalism articulated in all the other sections of the country, features of the physical environment—pines, plains, sand, saguaro, rainfall, aridity—seem at least iconic and often determinative. *The Good Country*, one theme of which is a sort of independence, seems to stand independent of the physical ground on which it is situated. This is a remarkable, and remarkably twenty-first-century, intellectual development.

Jon Lauck is intent on constructing a Midwest that, in its physical extent (not to mention its character), differs from the one described a generation ago by Kansas geographer James Shortridge in his 1989 book, *The Middle West: Its*

Meaning in American Culture. His work seeks to encompass and incorporate certain states—such as Kansas—heretofore considered beyond the pale of the core Midwest. The regional identity of Kansas, once it emerged from the trauma of Bleeding Kansas and the Civil War, claimed an intellectual place not in the Midwest but in the American West—Robert Richmond’s state history established that. Kansas historians may welcome a midwestern invitation to come down off the Great Plains. Or, noting that their state historical journal declares itself a “Journal of the Central Plains,” they may continue to cast their lot with the emergent West.

Reviewed by Thomas D. Isern, Professor of History & University Distinguished Professor, North Dakota State University, Fargo, North Dakota.

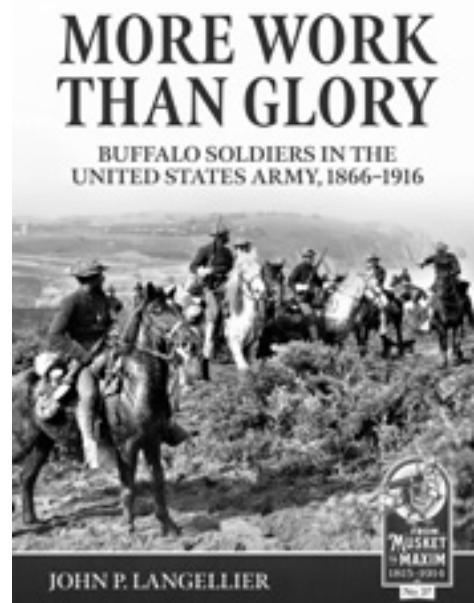
More Work Than Glory: Buffalo Soldiers in the United States Army, 1866–1916

by John P. Langellier

xii + 322 pages, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index.

Warwick, UK: Helion, 2023, paper \$49.95.

The buffalo soldiers played a crucial role in helping the U.S. Army conquer the West following the American Civil War, yet the contributions of these men are often glossed over by scholars since they did not see much battlefield action. In *More Work Than Glory: Buffalo Soldiers in the United States Army, 1866–1916*, public historian John Langellier tells the story of these individuals, relating their trials, successes, and roles in military history in a way that appeals to both professional historians and general readers. Langellier argues that the story of the pre–World War I buffalo soldiers needs to be considered because of its many layers, the roles that these men played in the struggle for equality in the armed services, and the importance of their noncombat duties.



Although Langellier mentions that Black men had seen action in previous American wars, he focuses his study solely on the African American units raised by the federal government in 1866. Instead of providing an operational military history, however, Langellier treats the reader to an examination of the motivations behind the enlistment of Black men in the U.S. Army and their individual experiences. The first two chapters provide brief biographies of numerous buffalo soldiers as well as of the first Black officers. This discussion segues into a pair of chapters presenting accounts of the buffalo soldiers serving—on and off the battlefield—in many western states, including Kansas. Langellier emphasizes the noncombat actions of the subjects rather than those undertaken under enemy fire. To conclude, the reader is given the author’s appraisal of how these men have been remembered by the military.

Langellier’s book examines themes investigated by previous authors, but in greater detail. Racial discrimination factors heavily into the lives of those mentioned in the work. Race, according to Langellier, impacted almost every facet of life for Black soldiers in the U.S. Army. It influenced conceptions of manhood, soldierly ability, and

military discipline in the minds of both the whites who interacted with buffalo soldiers and the soldiers themselves. Nevertheless, men serving in these regiments formed bonds that “heightened *esprit de corps* and enhanced morale” (p. 282).

More Work Than Glory also attempts to refute a famous myth about the U.S. Army during this period while simultaneously addressing holes in the historiography of the topic. Many scholars have asserted that immediately after the Civil War, the U.S. Army’s sole objective was to pacify the Indigenous peoples of the West, but *More Work Than Glory* contradicts this notion by showing that army personnel were engaged in various noncombat ventures during the period. Early in the work, Langellier expresses agreement with Michael Tate, who proposed that the U.S. Army spent little time fighting Indigenous peoples since its efforts were centered around noncombat operations such as policing the frontier and assisting in settlement. While showcasing the service of buffalo soldiers in these less glamorous pursuits, Langellier’s volume is inspired by the works of historians William Leckie and James Leiker. Leckie and other scholars, Langellier argues, have not looked at this period enough to fully comprehend how much the experiences of the buffalo soldiers reflect current theses about this time in U.S. Army history.

In his concluding remarks, Langellier explains that his research was inspired by the call issued by William Leckie in his notable book *The Buffalo Soldiers* to conduct “further research” on the buffalo soldiers. In this task, he has succeeded. *More Work Than Glory: Buffalo Soldiers in the United States Army, 1866–1916* not only delivers well-documented evidence to support its claims but also humanizes a group of individuals who are not often discussed in works about this period in both U.S. and Kansas history.

Reviewed by Damon Penner, PhD student, Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas.

Union General: Samuel Ryan Curtis and Victory in the West

by William L. Shea

x + 346 pages, illustrations, notes, index.
Lincoln, NE: Potomac Books, 2023, cloth \$34.95.

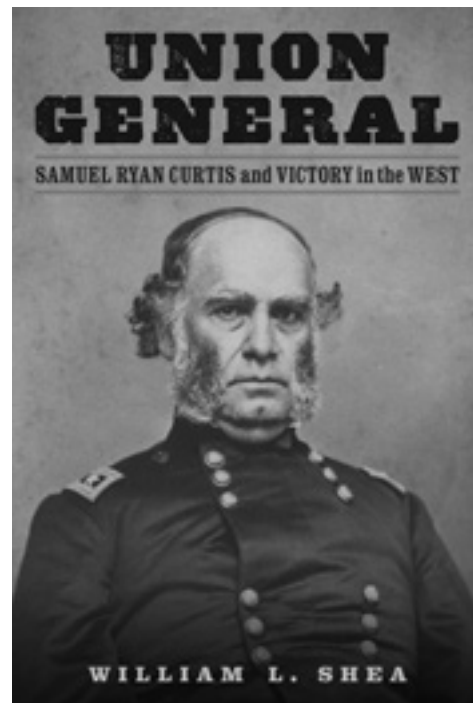
The Trans-Mississippi states in the American Civil War (especially Missouri, Arkansas, and Kansas) are enjoying an overdue renaissance. The landscape that witnessed slavery’s late growth spurt and rehearsed the maelstrom that accompanied it has long been seen as a sideshow to the ensuing conflict’s main events. Two of these states—Kansas and Missouri—remained with the Union, while two—Arkansas and Missouri—either joined the Confederacy outright or had a rump legislature that claimed it had. (The Confederate Congress in turn dubiously claimed Missouri as its twelfth state.) All bled from, and for, their divided cultural, economic, demographic, and political allegiances to the North and/or South. Ironically, in wartime they became the front line of the “violent and remorseless revolutionary struggle” that Lincoln claimed he sought to avoid the war becoming. A raft of recent books on slavery, military occupation, pro-Confederate and -Union guerrillas, and postwar Lost Causism in these states offer protean war-era tales: most of what the war became began in the western border states.

Despite the pedestrian title of this traditional and sympathetic biography, William L. Shea has done this narrative a great service with this first-ever published book on the most prominent and overlooked (even by his contemporaries) federal commander in the far western theater, Samuel R. Curtis. Offering an at once fine-grained and comprehensive military study of this New York-born, Ohio-raised West Pointer did not come easily. Shea researched Curtis’s personal collections and military records in archives scattered across sixteen states, from Connecticut to Washington, D.C., to Louisiana to Iowa to California. While Shea

might be taken to task for relying predominantly on personal correspondence, papers, and military records and for not including more of the recent relevant “new military history” that puts civilians and soldiers and their interactions at center stage, this book knits an operational military narrative together with narratives of Native Americans and freedpeople in what was once called “the forgotten war” across the Mississippi. Taken together, these narratives are as sprawling as the West itself.

Curtis, a river and railroad engineer, lawyer, U.S.-Mexican War veteran, three-term Iowa congressman, and committed abolitionist, gave up his seat in 1861 to lead Union troops following the disaster at First Bull Run. Promoted to brigadier general and transferred to St. Louis, Curtis led the Army of the Southwest to victory at Pea Ridge in 1862. Later that year, he marched hundreds of miles across Arkansas in an unsuccessful attempt to capture Little Rock, then was convicted by court-martial in 1863 on specious charges of cotton-trading corruption at Helena. More likely, as he was one of the few abolitionist generals in the Trans-Mississippi region, slavery politics played a heavy role in his conviction. Curtis’s controversial military emancipation policies and his open conflict with Missouri’s conservative wartime governor, Hamilton R. Gamble, created a storm of criticism among proslavery conservatives, leading Abraham Lincoln to temporarily (and apologetically) remove him from command. Once restored as department commander in Kansas in 1864, he expertly deployed and led militia units in a crushing victory at Westport over Sterling Price, ending his famed raid.

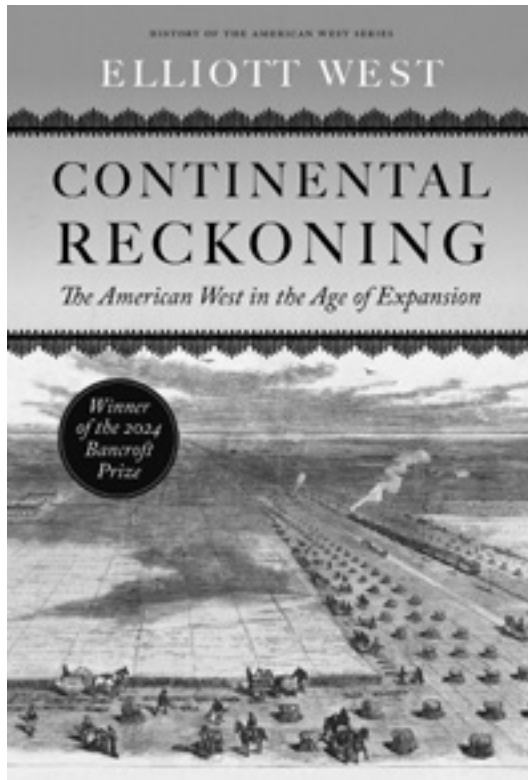
Shea rightly judges Curtis to be the most effective yet underappreciated commander in the Trans-Mississippi theater. He is mystified by Curtis’s poor treatment by peers and subordinates such as Frederick Steele and William S. Rosecrans and superiors such as Henry W. Halleck and Ulysses S. Grant. Before being forced out of the postwar army, Curtis served briefly as commander of the Department of the Northwest, offering



evenhanded military responses to Sioux uprisings in Minnesota and Dakota Territory. While acting as government liaison with the Union Pacific and supervising the construction of the transcontinental railroad, Curtis died suddenly near Omaha in 1866. Although Shea attributes this lack of appreciation to his military and emancipation politics, Curtis’s antislavery stance in the West would certainly have benefited him with Lincoln’s administration. Rather, in *Union General*, he comes off as tedious, often prickly, and always supercilious, qualities that likely figured into the politics of command that lay behind his struggles.

At a national moment of reckoning on the long-term impacts of the war, this important biography and synthesis of the West’s Civil War narrative is especially welcome and deserving.

Reviewed by Christopher Phillips, John and Dorothy Hermanies Professor of American History and University Distinguished Professor in the Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, Ohio.



Continental Reckoning: The American West in the Age of Expansion

by Elliott West

xxxiii + 628 pages, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index.

Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2023, cloth \$39.95.

The American West is a complex and loaded topic, steeped in cultural, political, and social associations. As historians, we must delve deeply into these associations, using every tool at our disposal to unpack their meaning. Elliott West, esteemed professor emeritus at the University of Arkansas, is a master of this craft, skillfully teasing out the nuances of the American West from its tangled web of connotations. In *Continental Reckoning*, West masterfully distills decades of historical research into a palatable monograph about the West and its role in American history.

Continental Reckoning depicts the birth of a

region and how the nation remade itself and subsequently shifted onto a new path. West divides the book into three parts to achieve this goal. The first part, “Unsettling America,” traces the American West’s emergence and role in the greater United States. The second part, “Things Come Together,” follows the post–Civil War era, when the West became a laboratory for science and knowledge production. Finally, “Worked into Being” explores how the East exploited western resources for the nation’s economy and global ascendancy. For Kansas historians, West argues that Kansas “is best seen as a variation of what was unfolding across the new country—transforming the West into property” (p. 131). During the mid-nineteenth century, these conflicts over property fueled the tensions that sparked the American Civil War. Kansas is not just the site of a sectional crisis but a representative of the West’s continental disharmony.

Elliott West provides a perspective that, in his words, “allows a far more prominent role for the emergence of the West and the changes it brought” (p. xx). To expand on this quotation, West builds upon his “Great Reconstruction” thesis by emphasizing the longer Civil War throughout the continental United States. In his 2003 article “Reconstructing Race,” he urged historians to rescue Reconstruction and the Civil War from the American South. He argued that the West provides just as many historical instances for analyzing the race relations that shape the nation today. He fulfills that task in *Continental Reckoning*. The American West initiated an expansion and restructuring of the United States, and the mid-nineteenth century served as a crucial transition point in national life through agriculture, commercial access, transportation, and race relations. At these nexus points, the West emerged as the quintessential U.S. region. The West directed U.S. growth geographically, technologically, and economically.

Continental Reckoning presents a nuanced portrayal of the West across multiple fields: cultural, environmental, racial, and ideological. Across

these fields, as in the book's title, Elliott West asks his readers to reckon with the West's legacy and meaning. Throughout the book, he demonstrates how the United States conquered this region and subsequently incorporated it into its historical narrative. In the later nineteenth century, the West was mythologized. The author provides plenty of stories that contradict the myth of the American West. These mythologies persist, and historians closely examine them for the realities and nuances in the historical record.

If anything, a book written for nonacademic audiences can best combat these mythologies. *Continental Reckoning* is a testament to West's ability to traverse the realms of academia and public discourse. Both scholars and history buffs can find satisfaction in the well-crafted book. West has not only made significant contributions to the field but also engaged with the public through appearances on *The Joe Rogan Experience* and Ken Burns's *The American Buffalo*. This book is equally at home on a professor's desk or a family member's nightstand, a testament to its broad appeal. Above all else, West demonstrates his masterful storytelling skills in *Continental Reckoning*. He will continue to garner accolades because of his ability to balance so many different aspects within an accessible book.

Reviewed by Abigail Scott, PhD student, Department of History, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas.

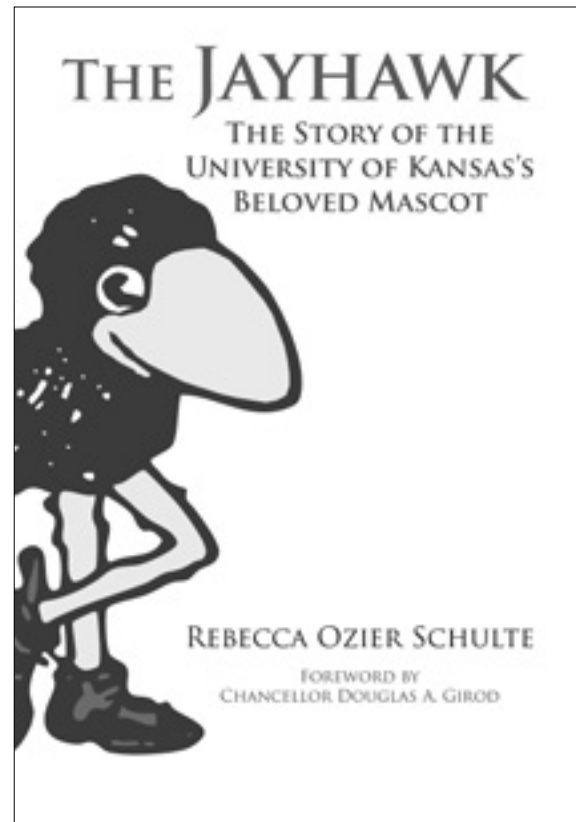
The Jayhawk: The Story of the University of Kansas's Beloved Mascot

by Rebecca Ozier Schulte

xi + 163 pages, illustrations, index.

Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2023, cloth \$34.95.

From free-state rhetoric to a recently erected set of bronze statues outside the University of



Kansas Memorial Union, the Jayhawk has been a popular symbol of independence and athletic dominance for over 150 years. Originally the term “Jayhawker” was used to describe ambitious California gold rushers and freestaters who “had been foraging off the enemy” (p. 1). The term gained popularity during the Civil War and quickly became synonymous with “all boys and girls who were born in Kansas” (p. 3). Before drawings of the mythical bird appeared in KU student and alumni publications and a Jayhawk mascot showed up at athletic events, the university adopted a “Rock Chalk, Jay Hawk” college yell, “among the first signs of the burgeoning student unity that would become an enduring university tradition” (p. 4).

The long, multigenerational history of the Jayhawk—the idea, the visual symbol, the chant, and the mascot—is thoroughly detailed in Rebecca Ozier Schulte's excellent book *The Jayhawk: The Story of the University of Kansas's Beloved Mascot*. In nine chapters filled with three hundred images, Schulte explains the evolution of one of the most

internationally recognizable college mascots as only an author with an intimate connection to primary sources, as well as the Jayhawk itself, could. A former University of Kansas archivist, Schulte not only lays out a history of the Jayhawk but also provides beautiful reproductions of letters, student newspapers, alumni magazines, yearbook covers, and photographs so that readers can enjoy the broad collection of sources used to tell this story. For enthusiastic readers, Schulte includes endnotes.

Embedded in the Jayhawk's history is a series of individuals whose love of KU prompted them to develop a new element of the icon for others to embrace. As early as 1910, fans created a Jayhawk costume for halftime appearances at football games. After that, homemade costumes appeared at subsequent games to the delight of fans, who had (for no known reason) previously enjoyed the company of a bulldog mascot. As team rivalries and halftime antics increased, several Jayhawks were stolen by opposing teams. For example, the University of Nebraska issued a photograph of a Jayhawk in its 1914 yearbook, stating, "The Kansas Jayhawk. Later captured and carried off to Lincoln by Nebraskans as a trophy of victory" (p. 47). It was not until 1922 that artists made a profit from Jayhawk stickers and copyrighted designs. During that period, KU athletic and cheer teams regularly used Jayhawk patches on uniforms and game-day advertisements. In the 1950s, the Alumni Association commissioned the first official mascot to appear at games. Two decades later, Baby Jay was born when an innovative KU sophomore built the costume in her family garage during a summer break, with materials costing less than \$54 and the assistance of her parents and neighbors. During a football game against Kansas State University in

October 1971, the band played music from *2001: A Space Odyssey* and Baby Jay emerged from a large blue egg and into the hearts of Jayhawks everywhere.

As the popularity of the Jayhawk grew in the twentieth century, so did the production of memorabilia and ephemera. Schulte details the creation of paperweights, coloring books, pennants, license plates, clothing, and other decorative items. In her later chapters, she explains how the icon became the subject of student projects, a logo for military troops, and a symbol for student advising. The largest known collection of over one thousand Jayhawk items was purchased in the 2010s and installed in the KU Memorial Union. Schulte also links some of those same collectors and funders, who added even more visibility to the Jayhawk, with the dedication of five bronze statues portraying historical versions of the Jayhawk in Ascher Plaza outside the Memorial Union building in 2022. Sculptors Matt Palmer and Robin Richerson had always dreamed of large monuments on the KU Lawrence campus, and they took the opportunity to add a new version of the icon, the Jayhawk Nest Monument, a bronze statue with "Mother Jayhawk" guarding three babies at various stages of hatching. The third baby Jayhawk, having just poked its head through its shell, reminds onlookers that the Jayhawk is both ever-emerging and ever-changing as a beloved and dynamic symbol. Schulte has skillfully documented the evolution of this symbol from its origin to the present.

Reviewed by Kim Cary Warren, Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education and Associate Professor of History, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas.