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Book Review: Merchants of Independence / William Patrick O'Brien

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BOOKS



Merchants of Independence: International Trade on the Santa Fe Trail, 1827-1860

William Patrick O'Brien, *Merchants of Independence: International Trade on the Santa Fe Trail, 1827-1860*. Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2014. xi + 211 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, appendices, and index. \$34.95 paper; available from Last Chance Store for \$33.00 postpaid.

Reviewed by Dr. Leo Oliva

Although most histories of the Santa Fe trade mention the town of Independence, Missouri, this is the first book to evaluate the important role of that community, particularly the merchants engaged in the international trade. The book covers the era from the founding of the town in 1827 to the eve of the Civil War, by which time railroads were changing the trade routes, and Westport, Kansas City, and Leavenworth superseded Independence as the dominant eastern terminus of the trail.

Dr. O'Brien, cultural resource specialist for the National Park Service, built this interpretive study on thorough research in primary sources, and he argues cogently that the merchants of Independence succeeded and provided three decades of leadership in a commerce that extended from several European nations through the United States into Mexico because of cooperation (rather than "independence") among many disparate people, including Anglo-Americans, Hispano-Americans, American Indians, African-Americans (slave and free), other ethnic groups (including Jews, Irishmen, and Germans), and women (intermarriage of Anglo and Hispano families helped build trade alliances). In addition to merchants, O'Brien explains that numerous others were involved in making the trade possible, including creditors, insurance companies, banks, commission and forwarding agents, customs officials, lawyers, judges, debt collectors, steamboat companies, wagon makers, blacksmiths, gunsmiths, livestock producers, fur trappers, Indian traders, teamsters, and soldiers. These diverse groups worked together in the community and in the international trade, contributing significantly to the expansion of the United States.

O'Brien provides a summary of the opening and early development of the Santa Fe Trail, providing essential background for the founding and growth of Independence, established in 1827 and incorporated in 1849. Of the first 70 lots sold in the new town, 25 were purchased by merchants engaged in trade with Mexico. The town quickly became the main eastern terminus of the Santa Fe Trail.

The history of the international commerce is summarized, including products transported to and from Mexico and the importance of Mexican silver in world trade. The shift of dominance over the trade with Mexico from Independence to Kansas City is explained, including the political split as Independence was pro-South and Kansas City was pro-Union by 1860.

O'Brien looks at four eras of conflict that disrupted the international trade: Mormon War (1833-1838), Osage War (1836), Mexican War (1846-1848), and Kansas Border War (1854-1861). He also assesses how problems of international law affected commerce. To overcome these obstacles, merchants in the U.S. and Mexico cooperated to keep trade flowing.

A case study of merchants David Waldo, William McCoy, and Jabez Smith explains the many details of how cooperation made this international trade network successful. Many other merchants are included in this study. The firm of Peter Harmony & Nephews is used as an example of how the international trade operated. The story of wagon-maker Hiram Young, a free African-American, is well told. The publisher is commended for placing footnotes at the bottom of the page. This penetrating study of Independence is a major contribution to the history of the Santa Fe trade and essential reading for anyone interested in understanding the complexities of that international commerce.

Readers should be aware of a few errors and omissions, none of which detract from the significance of this interpretive study. If not pointed out, however, they may be perpetuated by other writers. There is brief mention of alcohol in the trade with Indians, but the recent books by William Unrau show clearly that alcohol was a major commodity in the trade. It would be good to know how the Independence merchants were involved in that illegal commerce. Zebulon Pike's Southwest Expedition began in 1806, not 1805 and not two years after travels of Lewis & Clark (p. 17). Santiago Abreu was not the governor of New Mexico in 1845 (p. 43) but was former governor (1832-1833). There is no mention that wagons were used on the trail in 1822 (p. 65), and the statement that the 1830 caravan "was the first use of wagons" (p. 71) is incorrect. The same sentence and similar paragraph appear on pp. 79-80 and p. 90. Stephen Watts Kearny is misspelled as "Kearney" (pp. 101 & 105). The U.S. recognition of Texas independence did not occur in 1845 (p. 102); that is the year Texas was admitted as a state.

Missing from the bibliography are the following publications relevant to portions of this book: many articles from *Wagon Tracks*, including the series on Anglo-Hispano marriages by Doyle Daves (important for p. 87, note 19), Mary Jean Cook's *Doña Tules* (biography of Gertrudis Barcelo), and Annette Gray's *Journey of the Heart* (memoirs of Mammie Aguirre). An article by Pauline Fowler is cited (p. 96, note 35) but does not appear in the bibliography. ♦