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The Fragile Edges of the New Western Empire

A Review Essay on *Citizen Explorer: The Life of Zebulon Pike*



DAVID WROBEL

In the concluding pages of the fourth volume of *The Winning of the West* (1896), Theodore Roosevelt described Zebulon Montgomery Pike (1779–1813) as “an ardent patriot” whose loyalty to the “Union” was unquestionable, a skillful and “stout-hearted” hunter whose “indomitable will” and deep dedication to the men under his command during the 1805–1807 expeditions to explore the Louisiana Purchase saved their lives, and a “pioneer in the exploration of the far West” on par with Meriwether Lewis and William Clark.¹ Reviewing the volume in the *American Historical Review*, Frederick Jackson Turner, like Roosevelt, treated “the explorations of Lewis and Clark and Pike” together, as an interconnected set of journeys, and chronicles, of western discovery. However, Turner’s review criticized Roosevelt for relying on ornithologist and frontier historian Elliott Coures’s editions of the *Journals of Lewis and Clark* (1893) and *The Travels of Zebulon M. Pike* (1895), and Henry Adams’s *The History of the United States of America, 1801–1817* (9 vols., 1889–1891), and for not utilizing available archival sources.² Shortly after the review appeared, Roosevelt wrote to Turner in his own defense, and in the politest

JARED ORSI, *Citizen Explorer: The Life of Zebulon Pike* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. xii + 379 pp. 42 halftones, 12 maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95 cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-976872-1). DAVID WROBEL is Merrick Chair in Western American History at the University of Oklahoma where he teaches undergraduate and graduate courses on the American West and American thought and culture. His most recent book is *Global West, American Frontier: Travel, Empire, and Exceptionalism from Manifest Destiny to the Great Depression* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2013). He is currently working on *The West and America, 1900–2000: A Regional History*.

of tones explained that since he was a “more general writer” and “thoroughly good” studies of Lewis, Clark, and Pike were available, he “did not try to get any manuscript sources for th[ose] travels.”³

Readers of Jared Orsi’s superbly researched biography of Pike need have no such concerns about the use of available archival sources; the author has mined approximately sixty manuscript collections and consulted a wide range of additional published primary sources, as well as an impressive selection of pertinent secondary works, and demonstrates full command of those varied materials. Although *Citizen Explorer* reaches generally positive conclusions about Pike, it offers a considerably less triumphalist and more nuanced picture than Roosevelt’s work. Nonetheless, Orsi suggests, like Roosevelt, that we should remember Pike as readily as we do Lewis and Clark. Orsi’s book is certainly the most definitive treatment of Pike to date, and is likely to remain so for a long time to come. Moreover, the work makes important contributions to the fields of western American and environmental history, as well as to the history of the early American Republic. Indeed, *Citizen Explorer* is driven by the question of “how...Pike himself and the early republic more generally develop and sustain nationalism when their ideals bumped up against the physical challenges of the North American environment?” (p. 6).

In the 1890s, Turner and Roosevelt had both explicitly argued that the westward-moving frontier was the leading edge of American nationalism, that Americanism was stronger on the western periphery, where the nation-building process was playing out, than on the East Coast, where the vast majority of the populace, and the government, were located. Orsi offers the careful reminder that the converse scenario was the more likely and logical one: as the nation’s advance guards, Lewis and Clark, and Pike, were sent out to and beyond the fringes of the nation’s new boundaries where they encountered indigenous cultures, fur traders, and representatives of European nation-states who cared much about the cultivation of commerce, but had little regard for the emerging American state. Pike’s adventures unfolded in remote regions where the nation’s influence was thin and fragmentary at best, and the allegiance of citizens (even members of the actual expeditions) to the new American nation was tenuous. Yet in Pike’s enduring dedication to the United States, Orsi finds the embodiment of the young nation’s resilience and ultimate success. Indeed, this is in the last analysis a story about how Pike, “an ardent nationalist,” consistently and doggedly sought to secure his personal independence through military service to his country (p. 14).

Orsi chronicles Pike’s life in seven finely crafted chapters. The first traces the Pike family’s quest for independence in North America from the mid-seventeenth century to 1794. The second examines Pike’s continued dedication to the nation

through military service from 1794 to 1805. The next four chapters—the heart of the narrative—are devoted to Pike’s two expeditions, from 1805 to 1807. The final chapter covers his continued military service from 1807 to 1813 and tragic death at the Battle of York. An epilogue ponders the dramatic changes in the West during the rest of the nineteenth century and attempts to place Pike—a figure of relative historical insignificance in the writings of the twentieth century—back at the center of the pantheon of important early western and national actors. “Pike endured physical hardship with fortitude in difficult environments in order to establish the nation in the West and defend its independence from rival peoples,” Orsi writes (p. 290).

In February 1806, while leading his first expeditionary party, charged with discovering the headwaters of the Mississippi, Pike and his men, weary and half frozen, wandered up to the British North West Company fur trading post at Leech Lake (near the westernmost tip of Lake Superior) where they were fed and sheltered and treated in thoroughly hospitable fashion by the fort’s commander, Hugh McGillis. Ten days later Pike ordered his men to shoot down the fort’s British flag and raise the American one in its place. During his stay, Pike also wrote McGillis an official letter in which he accused him of evading U.S. customs and trading without proper licenses. McGillis responded by flattering Pike, thanking him for not enforcing a fine for the violations, assenting to follow all of his directives, providing his party with dogs and a new sled, and then returning to business as usual as soon as Pike departed. In recounting this incident Orsi hits upon a central theme of the narrative: Pike’s persistent practice of “enforcing American sovereignty over hosts upon whom he was utterly dependent” (p. 122).

Journeying across the Plains on his second major expedition, from July to November 1806, Pike and his men relied upon the hospitality of the Osages and then the Pawnees, while Pike sought unsuccessfully to incorporate both into the new American nation. His experiences once more illustrated both his deep dedication to building the republic and that republic’s fragility at its western edges. Venturing into the Rockies, from November 1806 to February 1807, Pike orchestrated what might be considered a comedy of errors if it had not been so awfully tragic. Orsi writes, “[t]hree times he crossed chains of mountains without needing to do so. He left frostbitten men in the snow, contemplated suicide in the wilderness, threatened to execute a malingerer, and raised an American flag on Spanish soil” (p. 160–61). Pike’s actions on this leg of his explorations led to accusations that he was acting on secret orders, colluding with Gen. James Wilkinson and Aaron Burr in treasonous activities. But Orsi, like Roosevelt long before, rejects such conclusions, insisting that “Pike’s actions during those months were . . . consistent with those of a man stumbling through the mountains” (p. 200).

The last phase of Pike's second expedition, from February to July 1807, was marked by his party's capture by a Spanish force that escorted them to Santa Fe and back to Natchitoches, via El Paso, Chihuahua, and San Antonio. During his comfortable captivity, Pike managed to conceal enough of his diary entries and other papers to construct an account of the expedition. The resulting volume comprised Pike's reconstructed journals from the expeditions, along with other documents that bolstered his reputation as a dedicated patriot and discounted the Aaron Burr associations. As the account moved toward print and Pike disseminated key documents to the press, he received a series of military promotions, reaching the rank of lieutenant colonel by the time the book was published in 1810. The following year Pike referred to himself, in a letter to the U.S. attorney general, as a "Citizen Soldier" (p. 264). Then, during the War of 1812, he received one more promotion, to the rank of brigadier general. Writing to his father prior to departing for battle, Pike noted that if he were to perish, then he hoped for a death "like Wolfe's—to sleep in the arms of victory" (p. 268). Just before he died (after being struck in the head by debris from the fort's explosion), Pike reportedly learned that the British flag had been taken down and "[t]he stars are going up" (p. 271). "In death," Orsi concludes, "Pike reaped the honor and gratitude that had escaped him in life" (p. 272). Orsi has provided a powerful and perceptive account of a life worth remembering for its successes and failures, as well as its insights into early American expansionism.

Notes

1. Theodore Roosevelt, *The Winning of the West, Vol. IV: Louisiana and the Northwest, 1791–1807* (New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1896), 329, 337–38, 340.
2. Frederick Jackson Turner, review of *The Winning of the West, Vol. IV*, by Theodore Roosevelt, *American Historical Review* (October 1896): 171–76. Turner's review copy of the book, with his published review pasted in the back, is in the Huntington Library Rare Book Collection, no.139455.
3. Theodore Roosevelt to Frederick Jackson Turner, 4 November 1896, in Theodore Roosevelt, *Letters and Speeches* (New York: Library of America, 2004), 91–92.