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Review Essay

DONALD WORSTER, *A RIVER RUNNING WEST: THE LIFE OF JOHN WESLEY POWELL* AND KEVIN J. FERNLUND, *WILLIAM HENRY HOLMES AND THE REDISCOVERY OF THE AMERICAN WEST*

James P. Ronda

It is a familiar tale — one of the great American creation stories. A poor boy from the farm, consumed with a hunger for knowledge and a passionate ambition, goes in search of fame and fortune in the wider world. John Wesley Powell and William H. Holmes do not perfectly fit that mythic template but they come closer than most. Powell (born in 1834 in Mount Morris, New York) and Holmes (born in eastern Ohio in 1846) had lives and careers shaped by small town childhoods, an unquenchable thirst for learning, and relentless ambition. In the theater of memory that is the American mind, characters from the past appear before us in simple costume. Lewis and Clark, the current national obsession, live as highway sign silhouettes forever pointing West. So it is with Powell. He strides into the present as either the wild, one-armed adventurer plunging through the boiling Colorado River waters of the Grand Canyon or as the visionary prophet warning the nation about the limits of land and water in Mr. Jefferson's Empire of Liberty beyond the wide Missouri. Memory has been even less kind to Holmes, denying him

A River Running West: The Life of John Wesley Powell. By Donald Worster. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. xiii + 673 pp. 55 halftones, line drawings, line illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00 cloth, ISBN 0-19-509991-5.) *William Henry Holmes and the Rediscovery of the American West.* By Kevin J. Fernlund. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 2000. xvii + 300 pp. 38 halftones, map, notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95 cloth, ISBN 0-8263-2127-5.) James P. Ronda is H. G. Barnard Professor of History at the University of Tulsa. His most recent publication is *Finding the West: Explorations with Lewis and Clark* (University of New Mexico Press, 2001).

even the presence of stereotype. For all his magnificent drawings and remarkable artistic-scientific vision, he does not exist in our collective memory. But what Donald Worster writes about Powell is equally applicable to Holmes. “To discover the man is to discover a more complicated America” (p. xi).

Biographies of western characters have a way of turning out as simple stories, laundered and shrunk to acceptable size. Worster and Kevin Fernlund will have none of that. What they offer readers are complex stories about arresting, often difficult men living in times as demanding and intricate as our own. Worster’s biography of Powell goes in search of that “more complicated” man and his America. In many ways, *A River Running West* is two books, both knit together by Worster’s powerful imagination and graceful prose. The most obvious of those “books” is the narrative telling of an extraordinary life, one filled with colorful characters, exotic locations, and memorable events. With a keen eye for detail, Worster takes readers through Powell’s busy life—from Civil War soldier to explorer, from government bureaucrat to cosmic philosopher. All the great events are here, including a compelling treatment of the Colorado River expeditions of 1869 and 1871–1872. But Worster knows that Powell was more than a scientifically inclined river runner. One of *A River Runs West*’s great strengths is a sensitive discussion of Powell’s many Washington political battles. No knee-jerk apologist for Powell, Worster casts the controversies between Powell and his archenemy Senator William M. Stewart as the clash of rival visions for the future of America and the West. Long biographies (this one is 573 pages of text) sometimes bog down in the middle, leaving readers stranded half way between birth and death. Not so with Worster’s Powell. Worster knows how to tell a good story; readers who sign up to ride *A River Running West* will not be grounded on a sandbar or lost in white water.

But Worster’s book is no simple recounting of a fascinating and adventure-some life. It seems clear that Worster decided to write about Powell because he sees him as an emblematic figure—someone representative of larger and fundamental American stories. To explore Powell’s life is to trace the contours of American history in the second half of the nineteenth century. And this is Worster’s second “book,” a revelation of Powell as one of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “representative men.” Powell’s many pursuits suggest a certain national sequence. He was a schoolmaster, soldier, scientific explorer, ethnologist, administrator, publicist, organizer, and (in modern terms) a public intellectual. Other Powell biographies, most notably Wallace Stegner’s classic *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the American West* (1954), have described the curve of that career.

Worster acknowledges Stegner's contribution but then moves on to ask different questions. What were the values that shaped Powell's life, and how did Powell himself advance those values? In asking and answering those questions, Worster gives readers a cultural history of American life from the 1840s to the beginning of the twentieth century.

As Worster sees it, Powell's life was defined by four clusters of values. First, it was a powerful sense of personal and national mission that sent Powell to enlist in the Union Army. And it was an equally strong sense of mission that shaped him as an explorer, scientist, and federal bureaucrat. One of the great strengths of this biography is the thoughtful attention paid to the evangelical Methodism that pervaded Powell's early years. As Worster explains, "from his parents he [Powell] had inherited a certain readiness to challenge power and authority in the name of principle" (p. 337). As the dogmas of Methodism slipped away, they were replaced by another, and perhaps more appealing, gospel. Powell's new set of values sprang from an ardent faith in science and the search for secular knowledge. Deeply influenced by the writings of Charles Lyell and Charles Darwin, Powell cast his "deepest intellectual loyalties" with science and the search for knowledge in this world (p. 66). But in all of this Powell never escaped his small-town origins. He would always champion a certain kind of Jeffersonian vision for America, one that honored small landholders and was deeply suspicious of corporate power. As Worster explains, Powell "studied the land with the eyes of a farmer" (p. 347). Overarching all of this was Powell's profound faith in the goodness of the American nation. In what is perhaps the key line in the biography, Worster writes that Powell was an "intense nationalist who accepted the idea of America's destiny completely." Further, Powell's nationalism led him to see "his country as a benevolent force" (p. 96-97). If rational men guided by objective science made policies in such a nation, the future would be bright indeed. This was the promise in his *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region* (1878) and so much of what followed as Powell sought to reimagine the West. All of these values, these deeply held beliefs, were present whether Powell was running a river, pondering questions of western land policy, or threading his way through a political tangle. Worster gives us the man whole, filled with all the contradictions and confusions of his age. In doing so, we are reminded that the West remains what John McPhee calls "suspect terrain."

Historians (and others) in pursuit of John Wesley Powell's America suffer an embarrassment of riches. In a long and often controversial life, Powell left behind a mountain of letters, speeches, published papers, and official re-

ports. Part of his sense of mission was the desire that subsequent generations understand him and his causes. Friends and enemies alike all had things to say about Powell, his opinions, and his actions. Drawing on that rich evidence, Worster's biography reveals both the public man and something of the private one as well.

Taking on William H. Holmes as a biographical subject, Kevin Fernlund confronts a very different problem. Near the end of his life Holmes prepared a twenty-volume extended autobiographical narrative entitled "*Random Records of a Lifetime, 1846–1931*." As Fernlund explains, that "record" dealt with Holmes as public man—scientist-artist, explorer, geologist, archaeologist, and administrator. Holmes's private life was just that—private. And just how private can be judged from Fernlund's index. Holmes's wife Kate has exactly one entry, that for her marriage in 1883. Denied access to Holmes's inner and more personal self by an unrewarding evidence base, Fernlund has skillfully turned necessity to great advantage. Rather than engage in idle speculation and fruitless psycho-history, Fernlund offers readers a masterful exposition of Holmes's key ideas and accomplishments. Visitors to the Grand Canyon are sure to encounter Holmes's magnificent "Panorama from Point Sublime." Perhaps some of them might ask about the artist, the place, and the ideas that inspired both the man and his work. For, as Fernlund explains, "the West's greatest draughtsman had found the West's greatest view" (p. 108).

Artistic talent, restless ambition, and a dash of good luck at just the right time made Holmes an essential part of the post-Civil War scientific exploration of the American West. Never as famous as the men who employed him, Holmes was every bit as important as Powell, F. V. Hayden, and Clarence E. Dutton in giving the western landscape scientific visualization. Behind all of his memorable work were three central ideas, three constellations of scientific theories and social forces that determined so much of who Holmes became and what he did. The first of those was the steady professionalization of exploration and science throughout the nineteenth century. As Fernlund makes clear, the old Humboldt vision of unity in knowledge and the role of gifted amateur naturalists was slipping away, giving ground to a more modern if fragmented notion of compartmentalized knowledge gathered by specialists. Holmes embraced that growing specialization, as science in the West became not so much a gentleman's pursuit as a discipline and a profession. Holmes's career also serves Fernlund as a way to remind readers of the growing divide between art and illustration, a separation that paralleled the schism between the older natural history tradition and the new require-

ments of scientific geology. The European, Enlightenment notion of the artist-scientist came into the American West with figures like John Webber, José Cardero, George Catlin, and Karl Bodmer. Those artists sought to document American landscapes, plants, animals, and native peoples while still creating something that European audiences would recognize as “art.” By the time Holmes began his work in the West, there was a growing tension between illustration and art. That tension came home to the young Holmes when Smithsonian notable Spencer Fullerton Baird looked at one of his bird drawings and observed: “pretty picture, but what species of bird is it” (p. 10)? Stung by that question and influenced by the growing demand for precision, Holmes fashioned an artistic technique that offered “a faithful impression of nature in as representational a language as he could command” (p. 45). He would let Thomas Moran be the artist of the sublime; Holmes wanted to be a scientific illustrator. Finally, toward the end of his public career Holmes became increasingly interested in questions of antiquity, race, and human settlement. Here Fernlund is at his best, carefully presenting Holmes’s ideas within the cultural and scientific context of the time. It would have been easy to dismiss Holmes as one more advocate for American racism and cultural imperialism. Instead, readers are given a broader understanding of the scientific (and often deeply personal) controversies that occupied much of Holmes’s last years.

Bookstore shelves are filled with oversized biographies, all promising revelations about the lives of the famous and the forgotten. Most of those books will quickly pass into the remainder bins, slipping away as unnoticed as the lives they attempted to chronicle. This will surely not be the fate of what Worster and Fernlund have written. Both of these biographies offer stories of complex lives—lives that exemplify larger narratives of the West and the nation. Near the end of his life Powell’s vision encompassed not just the West but the entire country. In many ways these books belong not just to western history but to the broader reaches of American history. Biographers must run dangerous rivers. There are many treacherous places that can wreck the finest craft. Worster and Fernlund make their river passages with grace and skill, reminding us that past lives always illuminate present ones.