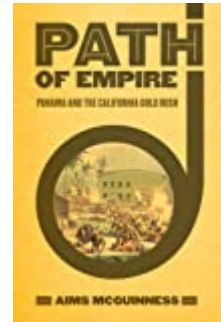




Aims McGuinness. *Path of Empire: Panama and the California Gold Rush.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008. 264 S. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-4521-7.



Reviewed by Torsten Loschke

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A. McGuinness: Path of Empire

The last years witnessed efforts to establish a transnational perspective on the history of the United States, arguing that American history can only be understood and explained by regarding the country's transnational and global entanglements. See for example: Tyrell, Ian, *Transnational Nation*. United States history in global perspective since 1789, Basingstoke 2007; Bender, Thomas, *A Nation among Nations*. America's Place in the World History, New York 2006; Bender, Thomas (Hrsg.), *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, Berkeley 2002. Aims McGuinness applies this new approach in his book *Path of Empire*. Based on his dissertation: McGuinness, Aims, *In the Path of Empire*. Labor, Land, and Liberty in Panama during the California gold rush, 1848-1860, (Ph.D. Thesis), University of Michigan 2001. to the California Gold Rush of 1848. The rush was a central event of U.S. national history in the nineteenth century, but at the same time an event with numerous transnational aspects. One of these was the migration of thousands of people via the Isthmus of Panama to California (and back) in the 1850s and 1860s. Especially after the construction of the Panama Railroad in 1855 this route was the fastest and easiest way for immigrants to

travel from one coast of the United States to the other, until the completion of a transcontinental railroad in the U.S. itself in 1869. The Gold Rush connected Panama – which was at that time part of the state of Nueva Granada (later Colombia) – for a short period with various distant points of the world and caused manifold and profound changes in Panamanian society. The goal of McGuinness's book is to unbind the gold rush from the confines of U.S. history by telling that event as the history of a small place of global importance in mid-nineteenth century. (p. 15)

Indeed, the outcome of this surprising arrangement is not only a fascinating story about the history of the nineteenth century, but also a stimulating example of writing global history in a local perspective. The contested arenas of communication and sovereignty serve as guidelines of McGuinness's historical analysis of Panama as a nexus of the world economy (p. 9), illustrating that the author tells us a story about the struggle of a society for the best way to participate in and benefit from globalization by maintaining a maximum of sovereignty at the same time. McGuinness is able to show that globalization had very different but always very concrete faces

for the people of Panama in 1848. He does that by using a large amount of sources from Panamanian archives, which makes his endeavour especially valuable.

The first two chapters are the most convincing parts of the book: After an overview to the geography of Panama and its history since the European conquest, McGuinness shows how Panamanians profited as boatmen, muleteers or sellers of food from the flow of persons and goods passing the isthmus, and how different cultures clashed in everyday contact with American travelers. Subsequently he describes the dramatic changes that occurred when an U.S. American company, endowed with some extraterritorial rights, built the Panama Railroad between 1850 and 1855, imported hundreds of workers, and monopolized in the end the economic profits of the transit route. These transformations led, together with political changes in Panama itself and American diplomatic pressures, to growing discontent and anti-American sentiments on the isthmus, and struggles between various branches of Panamanian society (chapters 3 and 4). At the centre of the book stands the *Tajada de San*, a violent riot in Panama City in April 1856 when fifteen Americans were killed, which became later a key event in Panamanian national consciousness (although McGuinness makes unfortunately not clear when and how this took place). The book closes with telling the story of the diplomatic and social struggles following the riots and adds some contemplations about the broader context of U.S. expansion in Latin America in the mid of the nineteenth century and the discussion about the idea of *Latin America* at the same time.

Apart from the lessons about the history of globalization in the nineteenth century three further aspects of the book should be emphasized: First, McGuinness illuminates the history of U.S.-Latin American relations and especially of U.S. imperialism in the nineteenth century by showing a quite diffuse or indirect form of imperial expansion which took the form of railroad building, migration, diplomatic struggles or military short-time interventions. The author asks to overcome the traditional historiographical interpretation that separated American imperial history in a phase of continental expansion until the closing of the frontier in the 1890s and a phase of overseas expansion after 1898. Following recent literature that emphasized the linkages between both imperial projects, he argues that the making of U.S. empire in Panama was not a by-product or an aftereffect of the Anglo-American conquest of California but integral to and coincident with that conquest. (p. 186)

Second, the book is a contribution to the controversial literature on the emergence of the term *Latin America*. McGuinness introduces the Panamanian intellectual and statesman Justo Arosemena as a new voice in this debate, who wrote in the 1850s about the challenges and possibilities of a globalizing world, in which the Isthmus of Panama had a central importance for the flows of goods, peoples and ideas. In this context he reflected upon the threat that posed the apparently irresistible U.S. expansion to the countries in Latin America in general and, through its desire to control the isthmus, to Panama in particular. As part of a greater circle of Latin American intellectuals who thought about this questions, Arosemena saw his contemporary events as a gigantic struggle between the invasive *raza yankee* (Yankee race) and the *raza Latina* (Latin race) and demanded a *Latin American* or *Hispanic American* unity against the common enemy. (p. 159-163)

Third, connected to this is the surprising background story that McGuinness tells us in his book: The liberal reforms carried out by the state of Nueva Granada in the midst of the nineteenth century. The abolition of slavery in 1852, the establishment of universal manhood suffrage through the ratification of what was perhaps the most radical national constitution in the world in 1853 (p. 86) and the establishment of a federal state structure don't coincide very well with ideas of unilinear historical progress led by Europe and North America. Rather, these events cast a quite damning light on the United States in the 1850s where slavery and racial discrimination were still widespread, or the ambiguous outcome of the revolutions of 1848 in Europe.

Despite these valuable contributions, McGuinness's book contains some fundamental weak points. Although the author promises in the introduction a work about transnational history he is not able to uphold this argument and perspective throughout the whole book. In fact, he devotes a lot of space to the description of Panamanian social conflicts and local policies whose relevance and connection to the whole picture is not always clear. Especially the detailed examination of the *Tajada de San* riots is extended in an inappropriate manner. On the other hand, aside from the three issues named above, McGuinness touches many further important themes like race, culture, migration and labour, but without discussing each of them comprehensively and satisfactorily. The book lacks a coherent structure and argumentation, in spite of the examinations's framework of *sovereignty* and *communication*, and the readability is disturbed even more by the division in very short

subchapters. Perhaps it would have been better to concentrate on fewer aspects and to follow for example the transnational perspective more consequently.

To summarize it, this book sheds light on a neglected part of Latin American and U.S. history by applying an innovative perspective. It contains a lot of interesting

aspects and important contributions to the mentioned fields of historiography, but it cannot decide for a main focus of interest and suffers a lack of coherence and structured argument.

Annotations:

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