Review of *Scenery, Curiosities, and Stupendous Rocks: William Quesenbury's Overland Sketches, 1850-51* by David Royce Murphy, with contributions by Michael L. Tate and Michael Farrell

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This handsome volume is a welcome addition to the growing literature detailing nineteenth-century overland migration, especially travel in and through the Great Plains. Its subject is the Omaha World-Herald’s William Quesenbury sketchbook, published here in its entirety for the first time. Quesenbury, who traveled west from Arkansas to California seeking gold in 1850 and returned east with John Wesley Jones as part of his team of Pantoscope artists in 1851, produced more landscape drawings of the North Platte and Sweetwater Rivers High Plains regions than any other historical figure.

The book consists of an introduction by David Royce Murphy of the Nebraska State Historical Society; two essays, one by historian Michael Tate about Quesenbury’s association with Jones and the Pantoscope project, and a second, by Murphy, which contextualizes Quesenbury’s sketches within the Euro-American topographic tradition; and a modern-day travelogue written by public television producer Michael Farrell. These contextual elements surround the sketchbook, which covers over one hundred pages and reproduces, with exceptional quality, these important early sketches of the Great Plains and the Front Range of the Rockies, including Quesenbury’s notes and contemporary observations about the locations depicted. While other aspects of Quesenbury’s remarkable life and career are covered in some detail, particularly his fascinating association with entrepreneur John Wesley Jones and his considerable work for various Great Plains newspapers, the “principle goal [of the book] is quality reproductions of the Quesenbury sketches.”

For all its successes, the project has two shortcomings. First, the book would have
benefitted from a voice from art history, visual studies, or American studies. When compared with Robin Kelsey’s *Archive Style: Photographs and Illustrations for U.S. Surveys, 1850–1890* (2007), a recent book written by an art historian dealing with a similar subject, it is clear that Murphy and his coauthors leave much unsaid about how the images themselves might work as either historical documents or as art.

Second, the decision not to reproduce the sketchbook as a facsimile has some deleterious effects. Each sketch is reproduced on its own page, rather than two and three sketches per page as in Quesenbury’s original, and at two to three times its original size. Although such design choices allow for better reproductions, much of the associational value of the original sketchbook is lost. That said, *William Quesenbury’s Overland Sketches* is a splendid resource for the general reader, an admirable addition to the historical canon, a rich starting point for cultural studies, and fills a lacuna in the study of mid-nineteenth-century sketches of the Great Plains and Rocky Mountain region.

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