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Review of Astoria & Empire

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Astoria & Empire. By James P. Ronda. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990. Illustrations, maps, appendices, notes, bibliography, index. xiv + 400 pp. \$25.00.

James Ronda blends new documentation with older sources to provide an ample study of New York businessman John Jacob Astor's failed effort to spawn a transcontinental and transglobal fur trade enterprise in the second decade of the nineteenth century. The new interpretations include a view of Astor as capable of being, when pushed to the limit, a scoundrel and a liar (273, 274). Ronda also provides interesting discussions of the Russian connection, the relation between biologists and Astorians, and the political ramifications to the United States of Astor and Astoria. Meanwhile, the main narrative treats the rise and fall of Astoria fairly traditionally. Following Washington Irving in the last century and Hiram Chittenden early in this, Ronda disappointingly retains the thesis that Astor and Astoria were victims of fortune.

Ronda's less than probing approach leaves largely unexplored Astor's shortcomings as the seeds for the failure of the enterprise. Whereas he credits Astor with injecting energy and direction into the vision of early fur trade explorers (36), Ronda nowhere considers how exceptional was Astor's attempt to control and expand a frontier while never setting foot west even of the Alleghenies: fur traders and explorers with vision were hardly armchair travelers.

Similarly exceptional but only superficially analyzed by Ronda is Astor's selection of manpower and delegation of authority. Rushing himself into an enterprise that required what obviously did not exist—sufficient American leadership and labor—Astor appointed two fur trade neophytes: Wilson Price Hunt had never seen the Rockies or traded with the big boys, and proved no match for them (283); Jonathan Thorn had never commanded a ship. They both proved failures at commanding more seasoned employees, but while Ronda explains how these Americans came to be appointed, his honorific portrait of Astor fails to analyze the quality of mind that was doing the appointing.

For the reader not well versed in the literature, *Astoria & Empire* will prove somewhat misleading and confusing. The narratives published by Astorians are quoted and referred to at length but not analyzed, so that diaries, journals, and retrospective accounts are handled as if identical in reliability. Moreover, at least one, Alexander Ross's, which was a retrospective account and not a "diary" (108), is faulted for its "usual romantic flourish" (200) while unreservedly depended upon for its accurate quotation of Donald Mackenzie's remarks concerning the abandonment of Astoria (281). The "diary" [sic] of Gabriel Franchère, which Ronda's reader never learns was published originally in French and prepared for the press by Montreal author Michel Bibaud, is employed as entirely dependable. For example, Ronda quotes Franchère's book as confirmation that Astoria treated its employees as well as possible (218). Does one not expect such a statement, and no less, from one who, following the demise of Astoria, "continued to work for Astor as an important fur agent" (211)? As for Irving's *Astoria*, Ronda provides an insightful assessment that nevertheless falls short of considering its creation as another—one of Astor's last—empire-building maneuvers.

Particularly unavailing is Ronda's indictment of Duncan McDougall's explanation for selling Astoria as "a careful blend of honest evaluation and less-than-truthful argument" (282). Ronda quotes McDougall's letter but fails to make plain

which of its details he considers honest, which he does not, and why. In a similar vein, he contradicts the Astorians' claims that fur returns had been poor but he does not explain his conclusion (279), he gives only a contradictory view, not a substantiated refutation. Although Ronda states that Hunt insisted returns warranted continuation of the enterprise, he fails to explain either Hunt's reasons (285) or how his minority view evaporated, as one is left to infer it did (297).

After painstakingly following the route of Hunt's overland contingent from Lachine to Astoria, Ronda shortchanges himself with only one poor and misplaced map. A series of them would have kept this study from continuing what Ronda laments (326)—a tradition among published narratives and studies about Astoria of cartographic underrepresentation.

Finally, in what amounts to a substantive error in a study where nationality if not nationalism plays a role, Ronda misuses the appellation "Canadian" to refer not just to Canadians but to all British North Americans. Apart from a surprising failure to consult the works of geographer John Logan Allen in his initial chapter, many of this work's oversights and errors are minor, but they amount to a substantial deficiency. Without doubt, Ronda's work offers an advance on Irving's and Chittenden's, but less than one expected.

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