

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

Winter 1998

Review of *The Myth of the West: America as the Last Empire* By Jan Willem Schulte Nordholdt and Herbert H. Rowen

Sheila Ruzycki O'Brien
University of Idaho

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

O'Brien, Sheila Ruzycki, "Review of *The Myth of the West: America as the Last Empire* By Jan Willem Schulte Nordholdt and Herbert H. Rowen" (1998). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2092.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/2092>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

The Myth of the West: America as the Last Empire. By Jan Willem Schulte Nordholdt and Herbert H. Rowen, trans. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995. Preface, index. xi + 227 pp. \$23.00.

As an Americanist, I needed to adjust my perspective as I was reading Nordholdt's *The Myth of the West*. Much of this book by a Dutch scholar is about European views of Empire, particularly about the various permutations of the heliotropic view of empire—the belief that empires progress from east to west. The subtitle *America as the Last Empire* is somewhat misleading, since much of the book presents how the European literati throughout the centuries viewed various empires within and near their own continent, though naturally the heliotropic view does lead west over the Atlantic. (It also leads west over the Pacific, but Nordholdt claims that the myth stopped in the US.) Even when the book's focus shifts to the United States, Nordholdt sets the discussion within a traditional European framework.

While *The Myth of the West: America as the Last Empire* does not offer any groundbreaking new theories, or even much of a new spin on the progression of empires, Nordholdt does provide his readers a service by drawing together centuries of thinking about his topic. And while the writer's style is somewhat dry, the links between philosophy and changing desires that Nordholdt presents are intriguing—such as the seventeenth-century shift in viewing God as an “unfathomable power” to

perceiving him as a “benevolent collaborator” who would support earthly progress.

While Nordholdt's approach does enable him to present much information about the history of thought in regard to the dominant culture's views on the progression of empire, I was struck by the restriction of his perspective. African Americans are a minor blip in this text, and their role in the development of the US is unvoiced; the same is true of women in general. Nordholdt discusses seventeenth-century popular beliefs as being held by “pious and reasonable men.” In reading on, I expected to learn what women believed, but was disappointed. While Mercy Warren and Harriet Beecher Stowe are briefly mentioned (Stowe *very* briefly), Nordholdt's assertion that Philip Freneau was “the first accomplished poet in America” belittles the work of Edward Taylor and the poetic giantess, Anne Bradstreet. In the same vein, the author's claim that colonial America had “arisen as if out of nothing” discounts the vital presence of Native Americans.

While *The Myth of the West* offers meaningful information on a myth that influenced the history of the Western world, in the future Nordholdt's work would benefit by more cultural breadth and circumspection.

SHEILA RUZYCKI O'BRIEN
Department of English
University of Idaho