

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

Fall 2000

Review of *William Henry Jackson: Framing the Frontier* By Douglas Waitley

Peter Bacon Hales

University of Illinois at Chicago

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



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

Hales, Peter Bacon, "Review of *William Henry Jackson: Framing the Frontier* By Douglas Waitley" (2000).
Great Plains Quarterly. 2119.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/2119>

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.

William Henry Jackson: Framing the Frontier. By Douglas Waitley. Missoula, MT: Mountain Press Publishing Company, 1999. Illustrations, resources, notes, bibliography, index. vi +217 pp. \$36.00 cloth, \$22.00 paper.

Certain markers have traditionally distinguished the professional from the amateur historian, prominent among them a quality of skepticism about the nature of sources and the facts they might reveal. In the National Archives reading rooms, one will still see women and men opening boxes with an air of anticipation restrained by severity of manner; they may remove the yellowed diary-book from the archival case with shaking hands, but they will almost immediately subject its paper, its vellum cover, and even the handwriting within, to a certain suspicious inspection before turning to the content. At the largest and most critical level of investigation, professional historians declare their craft by remaining deeply aware of the currents and pressures that define the contest for truth among those who are shaping or long ago shaped the events and ideas recorded in the documents.

Amateur historians rarely have any of these habits of doubt. They are enthusiasts first—else why would they risk their vacations and marriages in their passionate embrace of what has probably already been unearthed, perused, analyzed, and then written about by others? They are usually too immersed in their passions to notice the tendentiousness of

their research or to care very much about their gently sliding over inconvenient exceptions to the narratives they wish to impose on the past.

These days, amateur historians have a hard time of it, as publishers find it increasingly expensive to produce books, and as competition for venues leads them toward the Internet and not the Library of Congress. So it is with a certain nostalgic pleasure that one takes up a book like Douglas Waitley's *William Henry Jackson: Framing the Frontier*. Waitley reports himself to be the author of thirteen other books, including a history of Florida's Marco Island and the *Roadside History of Florida*. Now he has turned his enthusiasms to the American West and one of its certified heroes, the photographer, explorer, and artist William Henry Jackson, whose photographs, especially, still resonate with freshness and record with grace and enthusiasm a long string of moments in the history of American westward expansion, consolidation, and self-definition.

Waitley's Jackson volume, however, is one of those failures of amateurism that cause true scholars to cringe with a certain fascinated repulsion. Its author has shoved the definitive scholarly, critical, and historical works on this American landscape photographer off the research table; to those who know this body of scholarship, the reasons are no mystery. Over the years close study of original documents has revealed the compromised nature of much of Jackson's own output, whether memoir or photograph, and the resulting studies have placed the man in a more complex and interesting context than the simple story he himself told in his ghost-written and bowdlerized autobiography, *Time Exposure* (1940). Jackson's tale of engagement in the great westward migration was always popular with Western enthusiasts of the corporate and laissez-faire sort—mining equipment factory owners, say, or upper executives in petroleum extraction companies, some of whom supported him in his old age in return for favors that diminished the man, damaged his reputation, and made of him a curiosity at

parades, "frontier days," and the like. When they had finished with him, Jackson combined Horatio Alger's *Ragged Dick* with Horace Greeley's "Go West, Young Man, and Grow Up With the Country." Were this version of his story true, the unhappy details accompanying continental expansionism might somehow be tucked behind the soft armchair in which one dozed after reading about the adventures of Will Jackson, muleskinner, or the triumphs of William Henry Jackson, global documentarian.

So Waitley has written what is in essence a marvelous approximation of a '40s juvenile hortatory text. Even the illustrations are of a piece with the research and writing—clear and engaging at a distance, muddy and destructive seen close up. It is a pity that an earnest publisher like Mountain Press should be reduced to a work of this sort; more the pity that it may well appear in national parks bookstores or local tourist spots, resuscitating a century of historical missteps and outright falsehoods in the name of the myth of the great frontier, while poor Mr. Jackson, so buffeted in his life by the forces of history, finds himself further buffeted in death at the hands of an amateur historian whose enthusiasm far outstretches his grasp of the richness of his own subject.

PETER BACON HALES

Department of Art History
University of Illinois at Chicago