

one thousand years of prehistory that is certainly relevant to analyses of Euro-American settlement on the western prairie.

This book's interdisciplinary approach and stimulating discussions of human adaptive strategies that occurred more than one thousand years ago should appeal to both prehistorians and historians who seek to understand the process of cultural and social change.

*John Charles Frémont: Character as Destiny*, by Andrew Rolle. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991. xvi, 351 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY ROGER L. NICHOLS, UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

For readers of American frontier and western history, the name John Charles Frémont brings many pictures to mind: soldier, explorer, western publicist, Mexican War troublemaker, presidential candidate, mining entrepreneur, and Civil War general to mention just the most obvious. In this new biography, Andrew Rolle attempts to describe the famous pathfinder's activities as part of national expansion and development. Of perhaps even more importance, the author suggests at least a tentative thesis that he claims helps to explain Frémont's often unclear and even bizarre actions. He depicts Frémont as living out a need to deal with his abandonment by a missing father—a man he never met. Thus, Rolle posits his subject's continuing need to seek out strong, older men who might serve as stand-ins for his father. Not only does he seek to portray Frémont as needing strong male figures, at least at the fringes of his life, but he claims that the pathfinder also felt a need to rebel against direction and domination by these individuals. In effect, the author depicts his biographee's life as a series of personal relationships, usually gone wrong. Somehow, throughout his career, Frémont managed to attract favorable attention and to acquire a reputation as a dashing, national hero. This telling of his life story hardly supports such a view: a publicity hound—yes—but rarely, if ever, was he a man of either heroic thoughts or actions.

Rolle does add to an understanding of Frémont's heritage by proving beyond any reasonable doubt that the explorer's father was not a French emigré. Rather he was a French Canadian named Louis René Frémont, born in Quebec. After drifting to the French West Indies, he arrived in Virginia shortly before the War of 1812. There he ran off with Mrs. Anne Pryor. That act cost him his social standing as well as his livelihood as a teacher of French and fencing. He lived with Anne until 1818, when he died. During their frontier wanderings, Anne and Louis Frémont had four children of whom John Charles

was the eldest. A bright, ambitious child, Frémont grew into a handsome, healthy, and apparently self-assured young man. Nevertheless, the author notes his inability to make close friends. According to Rolle, his subject developed a "grandiose selfhood" as a way to shield himself from future disappointments.

Frémont's career unfolds before the reader in an orderly progression. By 1833, he had been appointed as an instructor of mathematics aboard the naval ship *Natchez*. Five years later, bored with naval life, he accepted an appointment as an assistant engineer in the army, where he would achieve most of his later fame. Gaining experience with survey work, including such chores as gathering natural specimens, he soon joined the Corps of Topographical Engineers, then busily exploring the West. In 1838 he served as a member of Joseph Nicollet's expedition in the upper Mississippi and Missouri valley regions. Working with Nicollet, Frémont learned how to use the latest scientific instruments while on the frontier, and this led to his later success at data-gathering in the West.

In 1841 Frémont met Senator Thomas Hart Benton and his willful daughter, Jessie. That encounter changed his life. Soon he married Jessie, despite Benton's displeasure, and by 1842 he had set out to explore the West on the first of his four expeditions in that region. While John Charles gathered material, Jessie helped shape his reports into fascinating reading, so that Frémont quickly acquired a wide public following that stayed attentive for the next several decades. By 1846, the explorer had arrived in California during the early stages of the war with Mexico. While there, he tried to assume command of American forces in the region, an act that brought him into open conflict with General Stephen Watts Kearny. Eventually, Frémont was court-martialed and temporarily disgraced for his role in California.

The narrative carries Frémont through more than a decade of effort as a mining speculator, a would-be railroad developer, the first Republican candidate to run for president, a Civil War general, and even the territorial governor of Arizona. Throughout the book, Rolle notes Frémont's relations with his friends, family, and mentors, showing the pathfinder's almost pathological inability to make long-term friendships or to continue any reasonably healthy relationships with colleagues or superiors. This, the author feels, is the secret to understanding what otherwise seem to be inexplicable shifts in Frémont's thoughts and actions.

The book is well written. Its prose is interesting and readable. The research is careful and thorough. Yet somehow one feels that something is missing. Perhaps it comes from the lack of maps to demonstrate the explorer's travels. Or it may result from a certain

inexactitude about dates in particular. Often the reader is uncertain when events occur. At least some of the difficulty stems directly from Frémont himself. He kept most of his thoughts bottled up, and even a biographer as successful as Rolle has some difficulty in bringing this person to life on the pages of a biography.

*Wondrous Times on the Frontier*, by Dee Brown. Little Rock: August House, 1991. ix, 324 pp. Notes, index. \$23.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY PAULA M. NELSON, UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-PLATTEVILLE

*Wondrous Times on the Frontier* is the latest in a long string of books on the West by Dee Brown. Brown is perhaps best known as the author of *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West*, a book that helped awaken interest in the history and contemporary plight of Indian peoples, but he has also written fourteen other works of nonfiction as well as ten novels. In the course of his productive career, Brown has had the opportunity to collect hundreds of jokes, tall tales, anecdotes, and lively quotations from the motley crew that made up frontier western society. Here he organizes those quotes and stories into a loose narrative. His purpose: to help past frontier peoples to "tell why they were there, what they believed in, how they endured and how they used humor—both light and dark—to contend with the burdens of their world" (16).

*Wondrous Times* is arranged topically. The first section deals with travel and tourists, dancing, gambling, climate and other natural phenomena, and the dark side of humor. The second section discusses the various professions on the frontier and their contributions to humor and tall tales. Brown features lawyers, editors, teachers, preachers, and other such personalities. Finally, a third section surveys the humor of and about "misunderstood minorities"—women and Indian peoples. Within each section Brown ranges widely in time and place. The stories date from the 1840s to the end of the nineteenth century; the locales include most of the trans-Mississippi West.

Unfortunately, *Wondrous Times on the Frontier* is disappointing. Although Brown states a clear goal for the book (as quoted earlier), he never reaches it. The narrative is flimsy, apparently tacked together to house a host of barely related events or anecdotes. The tone of many of the stories is decidedly unfunny and even depressing. For example, in his chapter on the medical profession in the West, Brown states that doctors had to equip their offices with curiosities, such as pickled organs removed from earlier patients, to impress their current patients with the mysteries of medicine and with their own professional capa-

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.