

8-2019

## Westward Empire: George Berkeley's 'Verses on the Prospect of Planting of Arts' in American Art and Cultural History

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Westward Empire: George Berkeley's 'Verses on the Prospect of Planting of Arts'  
in American Art and Cultural History

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in History

by

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August 2019  
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This dissertation is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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## Abstract

This study investigates the extraordinary half-life of a single line of poetry: “*Westward the Course of Empire takes its Way...*”. Beginning with their composition in 1726 by the Irish-Anglican bishop George Berkeley, these words colonized an enormous swath of cultural landscape over nearly two centuries. Immortalized in newsprint, broadsides, statesmen’s speeches, reading primers, geographies, the first scholarly history of the United States, as well as in poetry, paintings, lithographs, and photographs, the words evolved from an old-world vision of prophetic empire into a nationalist slogan of manifest destiny. Following the poem as it threads through literary and visual culture, this project demonstrates how a simple sentence acclimated Americans to an expansive conception of United States empire from the colonial period through Reconstruction. The persistent certainty about the westward progress of empire, indeed, about the inevitability of empire itself, demonstrates the enduring vitality of the colonists’ British cultural inheritance on the eve of the American Revolution. As equally important are the ways that Americans reshaped the ideology of the poem to fit their evolving sense of national self in the early republic and antebellum eras. Berkeley’s words offered a critical venue for nationalistic explorations in the early decades of the new republic, easing the transformation of the nation into a capitalist, acquisitive society; in the mid-nineteenth-century conflicts, they served to justify American bellicose imperialism in the Mexican-American War, while deeply informed the debates surrounding the coming of the Civil War and its immediate aftermath, as the nation wrestled over the contours of America’s future. For two centuries, this ideology has enabled Americans to be both convinced evangelists of the exceptional character of their democratic-republican form of government and, in the same breath, self-righteous defenders of their imperial prerogative, first over the north American continent and its

indigenous inhabitants, and ultimately over a global colonial empire. “Westward Empire” reveals the ways that Berkeley’s poem shaped this unique ideology, as well as the ways that Americans adapted Berkeley’s poem to their unique circumstances, and the ways that this evolving and multi-layered interpretation in turn shaped American thought and behavior between 1752 and 1876.

## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family—to my parents Dennis and Barbara Kiszonas, to my sister Heather, and to my brother-in-law Sam—for their unwavering support, unflagging enthusiasm, and profound intellectual and soulful inspiration.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my committee members, Jim Gigantino, Leo Mazow, Dan Sutherland, and Elliott West for their help with this project. I have been fortunate to do my doctoral studies in an incredibly supportive and generous department.

Special thanks to the curatorial and library staff of the Detroit Institute of Art, the New York Public Library, the New York State Library, the American Antiquarian Society, and the Library Company of Philadelphia for their kind assistance in providing research materials and for gamely fielding obscure queries. I am grateful to Dan Richter and the McNeil Center for Early American Studies at the University of Pennsylvania for an intellectually rich fellowship year in 2018-2019; and to my fellow McNeil fellows, who provided a deeply collegial, thoughtful, and convivial community. Boundless thanks to fellow grad students Louise Hancox and Chelsea Hodge whose friendship made the journey not only survivable, but enjoyable. And to Laurent Sacharoff, who unfailingly offered a critical ear, a sharp eye, and a good measure of wit and wisdom.

In completing this dissertation, I owe a particular debt of gratitude to two people. Leo Mazow has been an incomparable conversation partner over the last eight years. This project would quite literally have never materialized without his encouragement and brilliantly creative insight. I am a more confident thinker and writer and a more critical inquisitor of American culture because of his influence. His generosity as both a scholar and a friend has been invaluable to me. I have been equally fortunate in my advisor, Jim Gigantino. I cannot find the words to adequately express how grateful I am for the role he has played in my academic career. I am a better thinker, a better interlocutor, a better colleague, a better writer, a better historian for having had him as a mentor, both formally and informally. The poet Alexander Pope famously ascribed to his friend

George Berkeley, "ev'ry virtue under heaven." I have often thought the same could be said of  
Jim.

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## Introduction

*In happy climes, the seat of innocence,  
Where nature guides and virtue rules,  
Where men shall not impose for truth and sense  
The pedantry of courts and schools...*

*Not such as Europe breeds in her decay;  
Such as she bred when fresh and young,  
When heavenly flame did animate her clay,  
By future poets shall be sung.*

*Westward the Course of Empire takes its way,  
The four first acts already past,  
A fifth shall close the Drama with the day,  
Time's noblest offspring is the last.*

—from George Berkeley's *Verses on the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America* (1726)

“Sir,” began the letter in the *Boston News-Letter* on September 3, 1730, “As there hath been discovered in this our Town a very wonderful Phenomena, I have sent you an Account thereof for the perusal of your curious Readers.” The writer went on to relate an incident that had occurred while on a ramble through Plymouth, Massachusetts, the week before. Passing by a place “where they were about to dig a Cellar, we discovered a Stone, on which there seemed to be engraven certain letters, which when we had cleared from the Dirt, we read to our great Astonishment engraven very deep the ensuing Lines, ‘The Eastern World enslav’d, it’s Glory ends; And Empire rises where the Sun descends.’” The stone’s condition suggested that it had been buried for many years. The writer refrained from sharing further details, as he intended, “so

soon as the Distemper is past,” to bring the stone to Boston to show it around “to the curious and the learned Gentlemen in that place.”<sup>1</sup>

The stone never materialized, although the story itself, or components of it, resurfaced from time to time over the course of the eighteenth century. The storied stone’s rhyming couplet found its way into the back of a colonial portraitist’s notebook, scribbled beneath other vaguely subversive sayings, dating no later than 1747.<sup>2</sup> Some forty years later, the *Royal American Magazine*, a short-lived Boston periodical, resurrected the tale in a letter to the editor in the December 1774 issue. The correspondent wrote of a recent encounter with a “venerable old gentleman...who assured me, that about forty years past, a stone was dug out of a well in some part of the province.” Varying slightly from the original telling, the writer reported that the following lines were inscribed on it: “The Eastern world it’s glory ends / An empire rises where the sun descends.” The correspondent detailed his failed attempts to verify the story, but hoped that by publishing it in “your useful Magazine, you may be instrumental at bringing this matter further to light.”<sup>3</sup> Across the Atlantic in 1776, a visitor to a Derbyshire inn encountered a version of the couplet as a piece of graffiti on his bedroom wall. “The Eastern Glory is lost: its Power ends / And Empire rises where the sun descends,” it read. It was signed: “E.G. An American rebel, Sept. 12, 1773, was here.”<sup>4</sup>

At the turn of the nineteenth century, it made one more appearance. In a chatty letter to Benjamin Rush in 1807, John Adams recounted a conversation from the previous evening.

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<sup>1</sup> “Extract from a Letter,” *Boston News-Letter* (Boston, MA) 3 September 1730, 2.

<sup>2</sup> John Smibert, *The Notebook of John Smibert*, (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1969) 8. It is difficult to determine a precise date; the notebook covers a period from approximately 1720 to 1747.

<sup>3</sup> “To the Editor,” *Royal American Magazine* vol. 1 (1774): 448.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Lewis Einstein, *Divided Loyalties: Americans in England during the War of Independence* (London: Cobden-Sanderson, 1933) 359.

Adams had asked his brother-in-law William Cranch, (“a Gentleman of fourscore, whose Memory is better than mine...”—Adams was 71 at the time), if he could remember a couplet, whose second line was, “And Empire rises where the sun descends.” Thinking for a moment, Cranch came back with, “The Eastern Nations Sink; their glory ends / And empire rises where the Sun descends.” Adams queried his brother-in-law as to whether “Dean Berkley was the author of them. He answered No. The Tradition was, as he had heard it, for Sixty Years, that these Lines were inscribed, or rather drilled into a Rock on the Shore of Monument Bay in our old Colony of Plymouth, and were Supposed to have been written and engraved there by Some of the first Emigrants from Leyden who landed at Plymouth.” Adams went on, “There is nothing in my little reading, more ancient in my Memory than the Observation that Arts Sciences and Empire had travelled Westward.” Since he was “a Child,” Adams had understood “that this next Leap would be over the Atlantick into America.”<sup>5</sup>

Adams’s recollection is a succinct statement of an ancient concept known as *translatio imperii*, literally, the transfer of empire. This adage described the belief that the course of civilization has been, and always will be, westward. Adams’ second, more personal recollection, that since he was a child, he had often heard that America was to be the next stop on this westward journey, was an extrapolation that countless western Europeans before him had made about their own place and time. It had, however, gained particular popularity in the eighteenth century among those who exulted over the expansion of Great Britain’s empire. In the British colonies, as Adam’s reminiscence reveals, the theory was so long and so often affirmed as to have become an assumption. That Adams misattributed the lines to the Irish-Anglican Bishop

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<sup>5</sup> “John Adams to Benjamin Rush, 23 May 1807,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified June 29, 2017, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-5211>.

George Berkeley (1685-1753) tells us even more, for it is Berkeley's poetic formulation of the westward course of empire that became the most famous and powerful few lines of so-called "progress poetry" in America. Though written in 1726, the words were yet unknown when the story of the Plymouth stone appeared in the *Boston News-Letter*. With the publication of Berkeley's poem in 1752, the translatio idea achieved a new level of popularity, and Berkeley's rendition of it, even greater. The poem proliferated in the newspapers and periodicals of colonial America. More than any other translatio formulation, it captured the spirit and imagination of eighteenth-century British North America, playing off old and familiar concepts, but inserting a new and important dimension. History and prophecy had long attested that empire moved west. Berkeley declared that not only would America be the next empire, it would be the greatest, and the last. The degree to which colonists believed in the "prophecy" of Berkeley's poem is demonstrated by their willingness barely two decades after its appearance in print to separate from the mother country and test the truth of his words by going it alone. How and why that happened, and how it is that Berkeley's poem continued to hold currency forty years after the Revolution, as Adams's reminiscence attests, and would continue to hold significant political and cultural power through the era of westward expansion as the Revolution cast its long ideological shadow is the subject of this dissertation.

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The popularity of the translatio idea, a notion with deep roots in the Old World, and the fluency with which Americans engaged it during the colonial period, places this story squarely in an Atlantic world context. Brimming with cultural exchanges, as people, goods, and ideas passed across the Atlantic, the ocean connected people from vastly different cultures and identities. This unprecedented transatlantic movement resulted in a marked Anglicization of American culture in

the decades immediately preceding the American Revolution. This Atlantic model, with its emphasis on an increasing integration of the colonies into the British empire in the late colonial period, runs counter to the traditional nationalist historical narrative that held sway for nearly two centuries after the Revolution. Until the middle of the twentieth century, historians of early America regarded Britain as a country left behind, “an Old World whose relevance had become increasingly tenuous in the lives of eighteenth-century Americans.”<sup>6</sup> Assumptions about the geographical isolation of the colonies obscured the links that bound the colonists to the mother country, and discouraged inquiry into what it meant to the colonists to be members of a transatlantic empire. A teleological view of the period determined the outlines of this narrative. If the break from Britain was the climax of the colonial period, then the years 1660 to 1760 served as an incubation period for an inevitable revolution. After the initial wave of settlement, nationalist historians posited, the colonies’ relationship and identification with Great Britain experienced a steady decline, as successive generations of colonists shed their Britishness and replaced it with a new, distinctive Americanness. A final break with the mother country represented the natural conclusion to this process.<sup>7</sup>

Few historical accounts of early America challenged this hegemonic declension narrative until the tide shifted in the last half of the twentieth century.<sup>8</sup> A rising group of historians,

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<sup>6</sup> T.H. Breen, “An Empire of Goods,” *Journal of British Studies* 25 (1986): 470.

<sup>7</sup> See George Bancroft, *History of the Colonization of the United States* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1846) for an early nationalist history; for an updated synthesis, see Jon Butler, *Becoming America: The Revolution Before 1776* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> Charles M. Andrews was the first historian to challenge the narrative in “Colonial Commerce,” *American Historical Review* 20 (1914): 43-63. Andrews argued that the prevalent practice of colonial history that viewed the period primarily through the prism of the Revolution, emphasizing colonial detachment from England and the Continent, did so at the expense of recognizing the important role that commercial connections played in the colonial relationship. See also, Charles M. Andrews, *The Colonial Period of American History* (New Haven, 1934-38), esp. vol. I, xi-xiii

including Bernard Bailyn, John Murrin, T.H. Breen, and Jack Greene, took up the colonial period anew, suspending a sense of inevitability and attempting to study the period on its own terms. What they found turned the traditional narrative on its head. In micro studies of individual communities and macro quantitative studies of ship manifestos, transatlantic routes, and storehouse inventories, through fresh analyses of probate wills detailing the contents of colonial homes, of colonial decorative wares in America's museums, and the ephemera of print culture bundled away in antiquity collections, the evidence collectively indicates that the isolation of the colonies in the years immediately following settlement reversed itself by the early eighteenth century.<sup>9</sup> A growing social and cultural convergence occurred between 1660 and 1760 that created a common British cultural order in the western Atlantic.<sup>10</sup> The transmission of goods, ideas, and news, as well as people, increased substantially in eighteenth-century America, forging ever deeper connections with the mother country. By the middle decades of the eighteenth century, British colonists found themselves enmeshed in a thick web of transatlantic relationships where all levels of society actively and enthusiastically participated in an Atlantic world.

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<sup>9</sup> The foundational studies that contributed to this historiographical turn include Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968); John Murrin, "The Legal Transformation of the Bench and Bar of Eighteenth-Century Massachusetts," in Stanley Katz (ed.), *Colonial America: Essays in Politics and Social Development* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971); Carl Bridenburgh, "Right New-England Men," *Proceedings of Massachusetts Historical Society* 88 (1976); James G. A. Pocock, "The Limits and Divisions of British History: In Search of the Unknown Subject," *American Historical Review* 87 (1982): 311-36; Breen, "An Empire of Goods"; Ian K. Steele. *The English Atlantic, 1675-1740: An Exploration of Communication and Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Jack Greene, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Social Development of Early Modern British Colonies and the Formation of American Culture* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988); for a more recent version, see T.H. Breen and Timothy Hall, *Colonial America in an Atlantic World: A Story of Creative Interaction* (New York: 2004).

<sup>10</sup> Greene, *Pursuits*, 174.

This historiographical turn has forced a reassessment of the development of a coherent American identity. The numerous ties with Britain provided white Americans with a common framework of experience as the transmission of British culture standardized the culture of the American colonies. As T.H. Breen writes, “The road to Americanization ran through Anglicization.” This meant that “on the eve of the American Revolution, Americans were more English than they had been in the past since the first years of the colonies.”<sup>11</sup> This ongoing realignment with British modes of material, cultural, and intellectual consumption would prove to be deeply significant as the empire tightened its control over the colonies in the wake of the French and Indian War. At the very moment that the empire began to legislate the colonies as dependencies, American colonists had never been surer of their rights as full citizens of the British Empire. This misreading of the colonial situation would be the undoing of Great Britain’s North American empire.

The story of Berkeley in America fits within this narrative of an increasingly Anglicized society. Berkeley’s poem entered into American print culture in a volume of his collected works in the early 1750s, at the height of Anglicization. Yet, “Westward Empire: George Berkeley’s ‘Verses on the Planting of Arts’ in American Art and Cultural History,” challenges this Anglicization model by reversing the pervasive historiographical interpretation that a declension of Anglicization was substantively reversed by the integration of the Atlantic World in the early eighteenth century. In actuality, “Westward Empire,” points to the tenacity of British modes of thought and frameworks of both religious and historical understanding that had been en vogue since the earliest days of settlement. English men and women did not abandon their essential beliefs and constructs in America—the persistent certainty about the westward progress of

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Breen, “An Empire,” 496.

empire, indeed, about the inevitability of empire itself, demonstrates the enduring vitality of the colonists' British cultural inheritance on the eve of the American Revolution. The poem, and its embedded prophecy, came to be readily embraced precisely because the ideas it represented—its theory of history, of cultural progress, its sense of America's special dispensation—were deeply familiar ideas. At the same time, although the ideas in Berkeley's poem were rooted in British culture, in America these theories assumed a unique significance. The poem's susceptibility to a "colonial" reading would have enormous consequences, not merely for the colonial period, or the coming of the American Revolution, but for the history of the United States writ large.

The ideologically-formative role Berkeley's poem plays in the unfolding of this history begins properly with the American Revolution. While a search for the causes of the American Revolution has been a mainstay of American historiography since the early decades of the nineteenth century, it has only been in the last fifty years that historians have rigorously considered the role of ideas in the coming of the Revolution. In a groundbreaking 1964 essay, cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz recovered the term "ideology" as an analytical concept. Shaking it free of its then pejorative and polemical usages, Geertz urged scholars to take ideologies seriously as culturally-specific systems of meaning. Rather than view ideology as a weapon of different interests in a struggle for power on the one hand, or dismiss it as a salve for social and psychological distress on the other, Geertz argued that the content of an ideology has particular meanings that correspond with a particular social reality and helps to make visible larger concerns within a culture. More than simply a worldview, ideology arises when existing patterns of life become disrupted, offering a template for understanding and a pattern for action



in such times of social and political uncertainty. With this redefinition of ideology, Geertz made a coherent case for the link between ideas and behavior.<sup>12</sup>

The salience of Geertz's argument for the study of early American history was immediately apparent. Within a few years from the publication of Geertz's essay, American historians brought these theoretical insights to bear on the War of Independence, a profoundly disruptive event, producing a handful of studies on its ideological origins. These works collectively made the then-novel argument that a specific collection of ideas and beliefs—an identifiable ideology called republicanism—shaped the American Revolutionary mind, pervaded discourse, and provided a motive for active imperial resistance.<sup>13</sup> Bernard Bailyn, Gordon Wood, and J.G.A. Pocock led the way in mapping out the intellectual matrix that, in Bernard Bailyn's words, "would determine the outbreak and character of the American Revolution and that thereafter in vital aspects would shape the course of American history."<sup>14</sup>

Bailyn identified five major sources from which American colonists drew their political thinking—the writings of classical antiquity, the writings of Enlightenment rationalism, the tradition of English common law, the political and social theories of New England Puritanism,

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<sup>12</sup> Clifford Geertz, "Ideology as a Cultural System," in *Ideology and Its Discontents*, ed. David E. Apter (Glencoe, IL: Free Press of Glencoe, 1964), 47-76.

<sup>13</sup> Three books are usually cited as inaugurating the classical republican account of the founding: Bernard Bailyn's *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1967); Gordon Wood's *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969); and J.G.A. Pocock's *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1975); Caroline Robbins, writing a generation earlier, first lodged a challenge to the prevalent belief that American republicanism was sui generis. See Robbins, "Algernon Sidney's *Discourses Concerning Government*: Textbook of Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3:4 (1947): 267-96, and, *The Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman: Studies in the Transmission, Development, and Circumstances of English Liberal Thought from the Restoration of Charles II until the War with the Thirteen Colonies* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1959).

<sup>14</sup> Bernard Bailyn, "Themes," in *Essays on the American Revolution*, ed., Stephen G. Kurtz and James H. Hutson (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1973)

and the writers associated with the English Civil War and Commonwealth period. According to Bailyn, this last group, radical English Whigs, innovated the perspective that brought order and synthesis to these disparate strands of writing, and more than any other source, “shaped the mind of the American Revolutionary generation.”<sup>15</sup> The perspective of the radical Whigs, disseminated through a vigorous pamphlet campaign, represented a strain of anti-authoritarianism, first originating during the English Civil War, only to resurface in the 1720s and 1730s among opposition politicians who resisted what they saw as the encroachment by royal ministers on Parliament’s representative authority. They framed the struggle as one between power and liberty, court and country, empire and republic, and, ultimately, between decadence and virtue. For Whig opposition writers who revered England’s constitutional heritage, the usurpation of power by the court ministers seemed a sign of England’s decay, its falling away from the original animating virtue that had enabled such a unique liberty-preserving mixed government in the first place. While these pamphleteers held relatively little influence in early eighteenth-century Britain, Bailyn argued they were nonetheless immensely popular and influential in the colonies in the middle decades of the eighteenth century.<sup>16</sup>

Pamphlets were not the only place that American colonists would have encountered the outline of these ideas. Berkeley’s poem stands as a complementary text, and one that arguably had a wider readership among average American colonists than any of the radical Whig pamphlets. George Berkeley is best known as the philosopher of *esse est percipi* (to be is to be perceived), and his esteem in colonial America was largely tied to his reputation as a brilliant metaphysical thinker. His poem, *Verses on the Planting of Arts and Learning in America*, is the

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<sup>15</sup> Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, 23-35.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 45-51.

only piece of poetry he is known to have written. The *Verses* were first composed in 1726 as Berkeley embarked on a project to establish a missionary college in the island of Bermuda. The impetus for this scheme lay in a mounting certainty of Britain's imminent decline. Like the radical Whigs, Berkeley harbored deep misgivings about the moral state of England. A contemporary of the radical Whigs, equally critical of the court ministers, and suspicious of corruption emanating from the highest realms of power, Berkeley saw the American colonies as the last hope for the world and the redemption of humanity. With this vision in mind, Berkeley composed a six-stanza poem that functioned as a pejorative assessment of recent English history. American colonists reading Berkeley's poem when it landed in the colonies in the 1750s could not misapprehend his meaning: Virtue had fled England for America, and with virtue, according to classical theory, empire. In simple, rhyming, and thus highly accessible form, Berkeley gave American colonists the basic outlines of the radical Whig critique. By the 1760s, this critique would provide the lens through which colonists viewed Parliament's aggressive jurisdiction in the colonies in the aftermath of the French and Indian War. Believing that these actions were a deliberate attempt by corrupt ministerial officials to deprive the colonies of their liberty, a pattern laid out by opposition writers, the colonists were propelled into Revolution.<sup>17</sup> Berkeley's poem, I argue, played a critical, though overlooked, role in inculcating American colonists with this subversive ideology.

The republican synthesis outlined by Bailyn, while increasingly nuanced, has remained largely ascendant in the taxonomy of causes of the American Revolution. But more recently, a historiographical shift has begun to pose significant challenges to the republican synthesis model. Emerging out of Atlantic history and the Anglicization thesis, this new scholarship also

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 94-95.

considers the power of ideas, but rather than evaluating the influence of radical mid-eighteenth century thought, it looks further back, exploring the ways that colonists were shaped by the rhetoric of empire and the imperialist world from which they came. Rather than see colonists as protorepublicans, the work produced within this renewed imperial focus suggests a deep institutional and intellectual continuity between the empire and the republic. Recent works by this neo-Imperialist school have served to complicate our understanding of how radical revolutionaries perceived monarchy and empire, suggesting a far less adversarial position on these issues than scholars of the past half-century have assumed. A thoroughgoing republican synthesis is difficult to sustain in light of the dogged commitment of the majority of delegates to the Continental Congress to remain within the British Empire, to preserve the sanctity of British constitutionalism, customs, laws, traditions, and to defend British constitutional monarchy—indeed, recent work has demonstrated that the majority of congressional delegates sought to strengthen, not weaken, the king’s prerogative powers while denying Parliament’s right to oversee the king’s activities in the colonies. By emphasizing the essential imperial character of the crisis that led to the War of Independence, and the centrality of monarchy for the colonial opposition position and, in the long-term, to American political institutions, contemporary adherents of the Imperial school are effectively challenging the republican historiography of the last several decades.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> This renewed interest in empire and imperialism includes the work of Jack P. Greene, *The Constitutional Origins of the American Revolution* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2011); Mary Sarah Bilder, *The Transatlantic Constitution: Colonial Legal Culture and the Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2004); Daniel Hulsebosch, *Constituting Empire: New York and the Transformation of Constitutionalism in the Atlantic World, 1664-1830* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Alison L. LaCroix, *The Ideological Origins of American Federalism* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2010); Brendon McConville, *The King’s Three Faces: The Rise and Fall of Royal America, 1688-1776* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Eric Nelson, *The Royalist Revolution: Monarchy and the American Founding*

Proponents of the two schools find themselves at an impasse. On the one hand, a well-rehearsed argument locates the founders deeply immersed in a political philosophy of republicanism and hostility towards monarchy; on the other, scholars find the leaders of the Revolution expressing a point of view so strongly royalist on the cusp of the American Revolution that the colonial position in significant ways was more royalist than late eighteenth-century Britain itself. “Westward Empire” offers a way of bridging the divide. In the reception and adaptation of Berkeley’s *Verses* in late-eighteenth century America, we find evidence of Americans holding these seemingly conflicting views with little strain. Republic and empire, they seemed to suggest, could be two sides of the same coin, as long as the metal was made of virtue.

Virtue, to the eighteenth-century mind, was the ultimate safeguard against power. The rise and fall of empires, as antiquity, republican ideology, and Berkeley all suggested, could be directly attributed to the social health of their people. Where frugality, industry, restraint, and, most importantly, sacrifice of individual interests to the greater good prevailed, empire flourished. Luxury and vice, on the other hand, destroyed empires. Selfishness, love of refinement, desire for distinction, idleness, all were inimical to the public good, and if left unchecked, led to corruption, tyranny, and societal collapse. The foundation of a just republic consisted of a virtuous and harmonious society, whose members were knit together by mutual concern for the good of the community. This constituted the idealistic goal of the Revolution, “a

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(Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2014); Barry Alan Shain, “Three Congresses, AngloAmerican Constitutionalism, and British Imperialism and Monarchy: In Search of a New/Old Approach to Understanding American Revolutionary-Era History,” in *The Declaration of Independence in Historical Context*, ed. Shain (New Haven: Yale UP, 2014); Craig Yirush, *Settlers, Liberty, and Empire: The Roots of Early American Political Theory, 1675-1775* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2011).

vision so divorced from the realities of American society,” writes Gordon Wood, “so contrary to the previous century of American experience, that it alone was enough to make the Revolution one of the great utopian movements of American history.”<sup>19</sup> *Too* utopian, as it would soon become clear.

The new nation had barely gotten off the ground when the virtuous society seemed to founder on the horns of prosperity to those who advocated this ideology. The resolution to the dilemma this posed came in a radical redefinition of virtue that substantively altered the way that Americans navigated the concepts of republic and empire with profound consequences for the future of the young nation. The years after the Revolution were a critical juncture when Americans had to determine what sort of institutions and economic structures were compatible with the preservation of a liberty-loving republic. In the early constitutional period, debates around political economy, a notion that encompassed politics, economics, as well as moral philosophy and ethics, revealed rival conceptions of what made a good society and a good economy. The complexity and urgency of the debate was driven forward by the rapid commercial and capitalistic growth of this era. On one level, the new nation’s economic expansion fit the republican program, ensuring political and economic independence from the Old World while fostering internal economic and social stability. But it soon posed a new problem as America’s success threatened to undermine its older animating values. The perils of luxury became a leitmotif in the early years of the republic as the Revolutionary generation wrestled with the problem of preserving virtue in the light of America’s increasing wealth and pursuit of material gain.<sup>20</sup> The answer to the dilemma for a nation of striving people gripped by

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<sup>19</sup> Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969; 1998), 52-59; 54.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 393-429.

the prospect of great economic and social opportunities as the nation moved into the nineteenth century came in a new emphasis on productivity as a sign of virtue. It was only a step further to make prosperity itself a virtue. As historian Drew McCoy writes of the early republic, “[The] fundamental assumption that republican government, increased productivity, and economic prosperity were closely intertwined...reflected at least a rudimentary national consensus in political economy.”<sup>21</sup> In a speech to Congress in 1824, Daniel Webster made the point explicit. The republican experiment, he argued, had yielded “the greatest possible prosperity,” accruing for America “distinction and respect among the nations of the earth.” The material accomplishments of the republican system of government proved its worth, Webster proclaimed. “We shall no farther recommend its adoption to other nations, in whole or in part, than it may recommend itself by its visible influence on our own growth and prosperity.”<sup>22</sup> The Republic, then, was good because it was prosperous; and “good” became defined by success.

The significance of this shift in thinking comes into sharp relief in the nineteenth century, when America’s growth could be measured both in economic and geographic terms. If success was a sign of virtue, every dollar multiplied in capitalist ventures and every mile carved out of the wilderness represented proof of America’s righteousness. And as Americans reconceived “Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way,” for a new century, the prophetic mandate of the line combined with a belief that America’s successful progress in “conquering” the West proved the inherent virtue of its mission, made for a mind-twistingly heady elixir. The resulting construct formed a powerful and muscular ideology in the middle decades of the nineteenth

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<sup>21</sup> Drew McCoy, *The Elusive Republic: Political Economy in Jeffersonian America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 181.

<sup>22</sup> John Kasson, *Civilizing the Machine: Technology and Republican Values in America, 1776-1900* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1976), 40-41; Daniel Webster, *Speeches and Forensic Arguments* (Boston, 1830), 245.

century, shorthand into a pithy slogan, “manifest destiny.” It played a critical role in the mid-century conflicts, justifying American bellicose imperialism in the Mexican-American War, and deeply informing the debates surrounding the coming of the Civil War, as the nation wrestled over the contours of America’s future. For two centuries, this ideology has enabled Americans to be both convinced evangelists of the exceptional character of their democratic-republican form of government and, in the same breath, self-righteous defenders of their imperial prerogative, first over the north American continent and its indigenous inhabitants, and ultimately over a global colonial empire. The study that follows reveals the ways that Berkeley’s poem shaped this unique ideology, as well as the ways that Americans adapted Berkeley’s poem to their unique circumstances, and the ways that this evolving and multi-layered interpretation in turn shaped American thought and behavior between 1752 and 1876.

“Westward Empire” is divided into two sections. The first section places the poem in context, surveying the history of the ideas that move beneath its rhyming surface, the circumstances that inspired its composition, as well as the intellectual milieu in which it circulated upon its arrival in America. This section pays particular attention to the written word—letters, literature, and derivative poetry—that helped to create a thick biography for the poem. In the reception and adaptation of Berkeley’s words in the critical years of the American Revolution and Early Republic, we see how the poem gained authority and entered into the pantheon of ideas that helped to shape the self-identity of the young nation.

The gradual transformation of a complex ideology into a widespread popular belief can be documented not only by texts, but by popular paintings, prints, and photographs, the subject of the second half of the dissertation. Artists of the nineteenth century carried on the ideological project of the founding generation by creating a visual catalog of vernacular pictures that even



the most illiterate of Americans could read, helping to embed the ideology of “Westward the Course of Empire,” ever deeper into the cultural fabric and psyche of the nation. In the last twenty years, art historians have produced a number of studies on the role of art in the young republic, on landscape as a genre of American art, and on the role of artists as purveyors of nationalist and ultimately frontier ideologies.<sup>23</sup> However, scholars have largely sidestepped the connection between these various themes and Berkeley’s immensely powerful, immensely elastic maxim that underscored a significant body of artistic production in the nineteenth century. This study endeavors to rectify that gap in the historiography. There is no attempt to make this an exhaustive survey of the art inspired by Berkeley’s poem, rather a few select pieces stand to demonstrate how art not only reflected ideas, but were critical sites for working out the meaning of national identity through symbols and metaphors, and through decisions about what to represent and what to leave out. As art historian Wanda Corn has argued, the “language of nationalism is inseparable from the history of American art.”<sup>24</sup> Although not all of the artists included in this study necessarily sought to promote this ideology, the ways that their art was

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<sup>23</sup> See James Thomas Flexner, *That Wilder Image: The Painting of America's Native School from Thomas Cole to Winslow Homer* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1962); William H. Gerds and Mark Edward Thistlethwaite, *Grand Illusions: History Painting in America* (Fort Worth, TX: Amon Carter Museum, 1988); Dawn Glanz, *How the West Was Drawn: American Art and the Settling of the Frontier* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1982). Angela Miller, *Empire of the Eye: Landscape Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825-1875* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); Barbara Novak, *American Painting of the Nineteenth Century: Realism, Idealism, and the American Experience* (New York: Oxford UP, 2007); - Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape Painting, 1825-1875* (New York, 1980; 2007), Martha Sandweiss, *Print the Legend: Photography and the American West* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2002); William H. Truettner, ed. *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991); William H. Truettner and Alan Wallach, *Thomas Cole: Landscape into History* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1994).

<sup>24</sup> Wanda Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), xv.

nevertheless read or misread stands as a measure of the extent to which an orthodox interpretation of Berkeley's line had solidified by the end of the period under consideration. Collectively, these artists show us in vivid terms how a simple sentence managed to acclimate Americans to an expansive conception of United States empire.

Chapter one introduces Berkeley's poem and places it in the larger framework of the eighteenth-century Atlantic world. A sketch of the ancient origins of the notion of *translatio imperii* and its renewed relevance with the European discovery of America is followed by an investigation into the immediate context, impetus, and meaning of Berkeley's poem. Chapter two analyzes the reception of Berkeley's poem in the American colonies and follows it through the dawning of the Early Republic. By the end of the eighteenth-century, the poem had earned the imprimatur of "prophecy." For the writers, thinkers, politicians, and educators of the Revolutionary era and Early Republic, Berkeley's rhetoric of empire assisted in conceptualizing and justifying an expansionist view, even as it provided a useable past, locating the young republic within a larger scheme of world history, affording a reassurance that what, where, and who they were mattered. Chapter three uses Thomas Cole's five-painting series, *The Course of Empire* (1836), to examine how the second and third generation of Americans dealt with the growing pains of an increasingly democratic, capitalistic, and expanding society. This well-known series of paintings is re-contextualized within an ongoing historical debate over the meaning of *translatio imperii*. The contours of this debate pitted a traditional reading of Berkeley's poem that conceptualized America as part of an inevitable cycle of world history against an emerging notion of American exceptionalism that played both sides of the coin: claiming the power of historical inevitability yet positing a distinctive, but nonetheless prophetic, destiny for the nation. Cole's work was among the first to recognize the actual American

landscape as the contested ground over which this battle for America's meaning and future would be fought. Chapter four brings the poem forward into the Civil War era. Emanuel Leutze's mural in the capitol rotunda, *Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way* (1861), executed as war raged outside, posited a resolution to some of the tensions of Cole's era. Through an anachronistic rendering of westward-journeying pioneers, Leutze used Berkeley's line to both historicize westward expansion and to project a dazzling future for the United States, one that encompassed the native-born of the North and South, immigrants, and freedmen, as well. Leutze's work reveals not only an early confidence in Union victory and a cognizance of the changing meaning of the war, but how the triumph of the North's vision for America's future was a critical component of manifest destiny. Chapter five joins Berkeley's verse with the physical embodiment of westward expansion—the transcontinental railroad. John Carbutt's photograph, *Westward the Monarch Capital Makes its Way* (1867), produced during an excursion to the 100th Meridian to observe the construction of the Union Pacific Railroad circa 1866, frames the post-war period as one of continued struggle, but one through which the nation would nevertheless persevere and over which it would inevitably triumph. I consider Carbutt's photograph in tandem with several other significant pieces of art produced in the Reconstruction period: Francis Bond Palmer's *Across the Continent: Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way* (1868), Theodor Kaufmann's *Westward the Star of Empire* (1867), and Andrew Melrose's *Westward the Star of Empire Takes Its Way—Near Council Bluffs, Iowa* (1867). These works encapsulate a visual record signaling the conflicts embedded in the ideology of this line, even as they attest to a deep abiding faith Americans had in the inevitability of westward empire, and to a certainty in its spatial and temporal culmination in the United States.

## Chapter One

### “Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way”: The *Translatio* Theory in Western Civilization

By the eighteenth century, the notion of the westward progress of civilization was very much in the air. It had been floating through colonial culture in various forms since the earliest days of English settlement. It manifested itself in early histories of New England and in prophecies flowing from the pens of poets and divines alike. It framed the religious awakenings that swept through the colonies in the first half of the eighteenth century, even as it found common cause with the new theory of progress taking root in American intellectual circles. History, prophecy, progress. These three fed the soil of early American thought and created the fertile ground in which Berkeley's verses eventually landed, grew, took shape, and, in turn, shaped a sense of American identity and mission.

The precise image of westward progress appeared in the American colonies from their earliest inception. In the seventeenth-century works in which it initially surfaced, it was often linked to the idea of Providential history. Among the early New England historians, Edward Johnson was the most prominent in developing the idea. Johnson emigrated to New England with John Winthrop and likely would have been in the audience for Winthrop's famous "A Model of Christian Charity" sermon on board the *Arbela*. In Johnson's history of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, *Wonder-Working Providence of Sions Saviour in New England* (1653), Johnson repeatedly sought to demonstrate how God had moved behind the scenes of history, pushing civilization westward, ultimately preparing New England to receive the gospel as England fell into decline.<sup>1</sup> Cotton Mather picked up this theme in *American Tears* (1701), as

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<sup>1</sup> Harold Jantz, "The Myths About America: Origins and Extensions," *Jahrbuch fur Amerika-studien* 7 (1962): 12.

he recounted the fall of Constantinople as a “happy revolution” that ultimately led to the transfer of religion from Britain to America. “Constantinople’s fall drove learning westward to Italy. Following this *translatio studii*, there was a remarkable revival of arts and letters in the west during the period we have learned to call the ‘Renaissance’.” Mather argued that as the West became more humanized and civilized as learning passed from the east, it also became more inclined to the “reform of religion.” Thus, for Mather, the Renaissance “...prepared the world for the Reformation of Religion” by fostering civilization in the West.<sup>2</sup> In articulating this common sense of westward progress, Johnson, Mather, and other American writers drew from a collection of European idea that came layered with millennia of meaning and precedent, shaping how they were received and applied in colonial America.

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Traces of the idea of civilization’s westward movement appear among the earliest writings of western civilization. If much of the world remained shrouded in mystery for the writers of classical antiquity, one thing was certain: the sun rose in the east and descended westward: *ex oriente lux*. Other certainties tied to the cardinal points of a compass spun off this first essential one. If the east was the dawn, the west was the fulfillment. The east was all that was already known; the west was otherworldly, a paradisiacal dreamscape.<sup>3</sup> In a word, the west was the future. By the first century AD, the west already had its booster propagandists. The Roman poet Horace told a generation of young Roman men ground down by endless civil strife: “Let the weak and hopeless remnant rest on their ill-fated couches! Ye who have

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<sup>2</sup> Laurence Dickey, “The ‘Geography of Salvation’,” in *The Cultural Gradient: The Transmission of Ideas in Europe, 1789-1991*, ed. Catherin Evtuhov and Stephen Kotkin (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 22.

<sup>3</sup> Jantz, “The Myths,” 11.

manhood...speed past the Etruscan coasts! Us the encompassing ocean awaits. Let us seek the...Happy Fields...where every year the land, unploughed, yields corn, and ever blooms the vine unpruned... a happy escape is offered to the righteous...<sup>4</sup> For the earliest writers of western civilization, the west quickly assumed an outsized quality.

This east-to-west trajectory, first observed in the movement of the sun as it arched overhead, seemed to explain other observable phenomena of the western world, including the progress of history itself. Empires rose and fell, power transferring from one people to another, seemingly on a westward course: Assyria to Babylon, Persia, Greece. Rome eventually joined this list. Ancient writers were well aware of this cyclical outline of history. The eighth-century BCE poet Hesiod periodized history into a sequence of five civilizations on a western trajectory.<sup>5</sup> Writers in classical Rome were likewise struck by this pattern, and sought to find meaning in it for their own national identity. Virgil explored the theme in his epic *Aeneid*, seeking a sort of usable past for Rome by suggesting that the transfer of civilization from Greece to Rome not only organically connected Rome to heroic epics, but more importantly, made Rome the heir to, and consequently equal of, the glories of classical Greece.<sup>6</sup> This pattern of constructing a national identity against the fading brilliance of past civilizations through the notion of the westward transference of empire would appear repeatedly as this refrain moved across time.

Across the Mediterranean, the theory was recapitulated in the Old Testament book of Daniel. The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar had a troubling dream in which he saw a giant statue divided into five segments: a head of gold, a chest and arms of silver, belly and thighs of

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>5</sup> John E. Goldingay, *Daniel* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989), 40.

<sup>6</sup> Kimberly K. Bell, "'Translatio' and the Constructs of a Roman Nation in Virgil's 'Aeneid,'" *Rocky Mountain Review* 62:1 (Spring 2008): 11.

bronze, legs and feet a mixture of iron and clay. Nebuchadnezzar watched as a stone crashed into the feet, bringing the whole statue down, crushing and comingling until it became like chaff and blew away in the wind. The Judean prophet Daniel interpreted the vision and informed Nebuchadnezzar that his dream was a prophecy of his kingdom. Babylon was the golden head, but after Babylon, another kingdom would rise and crush it; then another, and another; until finally, a fifth kingdom, symbolized as a rolling stone cut out of a mountain “without hands,” would strike the fourth kingdom. The whole apparatus of earthly empire would come crashing to the ground, replaced by the fifth and final kingdom, the kingdom of God, heaven come to earth.<sup>7</sup> Subsequent exegetical tradition would identify the kingdoms of the statue as Babylon, Persia, Greece, followed by Rome. By the medieval era, the ten toes of the feet represented subsequent western branches of the Roman empire.<sup>8</sup> But the fifth kingdom, the rolling stone, remained elusive, a thing of prophecy. Its identity and the signs of its coming would form a substantial part of the New Testament book of Revelations, written several hundred years after Daniel. Nonetheless, what Daniel presented was a vision not of Israel’s history, in contrast to much of the Old Testament, but rather a theology of secular history—a chronicle of heathen kingdoms that rise and fall at God’s will.<sup>9</sup> In effect, it affirmed the sovereignty of God in human history, an idea that would find resonance among seventeenth-and eighteenth-century Americans.

This theory of the westward movement of empire that began as a myth more than anything else, an attempt to understand the cosmic powers behind history’s mysterious course, first found its way into historiography in the works of the fifth-century CE philosopher and

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<sup>7</sup> See Daniel, chapters 2 and 7.

<sup>8</sup> Tremper Longman, *Daniel: the NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 97.

<sup>9</sup> Goldingay, *Daniel*, 57.

church historian Augustine. In the *City of God*, Augustine wove these complementary secular and religious theories into a philosophy of history, and infused it with a Christian teleology. Although living in the dying days of the Roman empire, Augustine cast his gaze back to the days when Rome was in her glory. He argued that the greatness of Rome was a result of the transference of pagan culture and intellectual effort from one empire to another. Yet the hand of God was still present in what seemed to be entirely human-driven events, “The cause, then, of the greatness of the Roman empire is neither fortuitous nor fatal... In a word, human kingdoms are established by divine providence.”<sup>10</sup> In this, Augustine saw God using human effort as a means to accomplish his own purposes. Out of the glories of Rome, this empire that represented and encompassed the best of human achievement, God would create his heavenly kingdom, the eponymous City of God. This formed the teleology of Augustine’s theory of history. History itself indicated the inexorable movement of civilization and empire westward across time. But, Augustine argued, this cycle would not continue indefinitely. It had a stopping point, a *circa finem*. At the end of temporal history, the kingdoms of the world would be replaced by the eternal kingdom of God.<sup>11</sup> For Augustine, as for biblical writers and for subsequent generations of Christians, that final act of history was imminent.

By the medieval era, empire had noticeably moved westward yet again, transferring power and culture from the Latins to the Germans under the reign of Charlemagne. The historical phenomenon of westward transference of empire had become such a basic concept in medieval thought that medieval historians now had a term for it: *translatio imperii*. But the transference

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<sup>10</sup> Augustine, et al., *The City of God* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1888), 177; Peter Freese, “‘Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way’: The *translatio*-Concept in Popular American Writing and Painting,” *Amerikastudien* 41 (1996): 267.

<sup>11</sup> Jantz, “The Myths,” 11; Samuel Klinger, “The Gothic Revival of the German ‘Translatio,’” *Modern Philology*, 45 (November 1947): 76.



was understood now to be one not only of power, but of civilization itself. It involved a concurrent transfer of learning, science, arts, religion. *Translatio studii, translatio scientiae, translatio artium, translatio religio*.<sup>12</sup> The translatio theory blossomed among twelfth-century Christian historiographers just as the knowledge of Greek and the Greek classics was being recovered in Europe with the fall of Constantinople and the arrival of fugitive Byzantine scholars in European courts. With this re-discovery of the roots of western culture, European scholars were eager to place their own country and era in the historical lineage of cultural transmission. The twelfth-century French poet Chretien de Troyes made France the recipient of this tradition, writing, “Our books have taught us that Greece had the first fame of chivalry and learning. Then came chivalry to Rome, and the sum of learning, which now is come to France. God grant that it remain there, and...never depart...The honor which has taken up its abode here in France, God had but lent to the others...”<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, in Germany, the chronicler Otto of Friesing used a range of early Christian sources, including Greek commentaries on Daniel, to elucidate the history of translatio in his historical and philosophical treatise *Chronicle* (1143-45): “...There were from the beginning of the world four principal kingdoms...succeeding one another in accordance with the law of the universe...[and] in particular from the vision of Daniel...”<sup>14</sup> And just as Seneca and Augustine before him had employed the translatio theory as a nationalist sentiment to justify the political and cultural superiority of the realm in which they lived, Otto located the Frankish kingdom in this historical line, “The diligent investigator of events will find that learning passed from [Egypt] to the Greeks, from there to the Romans, and at last to the

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<sup>12</sup> Kliger, “The Gothic,” 78.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1973), 384-85.

<sup>14</sup> Kliger, “The Gothic,” 79, n.

Gauls...And it should be noted that all human power or learning took hold from the east and is ending in the west...”<sup>15</sup>

This theory of history was the most widely held assumption about the course of human progress held in the Renaissance. Men, nations, and the arts have their origin, rise, flourishing, and decay; when the process is completed, it does not stop but repeats itself. Civilizations ebb and flow in a continual refrain.<sup>16</sup> German humanist scholars of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries drew upon the *translatio* idea, and Otto of Friesing’s work in particular, to justify their criticism of Rome as they chafed under its religio-politico tyranny. The idea gathered momentum with the early German Protestant reformers. Luther, for example, saw the hand of God working behind the scenes as political empire shifted from the Babylonians to the Assyrians to the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans and the Holy Roman Empire, and now to the German nation. But in his conception, the transference was not of empire or culture, but of the gospel. Just as empire, civilization, and culture had moved westward, so had the message of salvation: carried from the Jews to the Greeks, to the Romans and finally to the Germans, who would bring about “a rebirth or rejuvenation of the world.”<sup>17</sup> But speculation as to why Rome had sunk led Luther and other German reformers to insert an explicit moral argument, tinged with racial connotations, into the conversation. In their assessment, it was the inherent wickedness and dissipation of the Latins that had induced God to remove them from power and make his face to shine upon the pure, kind, youthful, vigorous Germanic peoples.<sup>18</sup> The corollary of this argument

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<sup>15</sup> David Boruchoff, “New Spain, New England, and the New Jerusalem: The ‘Translation of Empire, Faith, and Learning (*Translatio imperii, fidei ac scientia*) in the Colonial Missionary Project,” *Early American Literature* 43:1 (2008): 19-20.

<sup>16</sup> Herbert Weisinger, “Ideas of History During the Renaissance,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 6 (October 1945): 426.

<sup>17</sup> Kliger, “The Gothic,” 73.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

suggested that should the German people sink into similar immorality and depravity, they too, would be cast aside, as God once again picked up empire and moved it westward.<sup>19</sup> This threat would be a critical component of later English permutations of the *translatio* theory.

The surprising “discovery” of America gave new meaning and force to the theory of the westward movement of civilization just as competing claims for prophetic nationalist supremacy reached their apex in Europe. The discovery represented a monumental paradigm shift as the fundamental intellectual challenge lay in the fact that the western hemisphere did not appear in the Bible, nor in any of the other classical authoritative texts of Renaissance Europe. There were no predictions, no descriptions that could enable easy categorization. Europeans delved deep into their existing system of knowledge, reappraising old theories in an attempt to adapt this new information. For theologians, the challenge lay in reconciling the historical and geographical prophecies of the Bible to this new discovery. The time and place of the fulfillment of eschatological prophecies had long been hypothesized within the context of the known world. Augustine’s interpretation of end time prophecies had long been held as the orthodox interpretation. The Bible, as God’s word, could not be wrong; but perhaps Augustine could be. The new world had to have been predicted by the prophets, Renaissance theologians conjectured. Former interpreters had simply lacked the necessary historical and empirical wisdom to discern it.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Jan Willem Schulte Nordholt, *The Myth of the West: America as the Last Empire* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmann, 1995), 17.

<sup>20</sup> Luis Filipe Silverio Lima, “Between the New and the Old World: Iberian Prophecies and Imperial Projects in the Colonisation of the Early Modern Spanish and Portuguese Americas,” in *Prophecy and Eschatology in the Transatlantic World*, ed. Andrew Crome (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 36-38.

On the historiographic front, as extraordinary as the discovery was, it nevertheless fit the expectations of western Europeans whose basic understanding of history revolved around an idea of the continuous movement of civilization guided by divine action and intervention. Scholarly works that delved into the method and meaning of history proliferated during the age of exploration as the discovery added a new chapter, geographically and temporally, to world history, even as it raised new questions about Europe's tenure on the world stage. One of the most popular and influential of these works was the French classical scholar Louis Le Roy's *De la Vicissitude*, published in 1576. Le Roy work surveyed the history of civilization, demonstrating the cyclical process by which particular societies attained an exceptional state of power and wealth, only to decline. Human things are not perpetual, Le Roy observed, all pass through the same cycle—beginning, progress, perfection, corruption, end. However, this was only a description of events, it offered nothing by way of explanation. To understand the cause behind the succession of world empires—why one people rose, only to fall to another—Le Roy looked to the hand of Providence. Le Roy's cyclical view of history posited the continual action of God in history as he granted temporary imperial and cultural superiority to one chosen people, now to another.<sup>21</sup> As a dynamic theory of history, the idea that events have their rise, flourishing state, and fall enabled writers during this age of exploration to account for the emergence of new information, new societies, new ways of life, when, in their estimation, there had been no changes in human affairs for hundreds, if not thousands, of years.<sup>22</sup>

Le Roy's work was quickly translated into English, and its influence on English writers is readily apparent. George Hakewill, Archdeacon of Surrey, elaborated this theory of circular

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<sup>21</sup> J.B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress* (London: McMillan and Company, 1921), 44-45.

<sup>22</sup> Weisinger, "Ideas," 428.

progress in his *Apologie* (1627). “There is,” he writes, “both in *wits* and *Arts*, as in all things besides, a kind of *circular progresse*: they have their *birth*, their *growth*, their *flourishing*, their *fading*, and within a while after their *resurrection* and *reflourishing* againe.” Hakewill declined to assign inferiority or superiority to any particular iteration of this cycle.<sup>23</sup> For Hakewill, as for LeRoy, the progression of civilization was merely a description of an observable process, it communicated nothing of the relative superiority of one civilization to another. If the theory revealed anything beyond a pure description of a somewhat mechanical process, it reflected an essential pessimism. Man was ever stuck on this eternal treadmill of time, never breaking free of the perpetual cycle.

The work of the seventeenth-century English theologian and cosmologist Thomas Burnet, whose treatises would appear in the early libraries of America’s first universities, also indicates the influence of Le Roy’s circular view of history, writing, “Not only are Empires changed, but Learning, Manners and Religion, pass from one Country to another.” The unwritten laws of the universe decreed that “every Country and Nation should take its Turn, both in good and evil Events.” Burnet added to the cyclical theory a specific geographical direction: “Learning, like the Sun, began to take its Course from the East, then turned Westward, where we have long rejoiced in its Light.” He also equivocated on the perpetual nature of the cycle, suggesting the possibility of an ultimate fulfillment in history, “Who knows whether, leaving these Seats, it may not yet...be universally diffused, and enlighten all the World with its Rays?”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Robert Foster Jones, *Ancients and Moderns: A Study of the Rise of the Scientific Movement in Seventeenth-Century England* (New York: Dover Publications, 1961), 30-31.

<sup>24</sup> Nordholt, *Myth*, 48; Thomas Burnet, *An Inquiry into the Doctrine of the Philosophers of all Nations, Concerning the Original of the World* (London, 1736), 132.

This nod to linearity reflected an emerging strand of thought in the seventeenth century. The cyclical view would not disappear, but its essential pessimism began to be eclipsed by a new optimism leading Europeans to believe they were moving towards a golden age. The secular version of this belief came to be expressed in the idea of progress. The notion of progress took the interpretation of history which regarded humanity as advancing through a series of stages, and suggested this progress moved in a definite and desirable direction and would continue until it reached a golden age. It implied that general happiness was the ultimate goal and the justification of the whole process of history. Although it paid an intellectual debt to ancient ideas revived during the Renaissance, in Le Roy's work for example, that posited a cyclical course of progress across history, it offered a course correction. Where Le Roy refrained from offering an evaluation of the progress of civilization, the steady increase in scientific knowledge in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries formed the basis for a new optimistic outlook.

Francis Bacon, writing a few decades after Le Roy, was the great articulator of the import of these advances. Whereas for much of western human history, people and nations had measured themselves against the greatness of classical antiquity, Bacon argued that in fact the present is the true measure of greatness. The age of antiquity was the youth of the world, he famously wrote. It knew little, understood little, compared with the increasing knowledge and technological advances of the present age. The modern world was now older, now more mature than antiquity. We *are* the ancients, Bacon declared. The modern age was indubitably the superior of all others: no age had ever been more glorious, no age more agreeable to live in. Human civilization was on a definite upward trajectory. The seventeenth century saw a fuller development of this idea as philosophers elaborated on its implications. To it were added a theory of the certain, indefinite progress of knowledge, and a theory that art and literature, as

expressions of society, are inextricably linked to its social development, and develop apace.<sup>25</sup>

The intellectual evolution of the seventeenth century lay the groundwork for the revolutionary speculations on the social and moral progress of man in the eighteenth century that proved formative in the creation of the United States.

Millennialism captured the Christian version of this historical optimism. Millennialism influenced the idea of progress and, because of its more orthodox roots, remained the primary expression of historical optimism for much of the early modern period, particularly during the settlement of British North America. The prophetic parts of the Bible formed the basis for Millennialism, especially the book of Revelation that itself referenced an earlier Old Testament apocalyptic tradition most substantively found in the book of Daniel. The original meaning of Millennialism was narrow and precise. Based on Revelation 20:4-6, it referred to the belief that Christ would return one day to earth where he would establish a messianic kingdom over which he would reign for a thousand years before the final judgement. Millenarians believed that the kingdom could come both soon and suddenly, that it was earthly, not merely spiritual, that it would be enjoyed by a faithful remnant, that it would utterly transform life on earth, and that it would be accomplished by supernatural means.<sup>26</sup>

While exegesis of Biblical prophecy certainly appeared before the sixteenth century, interpretations tended towards an allegorical reading of Revelation and Daniel. While theologians believed in an ultimate ending to world history with the arrival of Christ's kingdom, following the Augustinian tradition, its timing was vague and evidently held little speculative interest. During the Reformation, many Protestants hoped that their clarification and promotion

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<sup>25</sup> Bury, *Idea*, 5, 50-56, 76, 110, 124.

<sup>26</sup> Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (New York: Oxford UP, 1970), 13-14.

of the gospel might elicit Christ's return, but there was an observable hesitancy among the first generation of reformers when they approached the apocalyptic literature of the Bible. Luther questioned Revelation's authenticity, while John Calvin, verbose on every other aspect of the Biblical canon, avoided Revelation entirely.<sup>27</sup> However, the next generation of Protestants shared no such compunction. Hundreds of works regarding eschatology appeared across Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—more than ever before. Recasting the papacy as the Antichrist, the ultimate antagonist of Revelation, Protestants churned out militant apocalyptic writings. English commentators in particular pushed for a more proactive view, pioneering millenarian exegesis of the Bible and promoting social reform and church renewal as they did.<sup>28</sup>

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Two significant interpretations of Revelation arrived upon the scene immediately before the settlement of the American colonies. First, Johan Heinrichalsted, a German Reformed scholar, released a *Diatribes de Mille Annis Apocalypticis*, promoting a historicist millenarian approach to Revelation. The second major millenarian work appeared in 1627 and became a best-seller. Joseph Mede's *Clavis Apocalyptica* upended the field of biblical studies. Mede's "key" to unlocking Revelation found correlations between its symbolism and specific historical events.<sup>29</sup> Challenging an Augustinian and Reformation tradition that read the millennial period of Revelation as a symbolic, rather than literal, period that encompassed the present age, Mede argued that the text described not only a literal period of a thousand years, but indicated that the millennium had yet to arrive. This exegetical turn made possible the radical eschatological hopes

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<sup>27</sup> Douglas A. Sweeney, *Edwards the Exegete: Biblical Interpretation and Anglo-Protestant Culture on the Edge of the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2016), 163.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 163-64.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.



of the Puritans as well as later British and American evangelicals.<sup>30</sup> *Clavis* rapidly inspired similar work by a host of other scholars, most notably at Cambridge, the alma mater of the majority of the leaders of the Puritan Migration. By the late seventeenth-century, a major movement of millennial research had altered the way that many Europeans and Anglo-Americans read Revelation.<sup>31</sup>

With the rise of millennialism, the translatio motif took on a much more theological thrust. The seventeenth-century English minister Samuel Purchas, reflecting upon the concurrent discovery of the Americas and the Protestant Reformation, suggested that God had hidden the West from “the Persian, the Mogoll, the Abssine, the Chinois, the Tartarian, the Turke,” for the sake of Christendom. “Thus hath God given opportunitie by Navigation into all parts, that in the Sun-set and Evening of the World, the Sunne of righteousness might arise out of our West to Illuminate the East.”<sup>32</sup> In this twilight of human history, God had brought the gospel to the western hemisphere. And out of the West, Purchas suggested, the kingdom of God would rise and shed its light on the world. The English explorer Edward Hayes was perhaps the first to apply this idea explicitly to North America in his account of an expedition to Newfoundland in 1583. That he did not propose something strange or new was clear from the fact that he alludes to the hypothesis as to something familiar to his readers and generally accepted. He speaks of “the revolution and course of Gods word and religion, which from the beginning hath moved

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<sup>30</sup> Crawford Gibben, *Evangelical Millennialism in the Trans-Atlantic World, 1500-2000* (Hampshire UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 43.

<sup>31</sup> Sweeney, *Edwards*, 165.

<sup>32</sup> Loren Baritz, “The Idea of the West,” *American Historical Review* 66:3 (April 1961): 635.

from the East, towards, & at last unto the West, where it is like to end, unlesse the same begin again.”<sup>33</sup>

For the English who travelled to the New World, *translatio* was more than an abstract notion— it was a calling. Although self-interest certainly motivated the colonization of the New World, theological impulses were a critical and compelling part of the mix. The Virginia Company, the first of England’s colonizing outfits, bore a strong religious stamp. The propaganda distributed by the company and the sermons delivered by preachers in service to the Company steeled Britons for the task of converting the Indians of America to Christianity. The first charter King James I granted to the Virginia Company in 1606 reflects the spiritual justification for the project. The king commended the Company for their “desires for the furtherance of so noble a work,” in bringing the Christian gospel “to such a people, as yet live in darkness and miserable ignorance.” In time, James hoped, the effect of evangelism may “bring the infidels and savages...to human civility and to a settled and quiet government...”<sup>34</sup>

In the tracts promoting the Virginia Company, England’s mission to convert the American Indians took on an eschatological role beyond the moral obligation to hold a line against the antichrist in the last days. It emerged as a necessary precondition for Christ’s glorious return.<sup>35</sup> The poet and divine John Donne vocally defended the aims of the Virginia Company. Donne’s imagination was captured by the unknown world of the West to the extent that he sought, and failed, to gain appointment as secretary of the Virginia colony. Never traveling to

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<sup>33</sup> Jantz, “The Myths,” 12; Richard Hakluyt, ed., *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English*, vol. 12 (1600; repr., New York: The McMillan Company, 1905), 334.

<sup>34</sup> Beth Quitsland, “The Virginia Company, 1606-1624: Anglicanism’s Millennial Adventure,” in *Anglo-American Millennialism, From Milton to the Millerites*, ed. Richard Connors and Andrew Colin Gow (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 54.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 54-55.

America himself, he encouraged the westward migration with his words. In his many sermons in support of the Virginia Company, he emphasized the Biblical mandate to proclaim the gospel to the ends of the earth. In one, he admonished his listeners, “As Christ himselfe is Alpha, and Omega, so first, as that he is last too, so these words which he spoke in the East, belong to us, who are to glorifie him in the West.”<sup>36</sup> Another sermon, preached in 1624, reiterates this idea, and explicitly reflects the influence of the circular view of history, “...and this church, [God’s] chariot, moves in that communicable motion circularly; it began in the east, it came to us, and is passing now, shining out now in the farther west.”<sup>37</sup>

Six years later, inspired by the creation of the Massachusetts Bay Company, Donne’s friend, the poet and priest George Herbert, composed *The Church Militant*. Describing the course of religion, rising in the East and moving westward through Europe, restored by the German reformers and passing to England, Herbert identified America as its next destination. He wrote, “The course was westward, that the mighty light / As well our understanding as our sight / Religion, like a pilgrim, westward bent, / Knocking at all doors, even as she went.” In the lines that would become famous, he finished, “Religion stands on Tiptoe in our Land, / Ready to pass to the American Strand / Then shall Religion to America flee: They have their Times of Gospel ev’n as we.”<sup>38</sup>

The exodus of John Winthrop’s non-separating Puritans from England was the very image of religion on the run. However, few of these westward journeying pilgrims would have seen themselves in Herbert’s verses. None entertained the idea that their flight was permanent. It

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<sup>36</sup> Nordholt, *The Myth*, 56-58.

<sup>37</sup> Rexmond C. Cochrane, “Bishop Berkeley and the Progress of Arts and Learning: Notes on a Literary Convention,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 18 (1953): 239.

<sup>38</sup> Jantz, “The Myths,” 12.

was their intent, explicitly stated, to create a temporary refuge for the gospel across the Atlantic, preserving it there only until such a time as it could safely return to England. Winthrop's insistence on purity within the community—on their set-apartness as a city on a hill—only makes sense in light of their understanding of themselves as a faithful remnant tasked with the conservation of the true gospel. They fervently hoped to return to England and to carry out the reformation that had made its way to England under Henry VIII, had survived the religious and political turmoil of the sixteenth century, only to seemingly lose its way in the seventeenth as the established Anglican Church proved reluctant to decisively rid itself of residual Catholic elements. Hopes of returning triumphant to England died a quick death. Religious tolerance won out over religious purity in England's religious battles. In New England, the high-minded ideals of the Puritan experiment ran headlong into reality. Faced with the monumental task of establishing outposts in a foreign land, of building homes, creating towns, establishing governments, forming trade networks and businesses, their lives became increasingly rooted in the land, and the literal sense of their mission began to slip away. Over the seventeenth century, the English North American plantations settled into place as dependent colonies at the outer edges of an expanding British commercial empire.<sup>39</sup>

Although Britain had reached a level of political and religious equanimity by the turn of the eighteenth century, allowing it to increasingly turn its gaze outward, there were those who yet lodged impassioned, reform-minded critiques against the realm. One such critic was a young Anglican cleric by the name of George Berkeley. Born in Ireland in 1685, Berkeley had, by age thirty, already published the books that earned him a reputation as one of the great metaphysical

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<sup>39</sup> The main source for the early history of the Puritan odyssey is Edmund Morgan, *The Puritan Dilemma* (Boston: Little Brown, 1958).

philosophers of his era. They also garnered him the patronage and friendship of John Percival, first earl of Egmont, and an introduction to the English court through fellow countryman and colleague Jonathan Swift.<sup>40</sup> As a fellow at Trinity College, Dublin and a recently-ordained minister in the Church of Ireland, the world proverbially lay at Berkeley's feet. However, Berkeley was deeply pessimistic about Britain's moral and intellectual decline. His exposure to the intellectual world of London in 1713 left him disenchanted. That same year, Berkeley left for his requisite continental tour. Over two extended trips during the next seven years, Berkeley toured his way through European culture, keenly observing the art, literature, religion, and politics of the continent. It was not the richness and depth of European culture that impressed itself upon Berkeley as much as an oppressive sense of decadence and decline. The outlines of a critique of contemporary European civilization began to take shape. His antipathy only deepened when, upon his return to England in 1720, he found London society embroiled in financial disaster and scandal. Great Britain had just witnessed its first great stock market crash with the bursting of the South Sea Bubble. Like many of his compatriots, Berkeley had significant investments in the South Sea Company, a British joint-stock venture whose main commercial activity was the trade in slaves with South America. The collapse of the Company combined with accusations of ruinous speculation and insider trading at the highest levels of government sent shockwaves through the British economy, destroying fortunes and reputations, and giving rise to anxiety about Britain's moral health as much as its economic health.<sup>41</sup>

Berkeley was haunted by his sense that the decay he had observed in Europe had reached its diseased fingers into his native land. The crash was a symptom of a decline of morals and

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<sup>40</sup> Edwin S. Gaustad, *George Berkeley in America* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979), 19-20.

<sup>41</sup> John Daniel Wild, *George Berkeley: A Study of His Life and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1936), 258.

religion long coming. Compelled to jolt English society out its complacency, an *Essay Towards Preventing the Ruin of Great Britain* flew off of Berkeley's pen in the fall of 1721. Berkeley made explicit the link between this economic crash and the loss of national virtue in the first pages of his tract, arguing that "whether the prosperity that preceded, or the calamities that succeed, the South Sea project have more contributed to our undoing is not so clear a point as it is that we are actually undone."<sup>42</sup> The speculation involved in the South Sea Bubble reflected the elevation of private over public interest, of luxury and ease over industry. Taking a long view of history, Berkeley argued that this pattern repeated itself only to a nation's detriment, "Frugality of manners is the nourishment and strength of bodies politic. It is that by which they grow and subsist, until they are corrupted by luxury, the natural cause of their decay and ruin." Shades of the *translatio* notion worked its way into this critique. One had only to look at the examples of "the Persians, Lacedaemonians, and Romans, not to mention many later governments" to see this process repeating itself. Empires sprang up, continued a while, and then succumbed to the excesses of luxury.<sup>43</sup> For Berkeley, all signs pointed to Britain following in the same path and becoming a warning for future ages. "We have long been preparing for some great catastrophe. Vice and villainy have by degrees grown reputable among us." In his estimation, the moral order itself had been upended: "Infidels" pass for "fine gentlemen," "venal traitors" for "men of sense." People no longer respected "whatever our laws and religion repute sacred." The vaunted English modesty had quite worn off. They no longer blushed at their crimes but rather "at piety

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<sup>42</sup> George Berkeley, *The Works of George Berkeley* vol. 6, ed. A.A. Luce, and T.E. Jessop (London: T. Nelson, 1948), 69.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

and virtue.” In short, Berkeley wrote, “other nations have been wicked, but we are the first who have been wicked upon principle.”<sup>44</sup>

Berkeley’s railings found common cause with a larger movement critical of England in the early decades of the eighteenth century, particularly under the leadership of England’s first prime minister, Sir Robert Walpole. Styled as the “Country Party,” this group, made up largely of landed gentry, saw themselves as defenders of the interests of the whole nation, or “country,” in opposition to the self-interest of the corrupt so-called Court Party, London-based political elite who bought support with patronage and undermined the power of Parliament. Criticism of Walpole’s administration gave life to a new style of literature in the first several decades of the century called Augustan literature—characterized by sharp political satire, and refined and highly stylized literary output—novels, melodramas, and poetry of personal discovery. The philosopher Samuel Johnson and satirist Jonathan Swift, Berkeley’s patron and mentor, emerged as particularly influential figures in this movement. Their concerns reflected those of the oppositional Country Party. The Country Party would fade in England, but its ideology would be picked up by American patriots in the 1760s and 1770s in the buildup to revolution. Undergirding Augustan literature was a notion of poetry and prose as ideological intervention, an actual belief in the power of language to remake the world.<sup>45</sup> Berkeley’s literary output in response to the collapse of the South Sea Bubble, considered *prima facie* evidence of Walpole’s Court Party corruption, becomes particularly meaningful in that context.

Berkeley seemed fixated on the idea that the tides of history were moving against England. He mulled over the question of whether England was simply following the natural

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>45</sup> William C. Dowling, *Poetry and Ideology in Revolutionary Connecticut* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990), ix.

course of things, whether “civil states should have, like natural products, their several periods of growth, perfection, and decay,” or whether “it be an effect, as seems more probable, of human folly that, as industry produces wealth, so wealth should produce vice, and vice ruin.” Berkeley feared the day was coming when people would look on Britain with censorious pity. They would say, “This island was once inhabited by a religious, brave, sincere people” who respected “inbred worth rather than titles and appearances,” who defended liberty, loved their country, were “jealous of their own rights, and unwilling to infringe the rights of others,” cultivated learning and useful arts, were “enemies to luxury...” Such were the ancestors of the British people during their rise to greatness, Berkeley opined. They were the equals of the ancient Greeks and Roman, if not the superiors. But like all great empires before them, “they degenerated, grew servile flatterers of men in power, adopted Epicurean notions, became venal, corrupt, injurious, which drew upon them the hatred of God and man,” and climaxed in their final ruin.<sup>46</sup>

It was perhaps inevitable that Berkeley would begin to toy with the implications of such a conclusion. If the time of Britain’s decline were near, what would be the responsibility of the faithful? This essay was more than an armchair jeremiad. It was in fact Berkeley laying the groundwork for a proposal to action, perhaps further convincing himself of its necessity in the process. Writing to his friend Lord Percival in the spring of 1722, Berkeley confided, “It is now about ten months since I have determined with myself to spend the residue of my days in the island of Bermuda, where I trust in Providence I may be the mean instrument of doing good to mankind.” Berkeley hoped to organize a college in the West Indies to where “American savages” and “English youth of our plantations” could be educated and trained as missionaries and pastors

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 85.



to the colonies, “a thing (God knows!) much wanted.”<sup>47</sup> Berkeley knew little, or thought little, of the colleges already existing in North America. Instead, Berkeley proposed Bermuda as the location for his college, on maps it appeared the most equidistant to all of the English plantations in the West with the added advantages of a healthy climate and a harbor secure from marauding pirates.<sup>48</sup>

In pursuing his venture, Berkeley lobbied friends and government officials, writing *A Proposal for the Better Supplying of Churches in Our Foreign Plantations* as a way to raise funds and support. Excitement rose; financial subscriptions were taken; volunteers began to appear. By 1725, after long and complicated negotiations, Berkeley had a royal charter in hand and a pledged endowment from Parliament that would underwrite the venture.<sup>49</sup> In January of 1729, Berkeley and his small party arrived in Newport, Rhode Island. The pledged funds for the college yet forthcoming from Parliament, Berkeley hoped to speed the process along by settling himself in North America. It was a practical decision—Newport could serve as the base for the eventual supplying of Bermuda. But it was also for appearance’s sake—a demonstration of his commitment to the idea despite the bureaucratic delays. Berkeley’s small entourage included his wife Anne, a Dr. Thomas Moffat, slated to be a professor of medicine in the college, and Moffat’s uncle, the artist John Smibert, who had signed on to the Bermuda scheme to teach painting and architecture at the proposed college.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> George Berkeley to John Percival, March 4, 1722/23, in *The Correspondence of George Berkeley*, ed. Marc A. Hight (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012), 185-187.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Scott Breuninger, “Planting an Asylum for Religion: Berkeley’s Bermuda Scheme and the Transmission of Virtue in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World,” *Journal of Religious History* 34:4 (December 2010): 415.

<sup>50</sup> Benjamin Rand, *Berkeley’s American Sojourn* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1932), 62.

Berkeley's American sojourn lasted only thirty-three months, yet he left an indelible mark upon the American landscape. Berkeley enjoyed the status of a minor celebrity upon his arrival in America, as his philosophical treatises were already well-known in the colonies. Berkeley wrote home happily of the "many unexpected as well as undeserved honours" he received when his ship docked.<sup>51</sup> The farm he purchased along the coast outside of Newport quickly became a popular destination for provincial scholars. Visitors crowded in to bask in the brilliant philosopher's glow, sometimes staying for days. A young tutor from Yale College, Samuel Johnson, was a frequent guest and helped to forge a lasting connection between Berkeley and Yale.<sup>52</sup> Berkeley's presence in Newport inspired a local flourishing of learning and civil discourse. Prominent men of Newport rallied together in 1730 to create a "Society for the promotion of Knowledge and Virtue, by free conversation," in the style of Franklin's Junto, a club for intellectual and social improvement founded in Philadelphia two years earlier.

Berkeley preached regularly at Trinity Church in Newport, sometimes in the "adjacent parts of the continent."<sup>53</sup> He would often walk down to the sea, where he sat and wrote in the niche of a large boulder named Hanging Rock, a seat that locals remembered well into the nineteenth century as "Bishop Berkeley's Chair."<sup>54</sup> But the waiting wore upon Berkeley. "We have passed the winter in a profound solitude on my farm in this island," he wrote to Percival in March of 1730, "I wait here with all the anxiety that attends suspense till I know what I can

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<sup>51</sup> George Berkeley to John Percival, February 7, 1727/8, in Hight, *The Correspondence*, 264-265.

<sup>52</sup> A painting of Berkeley and the members of his expedition, *Bermuda Group* (1728), completed by John Smibert just before they set sail for America, was purchased by Yale College President Timothy Dwight in 1800 and hangs in the Yale gallery. Mrs. John King Van Rensselaer, *Newport: Our Social Capital* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1905), 285.

<sup>53</sup> George Berkeley to John Percival August, 30 1729, in *The Correspondence*, 285-287.

<sup>54</sup> Van Rensselaer, *Newport*, 285.

depend upon or what curse I am to take...I see nothing done towards payment of the money. All I can do is to continue to recommend it to those who are most likely...to push the matter.”<sup>55</sup>

With Berkeley absent from England, interest in his Bermuda college had waned. When it became clear that the endowment would never materialize, Berkeley dissolved his American estate, giving the land and his library of nearly a thousand books to Yale College, and returned to London in 1731. A second shipment of books arrived at Yale, and another shipment to Harvard in 1733.

Almost fifteen years later, Berkeley’s concern for the intellectual and spiritual improvement of the New World was still evident. Using the last of the contributions for the failed Bermuda experiment, he instructed his agent to purchase “the most approved writings of the divines of the Church of England, to which I would [add] the Earl of Clarendon’s History of the Civil Wars,” to be sent to Harvard, along with some of his own Greek and Latin volumes, “which I found they wanted.” Berkeley hoped the books would prove “a proper means to inform their judgment and dispose them to think better of our church.”<sup>56</sup>

Although Berkeley’s own institutional dreams had come to nothing, he was critically instrumental in furthering others’. Having spent nearly a decade conceptualizing the Bermuda college, Berkeley was a source of wisdom for Samuel Johnson as he contemplated creating an Anglican college in New York.<sup>57</sup> A deep admirer of Berkeley, Johnson enthusiastically circulated Berkeley’s advice among other promoters of higher education in the colonies. In a

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<sup>55</sup> George Berkeley to John Percival, March, 29 1730, in *The Correspondence*, 320-21.

<sup>56</sup> George Berkeley to Samuel Johnson, May 31, 1733 in *The Correspondence*, 352-54; George Berkeley to Benjamin Wadsworth, May 31, 1733 in *The Correspondence*, 354; George Berkeley to Bearcroft, Before April, 10 1747, in *The Correspondence*, 531-32. George Berkeley to Bearcroft, After April 1747, in *The Correspondence*, 533-34.

<sup>57</sup> George Berkeley to Samuel Johnson, August 23, 1749, in *The Correspondence*, 540-42.

letter to Berkeley in 1750, Johnson described separate plans underway for an academy in Philadelphia. “I have made use of your Lordship’s name and suggestions towards laying a good foundation for learning there,” Johnson wrote.<sup>58</sup> Benjamin Franklin was the recipient of these suggestions.<sup>59</sup> Johnson would become the foremost proponent of Berkeleyan philosophy in the colonies. He used it as the basis for the curriculum for his New York college, originally chartered as King’s College (1754), later Columbia University. Franklin’s academy eventually became the University of Pennsylvania.

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The intellectual milieu of the eighteenth-century American world that Berkeley briefly called home had many European features, as several generations of British sojourners had transported continental ideas across the Atlantic with them. As the colonies became more permanent, both providential history and the specific role of America in this history gained increasing attention. The first Americans to explore the connections between biblical prophecy and their own times were transplanted English men and women. The writings of the Protestant Reformation, with literally hundreds of volumes of prophecy to draw upon, influenced their views as prophecy became inextricably woven into the fabric of early colonial thinking, sermonizing, and writing. It defied denominational and creedal lines. Presbyterian, Congregationalist, Baptist, Anglican, all appealed to a common understanding of basic prophetic interpretation. The five-kingdoms prophecy in the book of Daniel, one of the historical foundational texts of the *translatio* motif, figured particularly prominently in colonial eschatological ruminations. The identity of the fifth and final kingdom was a regular source of

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<sup>58</sup> Samuel Johnson to George Berkeley, September 10, 1750, in *The Correspondence*, 540-42.

<sup>59</sup> Gaustad, *George Berkeley*, 182.

speculation and debate. But as to its timing, American expositors of Daniel generally affirmed a belief that they were living in the last days of the fourth empire, on the doorstep of Christ's final kingdom.<sup>60</sup>

The earliest American systematic commentaries on the book of Daniel began appearing in the 1640s. Thomas Parker's commentary on Daniel, *The Visions and Prophecies of Daniel Expounded: Wherein the Mistakes of Former Interpreters are Modestly Discovered* first appeared in 1646. Parker, an Oxford-educated Puritan minister, pioneering in the mission fields of Massachusetts, had kept abreast of exegetical controversies ongoing in England. Parker affirmed the standard interpretation of the first four kingdoms: Babylon, Assyria, Greece, Rome. As for the fifth kingdom, the stone cut out the mountain that would destroy the statue, "The stone is the kingdom of the Saints [which] shall be set up to destroy all adverse kingdoms in the world...Set up without hands, or without the help of man, by the hand alone of God Almighty." This had begun "anno 1160, in the Waldenses, and continue so unto this day." Many seventeenth-century Protestant scholars considered the Waldensians to be early forerunners of the Protestant Reformation. In other words, then, the kingdom of saints was to be a kingdom of Protestants who would annihilate the papacy, the Kingdom of Rome. Once this was accomplished, this fifth kingdom would enter as "the supreme kingdom; filling all the earth, because all dominion shall be subject unto it."<sup>61</sup>

William Aspinwall, a prominent Puritan who accompanied John Winthrop in the first migration of 1630, became an early and prominent disseminator of Daniel's prophecy. Aspinwall

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<sup>60</sup> LeRoy Edwin Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers: The Historical Development of Prophetic Interpretation* (Washington, D.C.: Review & Herald, 1954), 22-23.

<sup>61</sup> Thomas Parker, *The Visions and Prophecies of Daniel Expounded: Wherein the Mistakes of Former Interpreters are Modestly Discovered* (1646), 3-4, 7, 8.

was a member of group of nonconformists who adopted the name Fifth Monarchists. They spanned the Atlantic Ocean, with adherents in Britain and the North American colonies. This group formed itself around a literal geopolitical rendering of the Daniel prophecy. In 1653, Aspinwall published *A Brief Description of the Fifth Monarchy, or Kingdome that shortly is to come into the World*, detailing the theories behind the movement. Interpreting the Daniel prophecy in light of recent political developments, Aspinwall explained how the four kingdoms of Daniel—Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome—had culminated in the recent short-lived reign of King Charles I, “a fierce and arrogant tyrant and persecutor of the saints, whose dominion continued till...Parliament...slew the Beast, and utterly overthrew his dominion.” The fifth kingdom prophesied in Daniel 2 was soon to follow, certainly within their lifetimes, Aspinwall and his compatriots assumed. This fifth monarchy would be the universal millennial kingdom of Christ, peopled by the Fifth Monarchists and others who had resisted Roman tyranny. Although this was a spiritual kingdom with Christ as head, Aspinwall insisted that this kingdom would have a physical, earthly presence, although he hesitated to make any claims to its particular geographic location.<sup>62</sup>

In his 1672 Artillery-Election day sermon, *The Unconquerable, All-Conquering and more-than-Conquering Souldier*, Urian Oakes, colonial poet, Congregational clergyman, and Harvard president, closed his homily with a word to the military men in his Boston audience. “I am no friend of war,” he told them. He longed for the day when war and bloodshed would cease. And in a clear allusion to the fourth kingdom of Daniel, opined, “When will this Iron-Age expire and that glorious morn appear...wherein the nations shall beat their swords into ploughshares,

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<sup>62</sup> William Aspinwall, *A Brief Description of the Fifth Monarchy, or Kingdome that shortly is to come into the World*, (1653), 2-3, 5.

and their swords into pruning hooks.”<sup>63</sup> Oakes reflected the consistent conviction of seventeenth-century American theological commentators that they were living in the last days of the fourth kingdom, expectantly awaiting the millennial, universal kingdom of Christ. Similarly, Nicholas Noyes, a Harvard graduate, colleague of Cotton Mather, and minister at Salem during the witchcraft trials, preached in 1702, “Nebuchadnezzar’s image standeth upon his last legs...It is probable delay will not be much longer.” Noyes’ next words are particularly striking in their allusion to the *translatio* idea, “I know no reason to conclude this continent shall not partake of the goodness of God in the latter days; nor why the Sun of Righteousness may not go round the Earth as the Sun in the firmament doth go round Heaven.”<sup>64</sup>

Millennial speculation carried on into the eighteenth century, but as it did, it underwent a noticeable shift. As colonial society became a more entrenched and distinctive entity apart from Britain, it also became a more self-conscious one. As the British empire grew in the early decades of the eighteenth century, Americans became increasingly aware of their dependent and peripheral position within the empire. Although the colonies had a great deal of latitude, they were nonetheless economic and imperial demands that curtailed colonial independence. Britain aggressively intruded itself in the colonial world of eighteenth-century America through the small but powerful presence of crown officials and the flow of consumer goods into the American marketplace. Likewise, religious celebrities like George Whitefield, and Berkeley himself, no less the commercial press that in endless and compelling ways depicted the mother country as the most polite, most cosmopolitan, most urbane society the world had ever seen

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<sup>63</sup> Urian Oakes, *The Unconquerable, All-Conquering and more-than-Conquering Souldier*, (Cambridge, MA, 1672), 37.

<sup>64</sup> Nicholas Noyes, *New-England’s Duty and Interest to be an Habitation of Justice and Mountain of Holiness* (1702), 68-69.

influenced the colonists.<sup>65</sup> Americans became sensitive to how they were viewed by the English; sensitive to charges that they were less civilized than members of the metropole. They began to question whether being colonial inherently meant being regarded as inferior.<sup>66</sup>

American writing of the first half of the eighteenth century reflected this insecurity and deep-seated need for justification. While this impulse to define the exact role of one's country and its citizens against the wider world is not unusual in the history of civilization, Americans took it up with exceptional vigor.<sup>67</sup> In the realm of prophetic speculation, a growing chorus of voices contended that not only was the millennial kingdom imminent, its launching place would be the American colonies. The colonial diarist Samuel Sewall was the foremost proponent of the idea. He wrote the most scholarly exegesis of millennialism of his era and the best-known statement on the millennium in the early eighteenth century, *Phaenomena Quadam Apocalyptica* (1697/1727).<sup>68</sup> Sewall meticulously combed through theological texts, concluding that the millennium would begin in America. "Of all the parts of the world, which...entitle themselves to the Government of Christ, America's plea, in my opinion, is the strongest."<sup>69</sup> Believing that America stood a good chance of being made "the Seat of the Divine Metropolis," Sewall saw parallels between the signs of Christ's first coming and the signs of his second coming in America. Just as the wise men had come from the East to announce Christ's birth, so too had the founders of New England come from the East, only this time to announce Christ's second coming. Like the star that hung over Bethlehem guiding pilgrims to Christ's manger, the Puritan

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<sup>65</sup> T.H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution* (New York: Oxford UP, 2004), 82.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>67</sup> William David Andrews, "The Translatio Studii as a Theme in Eighteenth-Century American Writing," (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1971), 47.

<sup>68</sup> David E. Smith, "Millenarian Scholarship in America," *American Quarterly* 17:3 (Autumn 1965): 539-40; Andrews, "The Translatio," 63-65.

<sup>69</sup> Samuel Sewall, *Phaenomena Quadeam Apocalyptica* (Boston, 1697), 3.



fathers were “as the Morning Star, giving certain Intelligence that the Sun of Righteousness will quickly rise and Shine with Illustrious Grace and Favour, upon this despised Hemisphere...”<sup>70</sup>

This prophecy bears the clear marks of colonial defensiveness in its claim that Christ would shed his grace and favor over “this despised Hemisphere.” Sewall’s book was very much a self-justifying American text, written in response to Joseph Mede’s contention in *Clavis Apocalyptica* that the New World would in fact be the location of Hell.<sup>71</sup>

Sewall’s work directly inspired Cotton Mather. A number of Mather’s later works focused upon the idea that the millennial kingdom would commence on American soil. His 1710 sermon, *Theopolis Americana*, begins with a dedication to Sewall, crediting him with first introducing him to the idea. In *Theopolis*, Mather argued that America had a pivotal role to play in the millennial kingdom. Citing prophesies from the Psalms, (“I will give you the uttermost parts of the earth for your possession”), and Malachi, (“From the rising of the sun to its setting, my name shall be great among the Gentiles”), Mather claimed that America was clearly legible in these promises.<sup>72</sup> This was not, however, nascent American exceptionalism. When Mather projected out a role for America in the millennial kingdom, he saw it within the greater context of a universal kingdom. America had a role to play, but it was not an exclusive one. Rather, Mather’s emphasis is on the *inclusive* position of America in Christ’s millennial kingdom. Mather evinced this idea in his interpretation of the Daniel prophecy where he underscored that Christ’s kingdom would fill the whole earth, and would broadly bless “those Countries, which belong to the Ten Kingdoms [the “ten toes” from the Nebuchadnezzar statue] of the Roman

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., n.p.

<sup>71</sup> Reiner Smolinski, *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory: The Millennial Impulse in Early American Literature* (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall-Hunt Publishing, 1998), 2.

<sup>72</sup> Cotton Mather, *Theopolis Americana* (Boston, 1710) n.p., 44.

Empire.” The “countries” of the Americas, “do belong to some of those Kingdoms, are become a considerable part of their Dominion. Therefore, it was “most certain” that Christ’s kingdom “will some of it stand in these Countries, as well as in the European.<sup>73</sup> In the context of the defensive posture of eighteenth-century colonials, Mather did not so much assert the exceptionalism of America vis à vis Europe but rather the equality of America with Europe.

The bulk of Mather’s sermon was a classic New England jeremiad: theologically affirming that God is sovereign and merciful and the giver of all things and socially impelling an earnest effort on the part of the community to conform to the teaching of God’s Word before it was too late.<sup>74</sup> Going on at length, Mather warned his readers against rapacious and fraudulent behavior in the marketplace, against mistreatment of slaves and Indians, against drunkenness, lest judgment fall on New England. “If *Judgement* and *Truth* do not reign in the marketplace,” he wrote, “the Holy Son of God, will not Favour it, or *Pardon* it!...But the Lord calls upon us: *Get thee up!* Do thy part.”<sup>75</sup> There is little sense of inexorability here. Under the canopy of covenant that Mather’s New England audience would well understand, Mather suggested that America’s millennial future was as much dependent upon God as it was contingent upon human acts of faithfulness. He developed the same theme in *The City of Refuge* (1716) and *India Christiana* (1721).<sup>76</sup> Mather’s promotion of this idea in turn inspired Joseph Morgan, whose allegorical tale, *The Kingdom of Basaruah*, describes the possibility of a millennial paradise in the North American wilderness.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 4

<sup>74</sup> Harry Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986), 62-3.

<sup>75</sup> Mather, *Theopolis*, 6-7.

<sup>76</sup> Smith, “Millenarian,” 540.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

Cotton Mather's theological heir Jonathan Edwards carried on the legacy of millennialism to the next generation, although it is here that the theory waivered. For a brief moment in mid-eighteenth-century America, the millennial prophecies seemed more imminent than ever. And it was ultimately the disappointment of this mid-century millennial expectation that caused Edwards and later eighteenth-century colonial theologians to pull back on explicit claims to an American setting of the millennium. Edwards stood in a long line of Christian intellectuals, including Augustine and Mather, who conceived of history first and foremost in relation to the gradual unfolding of God's eternal plan for the redemption of the world. Most colonial Christians took the outlines of this view of history for granted. Christians held that history was progressive, full of purpose and direction. Edwards expanded this scheme most famously and fully in his sermon series on the history of redemption.<sup>78</sup> Edwards left little doubt about the sovereignty of God over history and its course. What he wrote and what he preached to his congregation repeatedly circled the sense of a God fully in control of history. Edwards encouraged his congregation to trust in what the Bible says of history and exhorted them to take a long view of God's promise to redeem his chosen people. Edwards often used the promise of brighter days to come—in the millennium and beyond—to bolster the faith of his congregation. His interpretation of end times as revealed in the Bible encouraged trust in God's control over the progress of redemption and, thus, the overall advance of history.<sup>79</sup>

When a spiritual revival broke out in Edwards' Northampton, Massachusetts congregation in 1733, Edwards viewed it in the framework of this millennial hope, wondering whether it was a sign that God was doing a special work in the colonies to bring about the

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<sup>78</sup> Sweeney, *Edwards*, 139.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

millennium. Edwards speculated that it could be the spark that would ignite a spiritual wildfire that would appear in the last days, as prophecy foretold.<sup>80</sup> Edwards told his congregation in 1741, “There is now an outpouring of the Spirit of God begun,” which might comprise “the beginning of that outpouring of the Spirit that is to introduce the Glorious times of the Church.”<sup>81</sup> As the revival spread beyond Massachusetts with the arrival of evangelist George Whitefield in the colonies in 1739, to the Middle Colonies by the 1740s, and to Virginia in the 1750s, many colonial evangelicals were convinced that the wave of revival conversions was specific evidence that God had chosen America for the setting of a special work he was doing in preparation for the millennium. In *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England* (1743), Edwards suggested to his congregation that “there are several things that seem to me to argue, that the sun of righteousness, the sun of the new heavens and new earth...shall rise in the west, contrary to the course of things in the old heavens and earth.” Even more confidently, Edwards asserted that the circumstances of the settling of New England, as a refuge for the gospel, made it the most likely location for the “glorious work of God,” if it should appear in any part of America. If this was so, the revival underway in New England was the “beginning or forerunner of something vastly great.”<sup>82</sup> But as the flames of revival began to flicker and the millennium had yet to appear, ministers of the establishment church criticized Edwards for making such a grandiose prediction. Edwards eventually clarified his views, conjecturing that the millennium itself would likely come about the year 2000 from the land of Judah.<sup>83</sup> Perhaps the

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<sup>80</sup> Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 100.

<sup>81</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* vol. 22, ed. Harry S. Stout, Nathan O. Hatch, and Kyle P. Farley (New Haven: Yale UP, 2003), 345.

<sup>82</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* vol. 4, ed. C.C. Goen (New Haven: Yale UP, 2009), 353-58.

<sup>83</sup> Sweeney, *Edwards*, 149.

revivals had only been a “gospel spring,” thawing the soil in preparation for seeds to be planted that would bear fruit some 250 years into the future. Edwards, like Mather, envisioned a role for America in the end times. This nevertheless falls short of any notion that America was to be the principal and decisive actor.<sup>84</sup>

The Awakening reflected a supernaturalist interpretation of history that saw events as the unfolding revelation of divine purpose—the work of redemption, as Jonathan Edwards phrased it—a work which would be completed with the second coming of Christ and the establishment of his millennial kingdom.<sup>85</sup> But an alternative interpretation of past and future began to make waves in American intellectual life, largely among leaders of the establishment church in reaction to the Awakening. The idea of progress, as it appeared in America, was inextricably tied to the millennial hope, even as it reflected a secularized version of it. In many ways, it ran parallel to the Christian formulation of the work of redemption, with somewhat different characters and emphases, but with the same essential plot: Mankind began in a low and savage state and was steadily progressing towards perfection, a golden age of humanity.<sup>86</sup>

A central issue arising out of the Great Awakening concerned the method of God’s governance of the world. At the heart of the debate was the question of whether God guided the process of history by means of special providence and supernatural inspiration, or whether he achieved his ends through natural law as revealed through reason, experience, and observation. The revivalists held the former view and their opponents the latter. The millennial hope itself was not the source of conflict, as both sides held to it as well as the belief that Christ would

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<sup>84</sup> Tuveson, *Redeemer*, 101.

<sup>85</sup> Stow Persons, “The Cyclical Theory of History in Eighteenth-Century America,” *American Quarterly* 6:2 (Summer 1954): 148-49.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

ultimately return to judge the world. The work of the anti-revivalists did not reject the millennial hope, but rather reformulated it in such a way that the expectation of the second coming eventually become a radically different concept, measuring progress towards the millennium in moral terms.<sup>87</sup> A secular version of Mather's *Magnalia*, William Douglass's *A Summary, Historical and Political, of the First Planting, Progressive Improvements and Present State of the British Settlements in North America*, published in Boston in 1749, demonstrates this shift. *A Summary* traced the founding of the colonies with emphasis on these so-called "progressive improvements." Indeed, Douglass itemized these improvements itemized in exhausting, if not exhaustive, detail. He took the reader through the development of education, government, commerce, industries in the colonies. The emphasis, as it became clear in two volumes, was on secular progress. His philosophy comes into focus in the brief section, "The Ecclesiastical or Religious Constitution of the British Colonies in North-America." He wrote, "The Differences in Religion generally amount only to this, *viz.* Different people worshipping the same God in different Modes," he continued, "There is with all sober-minded Men only one general Religion. The Practice Of True and Solid Virtue."<sup>88</sup> This is a striking statement held up against a page from Sewall, Mather or Edwards. Religion's value was as an ethical force producing a "good" society. There is no vision here of a providentially-ordained past, or future, but rather one of moral transcendence. This was a view influenced by "true solid Philosophy and natural History" rather than "pedantick metaphysical jargon."<sup>89</sup> This was secular progress on a moral trajectory.

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>88</sup> William Douglass, *A Summary, Historical and Political, of the First Planting, Progressive Improvements and Present State of the British Settlements in North America* Vol. 1 (1749) 224-225, n.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 231.

The theory of history which began to emerge from this line of thought was really a reversion to the older cyclical model of history. Repudiating a divine-interventionist view of history, the new (old) view that came into vogue among anti-revivalists found the source of history's dynamism in the operation of the universal moral law, the effect of which upon history was an endless cyclical movement. Societies and nations rise and fall in endless sequence in relation to their respect or disregard for those universal moral laws ordained of God and graven upon men's consciences for their governance and happiness. The decline and fall of empires represented a divine judgement upon the corruption of men.<sup>90</sup> Proponents dusted off the writers of classical antiquity who hinted at this theme, especially the historians and moralists, and took up the more recent English literature of the late seventeenth century. The engagement with English works linked them closer to some of the intellectual trends in eighteenth-century Europe, such as the scientific revolution and the world of the Enlightenment.<sup>91</sup> Reading Isaac Newton, or encountering him through the American press in pamphlets like Isaac Greenwood's *An Experiment Course of Mechanical Philosophy* published in Boston in 1726, that broke Newton down into thirteen digestible pages, colonials became familiar with the idea of universal natural laws as an operating principle behind history. The embrace of this theory can also be filtered through the defensive posture of eighteenth-century colonists, as they rejected a rustic, native, providential millennial tradition in favor of a progressive European one. The cyclical theory appealed powerfully to a reading public coming to pride itself upon its cosmopolitanism. The

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<sup>90</sup> Persons, "Cyclical," 153.

<sup>91</sup> Ned C. Landsman, *From Colonials to Provincials: American Thought and Culture 1680-1760* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2000), 5.

cyclical theory of history was to become for a brief period one of the distinctive historical conceptions of the dominant social group in America.<sup>92</sup>

All of these ideas would have familiarized colonial Americans with the animating concepts underpinning the classic *translatio* formulation, but many would have been familiar with the *translatio* motif itself through its most famous seventeenth-century expression, George Herbert's poem, "The Church Militant." Herbert was probably the most widely read English poet in colonial America, and most allusions to him that appeared in print in New England were to the couplet describing religion on tiptoe, "Ready to pass to the American strand."<sup>93</sup> The seventeenth-century New England divine Increase Mather owned an early edition of Herbert's collection of poetry, *The Temple*, in which "The Church Militant" appears. Perhaps Mather's son Cotton read this edition and paused at the preface where the couplet was quoted and the following editorial comment appended, "I pray God [Herbert] may prove a true prophet for *poor America*...Ride on, *Most Mighty Jesu*, because of the words of truth. Thy Gospel is a light big enough for them and us..."<sup>94</sup> However Cotton Mather encountered the poem, it made its way into his thinking. In the opening of Mather's epic history of the settlement of New England, *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702), Mather used Herbert's lines as the essential framing device for his narrative. Alluding to Herbert's poem in the very first sentence of *Magnalia*, "I write *the Wonders* of the Christian

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<sup>92</sup> Persons, "Cyclical," 152.

<sup>93</sup> Philip Pain, *Daily Meditations* (1668), ed. Leon Howard (San Marino, CA: Henry F. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, 1936), 9.

<sup>94</sup> Abram E. Cutler, "Poetical Prognostics," *New England Historic and Genealogic Register* 27 (1873): 346; George Herbert, Izzak Walton, and Barnabas Oley, *The Works of George Herbert*, vol. 1 (London: Pickering, 1848), 93-94.



Religion, flying from the Depravations of *Europe*, to the *American Strand*,” Mather implicitly suggested that the early history of America could be seen as fulfillment of this “prophecy.”<sup>95</sup>

By the early decades of the eighteenth century, the translatio motif appeared frequently. Developments in colonial society seemed to give legitimacy to the idea that arts and learning had crossed the Atlantic to make their home in the New World. As Benjamin Franklin observed in the early 1740s, “The first Drudgery of Settling new Colonies...is now pretty well over,” and in every colony there were now many who “afford Leisure to cultivate the finer Arts, and improve the common stock of Knowledge.” Franklin’s Library Company, founded in 1731, and the scholarly society he founded in 1742 that became the American Philosophical Society attest to this new drive to cultivate and celebrate cultural achievement in the colonies. Even if merely aspirational, colonial writers began to evince greater confidence that they could lay claim to the translatio tradition without apology.

The translatio theme also figured prominently in the work of native poets published in colonial newspapers and magazines. The first such instance dates to the July 3, 1729 publication of the anonymous “Let Philadelphia’s generous Sons excuse” in the *American Weekly Mercury*. The poet spoke in the voice of “distant Muse,” who “neglected, and whose harp unstrung,” has been charmed by the genius, wit, and polished prose of the citizens of Philadelphia to follow the goddess of civilization across the Atlantic. Fleeing impending wars and the dissolution that stalks Europe, civilization “sought Arcadia’s Plains,” and now “the Arts can flourish on Columbus Shore.” Emphasizing an Edenic image of America, the poet proclaimed that America would “Out-rival Ancient Greece Or Rome, or Britain itself, in the arts of Peace.” The poet concluded

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<sup>95</sup> J.A. Leo Lemay, *Men of Letters in Colonial Maryland* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1972) 132-33, n.; Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702; repr., Hartford: Silas Andrus & Son, 1853) 1.

with the prediction that before “Time has measured out an hundred years, Westward from Britain shall an Athens rise,” invoking the idea of the westward course of empire. The dependent relationship between the colonies and mother country would be reversed as the poet projected a future in which Europeans looked to America as the fount of wisdom and learning.<sup>96</sup>

In Titan Leed’s *American Almanac of 1730*, the best-known almanac in the middle colonies, another anonymous poem expressing confident expectation in Philadelphia’s preeminence appeared. Just as in the previous poem, the poet carried on the long tradition of measuring cultural attainment against that of ancient classical societies. But at its very best, America’s greatness would only be a recapitulation of Greece’s. “Thy hopeful youth in emulation rise; / Who, if the wishing muse inspired does sing, / Shall liberal arts to such perfection bring, / Europe shall mourn her ancient fame decline, / And Philadelphia be the Athens of mankind.”<sup>97</sup> It was a supremely prototypical *translatio* statement.

A similar piece, “No More a willing Muse her Aid bestow,” appeared in April of 1731 in Benjamin Franklin’s *Pennsylvania Gazette*. Here, the poet carefully balanced esteem for Britain with praise for her offspring, Pennsylvania. The poet prevailed upon the genetic relationship to ameliorate resentment England might feel at her colony surpassing her in glory. “Let this new Land employ your utmost Care, / Let her the choicest of your blessings share, / And in *Columbus* World the brightest Laurel wear.” In florid verse, the poet lavished praise upon Pennsylvania’s crystal streams and flowery vales. At the poem’s crescendo, Pennsylvania is described as “shin[ing] Bright as Bermudas.” In the closing lines of the poem, the poet alluded to the

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<sup>96</sup> “We have received the following Lines,” *American Weekly Mercury* (Philadelphia PA) 3 July 1729: 3.

<sup>97</sup> Quoted in *The Historical Magazine*, Vol. IV (New York: Charles B. Richardson & Co., 1860), 344.

translatio theme and ancient heliotropic imagery. In this version, however, the poet was much more explicit about the implications of empire's movement for those it leaves in its wake and more mythic about empire's destination. He wrote, "Or say that Time brings on the distant Day, / When present Empires like the past decay, / And even Europe's Glory melts away, / Tho' far, far West, beneath the setting Sun Shall Heroes rise, and mighty Deeds be done..."<sup>98</sup>

The emphasis on the transference of arts and letters reflects the fixation that developed among colonial Americans of the eighteenth century with ideas of civility and sociability. While the anonymous author of the poem sought to assure Britain against the rising glory of America, the poet spoke with bravado. Colonials were painfully aware of how they measured up against citizens of the metropole. Belles lettres became an important avenue through which Americans sought to prove themselves as urbane, sophisticated people.<sup>99</sup> Poems that argued that the Muse had fled Europe to land in America thus stood as the *prima facie* evidence of that assertion.

Assessments of population growth in the colonies in the first half of the eighteenth century also frequently prompted references to the translatio idea. The *Gentleman's Magazine*, a London publication with wide readership in America, ran an article in its August 1753 edition comparing the cities of Philadelphia, Boston, and New York. Noting the flourishing of "the Arts and Sciences...and its trade in general," and the swelling number of dwelling houses in the three cities, the writer was reminded of a poem he had read some twenty-five years previously. Only slightly altering the original words, the writer quoted, "Rome shall lament her ancient Fame

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<sup>98</sup> "To the Publisher of the Gazette," *Pennsylvania Gazette* (Philadelphia PA) 8 April 1731: 3-4.

<sup>99</sup> David S. Shields, *Civil Tongues and Polite Letters in British America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 12.

declin'd. / And *Philadelphia* be the *Athens* of mankind." An asterisk directed readers to a footnote: "An academy is lately established [in Philadelphia], and is in a flourishing state."<sup>100</sup>

The creation of institutions of higher learning evidently stood as proof of America's rising glory. The academy in question was the Academy of Philadelphia (later, University of Pennsylvania), recently founded by Benjamin Franklin with advice from Bishop Berkeley. The founding of Yale College earlier in the eighteenth century had similarly been recognized as a sign of westward progress. It proved to Jeremiah Dummer, an agent for the college, that "religion & polite learning have bin travelling westward ever since their first appearance in the World." It led him to hope that the arts "won't rest 'till they have fixt their chief Residence in Our part of the World." And in 1744 Ben Franklin himself found recourse in the idea with the publication of an American edition of Cicero's *Cato Major*. As the "first Translation of a Classic in this Western World," Franklin hoped it was a portend of things to come: "a happy Omen, that Philadelphia shall become the Seat of the American Muses."<sup>101</sup>

And of course, there was that intriguing tale in the *Boston News-Letter* of 1730. The evocative story of a stone inscribed by a people long-since dead reflected a range of American folk traditions. Tales of pre-Columbus explorers of America leaving a record of their visit by carving a message into a rock overlapped with an imagined memory of the Pilgrim fathers setting foot on Plymouth rock in 1620. A third source was a current subject of puzzlement—Indian petroglyphs on Dighton Rock at Taunton in Massachusetts. Cotton Mather wrote about it. And in 1730, the year of the letter, Berkeley visited the rock along with his artist friend John

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<sup>100</sup> "A Comparative View of Philadelphia, Boston and New-York; in a Letter to a Friend," *Gentleman's Magazine* August 1753: 372-73.

<sup>101</sup> Kenneth Silverman, *A Cultural History of the American Revolution* (New York: T.Y. Crowell, 1976) 10.

Smibert.<sup>102</sup> The anonymous author of the letter must have been aware of the currency of these traditions, and was familiar enough with the translatio motif that a couplet with the imprimatur of authenticity rolled off his pen with ease. The lines passed into oral tradition, turning up several times in the eighteenth century before we see them in Adam's 1807 letter.<sup>103</sup>

They struck the artist John Smibert, lately of the Bermuda experiment, who scribbled them down beneath another quote in the back of his notebook. "Let lawless power in the east remain and never Cross the wide Atlantick main Here flourish learning trade & wealth increase The happy fruits of liberty and peace."<sup>104</sup> The entries in Smibert's notebook date no later than 1746, but the pairing of the two verses suggest a shift in the mood of mid-eighteenth century America. The words do not speak of rebellion, or independence, or anything from which we could draw a direct line to the events of 1776. But they do indicate a mounting tension with the mother country. There is just the faintest hint of militancy in the words and in the choice to record them in the back of a notebook that otherwise contained quotidian records of portraits commissioned and sold.<sup>105</sup>

It is likely that as Smibert jotted these lines down, they reminded him of another set of verses by his friend George Berkeley. Written on the cusp of the Bermuda adventure, *Verses on the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America* circulated in manuscript form after 1726, and members of Berkeley's Bermuda group would certainly have read it.<sup>106</sup> The verses did not

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<sup>102</sup> J.A. Leo Lemay, ed., *An Early American Reader* (Washington D.C.: United States Information Agency, 1988), 39.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>104</sup> John Smibert, et al., *The Notebook of John Smibert* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1969), 102.

<sup>105</sup> David Evans, "The Provenance of the Notebook," in *The Notebook of John Smibert*, 8.

<sup>106</sup> Margaretta Lovell, *Art in a Season of Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 305.

reach a public audience until their publication in Berkeley's *Miscellany* (1752). But once published, they dropped like a bomb upon American colonial society. Reprinted in its entirety in virtually every large colonial newspaper and many books and magazines at some point in the decades immediately preceding the revolution, it would become the best-known statement of the *translatio imperii* in America:

*Verses On the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America.*

The Muse, disgusted at an Age and Clime,  
Barren of every glorious Theme,  
In distant Lands now waits a better Time,  
Producing subjects worthy Fame:

In happy Climes, where from the genial Sun  
And virgin Earth such Scenes ensue,  
The Force of Art by Nature seems outdone,  
And fancied Beauties by the true:

There shall be sung another golden Age,  
The rise of Empire and of Arts,  
The Good and Great inspiring epic Rage,  
The wisest Heads and noblest Hearts.

Not such as Europe breeds in her decay;  
Such as she bred when fresh and young,  
When heav'nly Flame did animate her Clay,  
By future Poets shall be sung.

Westward the Course of Empire takes its Way;  
The four first Acts already past,  
A fifth shall close the Drama with the Day;  
Time's noblest Offspring is the last.<sup>107</sup>

Composed in those heady days as he had finalized his Bermuda plans, Berkeley had enclosed the verses in a letter to Lord Perceval. Playfully disavowing authorship, he claimed them "a poem by a friend of mine with a view to the scheme. Your lordship is desired to show it

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<sup>107</sup> George Berkeley, *The Works*, 7:173.

to none but your own family...”<sup>108</sup> Originally entitled, *America, or the Muses’s Refuge, A prophecy*, Berkeley had reworked and retitled the poem in the intervening quarter of a century. The poem is a compendium of Old World commonplaces: heliotropic progress, Providential history, the divinely-ordained rise and fall of empires, romantic notions of savage man, the cyclical view of history and culture, the idea of lineal progress, of golden age optimism, of millennialism. Berkeley took nearly all of the prevailing philosophies of early eighteenth-century Europe and stuffed them into six rhyming verses.

The poem clearly reflected Berkeley’s earlier despair over the decline of England. The Muse at the beginning of the poem speaks in the voice of Berkeley, “disgusted at an Age and Clime” bereft of “every glorious theme.” Looking beyond England, Bermuda was undoubtedly the image Berkeley had before him as he wrote of genial suns and happy climes, but Shakespeare’s *Tempest* would also have been an obvious reference. The moldering decay of Europe is counterbalanced by fresh, young, virgin “distant lands.” The dichotomy between Old World and New is rooted in this sense of innocence; the true beauty of nature outshining the contrived “fancied” beauty of the Old World. The poem leaned heavily on the translatio notion and its close companion, cyclical history. What Europe was in her infancy, America now is. Compelled by God and by the inexorable forces of history, Europe must now give way to a “better time.” Animated by “heaven’ly flame,” civilization would be rebirthed in America, where the translation would be one not only of empire, but art and religion as well. Redemption, of all things, would come out of the West.

The final lines form the central image and most striking verse of the poem. “Westward the Course of Empire takes its way / the First Four Acts already past / The Fifth shall close the

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<sup>108</sup> George Berkeley to John Percival, February 10, 1725/26, in *The Correspondence*, 218-220.

drama with the Day / Time's noblest offspring shall be the last." In short form, Berkeley took the *translatio* motif, reimagined it as an epic Aristotelian drama, and gave it the weight of Biblical prophecy. The combination of these ideas augmented the power of the "prophecy" concerning America. The course of world history and God himself seemed to have foreordained America's existence and imperial rise.

Surveying the larger canvas of American thought in the eighteenth-century, we have seen how the matrix of ideas informing these lines would have been well-known to eighteenth-century colonial Americans. For at least the past century, Americans had variously borrowed and employed these ideas to discern the direction of their own society. Whether they based their ultimate hope in providence, or in the invariability of universal natural law, whether they expressed it in histories, sermons or poetry, most colonials believed that America had a significant role to play in the future. Part of the appeal of Berkeley's poem was that it offered something for everyone: theists could find a divine, prophetic mandate to establish a Christian American empire, while secularists or Deists could find a mechanical but equally irresistible force pushing civilization forward and westward. Either way, you had ample justification for imperial dreams.

However, Berkeley did not merely assert that America was the Muse's next destination on its westward course, or that America would somehow usher in the final, fifth kingdom of Scripture. He did not merely offer up a lucid super-pattern for history, or a compelling explanation of America's recent past. Berkeley's lines did more than that. He proclaimed that America *was* the Muse's final destination. America would not usher in the millennium. America would *be* the millennial kingdom, the last act of the universal drama. With a stroke of his pen,



Berkeley made America into the center of the vast landscape of human history, making its destiny the climax of total human destiny.

## Chapter Two

### “The Seeds of Empire Are Sown in This New World”: Berkeley’s *Verses* in an Era of Revolution

Andrew Burnaby was a recent graduate of Cambridge, about to take up ordination in the Church of England, when he set sail for North America in the spring of 1759 for a brief tour of the colonies. His visit fell at a pivotal moment—the French and Indian War, which had tested British military might in the colonies, had finally turned in favor of Great Britain. A peace treaty with France was still a few years away, but French dominance on the North American continent had been irrevocably undercut. Over the next year and a half, Burnaby traveled across the Atlantic seaboard. An acute observer of his surroundings, he filled his journal with details and anecdotes that would both inform and amuse his friends when he returned home. But as he wrapped up his journey, one observation rose above all others. “I must beg the reader’s indulgence while I stop for a moment, and as it were from the top of a high eminence, take one general retrospective look at the whole,” he wrote. “An idea, strange as it is visionary, has entered into the minds of the generality of mankind, that empire is travelling westward; and every one is looking forward with eager and impatient expectation to that destined moment when America is to give law to the rest of the world...”<sup>1</sup>

This idea, that the seat of the Empire could move to the colonies, leaving the mother country bereft of power, speaks to the mid-eighteenth-century revival of the ancient notion of the *translatio imperii*. In its classical formulation, the *translatio* argument depended upon a cyclical theory of history that explained the growth of empire in terms of organic development. As a state aged, it inevitably passed through stages of youth, maturity, and eventual decline—resulting in

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Burnaby, *Travels Through North America* (1798; repr., New York: A Wessels Company, 1904), 149.

the transference of empire, and its handmaidens of art, learning and religion, to another nation further to the west. While this cycle could be slowed, it could not be reversed. This notion had long been a basic commonplace in European historical thought, and elements of it had floated through the colonies since their earliest inception. Yet the revival of this idea in the middle decades of the eighteenth-century can be traced to a singular articulation of the idea: Berkeley's poem, *Verses on the Planting of Arts and Learning in America*, that burst upon the colonial scene with its publication in *Miscellany*, a collection of Berkeley's writings, in 1752.

Berkeley's poem, upon its appearance in America, represented a turning point in the development of this ancient philosophical and religious motif and literary convention. Although many of the ideas underlying Berkeley's poem would have been familiar: the notion of cyclical history, the concept of enlightened progress, the idea of an imminent millennium, Berkeley's innovation was to insert a teleology into what had long been understood as a cyclical process. Not only would the arts rise in America, but they would reach their zenith there. Not only would empire move westward, but it would find its ultimate conclusion in America. Not only would world empire conclude in America, but it would serve to usher in the final millennial kingdom of world history. Berkeley offered Americans on the cusp of independence an epic story with America at its center. America had a destiny that was not only assured by the course of history, but by the providential intentions of God himself. By 1776, virtually every colonial newspaper and dozens of periodicals and magazines had reprinted the poem in its entirety.<sup>2</sup> Invoked in sermons, poetry, correspondence and daily conversation in the decades immediately preceding the Revolution, its promises took on increasing prophetic certainty. As the bonds between the

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<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Silverman, *A Cultural History of the American Revolution* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1976), 10.

colonies and England began to fray, the logic of this “commonplace” infused American rhetoric and tacitly helped provide justification for revolution.

The salience of ideology in the coming of the Revolution, and specifically, the ideology exhibited in Berkeley’s poem, has theoretical support in the consensus view held by historians of early America since the 1960s. Coalescing around the work of Bernard Bailyn, the consensus view built upon the Whig school to develop the argument that ideology was not a pretext of the Revolution but was the real prism through which colonists interpreted the new imperial policy imposed in the decade between the two colonial wars. In other words, ideology effectively drove the Revolution. Bailyn’s seminal work, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, inaugurated a neo-Whig school of thought. In Bailyn’s formulation, a republican political ideology thoroughly Anglo, traditional and conservative promoted a movement that became increasingly radical as it went along, eventually spinning out into a popular movement for independence. This distinct ideology, developed and disseminated through widely read pamphlets in the prelude to war, drew upon the Enlightenment, English Common law, and most importantly, English “country,” or Whig, political ideology. The origins of this “country” ideology lay in English radical social and political thought expounded at the turn of the eighteenth century by a group of opposition polemicists. The fault lines of this opposition pitted “country” politicians and writers—so-called because of their professed concern for the entire country’s best interests—against court politicians, who, from the opposition perspective, represented factions intent on amassing power and wealth at the expense of the country. Spurred by the upending forces of proto-capitalism, the explosive growth of investment credit, the development of joint stock companies that created unreal wealth, as well as the bursting of the South Sea Bubble, country ideologists railed against financial and political corruption at the very

center of power—the court in London. The specific threat of the court politicians lay in their wresting of control of Parliament away from the landed gentry, the hereditary guardians of the nation’s welfare. Country polemicists fit their critique within a classical scheme of luxury and corruption versus liberty and virtue. Drawing parallels between their time and that of Rome, they viewed opulence as the source of imperial ruin throughout history. As a consequence of their consumption of radical country political propaganda, colonists embraced a democratic-republican theory of governance that increasingly turned them against imperial control, fearing the tyranny and executive power supposedly inherent to monarchy. The notion of *translatio* figured heavily into these ideas as a way of relating the evident decline of eighteenth-century Britain to the distant world of classical Greece and Rome.<sup>3</sup> Berkeley’s poem itself had been born out of this radical political moment. The shock of the South Sea Bubble had informed Berkeley’s condemnation of corrupt and corrupting English society, and had inspired his vision for an alternative future in the American colonies, where traditional English virtue and liberty could once again flourish. As agitated colonists mined English opposition writings to justify their resistance to constituted government, Berkeley’s verses were part and parcel of the corpus of thought that they drew upon.

At the same time, the popularity of the central image of Berkeley’s poem—the prediction that America would be the next, best, and final empire—seemingly sits at odds with the notion of an American opposition movement predicated on a rejection of imperialism in all its forms. This contradiction appears elsewhere as the crisis intensified: in the colonists’ direct pleas to the King in the late crisis period, begging for his intercession with a tyrannical *Parliament*, as well as in

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<sup>3</sup> Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992), 34-50.

the numerous positive references to the king and kingly prerogative peppered throughout colonial writings of this era. As many recent scholars have noted, colonists were never more British than they were in 1763, when praises to King George littered the colonial landscape in the aftermath of the Treaty of Paris. The question, then, is how and why colonists of the Revolutionary era could so readily embrace a future vision of America predicated on empire if they were, as one scholar pithily put it, “radical whigs, or republicans-in-waiting.”<sup>4</sup>

The historiography of the American Revolution has made another significant turn in recent decades that has particular bearing on the role of Berkeley’s *Verses* in Revolutionary America. While Bailyn’s work has offered invaluable insights into the Revolution, shifting the conversation enough that historians must engage his ideas, more recently scholars have begun to reengage with the work of the imperial school of the Revolution, calling us to reconsider empire as an answer, not only to the how and why of revolution, but to the question of how pre-1776 colonial America connects to post-1787 United States—two entities consistently separated and bifurcated by conventional understandings of this period.

This revision of colonial and revolutionary history has come about as scholars have paid increasing attention to the ways that the Atlantic Ocean connected old and new, east and west, metropole and colony. Through the work of Atlantic history, we have reconstructed an eighteenth-century colonial world defined by the movement of people, goods, and ideas. From the 1720s on, Atlantic historians have identified not the birth of an independent colonial world as Neo-Whig historians would have it, but rather the re-emergence and calcification of a distinctly British identity among colonists. This process of Anglicization transformed English colonists

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<sup>4</sup> Eric Nelson, *The Royalist Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2014), 6.

into Britons, even as it represented a mutual recognition that the colonists were integral members of a broader imperial system that was being consolidated throughout the eighteenth century.

In the early 2000s, T.H. Breen's exploration of the material culture of the colonies in the mid-eighteenth century, saturated as it was with the "baubles of Britain," formed the basis for a new assessment of the importance of empire in pre-Revolutionary America. Breen has argued that as consumerism refashioned the colonies into an integral piece of the empire, successive British ministries attempted to assert greater control over Atlantic trade—transforming what had been a mutually beneficial relationship into one that placed the colonies in a firmly subordinate role. In the missteps of Parliament's attempt to reimagine and manage empire lay the seeds of the Revolution: empire created the problem.<sup>5</sup>

Eric Nelson's recent work on "royalist" sentiment among the patriots connects the thread of empire in Breen's colonial period to the Revolutionary era. As his launching point, Nelson takes seriously the words of James Wilson at the Constitutional Convention of 1787, "The people of America did not oppose the British king but parliament—the opposition was not against an Unity but a corrupt multitude."<sup>6</sup> In other words, Nelson argues, patriots did not oppose empire, nor the kingly prerogative it enshrined, but the corrupting influence of a Parliament that

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<sup>5</sup> T.H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (New York: Oxford UP, 2004). For the relevance of "empire" as a critical concept, see also the essays collected in *Experiencing Empire: Power, People, and Revolution in Early America*, ed. Patrick Griffin (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2017). Peter Onuf has done something similar for the post-Revolutionary period, exploring how empire characterized power relations after the war. As the founders framed the new nation, a similar attempt to manage the sort of unruly and powerful dynamics that Britain faced led the leaders to impose state power through a muscular federal government to regulate the many problems, not least of which was an enormous expanse of land rolling westward from the frontier of settlement. Empire, then, became the answer to newly national problems. Onuf, *Jefferson's Empire: The Language of American Nationhood* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Nelson, *The Royalist*, 1.

had usurped the monarch's rightful power; a Parliament whose jurisdiction patriots steadfastly maintained they had never authorized either by original consent or ballot. Far from seeking to overthrow the tyranny of monarchy, colonists accepted the necessity of an enhanced executive prerogative in the administration of an empire to secure basic legislative coherence. Indeed, these "royalist" colonists—among whom numbered John Adams, James Otis, and Alexander Hamilton—believed themselves adequately represented by the King in the affairs of the realm and desired no other representation. In this, they adopted a distinctive theory of representation: a "good" representative, they insisted, was any agency authorized by the people, be it a parliamentary body or a king. Neither king nor parliament had a greater inherent claim to being a representative of the people, only insofar as one had been authorized more legitimately than the other.<sup>7</sup>

Throughout the 1760s and 1770s, as patriots refined this representation theory, they evidenced a remarkable comfort with the concept of monarchy and empire. Repeatedly, colonists framed their understanding of the conflict in terms of a Parliament who actively sought to undermine the legitimate authority of the king. A close reading of colonial writings up until the very eve of the Revolution indicates consistent support for the prerogative of the king and the construct of empire even as colonists chafed under British ministerial rule that threatened to strangle them politically and economically. It was only when it became clear that the king himself did not support the deeply royalist theory of representation developed by the colonists between 1765 and 1776 that the logic of independence took hold. When a final impassioned appeal to the King to protect the colonies from the tyranny of Parliament was met with the King's declaration that the colonies were in a state of rebellion, colonists finally turned against

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.



the King. Even as the word “tyrant” was thrown about by patriots with abandon throughout 1776, the fact of the matter was that King George was a tyrant, not because he was a king, but because he had refused to be the kind of king they wanted. The Declaration of Independence, often cited as evidence of patriot anti-monarchism, could rather be understood as a last royalist gasp: monarchy had failed them inasmuch as it failed to represent them against Parliament, a falsely representative body whose corruption had been thoroughly established by the Whig literature the colonists had avidly devoured over the same period.<sup>8</sup>

This revision of colonists’ attitudes towards the concepts of king and empire is supported by colonists’ engagement with Berkeley’s *Verses* and his prophecy of a future American empire throughout the decades immediately preceding the Revolution. Far from evincing a revulsion at the idea of empire, colonists celebrated the notion of an imminent American imperial glory. Aided by Berkeley’s words, they dreamed of a day when America would surpass all other empires: in learning, in arts, in commerce, in liberty. But never, until 1776, did they envision this empire outside of the sovereignty of the king of England. Nevertheless, even as the authorization theory of representation that the colonists refined between 1765 and 1776 served to affirm the kingly prerogative, it also gave them room to play out the notion of a separate American realm, submissive to the king, but independent from England. And Berkeley gave them the language to do this. Thus, as early as the 1750s, Americans could speak of the seat of empire moving from Britain to the colonies without disavowing the authority of the king. Yet even as the logic of empire heightened their identification with the sovereign, the poetry of American empire formed the basis of a growing sense of independent American identity.

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<sup>8</sup> Nelson, *Royalist*.

In this sense, the consumption and co-option of Berkeley's *Verses* in Revolutionary America help shed light on another conundrum of the period: how and when American nationalism was created. The overwhelming majority of scholars examining American nationalism reject the appearance of a national identity before the creation of a national political structure. John Murrin staked out this position in a classic essay, writing that "American national identity was, in short, an unexpected, impromptu, artificial, and therefore extremely fragile creation of the Revolution."<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Jack P. Greene writes that "there could have been no specifically American nationalism based on loyalty to an American national polity before there was such a polity or at the very least, the imminent prospect of such a state."<sup>10</sup> In the post-revolutionary period, Berkeley figures prominently in the identity-making exercises and stories that Americans told themselves about their past that would form critical aspects of early nationalism. Referenced in nationalistic poetry, Fourth of July sermons, and in revisionist tales of pre-Revolutionary history, Berkeley's verses represented a significant piece of memory—a fragment of a receding colonial past that, by virtue of its increasing antiquity, gave gravity and legitimacy to young America. But the appearance of Berkeley in the early national period actually complicates the argument about when nationalism can properly be said to form. The complication lies in the fact that Berkeley's *Verses* were in continuous usage throughout the pre- and post-revolutionary period. At nearly all points, they were instrumental in forging a sense of the colonies as a collective that had a collective past and a collective future. In other words,

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<sup>9</sup> John Murrin, "A Roof Without Walls: The Dilemma of American National Identity," in *Beyond Confederation: Origins of the Constitution and American National Identity*, ed. Richard Beeman (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 347.

<sup>10</sup> Jack P. Greene, "State and National Identities in the Era of the American Revolution," in *Nationalism in the New World*, ed. Don Harrison Doyle, Marco Antonio, and Vilella Pamplona (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2006), 61.

when Berkeley verses were used, whether in 1755, 1770, or 1787, they were helping to draw together thirteen disparate colonies, and later, states, into a singular entity, known only after 1787 as the United States of America. This raises the question of whether indeed nationalism could be said to have started sometime earlier, before the formal declaration of independence in 1776. If, as Max Savelle suggests, “the nation has no existence in the physical world. Its existence...while nonetheless real, is entirely metaphysical, or mental; the nation exists only as a concept held in common by many men,” Berkeley arguably helped to inform that concept, aiding colonists in forging a national identity while yet within the bounds of provincial sovereignty.<sup>11</sup>

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The 1750s were a portentous decade for a poem to appear that prophesied future American greatness within an imminently arriving millennial empire as the Great Awakening of the 1740s was still very much alive in American memory. Although the Awakening’s wave of religious enthusiasm had subsided by the 1750s, it left in its wake a sensitivity to a singular set of ideas. As the first real mass movement in American history, the Great Awakening spread into every colony, eliciting the enthusiastic participation of colonists from every ethnic, religious and socio-economic group then represented in the colonies. From New England to Georgia, from English to Dutch, slave to free, backwoodsmen to literate elite, the Great Awakening reached into the lives of colonial Americans on a massive scale and defused amongst them a common set of beliefs, expectations, and values. With its message of radical spiritual equality, it created a new rubric of social measurement. Rejecting the things “seen”—luxury, status, worldly attainments—for the things “unseen”—humility of spirit, personal piety, simplicity—the

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<sup>11</sup> Max Savelle, “Nationalism and Other Loyalties in the American Revolution,” *American Historical Review* 67 (1962): 901-23.

Awakening empowered ordinary people to challenge established sources of prestige and power, to see wealth as a vice and frugality as a sign of moral goodness, and to see virtue as the highest attribute—of both citizenry and government. The Great Awakening also raised intense millennial expectations. Millennial ideas were widespread among the American evangelists who traveled through the colonies, preaching the imminent consummation of world history.<sup>12</sup> The 1750s saw a greater volume of millennial literature coming from colonial presses than at any other point in colonial history, suggesting a widespread preoccupation with end times. As millennialism gained strength in the 1750s, it also became a less sectarian belief. Much of the millennial literature of the period was aimed at a general audience, composed by clergy well-outside of the New England Puritan tradition.<sup>13</sup>

Specific historical events of the 1750s help to explain this broad upsurge in millennial interest. A series of earthquakes across the globe aligned with expectations of the “signs” of the approaching apocalypse. A large tremor in Boston in 1755, followed a few months later by a devastating earthquake that flattened Lisbon, alongside of reports of earthquakes in the Caribbean and Peru were enough to rattle even the most rationalist observers. Although such events would seem to augur calamity more than anything else, adherents to millennial belief assumed things would temporarily get worse before they would get better. Taking a long view of history, their focus remained fixed on the millennial promise itself. Dark days were but a brief precursor to the glorious establishment of God’s kingdom on earth. Whether because of fluency

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<sup>12</sup> Ruth H. Bloch, *Visionary Republic: Millennial Themes in American Thought 1756-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985), 13-15.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

with apocalyptic literature, or incidents that seemed to portend some sort of cataclysmic event, the colonies were suffused with a generalized millennial expectation.<sup>14</sup>

The onset of the French and Indian War in 1754 itself seemed a portent of dramatic future events. Although what colonists believed it portended varied. For those caught up in a fervent millennialism, the war, when reframed in classic Protestant language as a struggle against the antichrist himself, further sparked speculation that the last days were upon them. But for others, the war suggested deeply political, empire-shifting implications. The war marked a critical reassessment of the relationship between Britain and her American colonies. Britain had begun to assert itself much more vigorously in colonial internal affairs as early as the 1740s in response to an anxious sense that Britain's control over its American colonies was eroding as the colonies' size, population, and confidence increased. The war exacerbated this unease and drove an ever more significant shift in colonial policy that eventually led to rebellion in the colonies a quarter century later.

The French and Indian War was borne out of this crisis of control, as the French challenged British hegemony at the precise moment British control of the colonies was at its most tenuous.<sup>15</sup> The conflict in North America was but a sideshow in a larger, centuries-old struggle for world domination between these two European superpowers. But the sideshow would prove more riveting and of greater lasting significance than the broader war. The conflict

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 25, 32.

<sup>15</sup> Jack P. Greene, "The Origins of the New Colonial Policy, 1748-1763," in *Blackwell Companion to the American Revolution* ed. Jack P. Greene and J.R. Pole (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2006), 101-10. Greene writes, "By the beginning of the Seven Years' War in 1756, Halifax and his colleagues were painfully aware that their campaign to amplify metropolitan authority in the colonies was a failure. Especially in the older colonies...metropolitan control was not significantly greater in 1756 than it had been eight years earlier when the whole campaign had begun," 108.

in the colonial theater would ultimately involve a diverse array of actors: Indians, French, Canadians, British, and British colonials in a struggle for dominance over the expanse of inland North America. The conflict began inauspiciously with some clumsy skirmishes between colonists and French troops around disputed territory near the Ohio River in western Pennsylvania in the spring of 1754. The subsequent ignominious surrender of a British fort on the Pennsylvania frontier sent ripples of unease that escalated into waves of tension by the time the news of the surrender reached London. Egged on by expansionist-minded colonial royal governors, including Massachusetts Governor Lord William Shirley and Virginia Lieutenant Governor Robert Dinwiddie, among others, the government in London concluded that the French were intent on seizing the Ohio River Valley and all that lay west. King George I quickly dispatched Major General Edward Braddock from London to take charge of the growing crisis and defend British territorial claims in the colonial backcountry. Landing in the colonies in December of 1754, Braddock set his sights on Fort Duquesne, a French stronghold on the Ohio River. With a combination of British and American forces, Braddock marched deep into unfamiliar territory, and, more consequentially, unfamiliar combat. When the French and their Indian allies launched an attack on Braddock's column as they approached Fort Duquesne in June of 1755, Braddock and his men were outmaneuvered. Accustomed to fighting in organized lines, exchanging volleys with a visible enemy force, and advancing with the bayonet, the British troops were unprepared for wilderness combat—an enemy who seemingly materialized out of the forest, only to fade back in, leaving unspeakable carnage in their wake. After the first clash between the two European superpowers, Braddock was dead. The hasty retreat of the British and American troops back east left western Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Maryland vulnerable to French and Indian incursions. Massachusetts Royal Governor Shirley, catapulted into position as

the commander in chief of north America with the death of Braddock, handled war along the Canadian border in northern New York with a similar lack of élan, getting bogged down in the rough terrain that indefinitely delayed a decisive attack against French Fort Niagara.<sup>16</sup>

Seventeen-fifty-five had proven to be a bad year for the British in North America.

It is in this context that the first reference to Berkeley's poem appears and it is telling that the radical political implications of it characterizes this first appearance. While much of the early reception of Berkeley's poem in America focused on the cultural transference that the Bishop had foretold, within just a handful of years, the transfer of empire would be on everyone's minds. In this, a young John Adams was particularly prescient. An encounter with Berkeley's poem not long after its initial publication inspired Adams to write to a friend, reflecting upon its prophetic contents in light of the war that had only recently commenced.<sup>17</sup> "This whole town is immers'd in Politicks. The interests of Nations, and all the dira of War, make the subject of every Conversation," Adams wrote as the year 1755 drew to a close.<sup>18</sup> A newly minted schoolmaster and not yet twenty, Adams had been closely following the course of the conflict from his perch in Worcester, Massachusetts, just west of Boston. With Governor Shirley stumbling across northern New York, the war would have held particular interest for Massachusetts colonists.

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<sup>16</sup> William M. Fowler, Jr. *Empires at War: The French and Indian War and the Struggle for North America, 1754-1763* (New York: Walker & Company, 2005), 1-2, 32-73.

<sup>17</sup> Adams would make this connection explicit in an 1807 letter to Benjamin Rush. This 1755 letter had recently found its way back into Adams's hands, after laying for some fifty years "in darkness & Silence, in dust and Oblivion," as Adams put it. Adams, of course, was struck by the prescience of his younger self, but explained to Rush that there was nothing "more ancient in my memory than the observation that arts, sciences, and empire had traveled westward," and that this ideas was based upon a "Couplet [that] has been repeated with rapture as long as I can remember which was imputed to Dean Berkley..." "John Adams to Benjamin Rush, 21 May 1807," *The Adams Papers Digital Edition*, ed. Sara Martin (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008–2017).

<sup>18</sup> John Adams to Nathan Webb, 1 September 1755, in *The Adams Papers Digital Edition*.

Bored and unhappy in his teaching position, Adams spent the year debating whether he should become a lawyer or minister. But the drills of the British troops as they passed through Worcester were much more interesting to contemplate, “I longed more ardently to be a soldier than I ever did to be a lawyer,” he would later write.<sup>19</sup> Adams was deeply involved in the social life of Worcester, regularly dining with the elite of the town, spending many evenings engaging in far-ranging conversations of philosophy, theology, and politics. Adams gleaned what news of the war he could, listening as his gentlemen acquaintances debated the events, tucking away “sage observations” to later chew on. “I some times retire,” he wrote to his friend, “and by laying things together, form some reflections pleasing to myself.”<sup>20</sup>

The talk that fall centered on the Braddock disaster and what many perceived as the general incompetency of Governor Shirley. Like many of his fellow colonists, Adams was dismayed and disgusted with the conduct of the British commanders. “Utmost anxiety prevailed,” Adams would later describe the mood of 1755, “and a thousand Panicks were spread lest the French should overrun Us all.” Many in Adams’s circle believed that the moment called for a union of colonies that could defend against the encroachment of the French. Some went further, suggesting, “We could defend ourselves and even conquer Canada, better without England than with her, if she would but allow Us to Unite and exert our Strength Courage and Skill...”<sup>21</sup>

In the privacy of his rooms, Adams had reflected upon these conversations, and begun to spin out both their historical and future implications. His tentative conclusions formed the

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<sup>19</sup> John E. Ferling, “‘Oh That I was a Soldier’: John Adams and the Anguish of War,” *American Quarterly* 36 (Summer 1984): 259.

<sup>20</sup> Adams to Webb, 1755.

<sup>21</sup> John Adams to Benjamin Rush, 1 May 1807, *The Adams Papers Digital Edition*.



musings he enclosed in the letter to his friend that October of 1755. “All that part of creation that lies within our observation is liable to change...states and kingdoms are not exempted,” he wrote. Demonstrating his fluency with the *translatio* motif, Adams ruminated upon the rise and fall of empires. Nations rise, spread their influence “’til the whole Globe is subjected to their sway.” When they have reached the apex of their grandeur, some small, seemingly insignificant event brings about their ruin, and empire is transferred to some other place. For Rome, Adams wrote, it had been the war with Carthage. Rome emerged the victor in this battle, but therein lay its downfall, the “minute and unsuspected cause” of its demise. In demolishing Carthage, and securing its own safety, Rome grew complacent, wallowed in luxury in the absence of external threats and the ease of peace, making itself vulnerable to some other upstart with more fire in its blood. Indeed, Adams argued, this was how England had emerged onto the world scene. Out of similar inconsequential beginnings, barbarian England had gradually accumulated “power and magnificence” and was “now the greatest nation upon the globe.” England today was as Rome had once been. And what insignificant event would bring about its inevitable ruin? Adams mused. Perhaps, he suggested, it was the migration of the Pilgrims to America a century earlier. “Perhaps this (apparently) trivial incident, may transfer the great seat of Empire into America,” Adams wrote, echoing what he had read in Berkeley’s poem. “It looks likely to me.” That Adams understood this transference as both imminent and outside of the imperial-colonial scheme is indicated by his conclusion, “For if we can remove the turbulent Gallicks, our People according to the exactest Computations, will in another Century, become more numerous than England itself. Should this be the Case, since we have (I may say) all the naval Stores of the Nation in our hands, it will be easy to obtain the mastery of the seas, and then the united force of

all Europe, will not be able to subdue us.”<sup>22</sup> Years later, Adams would cite this letter as his own “declaration of independence,” for which, as ever the case, he received little credit.<sup>23</sup>

But for the meantime, Adams remained a lone prophetic voice as, by the end of the decade, the changing fortunes of the war inspired an ebullient sense of optimism in many colonists, predicated on America’s place within a powerful and triumphant British empire. Looking to the future, they anticipated peace and the benefits it would bring. Amidst a booming population and a steadily rising standard of living, there seemed abundant reason for hope.<sup>24</sup> The rub for many colonists was a lingering sense of cultural inadequacy in the face of British sophistication. “Why should that petty Island, which compar’d to America is but like a stepping Stone in a Brook, scarce enough of it above Water to keep one’s Shoes dry; why, I say, should that little Island, enjoy in almost every Neighborhood, more sensible, virtuous and elegant Minds, than we can collect in ranging 100 Leagues of our vast Forests,” Benjamin Franklin queried to a British friend in 1763. But, ever the booster of American interests, Franklin quoted a sentiment from his heavily underlined 1752 copy of Berkeley’s *Miscellany*, “But ‘tis said, the Arts delight to travel Westward.”<sup>25</sup> Franklin’s comments reflect how, in its first decade of

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<sup>22</sup> Adams to Webb, 1755.

<sup>23</sup> John Adams, writing to Benjamin Rush, “Jefferson has acquired Such Glory by his declaration of Independence in 1776 that I think I may modestly enough boast of my Declaration of Independence in 1755, twenty one years older than his.” John Adams to Benjamin Rush, 1 May 1807, *The Adams Papers Digital Edition*.

<sup>24</sup> Joseph Ellis, “Culture and Capitalism in Pre-Revolutionary America,” *American Quarterly* 31 (Summer 1979): 177-178.

<sup>25</sup> Benjamin Franklin to Mary Stevenson, 25 March 1763, *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, vol. 10: January 1 1762, through December 31, 1763*, ed. Leonard W. Labaree (New Haven: Yale UP, 1966), 232. Eight years later, Franklin expressed the same conviction in a letter to the artists Charles Wilson Peale, “The Arts have always travelled Westward, and there is no doubt of their flourishing hereafter on our side the Atlantic, as the Number of wealthy Inhabitants shall increase, who may be able and willing suitably to reward them, since from several instances it appears that our people are not deficient in genius.” Benjamin Franklin to Charles Wilson Peale,

publication, members of the colonies' literate class primarily focused upon the cultural transference that Berkeley's poem prophesied. To a colonial culture suffering from an inferiority complex at mid-century, the appeal of this idea is clear.

Between 1755 and 1763, prophecies of America's future cultural greatness appeared repeatedly in print. The sixty-thousand families reading Nathaniel Ames's *Almanac* in 1758 would have learned that, "The curious have observed that the progress of humane literature (like the sun) is from the east to the west; thus has it travelled through Asia and Europe, and now is arrived at the eastern shore of America." Throughout the literary and cultural productions that Berkeley's *Verses* inspired, the transference of the arts was nearly inevitably paired with religion. So Ames noted in his *Almanac*, "As the celestial light of the Gospel was directed here by the finger of God, it will doubtless finally drive the long, long night of heathenish darkness from America. So arts and sciences will change the face of nature in their tour from hence over the Appalachian Mountains to the western oceans." At such a vision of the eminence that arts and sciences were to attain in the vast new continent in succeeding centuries, Ames rhapsodized, "O! Ye Unborn Inhabitants of America!...you will know that in Anno Domini 1758, we dream'd of your Times."<sup>26</sup> With both the arts and sciences and Christian religion having at long last reached America, they would follow their perennial course westward. In a surprisingly early anticipation of later developments, they would cross "the Appalachian Mountains," the first significant obstacle to settlement, and then continue onward to "the western oceans." Having thus opened up the continent, they would transform the wilderness, bringing civilization where

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4 July 1771 in *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, vol. 18: January 1 through December 31, 1771*, ed. William B. Wilcox (New Haven: Yale UP, 1974), 163.

<sup>26</sup> Nathaniel Ames, *Essays, Humor, and Poems of Nathaniel Ames*, ed. Sam Briggs (Cleveland: Short & Forman, 1891), 285-86; Marion Barber Stowell, "The Influence of Nathaniel Ames on the Literary Taste of His Time," *Early American Literature* 18 (Fall 1983): 143.

only savagery existed.<sup>27</sup> Long after Britain had exited the world's stage, a contemporary of Ames agreed, the Arts would be perfected in "th' utmost Bourne / Of California," and America, closing the cycle of culture begun long ago in the East, would stretch her domination as far as "proud Japan."<sup>28</sup>

Nowhere in the colonies did such conviction in the future glory of America take shape more conspicuously during these years than in the colleges at Philadelphia, Princeton, and New Haven. A culture of public performance was popularized at these college, where young men who felt the historical weight of their era spent their college years engaged in public demonstrations, presenting plays and orations that engaged with the changing political and cultural landscape of British North America. To a rising generation of leaders, these performances communicated intimations of the future as the colonies moved toward revolution.<sup>29</sup>

One of the most important figures in introducing Berkeley as a literary theme in the late 1750s and early 1760s was College of Philadelphia Provost William Smith. Immigrating to America from Scotland in 1753, William Smith first came to the attention of education-minded colonists through a pamphlet called *A General Guide of the College of Mirania in New York*, an educational utopic dream. Smith's prophetic vision reached Ben Franklin's attention and earned him the role as provost of the new college at Philadelphia.<sup>30</sup> Smith's vision for an American college, whimsically called Mirania, bore such a close resemblance to Berkeley's proposal that it is highly likely that Berkeley was a source for Smith. Smith's intimate friendship with

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<sup>27</sup> Peter Freese, "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way": The *translatio*-Concept in Popular American Writing and Painting," *Amerikastudien* 41:2 (1996): 275-76.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Benjamin Townley Spencer, *The Quest for Nationality: An American Literary Campaign* (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1957), 23.

<sup>29</sup> Emory Elliott, *Revolutionary Writers: Literature and Authority in the New Republic, 1725-1810* (New York: Oxford UP, 1986), 30.

<sup>30</sup> Edwin S. Gaustad, *George Berkeley in America* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979) 182-83.

Berkeley's protégé Samuel Johnson, founder of King's College (later, Columbia University) in New York City, furthers the likelihood of this connection.<sup>31</sup> More suggestively, the preface to Smith's essay includes a poem that parallels Berkeley's verses in its vision for America, making it the refuge of both the artistic muses and the gospel, and similarly concluding that America's glory would reach the furthest ends of the earth:

"It comes! At last, the promis'd Aera comes!  
Now Gospel-Truth shall dissipate the Gloom...  
O'er this dark Hemisphere, shed saving Beams!  
...To plant her Laurels in serener Lands!

Each Muse around her strikes the warbling string;  
and, mid Her Train, Peace, Justice, freedom sing  
Hail, Heaven-descended! Holy Science hail!  
Thrice-welcome to these climes; here ever dwell  
...To Thee we offer every softer seat  
And bid a New Britannia spring to Light!

...I antedate the Golden Days;  
...See! Other Bacons, Newtons, Lockes appear  
...Lo! Other Popes and Spencers glad-resound

...Where wolves now hold, shall polish'd villas rise;  
And towery cities grow into the skies.  
Earth's distant Ends our Glory shall behold;  
and the New-World launch forth to seek the Old."<sup>32</sup>

With the hope that other Bacons, Newtons, Popes, and Spencers would emerge in the New World, Smith also began publication of *American Magazine* in Philadelphia in 1757, the foremost literary magazine of this period that laid the foundations for a national American literature. Smith created his magazine to provide a venue for American literary talent and to

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<sup>31</sup> Kenneth Silverman, ed. *Colonial American Poetry* (New York: Hafner Publishing Company, 1968), 358.

<sup>32</sup> William Smith, *A General Idea of the College of Mirania* (1753), 5-6.

publicize the talents of the students at the college.<sup>33</sup> Readers “who would discourage genius in their own country, and prefer any thing from abroad, how mean soever,” betray themselves to be “equally bad men and bad citizens,” Smith challenged skeptics in an early issue.<sup>34</sup> In its role as a national magazine, Smith expressly sought to publish work from throughout the colonies. To this end, Smith wrote in the first issue’s preface that “we...promise that the greatest care will be taken to do equal justice to the affairs of every colony,” especially in “their literary productions and public-spirited undertaking, their improvements in arts and the several branches of commerce.”<sup>35</sup> Through the pages of *American Magazine*, Americans from different colonies could encounter one another and recognize in each other a common colonial identity.

Paralleling his efforts with the *American Magazine*, William Smith fostered an intensely creative culture at the College of Philadelphia, introducing courses on literature and encouraging the composition and staging of dramatic performances.<sup>36</sup> The fruit of this education was apparent in the elaborate commencement exercises as each new graduating class ventured forward to make their mark on history. At the May 17, 1763 commencement of the College of Philadelphia, the distinguished audience, including the royal Governor of Pennsylvania and Benjamin Franklin, witnessed an intricately choreographed series of performances. Intended to both proclaim the Berkeleian theme of colonial cultural achievement and stand as proof of its fulfillment, the exercises showcased orations in Latin, “sprightly” forensic debates, and syllogistic disputations, capped by a dialogue-and-ode to the peace established only three months

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<sup>33</sup> Silverman, *Colonial*, 359.

<sup>34</sup> Spencer, *Quest*, 12.

<sup>35</sup> William Smith, “Preface,” *American Magazine*, 1:1 (October 1757): 5.

<sup>36</sup> Elliott, *Revolutionary*, 30.

earlier with the Treaty of Paris.<sup>37</sup> Set to music and performed by students dressed as shepherds, the oration surveyed the current state and future prospects of their college and colony.

This joyful Day in Miniature we've shew'd  
Scenes that enraptur'd Athens would have view'd;  
Science triumphant! And a Land refin'd,  
Where once rude Ignr'ance sway'd th'untutor'd Mind.

A chorus made of "gentleman and ladies" repeated four times, "Blest Aera, hail / with Thee shall cease / Of War the wasting Train; / On Thee attendant white-rob'd Peace / In Triumph comes again." But while they celebrated pastoral innocence, the student shepherds expected something more from the blessed era. They anticipated, as the main character Philander said, "A Reign of Learning and of Peace."<sup>38</sup> The same themes preoccupied the commencement at the College of New Jersey that fall, whose no less distinguished assembly included the recently-appointed royal governor of New Jersey and son of Ben Franklin, William Franklin.<sup>39</sup> "Wonted, Peace, Caelestial Queen, / Welcome with thy gentle Train," the chorus sang. The oration that followed was replete with colorful and imaginative descriptions of the recent war,

Fierce Desolation blasting all around...  
The agonizing Matrons ript asunder  
By her own brutal Ravisher, and roll'd  
With reeking Bowels in her Infants blood  
...Here tender Infants with bespatter'd brains,  
And murder'd Parents weltering in their gore."

Troubled and dispirited by these scenes of war, the character Eugenio is met by a visiting spirit, "the Prophet of Israel," who rebukes him,

Let thy murmuring cease. Now canst thou hear  
What good from such Confusion may result?

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<sup>37</sup> "Philadelphia, May 26," *New-York Gazette* (New York, New York) 30 May 1763: 2.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.; Nathaniel Evans, *An exercise, containing a dialogue and ode on peace. Performed at the public commencement in the College of Philadelphia, May 17<sup>th</sup>, 1763* (Philadelphia, 1763) n.p., 6-7.

<sup>39</sup> William Armstrong Dod, *History of the College of New Jersey* (Princeton, 1844), 24.

Think, that, perhaps, t'extend the peaceful reign  
Of the Messiah... The wondrous Time prophetic shall appear,  
When o'er th'extent of this dark Wilderness, shine  
The glorious Sun of Righteousness...  
his beams shall shed One Tide of Glory.”

The chorus returned to the stage, singing of that future day when “Religion, Learning, Virtue rise; And, spreading wide their Reign... From East to West, from Pole to Pole.”<sup>40</sup> The connection was inseparable—the horror of war was to be outshone by its results, when the Messiah appeared. The Peace of 1763 had not merely ended the fighting, it had ushered in a peace on an entirely different scale: a huge continent whose potential was yet unrealized could at last be populated, settled, and refined, preparing the way for the millennial kingdom of the Messiah.<sup>41</sup>

For all of their bold declarations of future colonial greatness, the expressions of these middle years were couched within a carefully nuanced imperial perspective. Praise for America and the anticipation of its future glory were framed as a reflection of the glory of the British empire and its head. In their commencement addresses, student-poets wove in homages to the sovereign. “[I] draw our monarch on Britannias Throne / With Laurels of unfading Glory crown'd, / An Olive Scepter waving in his Hand / And all the Graces beaming from his Eyes...”, one commencement orator averred.<sup>42</sup> Colonial preacher Jonathan Mayhew likewise struck a conciliatory note. With the fall of Quebec in 1759, he declared that he could see “mighty cities rising on every hill, and by the side of every commodious port, mighty fleets alternately sailing out and returning, laden with the produce of this...country; happy fields and villages wherever I turn my eyes, through a vastly extended territory.” Mayhew predicted that the colonies would

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<sup>40</sup> Nathaniel Evans, *A dialogue on peace, an entertainment given by the Senior Class at the anniversary commencement, held at Nassau-Hall September 28<sup>th</sup>, 1763* (Philadelphia, 1763) n.p., 11, 20, 23.

<sup>41</sup> Silverman, *Cultural*, 8.

<sup>42</sup> Evans, *A dialogue*, 26.



become “a mighty empire,” though he was quick to clarify, “(I do not mean an independent one).”<sup>43</sup> Having just concluded a war which required the military support of the British, colonies were naturally disinclined to undervalue the assistance of the mother country, or to prophesy her doom. But on a more fundamental level, American colonists were proud to be British. In the face of British victory over the French threat during the recent war, they were especially inspired to reaffirm their British identification. As Benjamin Franklin told Lord Kames in 1760 “...no one can rejoice more sincerely than I do, on the Reduction of Canada; not merely as a Colonist, but as I am a Briton.”<sup>44</sup> The commencement orations themselves, representative of a larger body of 1760s-era “rising glory” poetry, are indicative of just how deep the currents of British identity and loyalty to King continued to run. Though in content, these exercises forecasted a glorious future specific to the colonies, and in form they sought to showcase and celebrate native literary production, their dependence on Berkeley’s poetic formulation supports T.H. Breen’s argument for a re-Anglicization of the colonies in the decades preceding the Revolution. Indeed, the literature of the period leading up to the Revolution indicates that British colonists believed more fervently than ever that they shared a culture with Great Britain. At the same time, just as Breen has demonstrated through American colonial participation in a common consumer culture, this derivative poetry, as much as it linked the colonies to the mother culture, linked the colonists more deeply to one another, creating a common cultural ground specific to American colonials. In reproducing British cultural practices, American poets established a pervasively normative colonial poetic form that functioned in a unifying manner. In identifying a distinctive future for

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<sup>43</sup> “Jonathan Mayhew to Thomas Hollis, 21 May 1760,” *MHS Proceedings*, 3d ser., LXIX (1947-50): 112.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Leonard Tennenhouse, *The Importance of Feeling English: American Literature and the British Diaspora, 1750-1850* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007), 11.

the American colonies, even within the boundaries of British imperial rule, these poems exemplified how native literary production fostered a collective colonial American identity.<sup>45</sup> If this common literary culture was not yet properly nationalistic, it nevertheless hints at Benedict Anderson's well-known account of the origin of nationalism as the rise of an imagined community of readers. Though geographically and socially dispersed, colonial readers found common ground in a common set of reading materials that enabled them to imagine themselves as part of a community of people much like themselves. Though they would likely never meet or have a conversation, they could nevertheless imagine others like themselves, reading the same material, and sharing the same perspective. Consequently, they would have a sense of themselves as members of a community with a shared common culture.<sup>46</sup> In this case, it was an imagined community of poetry hearers, readers, and memorizers.

The peace welcomed by the young commencement orators of 1763 proved short-lived. The aftermath of war left Britain in possession of overseas territories and foreign populations, including former French subjects and tens of thousands of Native Americans, who, at best, were ambivalent to this turn of events, and at worst, actively hostile. This new North American empire required internal policing and defense against foreign aggression. It also required organization. Keeping a permanent British army in the colonies seemed a reasonable solution to the first need. Rather than demobilizing at the cessation of hostilities, British troops were ordered to remain in the colonies. But this security had a cost, and to pay for the mounting expense, Parliament initiated a program of taxing the colonies. In addition, to prevent further unnecessary conflict with the Native Americans on the frontier, a proclamation was issued that fall of 1763 that,

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 15-16.

<sup>46</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 6; Tennenhouse, *Importance*, 12.

among other things, reserved land beyond the Appalachians exclusively for the use of Indians. In practice this meant that no colonial government could grant land in this zone; no surveyors could operate there; and no white colonists could settle beyond the Appalachian ridge. The standing British army would enforce all of these conditions.<sup>47</sup>

This news, coming just as the colonies were facing an economic downturn, was met with collective dismay. The economic boom brought on by the war had begun to reverse course, leaving warehouses packed with goods bought on credit. Merchants' inability to pay their creditors affected not only financiers in London, but the tailors, coopers, carpenters, shopkeepers, artisans, and farmers who did business with the merchants. Poor harvests in the early years of the 1760s exacerbated the economic recession. Bankruptcies spread through northern port cities and threatened deep into the hinterland. Casting about for new streams of income, many colonists looked to the newly conquered lands as a solution to their economic distress. In times past, colonists had often resorted to land speculation to offset their losses, land being one of the few things that consistently offered a prospect of financial return. For poorer colonists, their interest in the land was less in selling it for profit than in settling on it themselves and reaping its benefits. For colonists, wealthy or poor, the newly acquired territory represented "fields of opportunity that might deliver them from the constraints of a constricted postwar world."<sup>48</sup> But more than simply representing economic value, the land held imaginative wealth. The young commencement orators of 1763 had, after all, envisioned a continent-wide flourishing as they sang of "Religion, Learning, Virtue" rising, "And, spreading wide their Reign... From East to West." The Proclamation of 1763 abruptly curtailed such possibilities, frustrating

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<sup>47</sup> Fred Anderson, *The Crucible of War: The Seven Years' War and the Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754-1766* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), 561-566.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 596.

seemingly the entire colonial populations' hopeful expectations. The coincidence of British interests with American was no long assumed or assured. The irony of the Peace of 1763 is that it ushered in anything but peace. Indeed, the seeds of new conflict had been sown.

The change was palpable. Thomas Hutchinson, then royal governor of Massachusetts, who would later write a history of this period, noted that before 1763, "Speculative men had figured in their minds an American empire...but in such distant ages, that no body then living could expect to see it." As long as the French had remained a significant presence in North America, British colonists had seemed content with a dependent status that ensured protection as members of the British empire. But, "as soon as [the French] were removed, a new scene opened. The prospect was enlarged. There was nothing to obstruct a gradual progress of settlements, through a vast continent, from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean." With the French out of the way, Hutchinson suggested, colonists developed a new confidence in their dealings with the empire, premised on "a higher sense of the grandeur and importance of the colonies." Advantages "enjoyed by the subjects in the colonies, began to be considered in an invidious light, and men were led to inquire, with greater attention than formerly into the relation in which the colonies stood to the state from which they sprang."<sup>49</sup> Although Americans would not explore the specific territorial implications of Berkeley's *Verses* until after the Revolution, it is clear that territorial aspirations figured prominently in their restiveness as tensions increased with Great Britain. This shift, marked by a deepening sense of a colonial prerogative that Hutchinson observed in 1763 would only harden, gaining ground and additional justification as the decade continued.

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<sup>49</sup> Thomas Hutchinson, *The History of the Colony of Massachusetts's Bay from 1749 to 1774* (1765; repr., London, 1828), 85-86.

Debt left over from the French and Indian War coupled with the additional cost of maintaining a defensive army in the colonies represented an additional source of conflict between Great Britain and the colonies. As the result of the war, Britain's national debt had doubled, the cost of the war in America alone representing 40 percent of its total military expenditures. During the mid-1760s, paying interest on that debt consumed over half of Great Britain's annual budget. The yearly cost of garrisoning and protecting the North American colonies constituted an added burden to the overtaxed residents of the metropole. Having invested so significantly in protecting the colonies during the recent war, both in terms of men and money, British officials insisted that colonists help to shoulder the costs, as the chief beneficiaries of such an expensive war. Tightening their grip on the colonies, Parliament initiated taxation measures to raise this much-needed revenue.<sup>50</sup> With the rollout of each new taxation effort, colonists lodged vociferous objections, testifying to a growing, pervasive sense of dislocation as British citizens. The Stamp Act of 1765, the most reviled of Britain's attempts to derive revenue from the colonists, brought colonials' mounting grievances to the surface. As a direct tax on every piece of printed paper in the colonies, it touched the lives of colonists from all levels of colonial society. Incensed at what they perceived as a trampling of their liberties, colonists burned effigies of tax collectors in the streets, boycotted English goods, and composed vehement verses accusing England of devouring those she was obliged to protect.<sup>51</sup> Colonists made sense of these developments—the Stamp Act, the subsequent taxation efforts, the ongoing crisis of credit and debt, as well as the garrisoning of the British army in the colonies in a time of peace—in terms of a familiar ideology drawn from classical writers, Enlightenment rationalists,

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<sup>50</sup> Alan Taylor, *American Revolutions: A Continental History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2016), 51-52.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 96-100.

and common law, made into a coherent set of ideas by the English country politicians at the beginning of the eighteenth century. These politicians had created an image of the mother country that many Americans now applied to their present situation: England was awash and sinking in corruption.<sup>52</sup>

The Stamp Act stands as the turning point in colonial American's employment of Berkeley's verses. Berkeley himself was deeply influenced by Country ideology—it formed the basis for his critique of England and inspired his dream of America. In poetic form, Berkeley articulated the same overriding concerns of the colonists a half century later: societal and political decay, the loss of antique virtue, the promotion of artifice over nature, luxury and self-indulgence over simplicity, and the dark future these malignant signs portended. But Berkeley's *Verses* did more than articulate Country ideology in an accessible way and put words to what colonists suspected, feared, and agitated over in those portentous years. They ensured a resolution. Britain had sunk. Despite the savage critiques of the Country opposition writers, Parliament had continued in its deviant path. Britain could no more be saved than Rome, Athens, or Persia before it. Empire was on the move. Its destination was set. With all the force of history, providence, rational progress, and nature behind it, “Westward the course of empire takes its way... Time's noblest offspring shall be the last,” gave Americans a nearly mystical confidence in their future. In this charged atmosphere, colonial writings about America's relationship with England began to assume an increasingly strident tone.<sup>53</sup> As the decade progressed, Berkeley's poem was not only functioning as a framework within which America's preachers and poets

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<sup>52</sup> Bailyn, *Ideological*, 26-35.

<sup>53</sup> Scott Breuninger, “Planting an Asylum for Religion: Berkeley's Bermuda Scheme and the Transmission of Virtue in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World,” *Journal of Religious History* 34 (December 2010): 90.

could assert a proto-nationalist confidence, it began to be used as an explicit justification for American independence.

While Adams has the strongest claim for being the first to recognize in Berkeley's poem a powerful justification for an American "empire", by the mid-1760s he was no longer alone. Increasingly common were sentiments such as the one expressed by an anonymous letter writer in *The Pennsylvania Gazette* in 1768. The passage of the Townshend revenue acts of 1767, the latest of Parliament's tax measures, had roiled the colonies. With their imposition of new duties on tea and paper and the establishment of vice-admiralty courts unchecked by juries, the Acts were met with riots, boycotts, and unified colonial resistance in the form of a circular letter to King George. Parliament responded in kind, issuing a letter to the royal governors in the colonies instructing the disbandment of local colonial assemblies should the resistance continue. The open letter published in *The Pennsylvania Gazette* called upon Parliament to rescind these measures. Framing his impassioned supplication as one of a loyal subject of the King, the author laid blame at the feet of "odious" and "malignant" factions within Parliament who were intent on twisting and misrepresenting the grievances of the colonies to the King. "It has been the unhappy fate of...America, to be defamed and abused without intermission, by those who ought to afford his Majesty the best and truest intelligence," the correspondent lamented. For exercising their constitutional rights, the colonists had faced disproportionate reprisals: "Do we deserve to have ships of war before us...?...Shall we be perpetually threatened with troops and dragooning, for humbly laying before our royal Sovereign, the distress brought upon us, by the machinations of his and our enemies." The Revolutionary War lay eight years into the future, but the writer of this 1768 letter lodged an early warning of the costs of such Parliamentary folly in distinctly Berkeleyan terms. "May Heaven avert the ruin of the British empire. America, if properly

cherished now, will live to support that Empire! America may one day however bid defiance to the proudest of her enemies, and rise and shine imperial in the western world: This good land...may yet be the happy retreat of independence and freedom.” The author’s suggestion that Britain could forestall this potential by conceding to colonial demands was undermined however by the author’s conclusion: echoing Berkeley’s sense of inevitability, he wrote, “Let Britain live really Great, till in the course of time she must share the common fate of empires!”<sup>54</sup>

By the 1770s, the message of an imminent transfer of empire had so thoroughly saturated colonists’ writings in opposition to Parliamentary actions that it prompted a scathing rebuke from the English polemicist and pamphleteer Josiah Tucker. As a sign of the growing disjuncture between British metropolitans and colonists, Tucker treated these predictions of America’s rising glory less as reasoned predictions based on historical processes, than as irritants, expressions of childish boasting that could only be responded to in kind. In a pamphlet styled as a letter between an uncle and his impudent nephew, he rebutted the colonists’ escalating grievances. Tucker’s impatience with the colonists bristles through the prose. “You resent the sovereignty of Great Britain. ‘For you want to be an Empire by itself...This Spirit...is visible in all your speeches, and all your writings, even when you take some pains to disguise it,” he charged. Sardonicly quoting the colonists, Tucker continued, “‘What! An Island! A Spot such as this to command the great and mighty Continent of North America! Preposterous!’ Let us no longer be subjected to the paltry Kingdom of Great Britain, you say, but let the seat of empire be transferred to Great

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<sup>54</sup> Anonymous, “A Letter to a Friend in London,” *The Pennsylvania Gazette* (Philadelphia PA) 21 July 1768: 2.



America. These extravagant conceits are founded on a calculation which I think...both false and absurd.”<sup>55</sup>

The rebuke notwithstanding, between 1770 and 1776, Berkeley’s framework of a *translatio imperii* was articulated with increased urgency, as colonial writers sought to justify their opposition to Britain. Berkeley’s glorious vision for America did not necessarily depend for its fulfilment on any decisive break with the English past. The belief that America would inaugurate the millennial kingdom had traditionally been perfectly compatible with patriotic loyalty to the crown, a combination of sentiments that was characteristic of the sermons and poems delivered in the early 1760s upon victory in the French and Indian War.<sup>56</sup> But by the 1770s, American patriots had adopted a much more strident and divisive version of Berkeley’s imperial vision. College students were once again at the forefront of this evolving rhetoric. A new generation of student-poets, among whom were John Trumbull, Timothy Dwight, Philip Freneau, and Hugh Henry Brackenridge, composed patriotic poems about the rising glory of America at Yale and Princeton in 1770 and 1771. What had sounded in 1763 like loyal tributes to the empire took on a more threatening edge in the context of new imperial conflict.

In their poem for the 1770 Yale commencement, Freneau and Brackenridge recounted the familiar tale of America’s material and cultural progress since the original flight from persecution into the wilderness. But the young poets sounded a new note in arguing that the progress that the colonies had achieved by 1770 was not merely part of a recurring cycle of civilizing refinement but rather represented the culmination of cultural growth and improvement over the course of human history altogether. America was not only the latest frontier of human

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<sup>55</sup> “Marginalia in [Josiah Tucker], *A Letter from a Merchant*, [1770?],” *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified February 1, 2018.

<sup>56</sup> Bloch, *Visionary*, 70.

achievement, but also “the last, the best.” The allusion to Berkeley was difficult to miss. Just as Berkeley had simultaneously recast this future cultural greatness as Christ’s millennial kingdom, Freneau and Brackenridge looked ahead from present achievements in the arts, sciences, agriculture, and commerce into a still more magnificent millennial future: “And when a train of rolling years are past / ...A new Jerusalem sent down from heav’n / Shall grace our happy hearth, perhaps this land, / Whose virgin bosom shall then receive, tho late, / Myriads of saints with their almighty king, / To live and reign on earth a thousand years / Thence called Millennium. Paradise a new / Shall flourish, by no second Adam lost.”<sup>57</sup> John Trumbull paralleled these lines in his 1770 commencement address to the graduating class at Yale. In his piece, Trumbull outlined the spread of learning from Greece to Rome to England, closely linking its cultivation with the presence of political liberty. Trumbull ended by observing that colonial resistance to the Stamp Act had “awakened the spirit of freedom” and encouraged the arts. He concluded with a rapturous poetic vision inspired by Bishop Berkeley: “In mighty pomp America shall rise; Her glories spreading to the boundless skies; Of ev’ry fair, she boast the assembled charms; The Queen of Empires and the Nurse of Arms. See bolder Genius quit the narrow shore, And unknown realms of science dare t’explore; Hiding in the brightness of superior day The fainting gleam of Britain’s setting ray.”<sup>58</sup>

Even as Berkeley’s articulation inspired fresh visions of America in this rapidly shifting political context, his specific words continued to appear in print across the colonies. In 1773, and again in 1774, the *Virginia Gazette* ran the poem in full. Far to the northeast, in Newport, Rhode Island, readers of the *Newport Mercury* likewise encountered it. When southern readers opened

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 70-71.

<sup>58</sup> John Trumbull, *An essay on the use and advantages of the fine arts. Delivered at the public commencement, in New-Haven. September 12th. 1770* (New Haven, 1770), 5-7, 11, 13-15.

their *Georgia and South-Carolina Almanack* for 1774, the poem appeared alongside quotidian advice. What sets an appearance of Berkeley in an almanac apart from his appearance in newspapers is the function of almanacs. On the one hand, almanacs had an explicitly prescriptive purpose, aiding readers in constructing and ordering their daily lives and the world around them. At the same time, almanacs' "wisdom" relied on patterns of the past to plan the future.<sup>59</sup> So when John Tobler inserted Berkeley's *Verses* in his *Almanack* for 1774, it was intended to do more than entertain. It suggested a super-pattern that could inform the present, at the same time that it offered a prediction about the future, one which his audience could plan their lives upon as much as they used predictions of the weather to plan their crops. In this instance, Bishop Berkeley's lines were appended to an observation that "North-America probably now contains two Millions of White Inhabitants. In the Year 1830, there will not be so few as only twenty Millions...A most extensive Scene opens to view..."<sup>60</sup> The connection was clear, the tides were moving in America's direction.

By the early 1770s, the political implications of "Westward the course of empire...Time's noblest offspring shall be the last," were woven into the fabric of patriot political ideology, as a unique American destiny apart from Britain took shape. This change corresponded to the deepening crisis with Parliament's 1774 passage of the Intolerable Acts. Aimed at Boston, a city perceived by the British as the nexus of the rebellion, the Acts denied Massachusetts' right to self-governance, curtailed the activities of town meetings, and closed Boston's port indefinitely. Although the late 1760s and early 1770s were marked by a rolling

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<sup>59</sup> David Waldstreicher, "Rites of Rebellion, Rites of Assent: Celebrations, Print Culture, and the Origins of American Nationalism," *Journal of American History* 82 (June 1995): 57.

<sup>60</sup> John Tobler, *Georgia and South-Carolina Almanack for the year of our Lord 1774* (Charlestown, SC, 1773), n.p.

opposition to Parliamentary authority, the unrest in America fit within a general crisis of empire sweeping British, French and Spanish holdings throughout the western hemisphere. The growing colonial empires, with their unique commercial opportunities and military challenges demanded constant adjustments and accommodations. Parliament's ricocheting between reform programs and repeals reflected the experimental nature of this period, as Britain sought to develop a coherent strategy for managing its growing empire. Given the uncertain and evolving policies towards the colonies in this period, there are a number of directions the events could have followed; there was not yet a relentless march towards Revolution. Further, to this point much of the resistance in the colonies could be characterized as localized complaints about ministerial control; they would foment for a period before dying back down. No events had yet managed to produce the sort of sustained popular resistance to parliamentary control that would produce a revolution. However, what the Stamp Act, Townshend Acts, Boston Massacre, or Boston Tea Party had failed to do, the Coercive Acts succeeded, radically rupturing the flow of events. Historians have cited the Coercive Acts as the transformative incident that collectively alienated Americans as no other legislation or reform effort had thus far been able to do.<sup>61</sup> Writing from Boston, Mercy Otis Warren captured the shock of the moment, railing to a friend in England, "Will not succeeding generations be astonished when told that this maritime city was blockaded...Like an unnatural parent [Britain] has plung'd her dagger into the bosom of her affectionate offspring...such is the prevailing luxury and dissipation of the times." This offense would not go unmet, Warren warned, writing, "If [the majority in Parliament] still continue[s to be] the dupes of venality and corruption, they will soon see the Genius which once animated

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<sup>61</sup> T.H. Breen, "What Time Was the American Revolution: Reflections on a Familiar Narrative," in *Experiencing Empire: Power, People & Revolution in Early America* ed. Patrick Griffin (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2017), 236-39.

[British politics] has taken up her residence on these distant shores.” In this critical moment, Warren turned to Berkeley, using him to capture the sense that the colonies were now careening towards an inevitable confrontation. “*The seeds of empire are sown in this new World, the ball rolls westward fast,*” she wrote.<sup>62</sup>

The response of a town meeting of patriots in New Jersey indicates the extent to which this event in Boston was able to radicalize colonists across the colonies, producing the sort of popular resistance required to drive the resistance to its conclusion. Even as the geographic and demographic context of rebellion shifted, Berkeley continued to be a strand that connected these disparate groups. The patriots of Burlington County rose to the defense of their Boston counterparts, laying out their resolve in the form of song:

Come join hand in hand all ye true loyal souls,  
‘Tis Liberty calls, let’s fill up our bowls,  
We’ll toast all of the lovers of Freedom’s good cause  
...Tho’ the Lords and the Commons may rail in the house  
At our patriot Assemblies, we don’t care a souse,  
We’ll keep cheerful spirits, nor mind their commands,  
The sun of fair Liberty will shine o’er our lands  
...*The bright Star of Empire begins to arise,*  
the Genius of Freedom expands thro’ the skies;  
On her head we will place the imperial crown,  
America’s the spot where she fixes her Throne...”<sup>63</sup>

The lyrics were quickly reprinted in newspapers, reaching readers as far away as Boston to the north and Virginia to the south. As it entered into the repertoire of patriotic songs that circulated

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<sup>62</sup> Mercy Otis Warren, *Selected Letters*, ed. Jeffrey H. Richards and Sharon M. Harris (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 37-38.

<sup>63</sup> “Poetry,” *The Massachusetts Spy or, American Oracle of Liberty* (Worcester MA) 14 June 1775: 3.

through the colonies, it reflected not only the growing sense of shared colonial identity and colonial grievances, but a shared language of American destiny predicated on Berkeley's poem.<sup>64</sup>

In the fraught prelude to declaring independence, for colonists who accepted the Bekeleyan logic of a transfer of empire, religion, and the arts to the New World, who saw themselves as the heirs to the cultural heritage of Western Europe, the prospect of independence became not only possible, but also probable. According to this model of historical development, continued imperial rule was no longer a viable nor logical option. As Warren asserted, the time had come for Americans to claim their rightful inheritance in the line of imperial succession and their destiny as the "final" guarantors of liberty, religion, and learning.<sup>65</sup>

But it would take more than ideology to achieve independence, it would take war. Resolve on both the British and American sides hardened in the early months of 1775. As colonists stockpiled arms to prepare for the worst, the British forced the issue. In an attempt to seize cached weapons in Lexington, Massachusetts in the cover of night, the British stumbled upon seventy armed colonists on the village green. Although no one, apparently, intended to start a war that day, by the time the sun came up eight Americans were dead. The armed conflict spread to Boston. By the following summer, it had reached New York. On July 4, 1776 Congress approved the Declaration of Independence.

These were heady days of partisan ardor, with political unrest and patriotism fomenting in the streets. Yet, on nearly every objective level, America's prospects were dim. Most of the

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<sup>64</sup> In 1820, the Boston *Columbian Centinel* carried a news piece: "For the Revolutionary Minstrel. Mr. Russell.—Permit me to contribute my mite to the Revolutionary Minstrel, in the following Song, which in 1774 used to make the welkin ring. Your, &c. Old School. A New Patriotic Song 1774-5. Come join hand in hand all ye true loyal souls, 'Tis Liberty calls, let's fill up our bowls...". "Poetry," *Columbian Centinel* (Boston MA) 1 November 1820: 4.

<sup>65</sup> Breuninger, "Planting," 93.

recently created states lacked any sort of formal governing apparatus. The Continental Congress itself was a self-authorized gathering of disparate characters with conflicting ideas of how to advance. The document that legitimated the Congress, the Articles of Confederation, would not be ratified for another five years. The Continental army was a ragtag assembly of local militias, while the United States Navy comprised of four fishing boats transformed into battleships with the attachment of a few cannons. In contrast, thirty-two thousand British troops, supported by the British fleet and one hundred and fifty transport ships, amassed at Long Island.<sup>66</sup>

Nevertheless, in what were arguably the darkest hours of the conflict, a vein of millennial expectancy couched in Berkeleyan terms surfaced. In contrast to the French and Indian War, when expressions of millennial hope emerged primarily in response to British military success, these new expressions adapted to the tides of war, indicating the malleable usefulness of Berkeley's prophecy. Military successes affirmed its truth; while in the midst of military losses, his prophecy suffused the cause with hope. In a Thanksgiving Sermon in November of 1775, seven months into a conflict that was already looking decidedly dreary for patriot prospects, Minister Ebenezer Baldwin, a Yale graduate and Connecticut militiaman, predicted that the American colonies would be the "foundation of a great and mighty Empire...which shall be the principal Seat of that glorious Kingdom, which Christ shall erect upon Earth in the latter Days."<sup>67</sup> Baldwin believed that the War for Independence would usher in the Last Days because in America "the Principles of Liberty [were] to be better examined, than in the Foundation of any other Empire." Paraphrasing Berkeley, Baldwin took for granted that liberty had abandoned Europe, "Liberty, as well as Learning and Religion, has from the Beginning been travelling

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<sup>66</sup> Caroll Smith-Rosenberg, *This Violent Empire: The Birth of an American National Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 47.

<sup>67</sup> Ebenezer Baldwin, *The Duty of Rejoicing* (New-York, 1776), 38.

Westward. Liberty, when once driven from a Country, has never been wont to return; but to seek a dwelling in some other climes.” Baldwin framed this as the inevitable course of history, as other kingdoms had enjoyed their season of liberty, it remained for America, as the last kingdom, to enjoy hers. “And since it is in the last Ages of the World that America is to enjoy this prosperous State, and as this is the Time in which Christ’s Kingdom is to be thus gloriously set up in the World, I cannot think it chimerical to suppose, America will largely share in the Happiness of this glorious Day.” The present trials of war “are...preparing the Way for it.”<sup>68</sup> America was freedom’s last asylum and thus, despite gloomy military prospects, the center of God’s redemptive plan.

Another Yale graduate made a similar claim just a few months later. Yale’s class of 1776 graduated two weeks after the Continental Congress declared America’s independence from Great Britain. British troops had taken up quarters in New Haven, making a public commencement on Yale’s grounds impossible. The festivities carried on in a private ceremony. Slated to deliver the valedictory address Yale’s commencement exercises that July afternoon was the young Reverend Timothy Dwight. The grandson of Johnathan Edwards, Dwight was a prominent member of New England’s intellectual elite, and soon-to-be appointed a chaplain in the Continental army. Ebenezer Fitch, a young student of Dwight’s, sat in the audience that day, spellbound by Dwight’s oration. He marked the event in his journal, writing, “To crown all, Mr. Dwight delivered an excellent oration on the present state and future growth and importance of this country. It was written and delivered in a masterly manner.”<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>69</sup> Ebenezer Fitch, *Memoir of Ebenezer Fitch, D.D. first president of Williams College*, ed. Calvin Durfee (Boston, 1843), 9.



That afternoon, Dwight laid out a radical vision of revolution, the glorious future of the infant nation, and the moral progress of humanity. Looking beyond the grim realities weighing so heavily upon his listeners, he urged them to suspend disbelief and imagine their politically divided and war-torn nation as “the greatest empire the hand of time ever raised up to view.” Fixing America within God’s redemptive plan for world history, Dwight proclaimed that God had delayed the birth of the new nation until that special moment “when every species of knowledge, natural and moral, is arrived to a state of perfection, which the world never before saw.” In the United States “will be accomplished...the last thousand years of the reign of time...a glorious Sabbath of peace, purity, and felicity.” Embracing a millennial vision of a republican empire, Dwight exhorted Yale’s graduating class, “When you remember that your lot is cast in that land, which...is evidently the favorite of heaven; when you remember, that you live amongst the most free, enlightened and virtuous people on earth; when you remember that your labors may contribute to the hastening of that glorious period when nations shall be spiritually born in a day; with what zeal, with what diligence, with what transport must you be inspired!” Drawing upon Berkeley’s metaphor of the final act of a drama, Dwight urged the young graduates to answer their country’s call, to “act...on that extended stage” of history, there to lay “the foundations of American greatness.” In that critical moment, the most essential roles for those Yale graduates to fill were as citizen-soldiers in the Continental Army.<sup>70</sup>

Within weeks, New York City fell to the British. In November of 1776, the British broke through the Hudson, and for the next five weeks they chased the Continental army retreating across New Jersey. American defeat seemed certain. In that dismal hour, two major spokesmen

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<sup>70</sup> Smith-Rosenberg, *Violent Empire*, 46-49; Timothy Dwight, *A Valedictory Address to the Young Gentlemen, Who Commenced Bachelors of Arts, at Yale College, July 25<sup>th</sup>, 1776* (New Haven, 1776) 9, 12, 8, 21;

for the American cause, Thomas Paine and John Jay, wrote essays intended to rally disheartened Patriots to the defense of the nation. Although addressed to separate audiences, Paine's text to Pennsylvanians and Jay's to the citizens of New York, the documents appeared simultaneously and reflected themes that Washington and his staff wished to instill in flagging Americans' hearts and minds.<sup>71</sup>

Jay's tract represented the culminating statement of a man who had arrived at the decision for independence reluctantly. Actively involved in the leadership guiding the colonies in their resistance to Britain throughout the crisis, Jay had shared the conviction that Americans were legally and morally justified in resisting tax measures. In *Address to the People of Great Britain*, written by Jay and issued by the First Continental Congress in late 1774, Jay had argued only for the same rights and liberties that colonists' counterparts in England had. "We consider ourselves, and do insist that we are and ought to be, as free as our fellow-subjects in Britain, and that no power on earth has a right to take our property from us without our consent," he had written. Impositions like that of the Stamp Act and the Coercive Acts were designed to undermine those very liberties. The issue, Jay had insisted, was not an unwillingness of Americans to pay taxes necessary to their own upkeep. Had the protection and defense of the colonies been the true intention of Parliament, "we ever were and ever shall be ready to provide." Rather, these taxes imposed by Parliament "were laid upon us most unjustly and unconstitutionally, for the express purpose of raising a revenue. [... That is] lavishly squandered on court favourites and ministerial dependents, generally avowed enemies to America, and employing themselves by partial representations to traduce and embroil the colonies." Though

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<sup>71</sup> Elizabeth M. Nuxoll, ed., *The Selected Papers of John Jay* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010), 320.

labeled “seditious” by British ministers, Jay insisted American resistance had been both proportionate and reasonable responses to oppression by a people who shared a common love of liberty with those who lived at the center of the empire.<sup>72</sup> But Jay was leery of an outright break with Britain, maintaining a hope for reconciliation virtually to the last hour. When Jay finally joined the other signers in putting their names to the Declaration in July of 1776, it was a pragmatic decision driven by experience and exigencies. The burning of Norfolk, Virginia, by British troops in January of that year, followed by the shocking news of heavy casualties suffered at the Battle of Quebec, fought on the last day of 1775, all served to radicalize Jay. Convinced that only a war would compel Britain to respect the American position, Jay threw himself into defense of his native colony of New York as the British attacked New York City in the summer and fall of 1776.<sup>73</sup>

Having watched New York City fall to the British, and with little better news following Washington’s retreat across New Jersey, Jay was keenly sensitive to his fellow New Yorkers’ sinking morale. Having resolved himself to independence, Jay set out to compose an argument that would equally convince his neighbors of the justice of the cause and served to strengthen their resolve. Jay’s address revealed his lawyerly bent as he constructed a case against the British as methodical and logical as any legal brief, but it is a deeply moral indictment. For all that Jay was driven to independence by a specific set of events, it is clear that the moral implications of these events lay at the root of his radicalization. His address is grounded in the Country ideology of a hopelessly sinking Britain, awash in corruption and depravity. All the actions of the British

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<sup>72</sup> John Jay, “Address to the People of Great Britain, November 18, 1774,” in *The Selected Papers of John Jay Digital Edition*, Elizabeth M. Nuxoll, ed. (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2014–).

<sup>73</sup> Milton M. Klein, “John Jay and the Revolution,” *New York History* 81 (January 2000): 19-30.

to this point served as evidence in his charge against them: the King had ordered the confiscation of American boats and impressed their crews into service for the crown forcing them to “spill the blood of neighbors and friends...their fathers, their brothers and their children...Does any history sacred or prophane [sic], record any thing more impious, more horrible, more execrably wicked, tyrannical or devilish?”; the King had “ordered your cities to be burnt, your country desolated, your brethren to starve and languish and die in prison”; German mercenaries were transported “to plunder your houses; to ravish your wives and daughter; to strip your infant children...”<sup>74</sup> The list went on and on.

But threaded throughout the address was a throbbing confidence in Providence. “Under the auspices and direction of divine Providence, your Forefathers removed to the wilds and wilderness of America,” Jay reminded his listeners. Jay excavated the Old Testament for historical examples, religious explanations, and imagery to explain the recent events. He depicted British tyranny and aggression as God’s punishment for the irreligion, luxury, and vice that were developing in the colonies. But he explicitly refuted any notion that recent American losses were a sign “that God is not with you.” Rather, Jay insisted, “Our cause is the cause of God...” Jay closed his address with a call to action. In fervent and emotionally charged language, Jay entreated his listeners to lay claim to their God-given inheritance, writing, “If then God hath given us freedom, are we responsible to him for that, as well as other talents? If it be our birth-right, let us not sell it for a mess of pottage!” If the colonists failed to defend themselves, “What excuse shall we make to our children and our Creator?”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> John Jay, “An Address of the Convention of the Representatives of the State of New York to Their Constituents,” in *The Selected Papers of John Jay*, 338-45.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 346-47.

At the same moment, a hundred and fifty miles to the south in Philadelphia, Thomas Paine entreated his Pennsylvania audience, “These are the times that try men’s souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands by it now, deserve the love and thanks of man and woman.”<sup>76</sup> In parallel language to his New York readers, Jay captured the urgency of the moment, ““If ever a test for the trial of spirits can be necessary, it is now. If ever those of liberty and faction ought to be distinguished from each other, it is now. If ever it be incumbent on the people to know truth and to follow it, it is now.”” Jay gathered up the themes of his essay for an explosive finish, saving his strongest argument for the last. Reworking Berkeley’s words, Jay assured his listeners that all of the weight of history and Providence was on their side, “Rouse, therefore, brave Citizens!...Consider! That from the earliest ages of the world, religion, liberty and empire, have been bounding their course toward the setting sun.”<sup>77</sup>

Two days later, Washington’s troops rallied and launched a surprise attack against Hessian soldiers at Trenton, substantively reversing the course of the war. John Jay’s *An Address of the Convention of the Representatives of the State of New-York to their Constituents* would be forwarded to the Continental Congress, which recommended that it be given “serious perusal” by all Americans. Congress further authorized German translations to be distributed to German-speakers in New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. Dutch translations were circulated in New York, while English reprints were produced in Philadelphia and Baltimore. Across the mid-Atlantic colonies, patriots were swept with the conviction of the providential certainty of their cause. Within just a month of its publication, Charles De Witt wrote Jay from northern New

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<sup>76</sup> Thomas Paine, *The American Crisis* (London, 1819) 1.

<sup>77</sup> Jay, “An Address,” 347.

York describing copies of the pamphlet in the area as “much liked” and “Calculated to draw the attention of the meanest capacity, seriously to consider our present situation.”<sup>78</sup>

During the war years, Berkeley’s poem appeared less frequently in the American press. In the early years of the conflict, the prospects for the American colonies were stunningly bleak. Successive retreats weighed heavily upon patriot expectations as pre-war confidence ran headlong into painful realities. In this context, it is perhaps to be expected that explicit references to America’s future glory were scarce. Rather, Loyalist homages to British glory dominated the literary culture of the early Revolution. From prose to plays to poetry, Loyalists trumpeted British military superiority. As British General William Howe drove Washington in desperate retreat across New Jersey in the fall of 1776, Loyalist verse subverted the westward course motif, with the Old World now arriving at western shores to reclaim its former glory: “He comes, he comes, the Hero comes / Sound, sound your Trumpets, beat your Drums / From port to port let Cannon roar / Howe’s welcome to this western shore.”<sup>79</sup> The British occupation of the important print centers of New York and Philadelphia in the war’s first years also no doubt had a chilling effect upon printed expressions of American confidence. Not until 1783 would Berkeley’s poem materialize again in regular rotation.

While making few explicit appearances in the war years, the poem was nonetheless a palpable presence. The patriotic fervor of war stimulated a new round of poetry that drew inspiration from Berkeley. While bearing a clear resemblance to the celebratory commencement poems of the 1760s, as well as the poetry produced amidst the mounting tension of the early 1770s, this new body of poetry showcased a new set of themes, corresponding to the changing

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<sup>78</sup> Nuxoll, *The Selected Papers*, 320-21.

<sup>79</sup> Quoted in Silverman, *Cultural*, 326.

needs of the new nation. Evolving from a way to assert American cultural achievement and a warning against British oppressive action, Berkeley's *Verses* now became the basis for a new mode of epic poetry that assigned meaning to the word "America." A new nation needed a past; it needed myths; it needed definition. The poets of these years who found inspiration in Berkeley's poem were among the first to grapple with the challenges of fashioning a sense of American nationalism, and they did it largely by memorializing the Revolutionary War as it was happening, finding in their own present the seeds of a "usable past." As America's first national experience, the Revolution served as a powerful means of drawing Americans closer together, as much in battle as in public memory. It offered a common and (mostly) uncontested set of cultural symbols out of which Americans began to construct a sense of national identity where none had existed before.<sup>80</sup>

These poetic works followed a set pattern: tracing the history of freedom from its birth in ancient Greece and Rome to its flowering in the New World; they detailed the course of American settlement; and they reviewed the climactic events of the struggle for independence, from the Stamp Act, through the Boston Massacre and Valley Forge. As the poetry continued to evolve after the Revolution, the Treaty of Paris would be added to the historical repertoire.<sup>81</sup> Joel Barlow, a student and aspiring poet at Yale between 1774 and 1778, could speak directly to the events of the Revolution. The rising tide of patriotism had led him to enlist as a soldier during the long vacation following his sophomore year. Upon returning to college, he translated his

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<sup>80</sup> Sarah J. Purcell, *Sealed with Blood: War, Sacrifice, and Memory in Revolutionary America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 15.

<sup>81</sup> Sacvan Bercovitch, ed., *The Cambridge History of American Literature*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), 595.

experience into *The Prospect of Peace*, a poem he read at the 1778 Yale commencement, and published soon after.<sup>82</sup>

Like many poems of the era, Barlow's heroic couplets opened with the trouble with England and closed with the Day of Judgement after the continent had been settled and the course of empire could no longer westward take its way. Barlow set the historical context in the very first lines of the poem, "The closing scenes of Tyrants' fruitless rage, / The opening prospects of a golden age". Barlow called up images of the rising glory of America and of her progress in sciences, reason, art, and religion. He foresaw,

A broad realm its various charms unfold;  
See crowds [sic] of patriots bless the happy land,  
A godlike senate and a warlike band;  
One friendly Genius fires the numerous whole,  
From glowing Georgia to the frozen pole.

Barlow brought his poem to a close with a hint of the civilizing of western territory through religion and with an account of the beginning of the millennium in America. Barlow painted a picture of a redeemed American empire rising in the west, ending all human history,

Earth's blood-stain'd empire, with their Guide the Sun  
From orient climes their gradual progress run;  
And circling far, reach every western shore,  
'Til earth-born empires rise and fall no more."<sup>83</sup>

A year later, now serving as an army chaplain, Barlow set to work on a far more epic poem in nine books, *The Vision of Columbus*, that would first appear in 1787. As the Revolutionary War progressed, Barlow periodically updated his poem to incorporate the latest events. The poem imagines Christopher Columbus as he sat in prison, contemplating his wasted

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<sup>82</sup> Leon Howard, *The Connecticut Wits* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1943), 136-37.

<sup>83</sup> Joel Barlow, *The Prospect of Peace. A Poetic Composition, delivered at Yale College...* (New Haven, 1788) 3, 5, 11.



life. An angel appears to Columbus in his misery and transports him to the Mount of Vision from which they view America's past and future, helping Columbus to see how he has contributed to the future glory of America, and indeed, to the coming of a universal millennial empire. In the poem, Barlow traces the history of America from the ancient past through its revolutionary present. He recounts the early death of General Montgomery at the Battle of Quebec; the roar of the batteries at Saratoga "When bold Burgoyne, in one disastrous day, / Sees future crowns and former wreaths decay; / While two illustrious armies shade the plain, / The mighty victors and the captive train"; the Battle of Monmouth, where Washington, "the chief of heroes," "moved in sight...He points the charge, the mounted thunders roar...His guiding sword illumed the fields of air...Till flight begins; the smoke is roll'd away...Britons and Germans hurry from the field"; to the battle of Yorktown, when "from the southern isles, a daring train, / With Gallic banners; shades the billow main...While the brave Briton, mid the gathering host, / Perceives his glories and his empire lost."<sup>84</sup>

Having provided a thick, heroic history for the new nation, Barlow returned to the classic theme of cultural progress, devoting an entire book of the poem to the history of the arts that would bring final perfection to America, "That train of arts, that graced mankind before, / Warm'd the glad sage or taught the Muse to soar, Here with superior sway their progress trace, / And aid the triumphs of thy filial race." The poem concluded, as all of these epic nationalist poems did, with a vision of America as the stage for the final act of God's sacred drama.<sup>85</sup>

"On clouds of fire, with Angels at his side,  
The Prince of peace, the King of Salem ride,  
With smiles of love to greet the raptured earth,  
Call slumbering ages to second birth;

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<sup>84</sup> Joel Barlow, *The Vision of Columbus; A Poem in Nine Books* (Hartford, 1787) 172, 175, 185, 193-194.

<sup>85</sup> Elliott, *Revolutionary*, 100.

With all his white-robed millions fill the train,  
And here commence the interminable reign.”<sup>86</sup>

The resonance of Berkeley’s formulation, and the ways in which it continued to be used as a framework on which American poets hung new details but kept the essential ideas intact, indicates the lingering Old World-ness of America through the years of the Revolution. The language of the Revolution, including the language of this synthetic poetry, was essentially backward-looking. The ideological weapons these poets of the new nation used were ones they had inherited from the British. Rooted as much of this ideology was in the late Renaissance, the American Revolution was, as J.G.A. Pocock writes, less the “first political act of revolutionary enlightenment than...the last great act of the Renaissance.”<sup>87</sup> The poetry of the war years had a clear purpose—to historicize the new nation and give it myths to sustain them in the insecurity and turmoil of war. But the relatively rapid decline in popularity of this epic mode of poetry reflects the sense of its increasing anachronism in the new nation as a throwback to a different era and to the literary traditions of a now foreign culture.

For Revolutionary Americans, then, the Peace of 1783 marked a transition from an older, familiar status to a new, hopeful, but largely uncertain one. This disjunction between the world of the Revolution, and what came after is captured in the changing use of Berkeley in the new republic. Americans began to expand the concept, and the elasticity of Berkeley’s formulation was tested and proven. The ways in which citizens of the new United States took license with Berkeley’s poem reveals an evolved sense of self-identity. The best way to understand the shift is that these former colonists, former members of the British empire began to think like Americans.

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<sup>86</sup> Barlow, *The Vision*, 103, 254.

<sup>87</sup> J.G.A. Pocock, “Virtue and Commerce in the Eighteenth Century,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 3 (Summer 1972): 120.

No longer beholden to European imagery and language, no longer fitting their circumstances into Berkeley's framework, Americans began rather conforming Berkeley to their circumstances, on occasion even altering Berkeley's words to do so. While a sense of continental inferiority did not disappear, there is a sense that Americans felt less of a need to prove their conversance with European modes of thought by mimicking European literary forms. Everything was up for reinterpretation, anything could be co-opted to American purposes, including Berkeley.

One of the first ways that became obvious was in the use of the poem as part of post-war Revolutionary commemorations to offer a framework for Americans to historicize their past. In the post-Revolution years, the poem itself became a piece of America's past. As such, it could be used to legitimize the American experiment. In this sense, it was a conservative tool—undermining the radicalism of the revolution by indicating that it was both a natural development in America's historical progress as well as the fulfillment of an increasingly "historic" prophecy. This shift was hinted at as early in 1774, when appearances of the poem in print almost invariably began to include an editorial comment dating the composition of the poem to "nearly 50 years ago."<sup>88</sup> This historical contextualization of the poem became much more pronounced in the years of the early republic, as Americans began to reflect back upon the Revolution and their colonial past.

This early historical memory-making took place largely within the context of ritualized memorial celebrations. Although observed sporadically during the war years, Fourth of July commemorations began in earnest in 1783. In the early republic, the holiday served several

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<sup>88</sup> See "On the Prospect of Arts and Sciences in America," *The Georgia and South-Carolina Almanack, for the year of our Lord 1774*, John Tobler. (Charlestown, SC: 1773) n.p.; "Poetry," *Newport Mercury* (Newport RI) 25 July 1774: 3; "Of the Prospect of Arts and Science in America," *The Virginia Gazette* (Williamsburg VA) 25 August 1774:2.

important functions. As the Revolution receded from memory, the celebration of the fourth of July reconnected postwar Americans to an increasingly legendary past, cultivating a sense of national identity and national interest by stressing historical and moral origins which Americans presumably held in common. At the same time, the Fourth also provided an opportunity for Americans to reexamine their understandings of the past at regular intervals, and to alter those perceptions to accommodate new understandings, or even to broach wholly new interpretations. In this way, Independence Day rituals allowed Americans the flexibility to redefine the significance of their collective memory as needed.<sup>89</sup>

Americans had much to celebrate at the Fourth of July commemoration in 1789. The new United States Constitution had been ratified the previous summer. The contentious squabbling among the states that had characterized the debates surrounding the Constitution and its ratification had finally, if temporarily, resolved. The Constitution had gone into effect in September. The new government it had created began operating in March, with George Washington inaugurated as the nation's first president at the end of April. To the tens of thousands who had gathered along the path of Washington's triumphal journey from his home at Mount Vernon to the seat of the new federal government in New York, the inauguration signaled both the close of the revolutionary period and the beginning of a new era. America could now embark on a national existence like that of longer-established countries.<sup>90</sup>

The fourth of July celebration in Boston sought to harness the joyous spirit of the recent events on this very first independence anniversary under the new federal government. The day began with ringing bells and the firing of guns. Though the weather was "cloudy and unpleasant,

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<sup>89</sup> Len Travers, *Celebrating the Fourth: Independence Day and the Rites of Nationalism in the Early Republic* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 6-7, 10, 35.

<sup>90</sup> Silverman, *Cultural*, 598.

it could not impede the sunshine of cheerfulness which beamed in every countenance.”

Spectators were treated to a parade of military companies in uniform. A concert with vocal and instrumental performances followed. The celebrations were punctuated with moments of solemnity, as participants recalled the cost of independence.<sup>91</sup>

When Reverend Samuel Stillman delivered the anniversary oration, he adhered to a precise formula that had developed as Independence Day celebrations became a ritualized event. Audiences had come to expect the oration to address several major points, including the causes of the Revolution, the heroic characters who directed and achieved its successful conclusion, the blessings and advantages of republican government, and the importance of maintaining virtue, on which the entire experiment depended.<sup>92</sup> As Stillman tracked through these prescribed themes, he framed them within an overarching idea of God’s inexorable plan of history. “The American Revolution...is a great event in the moral government of God: new and astonishing to us and to surrounding nations, but not so that Omniscient Being, who is said....to see the end from the beginning,” Stillman began. “His unalterable purpose was its prime foundation.” Stillman then took the listeners through the unfolding of God’s purpose for America, from the arrival of their ancestors “driven by the violence of persecution from their native country,” through their creation of a commonwealth and the establishment of religious and educational institutions where freedom was a guiding principle.<sup>93</sup>

But while this love of liberty taught the colonists to be wary of oppression, it was not the cause of the Revolution. Stillman repeatedly emphasized rather a sense of inevitability, it was

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<sup>91</sup> “Boston, July 7,” *The Cumberland Gazette* (Portland, ME) 17 July 1789: 4.

<sup>92</sup> Travers, *Celebrating*, 49.

<sup>93</sup> Samuel Stillman, *An oration, delivered July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1789, at the request of the inhabitants of the town of Boston, in celebration of the anniversary of American independence* (Boston, 1789) n.p.

“the distance of the colonies from the mother country,” a matter of natural circumstance, “which rendered their Independence an unavoidable event, at a given period...” In making this argument, Stillman echoed Thomas Paine’s now-famous contention concerning the fundamental unnaturalness of such a large continent under the rule of a tiny island. But repeatedly, whether detailing the offenses of the British, or the difficulties the new nation faced under the Articles of Confederation, or the character of George Washington, or the blessings of the new federal constitution, Stillman circled back to a sense of providential guidance, by “that God, with whom are all the events of Empire.”<sup>94</sup>

The speech crescendoed with an ecstatic description of the prospects for the future glory of America set against a European world relegated to the past. “The sun of the old world is setting; of the new just beginning to rise,” Stillman cried. “Hail! my country, the glorious theatre, perhaps, of heaven’s last wondrous acts! That divine personage who made his entrance in the east, will ride in triumph through this western world.” Stillman was not content to leave the Berkeleyan logic implicit. He continued, “It is more than twenty years since a learned Prelate thus sung thy greatness O my country, in prophetic verse.” Stillman closed his speech quoting Berkeley’s poem at length. As Bostonians left this first celebration of the new nation, “Westward the course of empire takes its way, the four first acts already past, The fifth shall close the drama with the day; Time’s noblest offspring is the last,” rang in their ears.<sup>95</sup> As an exercise in forming collective, national identity, Stillman’s speech grounded American citizens in a distinctive religious heritage that gave the United States the stamp of Providential approbation. Using Berkeley’s *Verses* as a relic of America’s past and further framing it as the pronouncement of a

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 6-7.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 21, 19-30.

prophet, Stillman sought to posit a certainty with his listeners that, despite its radical beginnings and chaotic progress, the United States of America was meant to be.

Stillman's Fourth of July oration in 1789 launched a storied tradition of using Berkeley's *Verses*, and the final stanza in particular, to root the inception of the United States of America in an increasingly sacred and ancient past. Indeed, by the 1810s, orators were thrilling audiences with a "prophecy, written nearly 200 years ago... 'Westward the star of empire holds its way; the first two acts already past; the next shall close the drama of the day; Times noblest offspring is the last.'"<sup>96</sup> Some details were, clearly, lost in translation, but the dynamic power of Berkeley's final stanza remained unchanged. This altered form took on a life of its own, appearing in newspapers from Norfolk, Virginia to Concord, New Hampshire.<sup>97</sup>

The historicizing, legitimating, and not least of all, political, usefulness of Berkeley's poem in these early years of Revolutionary memory is perhaps best captured by an oration delivered in 1802. It was not the fourth of July being celebrated, but rather the first landing of the Pilgrims, although its meaning was entirely interpreted through the lens of the Revolution. John Quincy Adams, son of America's second, and now former, president John Adams, had been invited to speak. This annual celebration of the Plymouth landing, known as Forefather's Day, was a relatively recent creation—the first commemoration dated only to 1769.<sup>98</sup> For much of the colonial period, the Pilgrims had been a footnote to New England history, eclipsed by the larger, wealthier, and louder Puritan migration. But in the late 1790s, the Pilgrims had re-emerged as

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<sup>96</sup> "Poetry," *Susquehanna Centinel* (Montrose PA) 14 June 1817: 4.

<sup>97</sup> "Poetry," *The American Beacon and Commercial Diary* (Norfolk VA) 26 July 1817: 4; "Poetry," *Newburyport Herald* (Newburyport MA) 19 June 1818: 4; *New Hampshire Patriot and State Gazette* (Concord NH) 30 June 1818: 4; "Poetry," *Alexandria Gazette* (Alexandria VA) 18 July 1818: 2.

<sup>98</sup> Albert Matthews, "The Term 'Pilgrim Fathers' and Early Celebrations of Forefathers' Day," *Colonial Society of Massachusetts Publication* 17 (1915): 295.

singularly useful political tools. In the growing conflicts between New England Federalists and their southern Jeffersonian opponents that marked the turn of the nineteenth century, Federalists had seized upon these humble first-comers to strengthen their claim to historical and thus political legitimacy. Forefathers Days had rapidly evolved into blatantly partisan celebrations.<sup>99</sup>

But in 1802, Adams struck a conciliatory note, using the Pilgrim landing to fashion an influential and durable inclusive national myth. Departing from tradition, Adams placed his emphasis not on the love of religion and liberty that drove the Pilgrims forth, nor on the fact of their arrival, but rather on the social contract they drew up while still aboard the Mayflower.<sup>100</sup> In this brief contract, known as the Mayflower Compact, the Pilgrims pledged a covenant to one another, binding themselves together in a “civil body politic,” setting up a government for the young colony by majority consent, and in turn pledging to submit to the rules of this government for the good of the community. Resurrecting the Compact from the dustbin of history, Adams drew parallels between the Compact and the Enlightenment utopian theory of social contract between the rulers and the ruled that was foundational to the Revolution and invoked in the Declaration of Independence. What had only ever been an idyllic dream had been made real by America’s forefathers, Adams declared, claiming, “This is, perhaps, the only instance, in human history, of that positive, original social compact which speculative philosophers have imagined as the only legitimate source of power...a unanimous and personal assent by all individuals of the community, to the association by which they became a nation.” In this, the founders of Plymouth clearly differed from all those other settlers of “former European Colonies [who] had

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<sup>99</sup> Mark L. Sargent, “The Conservative Covenant: The Rise of the Mayflower Compact in American Myth,” *New England Quarterly* 61 (June 1988): 234.

<sup>100</sup> John D. Seelye, *Memory’s Nation: The Place of Plymouth Rock* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 55-57.



contented themselves with the powers conferred upon them by their respective charters, without looking beyond the seal of the royal parchment for the measure of their rights.”<sup>101</sup> In thinking independently in this way, the Pilgrims “anticipated the improvement of their nation.”<sup>102</sup> In a few short paragraphs, Adams had created a founding myth that all Americans could subscribe to. The Pilgrims, stripped of their sectarianism, became a model of progressive ideology. The exceptional document they created, that was so clearly a prolegomenon to the Constitution, had foreshadowed the creation of the United States.<sup>103</sup> By making the Pilgrims precursors to citizens of the new republic, Adams transformed a quaint piece of New England history into a foundation myth for the entire nation.

As he closed his speech, Adams turned to one other prophetic text. “Nearly a century ago,” he intoned, “one of those rare minds to whom it is given to discern future greatness in its seminal principles, upon contemplating the situation of this continent, pronounced in a vein of prophetic inspiration, ‘Westward the Star of empire takes its way.’” Adams continued, “Let us all unite in ardent supplication to the founder of nations...that what then was prophecy may continue unfolding into history—that the dearest hopes of the human race may not be extinguished in disappointment, and that the last may prove the noblest empire of time.”<sup>104</sup>

Pairing Berkeley with the Pilgrims made the myth that much larger. Not only had the Pilgrims anticipated the founding of United States, but they themselves were nested within a larger narrative of epic proportions that many Americans would by now be familiar with: the unfolding of world history that heralded nothing less than the fulfillment of the “dearest hopes of the

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<sup>101</sup> John Quincy Adams, *An Oration, delivered at Plymouth, December 22, 1802* (Boston, 1802) 17-18.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>103</sup> Seelye, *Memory's*, 55.

<sup>104</sup> Adams, *An Oration*, 31.

human race,” here, in North America. One myth begot a greater myth. Thus, the oration that launched the Mayflower Compact into a thousand textbooks made a compatible myth out of Berkeley, creating a web of shared history for a nation that had too little.<sup>105</sup>

Adams did one other thing that deepened the prophetic meaning of Berkeley: he misremembered the line of the poem—replacing “course” with “star.” Adams was not the first to make this mistake; versions of Berkeley’s line prophesying a westward “star” had appeared a handful of times since the 1770s. But in this case, it was an exceptionally impactful rhetorical slip. On top of a line that, by this point, was as familiar and comforting as a motto to many Americans, Adams had layered a new image, giving the line even greater possibilities. Not only was America part of the universal movement of history, but it was also now a guiding star, arching westward, lighting up the great expanses of wilderness even as it lit the firmament for all the world to see. The imagery of a star captured the dynamic movement already present in the stanza, and it further linked Berkeley’s prophecy more closely to the founding of the United States. The star was rapidly becoming a potent symbol in America—emblazoned in a group of thirteen on the first national flags.

As America pushed into the nineteenth century, Berkeley’s poem would be reprinted more often than not with the word “star” in place of “course.” And optimistic, resourceful Americans created new interpretations of the poem to fit around this altered imagery. When, between 1812 and 1815, the endurance of the United States of America was tested anew on the field of battle as conflict with Britain recommenced, Americans turned again to Berkeley’s trusted words to quiet fears and soothe anxious minds, and found that the altered language of the

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<sup>105</sup> “The exaggerated language usually applied to the compact originated with John Quincy Adams in this speech, before which time little attention was paid to it.” Matthews, “The Term,” 295n.

poem could be just as stirring. “America is not destined to an early termination of her splendid career,” Edward Bangs declared at the Fourth of July festivities in Sutton, Massachusetts in 1813. “She did not rise with bright and dazzling lustre, foretelling deliverance to the human race, so soon to set in everlasting night. For this her sages did not toil; her heroes did not bleed for this. She is reserved to consummate some higher purpose.—‘*Westward the star of empire holds his way.*’”<sup>106</sup>

The imagery of the star conjured up further powerful associations that Americans were quick to seize upon. Drawing a parallel with the biblical star of Bethlehem, one correspondent to the Federalist Boston newspaper *Federal Orrery* proclaimed, “[Many] suns have not yet revolved, since the star of empire, which led the Magi of Europe to the cradle of freedom, first appeared in the western hemisphere.”<sup>107</sup> Just as the most celebrated star in Judeo-Christian history had led the wise men westward, a star had pointed the way for the Pilgrim fathers seeking a refuge in America, these nationalistic armchair astronomers argued, and so too would this star lead the way to new frontiers and a new destiny. The movement of stars, constant and predictable, was a divine sign to be followed to the westward destination.<sup>108</sup>

There was no image better than a rising star to capture the mood of the country in these years of the early republic. If this period could be characterized by a single pervasive mentality, the word was progress. Among the many attitudinal shifts that the American Revolution brought about was an overwhelming belief that they had been liberated from the past, both from Old

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<sup>106</sup> Bangs, Edward D. *An oration, pronounced at Sutton, Massachusetts, July 5<sup>th</sup>, 1813, in commemoration of American Independence* (Boston, 1813) n.p.

<sup>107</sup> “For the Federal Orrery. Impartialis- No II,” *Federal Orrery* (Boston MA) 27 October 1794: 9.

<sup>108</sup> Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansionism and the Empire of Right* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996), 18.

World history and from their own shallow, dependent colonial heritage.<sup>109</sup> What seemed more important in the decades following the war was the idea of “improvement”—both in the life of the nation and in their own lives. Improvement was a word that fit with the rapid transformation of American life after the Revolution. The population boomed—doubling every twenty years. This exploding population was on the move as never before, spreading themselves over half a continent at astonishing speeds. Two great wagon-roads shuttled people west across the Allegheny Mountains in Pennsylvania. Another road crossed the Cumberland Gap between Virginia and Tennessee. By 1800, a steady stream of wagons packed full of pioneers and their possessions rolled right over the Proclamation Line of 1763, obliterating the boundary that had stymied colonists’ dreams and helped cause a war.<sup>110</sup> The West had been opened for settlement, and settlers came as never before. Of course, the West was not an empty wasteland. It was home to tens of thousands of Native Americans spread wide across the interior of the continent; Spain yet dominated Florida, Louisiana, and the southwest. But that would all be addressed in time. Meanwhile, settlement in the western territories was growing. By 1800, Ohio had gone from a virtual wilderness on the eve of the Revolution to a territory more populous than most of the original thirteen colonies had been at the time of the Revolution, while Kentucky had become the largest community west of the Appalachian Mountains. Between 1790 and 1820, Kentucky’s population multiplied nearly eight times.<sup>111</sup>

In this new chapter of America’s story, Americans brought Berkeley with them. To Americans gazing beyond the Appalachians, the logic of translatio helped explain not only their

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<sup>109</sup> Michael Kammen, *A Season of Youth: The American Revolution and the Historical Imagination* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1988), 5.

<sup>110</sup> Henry Adams, *The United States in 1800* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1963), 1-2.

<sup>111</sup> Gordon Wood, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789-1815* (New York: Oxford UP, 2009), 2.

past and the freedom they had fought for with blood, but their future as well, and the “empire” that was to be theirs in the Ohio and Mississippi valleys. The concept of an empire ordained by God made every step forward holy, just, necessary.<sup>112</sup> As Americans began pouring across the Appalachians in search of new land and new opportunity, the *Verses* affirmed that they were but fulfilling their God-given destiny. “‘Westward the star of Empire takes its way’—said the prophetic Bishop of Cloyne, a number of years since” read an article in the *Providence Gazette* in 1784, “and it can be said, it still progresses in that direction—if we may believe the accounts we have received from several quarters, of the great number of person who are now going and soon intend journeying to the Ohio country.”<sup>113</sup> Pausing at the Cumberland Gap, or the Monongahela River at the eastern edge of the Ohio Valley, the expanse spread out before them, America’s future seemed limitless. The empire had only begun.

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<sup>112</sup> J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1975), 510-11.

<sup>113</sup> “Legislative.” *Providence Gazette* (Providence RI) 10 November 1787: 3.

## Chapter 3

### “Luxury Sat Like an Incubus”: Anxiety, Elation, and Thomas Cole’s *Course of Empire* in the Early American Republic

It was a steamy August afternoon in 1824. The speaker for the distinguished Phi Beta Kappa Society oration at Harvard University, commemorating America’s fiftieth anniversary, stepped to the podium. Edward Everett, the chosen orator for the occasion and a public speaker of some renown in New England, had earned national recognition through his essays in the pages of the *North American Review*. The aging senator from Massachusetts Daniel Webster was an admirer and close friend who only a year earlier had brought Everett’s political commentary to the attention of President James Monroe, just in time to influence Monroe’s iconic 1823 State of the Union Address, the speech in which he laid the cornerstone of his foreign policy, the Monroe Doctrine.

When Everett rose to speak, he chafed under the monotony of a professorship at Harvard in Greek literature. The governorship of Massachusetts, election as Senator, selection as Secretary of State, and President of Harvard all lay in the future.<sup>1</sup> The galleries of the old church where the oration was to be given were packed. Everett’s growing fame as an orator was no doubt one part of the draw. But of even greater interest was the presence of General Lafayette, only recently arrived in the country after an absence of forty years, throwing the whole community into “a feverish excitement,” conjuring up “revolutionary memories connected with the place and neighborhood, the historic names which rose upon the lips of everyone,--Bunker Hill, Dorchester Heights, Lexington, Concord.” The crowd eagerly welcome this great friend of

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Mason, *Apostle of Union: A Political Biography of Edward Everett* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 24-34.

the country back to its shores. Speaking in “clear, untremulous and silvery tones,” Everett surveyed the progress of the country over the preceding decades.<sup>2</sup> Ostensibly a speech about the prospects of the development of a unique American literature, Everett used the opportunity to trace the development of societies throughout history. He drew attention to the aspects of America that made it so unique in the context of the march of civilization: its liberty, its free and popular institutions, including a free press that “with all its mighty power” spread ideas and circulated opinions without the impediment of a “diversity” of foreign languages, “over an empire more extensive than the whole of Europe.” Given these advantages, Everett predicted that “in no remote futurity,” this continent would be filled with “the mightiest kindred people known in history.”<sup>3</sup>

The United States’ recent history supported this assertion, Everett reminded his audience. Over the past two centuries, its population had doubled nearly every twenty-five years. Far out on the American frontier, Lexington, Kentucky, so named for the 1775 battle that occurred within weeks of its founding, had transformed from an encampment in the woods into “the capital of a state larger than Massachusetts” and was already the seat of a university “as fully attended as our venerable [Harvard]” in 1824. And the tide of emigration was pushing still further westward. But this remarkable expansion was by no means the full measure of the nation’s growth. The development of urban manufacturing, improvements in agriculture, and the construction of canals across the continent all pointed to the rapid rate of progress that Everett likened to a healthy giant, journeying on, “with a pace more like romance than reality.”<sup>4</sup> The

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<sup>2</sup> Rufus P. Stebbins, “Edward Everett as an Orator,” *Cornell Era* 4 (January 1872): 195-196.

<sup>3</sup> Edward Everett, *An Oration Pronounced at Cambridge Before the Society of Phi Beta Kappa* (New York, 1824), 5-32.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 28-32.

excitement in the audience was palpable as Everett reached the climax of his speech, “When we survey the progress of man,” when we follow him “from his cradle in the east to these last limits of his wandering,” Everett thundered, “We cannot but exclaim with Bishop Berkeley, the generous prelate of England, who bestowed his benefactions, as well as blessings, on our country, ‘Westward the Star of Empire takes its way; The four first acts already past, The fifth shall close the drama with the day; Time’s noblest offspring is the last.’ In that high romance, if romance it be, in which the great minds of antiquity sketched the fortunes of the ages to come, they pictured to themselves a favored region beyond the ocean, a land of equal laws and happy men.” And it now lay to this generation to fulfill America’s destiny. “By us must these fair visions be realized, by us must be fulfilled these high auspices.” There were no continents or worlds left to be revealed, “no more discoveries, no more hopes. Here then a mighty work is to be fulfilled, or never, by the race of mortals.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, Everett laid before his audience the glory, and the weight, of America’s exceptional role in world history.

Everett’s charge arrived at a critical moment in the nation’s history, one marked by dramatic change. A market revolution facilitated by improvements in transportation and the physical expansion of the nation paired with changes in attitudes and behavior in which most familiar forms of authority disintegrated were transforming the nation. Americans were beginning to feel the forces of modernity at the same time that the Revolutionary generation was passing away. James Monroe, just leaving office in 1824, was the last president to have been an adult at the time of the Declaration of Independence. The somewhat sudden and apparently permanent prosperity coupled with unprecedented expansion brought sharp realization that America was in danger of losing vital contact with the revered ideals of the past. The response to

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<sup>5</sup> Stebbins, “Edward Everett,” 196; Everett, *An Oration*, 38-39.



this realization involved a national reorientation, an assessment of what America had been, what it was, and what it was to be.<sup>6</sup>

In this period, two competing narratives of American destiny developed, and in both visions, Berkeley's famous line, "Westward the Course of Empire takes its Way," figured decisively. In one narrative, Berkeley's line, divorced from its original context, and sheered of its moral demands, functioned as a tried and true old saw. Repeatedly quoted as a description of America's progress and a prophecy fulfilled, it seemed to affirm America's potential as the nation headed temporally into the nineteenth century, physically across the continent, and historically into the epic history of world empires. And as the costs of this progress mounted, it could, at the same time, be rolled out to justify the social and environmental exploitation inherent in uninhibited capitalistic development.

But an alternative narrative challenged this ebullient reading, hewing much more closely to the historical context of Berkeley's poem. Conscious of the cycles of history, and the role of luxury in bringing empires down, critics feared the evils inherent in prosperity, and cautioned a clear-eyed approach to economic and material progress. For many writers and artists, the changes of these decades were cause for anxiety. In multifaceted ways, they lodged their concerns as warnings. Among the most well-known and powerful such warnings of this era was Thomas Cole's *Course of Empire* (1834-1836), a series of five paintings that took its title from Berkeley's poem. In Cole's hands too, the reference to Berkeley's poem was intended to conjure up prophetic notions. But the prophecy Cole identified in Berkeley's poem and poured across his canvases was not one of inevitable and exceptional triumph, but rather a tiresome and predictable

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<sup>6</sup> Fred Somkin, *Unquiet Eagle: Memory and Desire in the Idea of American Freedom, 1815-1860* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1967), 4.

declension narrative predicated upon the loss of national virtue—the quality upon which Berkeley’s original prophetic utterances revolved. Cole seems to have uniquely understood that in Berkeley’s philosophical schema, the virtue that Berkeley attributed to the colonies, that predicated the removal of empire from England to America, was not inherent to the New World, but rather conditionally based on its precapitalistic values and uncorrupted natural environs. The question for Cole and other critics of American progress was whether the prophecy would still hold if those qualities no longer held. Cole’s epic series was an attempt to force America to grapple with this question. Allegorically picturing the changes being wrought in America as indicative not of an empire on the rise, but an empire on the verge of collapse, Cole used his canvases to issue a sounding alarm, urging America to turn back before it fell to the relentless tide of destiny.

Because, indeed, beneath both narratives lay a singular question: What did the United States stand for and what ought its destiny to be? Would it cleave to the past, one defined by traditional hierarchies of authority, direct and intimate forms of exchange, implicit social obligations coupled with unencumbered freeholds, an agrarian empire characterized by its pursuit of common good over personal gain; one that found virtue in self-sacrifice? Or, conversely, would it charge into the future, embracing the capitalist spirit sweeping through the western world, a credo of credit and debt, risk and profit, improvement at the expense of the past, free trade, impersonal markets, equality of opportunity coupled with the elevation of individual rights over the needs of the larger community; one that identified virtue with success?<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Cathy Matson and Peter Onuf, “Toward a Republican Empire: Interest and Ideology in Revolutionary America,” *American Quarterly* 37 (Autumn 1985): 497-99.

By the end of the era, the question would be resoundingly answered. Progress was the watchword and America's future decisively lay in an aggressively capitalistic and acquisitive society, a direction that demanded a startling revision of the traditional notion of republican virtue that lay at the heart of the American experiment. Cole's series, painted with an eye to stave off the destruction portended by the United States' departure from its founding values, offers a window into the contemporary stakes of the debate. At the same time, the misreading and ultimate rejection with which audiences greeted Cole's series is a register not only of the extent to which Americans had coopted and transformed Berkeley's poetic line in service to American material and imperial ambitions, but the extent to which American identity had transformed in the fifty years between the creation of the Constitution and the twilight of the early Republic when Cole's series was first hung in the gallery of the New-York Historical Society.

The America that General Lafayette encountered on his celebrated return tour and that constituted the backdrop to Cole's series was a thriving, growing commercial empire, a nation literally on the move. The engine behind this growth was the development of a relatively new and profoundly disrupting economic system: capitalism. The Early Republic is a key transitional period, where the elements of full-blown capitalism that would come to characterize the American economy by the close of the nineteenth century—a flexible currency, banking, corporations, transportation systems, industrialization, and pervasive consumerism—began to take shape. A unified national paper currency would not appear until the Civil War, but in the interim the growth of a robust banking system provided a fluid, expansive, and extensive money supply. This new money poured into land speculation, mercantile activities, transportation innovations, even industrial production, multiplying wealth which might be used to underwrite

more banks, which printed more money, which expanded the economy further. The emergence of corporations in this period became a vehicle of capital investment. The concept of “corporation” itself was indicative of the shifting values of this era. Early corporations had to compete for a limited number of government charters in order to operate. Charters conferred special grants of privilege, often in the form of a monopoly, provided that such privately-run enterprises pursued activity for the general welfare. By the middle decades of the nineteenth century, this notion had deteriorated to the point that all economic activity began to be seen as pursuing the public good and corporations became a means to pool investment resources for banks and many other enterprises.<sup>8</sup> To people sensitive to the pace of change and mindful of the old rhetoric of national virtue, these were profoundly alarming developments.

As Cole conceived his series, these changes were at the forefront of his mind. America seemed to be following the trajectory of the *translatio imperii* with excessive speed, in no small way carried forward by a transportation revolution conveying capitalist tendencies to the furthest reaches of American settlement. With the support of local and state governments, merchants and financiers blanketed the country with new bridges and roads. The fledgling railroad, introduced in the 1830s, served as the final link in the transportation boom and the expansion of the market economy.<sup>9</sup> The exploding American population—doubling every twenty-five years—followed these roads out onto the frontier, hungry for lands newly opened up by the federal government, helping to drive a flourishing business in land speculation.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Paul A. Gilje, “The Rise of Capitalism in the Early Republic,” in *Wages of Independence: Capitalism in the Early American Republic* ed. Paul A. Gilje (Madison, WI: Madison House Publishers, 1997), 3-4.

<sup>9</sup> George Rogers Taylor, *The Transportation Revolution, 1815-1860* (New York: Rinehart, 1951).

<sup>10</sup> Rowland Berthoff, *An Unsettled People: Social Order and Disorder in American History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 136-38; Gilje, “The Rise,” 6.

Land speculation, and westward expansion itself, benefited from the neutralization of many of the historical indigenous nations. Andrew Jackson's presidency, the immediate context of Cole's *Course of Empire* series, took place against the backdrop of the extralegal, forced removal of Cherokees, Chickasaws, Choctaws, and Seminoles from the Southeast to the edge of the Great Plains in Indian Territory.<sup>11</sup> As the Gulf South emptied out its native inhabitants, settlers rushed in to stake their claims upon the plains of rich black soil. The cultivation of cotton, beginning with Eli Whitney's introduction of the cotton gin in 1793 had transformed the southern plantation economy, and was a critical component in the national development of capitalism that benefited not only southern elites, but investors up and down the Atlantic coast and out into the backcountry. With cotton cultivation's tendency to rapidly deplete the soil, and the most successful cotton planters buying up much of the best land, would-be cotton kings were pushed ever westward.<sup>12</sup>

For the nation, the most significant aspect of the cotton revolution was its role in reviving slavery. The expansion of slavery had slowed in the late eighteenth-century, and had seemed to many observers to be declining after the Revolution. In the North, where the institution had always been weakest, every state government had either abolished slavery or taken some step toward doing so by 1807; enlightened observers around the country expressed the hope and expectation that the South would follow suit in the not too distant future. But southern slaveholders showed, at best, a tepid commitment to emancipation—and the cotton boom of the early nineteenth century entrenched slavery even further.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Berthoff, *Unsettled*, 142.

<sup>12</sup> Edward Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2014); Sven Becket, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Penguin, 2015), 102-104.

<sup>13</sup> Baptist, *The Half*, 86-93.

The labor of cotton plantation slaves rapidly monopolized the balance of American trade. By the late 1830s, it accounted for over half the value of American exports. Much of the profit from the sale of cotton overseas returned to planters, but some went to northern middlemen who bought, sold, insured, warehoused, and shipped cotton to the new textiles mills of Europe, and increasingly, New England, where shifting modes of production constituted another element in the rise of American capitalism. Increased capital allowed for a developing economy of scale—and the manufacturing of goods moved progressively from small workshops into mechanized factories, feeding a seemingly voracious American appetite for *stuff*.<sup>14</sup>

But the ascendancy of capitalism as the guiding force of the American life was no foregone conclusion. The existence of alternatives to this mode of thought and behavior fed Cole's hope that his paintings could serve as a course corrective. For capitalism to become the foundation of society and government, some of the most basic assumptions of American life had to be redefined, forcing an evolution of notions of prosperity and progress in relation to American empire and destiny.<sup>15</sup> Undoubtedly, economic and technological progress threatened to undermine older values. By tapping natural resources and multiplying the results of American labor, new technology provided the nation with unprecedented and ever-increasing wealth, leading some to question if the country could withstand the temptations of its new prosperity. Discomfort and distrust of prosperity and its attendant luxury had been capitalism's companion from its first emergence in the Anglo-world in the seventeenth century. In fact, republican ideology had gained its new vitality in response to the development of capitalism in the late

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<sup>14</sup> Gilje, "The Rise," 6.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Zakim and Gary J. Kornblith, "An American Revolutionary Tradition," in *Capitalism Takes Command: The Social Transformation of Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Michael Zakim and Gary J. Kornblith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 1.

seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Broadly speaking, republicanism had emerged as a critique of the economic and administrative changes of the modernizing British economy in the wake of the Glorious Revolution and the settlement that saw the ascent of Parliament to power. An expanding economy of merchants and manufacturers could not survive without banks and networks of credit and loans. British “Country” politicians identified the new commercial interests with Court Whigs. Criticism became particularly shrill in the early decades of the eighteenth century, fed by catastrophic economic downturns like the one precipitated by the bursting of the South Sea Bubble. From the republican perspective, the new potential for economic and political excess, the rampant “stockjobbery” of nascent capitalism jeopardized public virtue. It was this transformation of England’s political economy, and the perceived loss of national virtue that followed, that caused Berkeley’s “Muse, disgusted at an age and clime,” to seek refuge “In distant lands...In happy climes, the seat of innocence, Where nature guides and virtue rules, Where men shall not impose for truth and sense The pedantry of court...”<sup>16</sup> It was precisely America’s precapitalism, her primeval virtue, a virtue rooted in the unspoiled land, that spurred Berkeley’s prophetic reverie.

In the earliest days of the American Revolution, American republicans were animated by the same critique of capitalism and luxury, and the threat they posed to republican virtue, as American patriots feasted upon a steady diet of English “country” opposition writings. History repeatedly demonstrated that material prosperity and expanding, acquisitive empire perverted the relationships between people and government by attaching the selfish interests of the citizen to government in various corrupt ways, resulting in the eventual subversion of personal

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<sup>16</sup> George Berkeley, “Verses on the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America,” in *The Works of George Berkeley*, Vol. 4, ed. Alexander Campbell Fraser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1901), 365.

independence and with it the very bedrock of civic virtue on which the republic had been founded. In the end, tyranny would rise out of the ashes of liberty.<sup>17</sup> John Adams' youthful musings in the midst of the French and Indian War had turned on this very idea. Just as Rome had degenerated through victorious conquest and effete luxury, so, Adams observed, ran the course of empires throughout time. The threat that this pattern could be repeated in America was a specter that haunted the founding fathers.

A healthy republic, as the Revolutionaries conceived it, needed safeguards against such decay. To that end, they emphasized the necessity of virtuous citizens, men who were self-reliant property owners, thus independent; who were committed above all to the public good, making personal interests subordinate to the needs of the state; who were armed against the threat of tyranny; who were deferential to a natural social hierarchy, but neither so rich nor so powerful as to reduce others to dependence (women, children, servants, and slaves, notwithstanding).<sup>18</sup> Wealth posed a particular threat in the minds of many of the Revolutionary generation. Their fears were captured in the comment of one attendee at the New York convention to ratify the United States Constitution in 1788. "As riches increase and accumulate in few hands; as luxury prevails in society; virtue will be in a greater degree considered as only a graceful appendage of wealth," he warned, "and the tendency of things will be to depart from the republican standard."<sup>19</sup> While the Founders certainly envisaged a prosperous America, they narrowly

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<sup>17</sup> J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1975, 2016) 469; Rowland Berthoff, "Independence and Attachment, Virtue and Interest," in *Uprooted Americans: Essay to Honor Oscar Handlin*, ed. Richard L. Bushman, et al. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1979) 99-100.

<sup>18</sup> Berthoff, "Independence," 100.

<sup>19</sup> "New York Ratifying Convention. First Speech of June 21, 1788," *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified June 13, 2018.



circumscribed wealth: the virtuous citizen ought to be industrious, practicing economy and amassing wealth, but only in order to improve his ability to serve the nation.<sup>20</sup> Self-sacrifice was the pivot around which all other characteristics turned. As historian Gordon Wood argues in *The Creation of the American Republic*, “The sacrifice of individual interests to the greater good of the whole formed the essence of republicanism and comprehended for Americans the idealist goal of their Revolution.”<sup>21</sup> This idealism pushed back against what they perceived as a self-serving elite who controlled the reins of parliament in England and had played a central role in leading that country into militarism, decadence, and decay. This, of course, was the essential argument underlying Bishop Berkeley’s critique of England, the reason his poetic Muses had been sent scuttling across the Atlantic Ocean to find inspiration in the virgin and virtuous climes of America.

But in the decades after the Revolution, republican idealism ran up against reality. As early as the Constitutional period, leading thinkers were already having to revise classical notions of virtuous republican government. Gordon Wood characterizes this era as the end of the classical conception of politics and the beginning of what he terms “a romantic view of politics.” The classical conception of the republic was predicated upon a simple, static notion of society. It presupposed that people were a homogenous entity who stayed within their complementary roles, gave appropriate deference depending upon their place in an organic social hierarchy, and remained disinterested at all points and on all matters. The reality of the early republic, however, was a cacophony of competing interests: for and against the proposed Constitution, for and

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<sup>20</sup> Colleen E. Terrell, “‘Republican Machines’: Franklin, Rush, and the Manufacture of Civic Virtue in the Early Republic,” *Early American Studies* 1 (Fall 2003): 110.

<sup>21</sup> Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969, 1998), 53.

against a national bank, for and against tariffs, taxes, a new federal capital, westward expansion, and a whole host of greater and lesser issues, including the rise of capitalism itself, that divided the American people and precipitated the split into separate political parties by the 1790s. It took just a few years for the Founders to recognize that Americans held an array of interests in opposition to one another and were fiercely jealous for their individual rights; they were less a homogenous disinterested entity than “an agglomeration of hostile individuals coming together for their mutual benefit to construct a society.”<sup>22</sup>

In the midst of a dynamically transforming capitalistic economy in the early decades of the nineteenth century, moreover, a host of new interests were amplified: mercantile interests, manufacturing interests, cotton interests, slave interests, banking interests, all undergirded by an unmistakable acquisitiveness. This struck numerous observers of American society in the early years of the nineteenth century. Alexis de Tocqueville, traveling through America in the 1830s, observed that money seemed to inordinately fascinate Americans. “The love of wealth is...either as a principal or an accessory motive, at the bottom of all that the Americans do.”<sup>23</sup> Michel Chevalier, an attaché of the French government who arrived in the United States in 1833 for a two-year visit to study the construction of canals and railroads observed of his travels through the continent, “The present generation in the United States, brought up in devotion to business, living in an atmosphere of self-interest, if it is superior to the last generation in commercial intelligence and industrial enterprise, is inferior to it in civil courage and love of the public good.”<sup>24</sup> While these may have been typical hyperbolic remarks of foreign observers, there is

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 606-07.

<sup>23</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 2 (1835; repr., New York: Appleton and Company, 1905) 716.

<sup>24</sup> Michel Chevalier, *Society, Manners, and Politics in the United States* (Boston, 1839) 393.

nonetheless evidence of a shift in how Americans understood prosperity as national wealth dramatically increased in the first half of the nineteenth century.

For those who were in a position to be tempted by the new promise of prosperity, they suggested that luxury was not necessarily an evil, but in the proper context might prove socially beneficial as well as individually rewarding. Writing in 1784, Benjamin Franklin queried, “Is not the Hope of one day being able to purchase and enjoy Luxuries a great Spur to Labour and Industry? May not Luxury, therefore, produce more than it consumes if without such a Spur People would be, as they are naturally enough inclined to be, lazy and indolent?”<sup>25</sup> Here was a redefinition of virtue—or at least a recognition of the constructive ends of vice—in which the collective good might be achieved through the pursuit of individual gain.<sup>26</sup> An alternative defense of prosperity emphasized its civilizing effect. Professor Edward Everett reassured the gathering of patriots on the fiftieth anniversary of the United States that American prosperity was the greatest proof for the legitimacy of popular government, and its most persuasive tool around the world. “It is in this way that we are to fulfill our destiny in the world,” he pointed out. “The greatest engine of moral power, which human nature knows is an organized, prosperous state.”<sup>27</sup>

By the early decades of the nineteenth century, Americans had largely broken away from the classical notion of a republic made up of modest, virtuous citizens. Most Americans would still agree that the preservation of the republic depended on virtue, but the accent had shifted. They no longer sought divine favor by cultivating virtue, but rather looked around at the

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<sup>25</sup> Benjamin Franklin Letter to Benjamin Vaughn, 26 July 1784 quoted in Drew R. McCoy, “Benjamin Franklin’s Vision of a Republican Political Economy for America,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 35 (October 1978): 626.

<sup>26</sup> John F. Kasson, *Civilizing the Machine: Technology and Republican Values in America, 1776-1900* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1976), 38.

<sup>27</sup> Edward Everett, “Principle of the American Constitutions,” *Orations and Speeches* Vol. 1 (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1870), 129.

enormous progress and growing wealth of the era, and concluded that it was evidence of their virtue. In this way, virtue and prosperity became intimately linked. Thus, the American people greeted the growing prosperity of the early nineteenth century with satisfaction. The greater the prosperity, the greater the nation's apparent stability, the more passionately Americans defended the nation's growth as evidence of national probity. "We cannot open our eyes," said a speaker at a Fourth of July commemoration in 1822, "without beholding the most unequivocal monuments of general success, which has crowned the industry and economy of our citizens."<sup>28</sup> The expansion of national territory, the creation of new industries, and the development of a vast transportation network were all indications of this "general success." In particular, the growth of the American population was held forth as a promise of ever-increasing greatness. The sheer number of Americans was seen as a testimony of divine approval and a plain confirmation of America's moral worth.<sup>29</sup>

In the newspapers of the day, Americans would have encountered these reassurances repeatedly, and more often than not, couched in the time-worn language of Bishop Berkeley. An 1814 article *New York City National Advocate* included a notice from the *Ohio Niles Weekly Register* reporting the improvements and "progress to opulence" happening on the frontier of the Ohio Valley, where the rise of the population, "late the hunting ground of the savage and range of the buffalo," wonderful as it was, "is not so wonderful as...the mighty improvements made; [we] see with pleasure the brilliant prospects of a happy population, numerous as the sands of the sea shore, beyond the Alleghanies; busy with the 'hum of commerce,' and abounding all the good

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<sup>28</sup> John C. Gray, *An oration, pronounced on the Fourth of July, 1822* (Boston, 1822) 5.

<sup>29</sup> Somkin, *Unquiet*, 14.

things of this world. ‘Westward the course of empire takes its way.’”<sup>30</sup> When the first shovelful of dirt was turned over in Washington, D.C. to begin construction on the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal in 1828, the *Farmer’s Cabinet* of Amherst, Massachusetts lauded this undertaking in an article entitled, “Westward the Star of Empire holds its way.” In the canal project, whose object was “to improve the bounties...of nature,” the newspaper saw nothing less than the hand of God: “May He...who controls the nations...crown this undertaking with his smile, until from the smitten rock shall rush the opulent stream, whose waters shall carry the produce of the remotest West, to meet the rising sun!”<sup>31</sup> And when the *New Hampshire Patriot and State Gazette* reported on the emigration to the newly founded town of Chicago, “where the floodgates of enterprise seem to be let loose, and the multitudes are crowding on to this young land...where they can build their fortunes and their hopes, and enjoy the plenty which our fat fields yield to the hand of industry,” they too could see nothing less than fulfillment of “the prophecy of the Bishop of Cloyne; the ‘Star of Empire is taking its way westward, and its last ascendant shall shine upon the noblest kingdom.’”<sup>32</sup> Although one would have had to look no further than the cover of George Bancroft’s intensely nationalistic *History of the United States* (1834), a triumphant story of the development of the United States in explicitly moral terms, where the words, “Westward the star of Empire takes its way,” were emblazoned in gold script on the spine (fig. 3.1). It was a fitting epigraph for a nation that viewed improvements, population growth, prosperity and expansion as evidence of America’s special dispensation.

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<sup>30</sup> “From the Niles Weekly Register. Resources and Improvements.” *National Advocate* (New York NY) 1 June 1814: 2-3.

<sup>31</sup> “Westward the Star of Empire holds its way.” *Farmers Cabinet* (Amherst MA) 19 July 1828: 3.

<sup>32</sup> “Chicago.” *New Hampshire Patriot and State Gazette* (Concord NH) 24 August 1835: 1.



Fig. 3.1. Spine of George Bancroft, *History of the United States*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (1837) with the embossed words, “Westward the Star of Empire Takes Its Way.” (Photo courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.)

But even as Gordon Wood and others have demonstrated the evolution of the notion of virtue in American political and social theory, the vocabulary of virtue and corruption persisted in American thought, not merely as a vestige slowly fading, but with a reality and relevance that kept it alive and in tension with the consequences that followed its revisioning.<sup>33</sup> Like the jeremiads of old, America’s moral spokesmen continued to reiterate their warnings of the dangers prosperity posed for republicanism. John Adams continued to beat the drum of

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<sup>33</sup> Pocock, *Machiavellian*, 526-27.

corruption and virtue until his death in 1824. For Adams, it was of a piece with his life-long ruminations on Berkeley's *Verses* and the cyclical course of empire in history. Writing to Lafayette soon after the War of 1812, Adams believed he could identify in America the same patterns of military victory ushering in complacent luxury that had destroyed Rome. "It seems as if a Seven years longer continuance of our late War would have been a Blessing. We were beginning in our little young World to be industrious, laborious, frugal and considerate: but the return of the piping time of Peace, with her train of Graces, Pleasures and fashions is precipitating Us into more Luxury and greater Extravagance than ever."<sup>34</sup> Adams continued to wrestle with the implications of this new prosperity for the preservation of republican virtue, writing to Thomas Jefferson in 1819: "Will you tell me how to prevent riches from becoming the effects of temperance and industry—Will you tell me how to prevent riches from producing luxury—Will you tell me how to prevent luxury from producing effeminacy intoxication extravagance Vice and folly." His thoughts took a darker turn as he continued, "I know it is high treason to express a doubt of the perpetual duration of our vast Empire...but... the [Roman] Republic...advanced in glory till riches and luxury come in—sat like an incubus on the Republic..."<sup>35</sup>

Adam's concern over the perils of prosperity found voice elsewhere in American society. Elihu Baldwin, a New York minister, argued in an 1827 sermon that the blessings ushered in by the new age of prosperity were ambiguous at best. Peace, social mobility, the spread of knowledge and religion, and general prosperity were all reasons for rejoicing. Yet each benefit

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<sup>34</sup> John Adams to Marie-Joseph-Paul-Yves-Roch-Gilbert du Motier, Marquis de Lafayette, 3 October 1815, *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified June 13, 2018.

<sup>35</sup> John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 21 December 1819, *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified June 13, 2018.

was counterbalanced by a corresponding danger. Prosperity was well and good, but for its tendency to magnify the power of men to do evil. “Increasing wealth rolls the tide of fashionable vice over the land,” Baldwin declared. “Who that reflects, but must tremble for the consequences?”<sup>36</sup> America was exposed to special danger as a land of abundance, thundered Lyman Beecher in 1829: “National wealth has been regarded as the perfection of prosperity. But...it has, in all ages, been the most active and powerful cause of national corruption and ruin.” Beecher cautioned, “The power of voluntary self-denial is not equal to the temptation...and no instance has yet occurred in which national voluptuousness has not trod hard upon the footsteps of national opulence, destroying moral principle and patriotism, debasing the mind and enervating the body, and preparing men to become, like the descendants of the Romans, effeminate slaves.”<sup>37</sup>

This concern over prosperity and decline received its most sustained exploration in a series of paintings, the *Course of Empire* (1834-1836), by artist Thomas Cole. Cole’s work and its reception illustrates a moment in time when older, traditional understandings of virtue and its role in securing America’s destiny crashed up against an emerging and dynamic new understanding of American exceptionalism. The extent to which American viewers either misunderstood Cole’s warning or rejected it is a measure of how thoroughly Americans had moved away from the original intent of Berkeley’s poem to a framework of citizenry, commerce, and government that would permit a vast expansion of America, the conquest of foreign territory, and an unshakeable belief in their divine entitlement and exceptional status.

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<sup>36</sup> Elihu W. Baldwin, *Considerations for the American Patriot: A Sermon delivered on the occasion of the annual Thanksgiving, December 12, 1827* (New York, 1828), 18.

<sup>37</sup> Lyman Beecher, “The Gospel, the Only Security for Eminent and Abiding National Prosperity,” in *The American National Preacher*, ed. Austin Dickinson (New York, 1828), 147.



Thomas Cole was born in Bolton-le-Moor, England, in 1801, into a family clinging to the outer edges of the middle class. His father was an unsuccessful woolens manufacturer in the early years of the industrial revolution, a man, who, as Cole's friend and biographer Louis Legrand Noble put it, "was better fitted to enjoy a fortune than to accumulate one."<sup>38</sup> The family emigrated to the United States when Cole was seventeen, but not before he had absorbed the painful lessons of a modernizing, industrializing world. His experience of the technological revolution in his place of birth shaped his understanding of both modernity and history, and profoundly influenced his perspective as America underwent parallel transformations within years of his arrival in 1818. Bolton, a small industrial city set in the countryside of Lancashire, was at the forefront of industrial development in the last decades of the eighteenth century. The town had prospered with the building of the Manchester, Bolton, and Bury canal, begun in 1791 and still under construction when Cole was born. The canal cut through the rural countryside, drawing Bolton into the markets of the British Empire, even as it polluted the landscape with shipments of coal and iron ore in exchange for the finished textiles that emerged from the mills that quickly populated the city's skyline.<sup>39</sup>

Cole's early years in Bolton coincided with a period of working-class unrest. The anti-industrial movement of the Luddites periodically protested, at times violently, the dislocation of artisans and the destruction of a traditional way of life with the advent of mechanized looms. Arson was a common protest tactic, and the spectacle of burning textile mills would have been a

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<sup>38</sup> Louis Legrand Noble, *The Life and Works of Thomas Cole*, ed. Elliot S. Vesell (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1964), 3.

<sup>39</sup> Tim Barringer, "The Englishness of Thomas Cole," in *The Cultured Canvas: New Perspectives on American Landscape Painting*, ed. Nancy Siegel (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2011), 2-6.

familiar sight in Cole's childhood.<sup>40</sup> With the failure of his father's factory, Cole's family moved to nearby Chorley, where industry had only just begun to take off. Here, according to Noble, Cole was "more intimately made acquainted with those trials and privations which attended him for several years."<sup>41</sup> The family's precarious finances forced young Cole, at the age of fourteen, into factory labor as an engraver of designs for calico fabric. Surrounded by "the rude character of many of his fellow-operatives" and with "evil around him," Cole struggled to hold onto his family's fraying gentility, spending his leisure time cultivating an ulterior landscape in his mind. An autodidact, he spent hours reading, familiarizing himself with history and poetry, and drawn especially to stories of foreign countries. The "natural beauties of the North American states" particularly captured Cole's imagination: "the great lakes, the flowery plains, the mighty forests, the Alleghanies, the broad rivers, particularly the Ohio." He "dreamed of them, talked of them, longed to cross the ocean to behold them."<sup>42</sup> This scenery whose descriptions captivated him would have stood in stark contrast to the belching, clacking factories of his everyday life. At some point, Cole made his way to Liverpool, finding employment once again as an engraver, where his family soon joined him to embark for America. Like many whose lives had been disrupted by the wild swings of the industrializing economy of Britain, they left to seek better prospects in the young United States.<sup>43</sup>

They arrived in Philadelphia in the spring of 1819, but quickly found that they had not left their financial difficulties behind them. "Expatriated by reverse fortune and struggling among strangers for subsistence," another early biographer of Cole characterized the family's

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Noble, *Life and Works*, 3.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 4-5.

<sup>43</sup> Barringer, "The Englishness," 15.

early experiences in America as a rude awakening for this marginally middle-class family. Emphasizing the difficulty posed by their fall in social station, the biographer describes Cole's parents as "amiable, virtuous, well-educated" who "try avocations, of which their only knowledge is derived from the reading of days when books were the elegant employment of leisure hours."<sup>44</sup> The rapid and evident failure of these attempts in Philadelphia soon sent the family on the move again. Had they opened up any number of newspapers of their day, they would have come across articles trumpeting the possibilities to be found in the western wilds of America. One such article, picked up in several newspapers that summer of 1819, excitedly announced that the Missouri River was now accessible by steamship. "This furnishes a most important era in the history of our internal improvements. It opens a communication to the interior of the country to an extent beyond what imagination can conceive. "Westward the Star of Empire points the way," the writer continued, "The expression now derives double force and pungency with the excess of emigration: for, in this point of view, the star of empire does indeed point to the west."<sup>45</sup>

Slipping into the scores of immigrants who headed westward from eastern cities seeking their fortunes on the frontier, the Cole family headed out for the Ohio Valley. There, Cole's father attempted to establish "a manufactory on a puny scale, of some articles which begin to be wanted in the newly risen towns of the West; and which requires little capital or credit."<sup>46</sup> Nonetheless, the business lost what little capital and credit it had, "the effort fails, and poverty is

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<sup>44</sup> William Dunlap, *A History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States* (1834; repr., Boston: C.E. Goodspeed & Company, 1918) 138.

<sup>45</sup> "Experiment; Missouri; Important; Imagination; Attempt; Yellow Stone; Westward; Star; Empire." *Alexandria Gazette* (Alexandria VA) 24 July 1819: 2. *Readex: Early American Newspapers*.

<sup>46</sup> Dunlap, *A History*, 138.

rendered more poor.”<sup>47</sup> The failure of this business, as well as a subsequent wallpaper works in Steubenville, Ohio, followed by a floor-cloth factory in Pittsburgh, paint a picture of a family intimately acquainted with the cycles of boom and bust inherent in an untethered nascent market revolution. In spite of the Coles’ reported virtue, thrift, and industry, they perpetually found themselves at the losing end of an otherwise booming economy. This jarring duality could not help but impress itself upon the mind of the young Thomas Cole. The experience of displacement, downward mobility, and poverty— an experience Cole shared with thousands of his contemporaries whose lives were similarly upended by the capitalist revolution— resulted in a tension between the aspiring artist’s actual situation and the pretensions to gentility he had acquired growing up in the Lancashire “middling class.”<sup>48</sup> Cole would remain uneasy with the individualistic, utilitarian culture of nineteenth-century American enterprise for the rest of his life.<sup>49</sup>

Driven by a desire to assist his family, Cole soon set out on his own. He followed a peripatetic path back east, a journey he took entirely on foot, painting portraits along the way to support himself.<sup>50</sup> But Cole’s art took an entirely new trajectory after a visit to the Catskill Mountains of upstate New York in 1825. This direct experience of the wilderness inspired a series of landscape from Cole’s brush, and in the process, introduced an entirely original art form that defied the existing conventions of landscape painting.<sup>51</sup> Cole, reared in the industrializing

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>48</sup> David Bindman, “John Martin, Thomas Cole, and Deep Time,” in *Transatlantic Romanticism: British American Art and Literature 1790-1860*, eds. Andrew Hemingway and Alan Wallach (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2015), 207.

<sup>49</sup> Angela Miller, “Thomas Cole and Jacksonian America: ‘The Course of Empire’ as Political Allegory,” *Prospects* 14 (1989) 66.

<sup>50</sup> Dunlap, *A History*, 141-43.

<sup>51</sup> Barringer, “The Englishness,” 17-18.

landscape of a modernizing Britain, recognized in the American wilderness the “wild grandeur peculiar to our country,” as his friend William Cullen Bryant would later remember after Cole’s premature death in 1848.<sup>52</sup> In the wilderness, Cole identified America’s greatest natural and moral resource. His art infused European aesthetics with an imaginative landscape vision to celebrate the one aspect of America that Europe could not rival: a vast, pure wilderness landscape so expansive as to be virtually incomprehensible in its scale and majesty.<sup>53</sup> The Catskill landscapes Cole produced as a result of his initial wilderness epiphany found their way into the window of a New York City bookseller, where they caught the attention of the dramatist, artist, and gadfly William Dunlap and his companions, the artists Asher Durand and Colonel John Trumbull, then president of the American Academy of Fine Arts. These artists introduced Cole to their network of aristocratic collectors and patrons, men who had for the most part only recently made their fortunes with the opening of the Erie Canal and the wealth it had quickly brought to New York. A booming local economy could now fund a rapidly expanding art scene. Thus, Cole’s career as a fine artist was launched.<sup>54</sup>

Thomas Cole’s career coincided exactly with the rise and fall of Jacksonian democracy. In 1825, the year Cole’s work first gained recognition in New York, John Quincy Adams was inaugurated as president, and his disappointed rival, Andrew Jackson, assumed leadership of the national democratic opposition. Later that year, New Yorkers celebrated the completion of the Erie Canal, an engineering triumph that secured their city’s position as the emerging American metropolis and also accelerated the nation’s westward expansion and commercial growth. These

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<sup>52</sup> William Cullen Bryant, “On the Life of Thomas Cole: A Funeral Oration Delivered before the National Academy of Design, New York, May 4, 1848,” *Thomas Cole Papers*, Detroit Institute of Art.

<sup>53</sup> Earl A. Powell, *Thomas Cole* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990), 10.

<sup>54</sup> Bindman, “John Martin,” 207.

developments deepened the political controversies that led to the Jacksonians' ascendancy. In 1848, the year Cole died, the Jacksonian moment had already begun to wane. Following the Democrats' annexation of Texas and the war with Mexico, national political debate centered on the territorial expansion of slavery—the issue that, above all others, threatened to disrupt existing political loyalties and wreck the republic. The 1848 campaign of the antislavery Free-Soil party foretold the collapse of the Democratic party coalition, setting the nation on a path to the Civil War.<sup>55</sup>

These events and the intervening upheavals of the period seem far removed from Cole's paintings. His landscapes of the New York wilderness are largely unpopulated, suggesting little of the social concerns that otherwise preoccupied his private musings. His pastoral scenes show no hint of the raucous new political climate, nor of American slavery. There is little evidence of the feverish competition that the Baltimore editor Hezekiah Niles described in 1815 as an "almost universal ambition to get forward." Nor do Cole's wilderness pictures depict vistas beyond the Mississippi River, reflecting little overt interest in the West, a subject of great interest otherwise among the American people and landscape artists alike.<sup>56</sup> Yet five paintings stand out from Cole's oeuvre, challenging the perception of Cole's reluctance to engage with the currents of American life on canvas. These five paintings comprise a series Cole entitled *Course of Empire*, a cycle of paintings crowded with historical and political allusions, and a subtly powerful critique of not only Jacksonian democracy, but America's imperial ambitions altogether.

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<sup>55</sup> Christine Stansell and Sean Wilentz, "Cole's America," in *Thomas Cole: Landscape into History*, ed. William H. Truettner and Alan Wallach (New Haven: Yale UP, 1994), 3.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

Although much of Cole's early work were landscape paintings, the young and ambitious Cole was deeply informed by the artistic conventions of his day that gave history painting pride of place among painting genres. Based on English artistic theory, this preference dominated the young American school. Cole's circle of artist acquaintances in New York led by John Trumbull, William Dunlap, and Samuel F.B. Morse shared a reverence for history painting. Although they quickly recognized Cole's talent for landscape, they nevertheless insisted that history painting alone would provide lasting renown for the young artist, inspiring in Cole a determination to master that genre.<sup>57</sup> In 1826 he expressed a desire to attempt a "higher style" of compositions, as opposed to working exclusively from nature, writing to his patron Robert Gilmore: "If the imagination is shackled, and nothing is described but what we see, seldom will anything truly great be produced in either Painting or Poetry."<sup>58</sup> Gilmore encouraged Cole to refine his artistic vision by visiting Europe, and provided the funds enabling Cole to do so.<sup>59</sup> Thus, Cole embarked on a three-year journey through Europe. It was here, amidst the ostentation of modern culture and the ruins of classical antiquity that Cole developed his ideas for a series of five paintings that would depict the course of empire.

In the first several decades of the nineteenth century, a pilgrimage to Italy was considered practically mandatory for the making of professional painters in the United States, where rigorous academic art training, notable art collections, or even a viable art market were lacking. For American artists and many of their patrons, Italy offered a living laboratory of the past, with

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<sup>57</sup> Alan Wallach, "Cole, Byron, and the Course of American Empire" *Art Bulletin* 50:4 (1968) 375.

<sup>58</sup> Thomas Cole to Robert Gilmore, 21 May 1828, quoted in Ellwood Parry, *The Art of Thomas Cole: Ambition and Imagination* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 1988), 78.

<sup>59</sup> Thomas Cole to Robert Gilmore, 25 December 1826, quoted in Franklin Kelly, *Thomas Cole's Paintings of Eden* (Fort Worth, TX: Amon Carter Museum, 1994), 19.

its cities, galleries and lands offering a visible survey of Western artistic heritage from antiquity to the present.<sup>60</sup> Henry Tuckerman, a contemporary biographer and critic of American artists, noted with unconcealed pride that an American artist more than any other would be affected by a visit to Italy: “The contrast between the new and old civilization, the diversity in the modes of life, and especially the more kindling associations which the enchantment of distance and long anticipation occasion, make his sojourn there an episode of life.”<sup>61</sup> Tuckerman saw little harm and much gain for an American artist abroad. Others saw just the opposite. Protesting that entirely too much deference was paid to the Old World by the New, Cole’s friend, the painter Asher B. Durand asked, “why should not the American landscape painter, in accordance with the principle of self-government, boldly originate a high and independent style, based on his native resources?” He further urged aspiring painters to “go not abroad...while the virgin charms of our native land have claims on your deepest affections.”<sup>62</sup> What most concerned Durand was the effect of foreign study upon the young artists. He feared that exposure to Europe’s proud academics and masterpieces would only corrupt American originality. William Cullen Bryant even went so far as to write a poem to Cole on the eve of his journey to Europe, though light and lilting in prose, the warning lay heavy:

Thine eyes shall see the light of distant skies: Yet, COLE!  
Thy heart shall bear to Europe’s strand  
A living image of thy native land,  
Such as on thine own glorious canvas lies;  
Lone lakes—savannas where the bison roves—  
Rocks rich with summer garlands—solemn streams—  
Skies, where the desert eagle wheels and screams—

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<sup>60</sup> Thomas Cole to Robert Gilmore, Florence, 29 January 1832, reproduced in Noble, *Life and Works*, 101.

<sup>61</sup> Henry T. Tuckerman, *Book of the Artists, American Artist Life* (1867; repr., New York: James F. Carr, 1967) 152.

<sup>62</sup> Asher B. Durand, “Letters on Landscape Painting, II,” *The Crayon* 1 (January 17, 1855): 35, 34.



Spring bloom and autumn blaze of boundless groves.  
Fair scenes shall greet thee where thou goest—fair,  
But different—everywhere the trace of men,  
Paths, homes, graves, ruins, from the lowest glen  
To where life shrinks from the fierce Alpine air,  
Gaze on them, till the tears shall dim they sight,  
But keep that earlier, wilder image bright.”<sup>63</sup>

Bryant and Durand need not have feared. While Cole enjoyed his years abroad, he was critical of many aspects of European art and culture. Cole arrived in London in the summer of 1829, and remained distinctly unimpressed throughout his visit. Recounting this journey several years later to William Dunlap for his *History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Design in America*, Cole remembered, “I did not find England so delightful as I anticipated. The gloom of the climate, the coldness of the artists, together with the kind of art in fashion, threw a tone of melancholy over my mind, that lasted for months.”<sup>64</sup> In his tour of London’s galleries and artists’ studios, Cole found an art scene that repelled him. Cole wrote home that his “opinions regarding English Art remain as they were.” In contrast to the “harmony and goodwill [that] prevails among the artists of N York,” he found in the British art scene “much jealousy and heart burning—In truth theres a deadness of feeling among the artists here. They are destitute of lofty aspiration and enthusiasm.”<sup>65</sup> Cole spent a lonely winter in London, feeling intensely a sense of alienation in this modern, competitive culture, “I found myself a nameless, noteless individual, in the midst of an immense selfish multitude.”<sup>66</sup> Of the art he encountered, he remembered, “[M]y *natural* eye was disgusted with its gaud and ostentation... ‘full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.’” Months later, having crossed the channel to France, Cole’s opinion of European arts

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<sup>63</sup> Noble, *Life and Works*, 100.

<sup>64</sup> Dunlap, “A History,” 150.

<sup>65</sup> Thomas Cole to Thomas S. Cummings, 19 October 1830, Thomas Cole Papers, Detroit Institute of Art.

<sup>66</sup> Dunlap, “A History,” 150-51.

sunk further, overwhelmed by the artificiality he encountered. “Modern French painting pleased me even less than English,” he recalled to Dunlap, “[Their] history [paintings], cold and affected. In design they are much superior to the English; but in expression, false.—Their subjects are often horrid...I saw more murderous and bloody scenes that I had ever seen before.”<sup>67</sup>

A poem, penned on the cover of the sketch-book Cole used while in Europe, captures Cole’s critique of European art: “Let not the ostentatious gaud of art, That tempts the eye, but touches not the heart, Lure me from nature’s purer love divine; But, like a pilgrim, at some holy shrine, Bow down to her devotedly, and learn, In her most sacred features, to discern That truth is beauty.”<sup>68</sup> In some ways, this poem serves as a response to Bryant’s earlier misgivings. But in these words, one can also detect an echo of Berkeley. Much like Cole, Berkeley’s journey to the continent a century earlier left him disenchanted with the progress of man. Berkeley in his *Verses* similarly contrasted the practiced artificiality of Europe with the untouched natural beauty of America: “In happy climes...and virgin earth...The force of art by nature seems outdone, and fancied beauties by the true; In happy climes, the seat of innocence, Where nature guides and virtue rules, Where men shall not impose for truth and sense The pedantry of courts and schools.” And in both poems, man-made “truth” contrasts with the implied superiority of nature’s truth. Although it is only conjecture to suggest that Cole had by this time encountered Berkeley’s poem, the parallels in sentiment are suggestive.

Cole reached Rome by 1832. For the American charmed by Arcadian dreamscapes, the actuality of modern Rome often proved a rude awakening. The city was a visual expression of the declining fortunes of the papacy that had ruled it for centuries. Underneath the crumbling

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>68</sup> Noble, *Life and Works*, 75.

veneers of its Renaissance and Baroque past, it was still very much a medieval town in plan and appearance. Vast tracts of abandoned land lay within the walls of the city, heightening the sense of a city long past its prime. The past was ever present in the very stones of Rome's architecture, quarried from the temples and monuments of the Caesars.<sup>69</sup> Cole described the scene to his parents, writing, "The things that most affect me, in Rome, are the antiquities....All these things fill the mind with wonder, and we cannot but contrast the energy of the ancient Romans with the effeminacy of the modern. A great part of ancient Rome lies buried...Here and there, excavations have been made, and we can now step on the pavement upon which Caesar trod."<sup>70</sup> The far past coexisted dramatically with the present, and the future seemed incomprehensible. The weight of the accumulated antiquity depressed all thoughts of progress and possibility. "The degeneracy of modern Rome," wrote Henry Tuckerman, "is a subject ever forced upon the thoughtful resident...And to one who is anywise familiar with her past history, or susceptible to her present influences, it becomes an almost absorbing theme."<sup>71</sup> It was a theme that absorbed many pages in the travel journals of Americans, not least of all, Cole's. Climbing to the upper tier of the Colosseum, Cole gazed down into "the abyss." The "mighty spectacle, mysterious and dark" becomes "more like some awful dream than an earthly reality,—a vision of the valley and shadow of death, rather than the substantial work of man." Cole marveled at the fact that it "once the crater of human passions; there their terrible fires blazed forth with desolating power, and the thunder of the eruption shook the skies. But now," he continued, "all is still in desolation."<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> John W. Coffey, *The Twilight of Arcadia: American Landscape Painters in Rome, 1830-1880* (Brunswick: Bowdoin College Museum of Art, 1987), 10.

<sup>70</sup> Thomas Cole to his parents, 4 March 1832, reproduced in Noble, *Life and Works*, 114.

<sup>71</sup> Henry T. Tuckerman, *The Italian Sketch Book* (New York: J.C. Riker, 1858), 85.

<sup>72</sup> Thomas Cole, Notes, 14 May 1832, reproduced in Noble, *Life and Works*, 116.

Against this backdrop of modern decadence and superficiality, with the haunting ruins of previous civilizations hovering, Cole's idea for the *Course of Empire*, first conceived in 1827, began to take shape. The inspiration was obvious—Cole looked upon Europe's ancient and dissolute ruins while picturing in his mind "the wild image bright" of his native land and the Catskills. The awesome presence of antiquity inspired and troubled his imagination. In a journal entry, dating to early in his trans-Atlantic travels, Cole scribbled an outline of "a series of pictures [that] might be painted illustrating the Mutation of Terrestrial things." Cole titled the composition, "The cycle of mutation," but subsequently penciled over this, "The Epitome of Man." Cole envisioned a cycle that would begin "with a picture of an utter wilderness, rocks, woods and water—lighted by the cold day—dawn—the sun not having emerged from behind the lofty mountains yet projecting his rays across the sky and tinging the light clouds with rose hues." The figures in the painting "should be savages variously occupied and indicating in their occupations that their means of subsistence is the chase—some might be exhibited in pursuit." In the background, "might be rude huts built of branches of trees—with women and children about them." The second picture in the cycle would take place at sunrise in a partially cultivated countryside. "Here and there groups of peasants either pursuing their labours in the field—conversing, or engaged in some simple amusement." The third picture "should be a noonday scene—a gorgeous city with piles of magnificent architecture. A port crowded with vessels—a splendid processions etc. and all that can be combined to show the fulness of prosperity." To this description, Cole made several addendums. Next to the word "prosperity" he wrote and then crossed out "wealth and luxury." And in the margins of his journal he made an additional note, "As this subject is the picture of man and the world and not of any particular nation or country the architecture as well as the costumes ought not to be those of any particular nation." The next

painting in the cycle “should be a stormy battle and the burning of a city with all the concomitant scenes of horror.” And the final painting “should be a sunset—a scene of ruins, mountains, encroachments of the sea—dilapidated temples etc. Sarcophagi—human skeleton—broken cisterns etc. A figure or two.”<sup>73</sup> Over the course of his time abroad, Cole continued to mull upon the idea. In the winter of 1832, Cole wrote to his patron Robert Gilmore from Florence, “A series of pictures might be painted that should be the History of a Natural Scene, as well as an Epitome of Man; showing the natural changes of Landscape, and those effected by Man.”<sup>74</sup> He continued to elaborate upon the plan, but in this one sentence, Cole indicates what would be the leitmotif of his series. At base, it was an ecological jeremiad, the story of the perennial destruction of nature at the hands of man.

Cole returned to the United States in the fall of 1832, prepared to embark on his epic cycle. By the following year, he had secured a patron for the series, Luman Reed, a New York grocer, whose deep pockets enabled the realization of such a grand ambition. Cole provided Reed with a sketch for its installation in Reed’s newly built mansion on Greenwich Street in New York City. The large central painting, *Consummation of Empire*, would hang over the mantelpiece in Reed’s third floor gallery, flanked by the *Savage State* and *The Arcadian or Pastoral State* on the left, and *Destruction* and *Desolation* on the right. But what had started out as an idea formed around meditations upon modern European society and ancient ruins, quickly took on a decidedly different tone. Returning to an America deep in the throes of the market revolution, Cole encountered an industrializing landscape that bore a discomfiting resemblance to the England of his youth. The relaxing of the nation into a boisterous era of Jacksonian

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<sup>73</sup> Thomas Cole, Notebook, Thomas Cole Papers, Manuscripts and Special Collections, NYSL.

<sup>74</sup> Thomas Cole to Robert Gilmore, 29 January 1832, Thomas Cole Papers, Manuscripts and Special Collections, NYSL.

democracy saw changing mores, class conflict, violence, and naked ambition celebrated. The societal breakdown these developments portended to the conservative Cole left its mark on his cyclical vision of history, transforming a generalized classical trope into a political and national allegory with a pointed meaning for his own place and time.<sup>75</sup> In ultimately choosing as his title, *The Course of Empire*, taken from Berkeley's *Verses*, Cole made clear that these paintings were an American jeremiad.

Like many of his friends and patrons, Cole was a member of the Whig party, a coalition that came together in opposition to Jackson, formed from the remnants of the old Federalist party. Cole's outlook, like that of the Whigs, tended to romanticize the social hierarchy and deference of a previous era, nostalgic for a past of aristocratic, agrarian simplicity, out of place in the more fluid democratic culture of the Jacksonian era.<sup>76</sup> Backward looking, the civic ideals of the Whigs were rooted in the republican ideology inherited from their revolutionary forbears. The Whigs believed that the Jacksonian Democrats endangered the very mechanisms for fulfilling republican ideals in the United States, while they claimed their own allegiance to those ideals.<sup>77</sup> The political partisanship that first emerged during the 1824 presidential contest between John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson only intensified once Jackson came into the presidency in 1828, spooking conservative Americans who rallied around the Whig banner. From the viewpoint of most Whigs, parties posed a threat to proper social order. Although partisanship had quickly appeared in the early days of the republic, it had nevertheless reflected an older set of values. It was highly personal, resting on friendship, individual loyalties, private

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<sup>75</sup> Miller, "Thomas Cole," 67.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Thomas Brown, *Politics and Statesmanship: Essays on the American Whig Party* (New York: Columbia UP, 1985), 3.

alliances, and reputation. It was also intensely hierarchical, the belief being that the natural aristocracy of America, those who embodied genteel society and had earned their rank by virtue of an honorable reputation, would naturally draw followers. Campaigning or entrusting your election to operatives was anathematic.<sup>78</sup> The new party system that debuted under the leadership of Jackson's political ally Martin Van Buren was an extensive, coordinated system intended to appeal to a mass electorate. Highly impersonal, it made use of a sprawling system of local and state societies linked to a national system. Political rallies, demonstrations, canvassing, and campaign surrogates all became standard features of the new political system. Party loyalty replaced personal loyalty, which, Whigs feared and warned, enabled the rise of "demagogues" to challenge the "natural" leaders of the community. This new conception of political parties encouraged what Whigs viewed as blind loyalty to faction that in turn used the passions of the people in pursuit of corrupt gains.<sup>79</sup> In their eyes, Jackson was the very demagogue that nightmares of partisanship were made of.

Evaluating the changes wrought in society by the rise of Jackson, Cole had, by the mid-1830s, become convinced that America was the victim of its own self-serving pursuits. The drive for personal gain drowned out loyalties to anything beyond the immediate, economic interests of the individual.<sup>80</sup> Vocally eschewing overt partisanship, Cole's own political opinions were nevertheless as partisan as those of his contemporaries. In a journal entry dated 1834, he noted with deep irritation a noisy group of revelers who had interrupted the quiet tranquility of a hike through the Catskill woods. "While we were in the valley we heard the shouts of a company of

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<sup>78</sup> Gordon S. Wood, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789-1815* (New York: Oxford UP, 2009), 158-69.

<sup>79</sup> Daniel Walker Howe, *Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 52-53.

<sup>80</sup> Miller, "Thomas Cole," 67.

Jacksonians who were rejoicing at the defeat of the Whigs of this county. Why were they rejoicing?" Cole queried sarcastically, "Because of the triumph of good principles or the cause of virtue and morality? NO! but because their party [sic] was victorious!"<sup>81</sup> On another occasion he acerbically described a conversation with a "Van Burenite" peddler who had given him a ride.<sup>82</sup> He followed the fortunes of the Whig party throughout the 1830s and supported the Whig candidate William Henry Harrison in the campaign of 1840. When Harrison died after just a month in office, Cole sent a letter to a friend where he mourned the loss of "Our President." "Since the death of Washington," Cole wrote with an air of Whiggish wistfulness, "no man has died more lamented by his country."<sup>83</sup> More than many of his contemporaries, Cole clung to the social mores of an earlier time, when hierarchy, deference, and order held sway. The political revelry and laissez-faire currents of Jacksonian public life repulsed Cole, who anguished over the poisonous effects of competition and commercial enterprise on the social fabric of modern American life. Writing in his journal in the spring of 1835, Cole recorded that he found his "mind occupied with so many cares and anxieties." "Every day," he wrote, "I feel as though there were fewer ties to bind me to my fellow beings—they are broken one after another."<sup>84</sup>

Perhaps most jarring for Cole were the changes being wrought to landscape of his own home state in the name of progress. The Erie Canal, opened in 1825, no doubt evoked images of the canal that had so thoroughly marred the countryside of his youth. Boom towns sprang up across the northwestern frontier as the Canal facilitated the movement of people, goods, and

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<sup>81</sup> Thomas Cole, Journal, 6 November 1834, Thomas Cole Papers, Manuscript and Archives Division, NYSL.

<sup>82</sup> Thomas Cole, Sketchbook, Detroit Institute of Art, cited in Alan Wallach, "Thomas Cole and the Aristocracy," *Arts Magazine* 56:3 (1981) 99.

<sup>83</sup> Cole to William A. Adams, 8 April 1841, quoted in Wallach, "Thomas Cole," 99.

<sup>84</sup> Barrett, "Violent Prophecies," 32.



factories into the wilderness. The symbolic significance of the Canal could not have been lost upon Cole, who had spent so much time in the forest of New York, preserving on canvas the quiet beauty of a rapidly disappearing way of life. But even to a more objective observer, the destruction of the American wilderness was remarkable, “The facts are as certain as if they had already occurred. In but a few years these impenetrable forests will have fallen,” wrote Alexis de Tocqueville in 1831, “It is this consciousness of destruction... of quick and inevitable change, that gives, we feel, so peculiar a character and such a touching beauty to the solitudes of America.” De Tocqueville registered a sort of split mind on approaching the American wilderness. “One sees [it] with a melancholy pleasure,” having to hurry to admire it before it was destroyed, even as “thoughts of the savage, natural grandeur that is going to come to an end become mingled with splendid anticipations of the triumphant march of civilisation.” It evoked in de Tocqueville, as it did in countless Americans, pride in the power of humans to alter the environment. “And yet at the same time,” he mused, “one experiences... bitter regret at the power that God has granted us over nature...”<sup>85</sup>

Cole felt no such ambiguity of sentiments in the face of the “triumphant march of civilisation.” Cole’s romantic pessimism regarding the state of the nation took hold as he began to equate the destruction of the wilderness with Jackson’s expansionist policies, decrying the destruction of the land in poetry and essays. In his iconic 1835 “Essay on American Scenery,” Cole protested, “The ravages of the axe are daily increasing, and the most noble scenes are often laid desolate with a wantonness and barbarism scarcely credible in a people who call themselves civilized.” Cole warned Americans to reconsider their immediate quest to conquer the landscape for “utilitarian” purposes and to stop and pause to hear the “‘still small voice’—that voice is

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<sup>85</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Journey to America*, ed. J.P. Mayer (New Haven: Yale UP, 1960), 399.

YET heard among the mountains! St. John preached in the desert; ‘the wilderness is YET a fitting place to speak to God.’”<sup>86</sup> In the midst of a society rushing into modernity, who saw the march of progress as a virtue, Cole tried to assert an alternative lesson: that the divine providence guiding the nation’s destiny was manifest in the wonders of the landscape.

Cole, sensitive to the sacrifice yielded by the forests to the instruments of civilization, also turned to poetry to capture the raw emotions invoked by this wanton destruction. In a poem of 1834, entitled, “On seeing that a favorite tree of the Author’s had been cut down—” Cole mourned the tree as he would the death of a beloved friend:

And is the glory of the forest dead?  
Struck down? Its beauteous foliage spread  
On the base earth? O! ruthless was the deed  
Destroying man! What demon urg’d the speed  
Of thine unpitying axe? Didst thou not know  
My heart was wounded by each savage blow?  
...Vain in my plaint! All that I love must die.  
But death sometimes leaves hope...  
But here no hope survives; again shall spread o’er me  
Never the gentle shade of my beloved tree—<sup>87</sup>

More than simply the ravages of industry, Cole imbued the felling of the trees with a moral meaning. The implied evil in the heart of “Destroying man” and his “unpitying axe” pitted the virtue of nature against the dissolution of modernity and the marketplace.

But perhaps most powerfully, Cole worked these frustrations and dismal fears out on canvas. In the *Course of Empire*, Cole brought together the lessons of his “trans-atlantic impressions,” his pessimistic visions of political and social declension, and his aversion for the forces of capitalism destroying the wilderness in a sharply rendered critique of American empire.

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<sup>86</sup> Thomas Cole, “Essay on American Scenery,” *American Monthly Magazine* 1 (January 1836) 2.

<sup>87</sup> Thomas Cole, *Thomas Cole’s Poetry*, ed. Marshall B. Tymn (York, PA: Liberty Cap Books, 1972), 67.

Although the viewpoint shifts throughout the series, all five paintings feature the same landscape: a natural harbor surrounded by hills and mountains. Even as the setting unites the series, each painting envisions this setting in progressive temporal eras that correspond to the diurnal progression from dawn to twilight. A large outcropping of rock dominates the background of every painting, serving both to ground the series in a particular location, and to function as a timeless geological feature in the midst of human cultural change. The setting, though broadly classical, is meant to be “nationless,” illustrating the universal truth of Berkeley’s lines. All societies were subject to the same inevitable cycles of growth and decay. Nevertheless, features in each of the paintings invoke iconic American images and ideas that would have been familiar to his viewers. Cole’s combining of classical vistas with American details was a strategy for encouraging viewers to draw upon the bank of historical associations. Rather than see something exceptional about the American experience, he wanted viewers to understand themselves in the context of a broader and deeper world history. As Cole observed while traveling through Italy in 1832, “He who stands on Mont Albano and looks down on ancient Rome, has his mind peopled with gigantic associations of the storied past.”<sup>88</sup> It was just these connections he wanted his viewers to make, as they contemplated America’s place in this scheme of cyclical history.

The initial scene, *The Savage State* (fig. 3.2), pictures civilization at dawn. Framed by vine-entwined trees on the left side of the canvas and a violently cloudy sky on the right, it is a sublime scene—wild, lush as vegetation grows untamed. All of the forces of nature seem unleashed in this passage. Winds blow, waves crash against the shore in the harbor. The scene is

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<sup>88</sup> Thomas Cole quoted in Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape Painting, 1825-1875* (New York: Oxford UP, 1980, 2007), 206.

bristling with movement, all on a left-to-right trajectory. Leaves, clouds, smoke all billow rightward across the canvas. Man and nature battle. The foreground is dominated by a chase scene: a European hunter dressed in animal skins emerges from the left of the painting, bow raised. His arrow has already struck home, quivering in the back of a deer leaping across the foreground to the right. Another group of hunters runs through the middleground, spears and bows menacing. In the near distance, animals circle each other, an attack in progress, adding to the latent violence of the scene. In the gathered gloom on the right side of the canvas, hunters paddle canoes across a lagoon. An encampment of teepees sits on a clearing above them. Figures stand and sit amidst the primitive shelters, while others dance around a roaring bonfire. Although much of the scene is in deep shadow, light has just begun to dawn on the left side of the canvas. The light from the rising sun, just beyond the frame, echoes the left to right movement of the scene, seeming to literally drive across the scene—calming the sea under its golden glow, blowing the smoke of the bonfire off the canvas, pushing away not only the dark clouds, but the prehistoric human figures themselves. Certain details play with specific associations that American viewers were likely to pick up on. Canoes and teepee-like huts were clear allusions to Native American culture, functioning in this context as a distinct characteristic of American landscape scenery. Likewise, the small group of partially-clothed hunters armed with bows and arrows in the middle ground resemble depictions of Native Americans in other paintings of Cole's.



Fig. 3.2. Thomas Cole, *The Savage State*, 1834, oil on canvas, 39.5 x 63.5 in., New-York Historical Society, New York.

In the printed description of the paintings that Cole circulated when the series was exhibited in 1836, he described this scene as the “Commencement of Empire.” The scene depicts “the rudiments of society. Men are banded together for mutual aid in the chase, etc. The useful arts have commenced in the construction of canoes, huts, and weapons. Two of the fine arts, music and poetry, have their germs, as we may suppose, in the singing which usually accompanies the dance of savages.” Cole continued, “The empire is asserted, although to a limited degree, over sea, land, and the animal kingdom.”<sup>89</sup> The left to right movement of the scene was designed to draw the viewers’ eyes into the center of the arrangement of paintings, to the fireplace mantle where the third canvas, *Consummation of Empire*, was to hang (fig. 3.3).

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<sup>89</sup> Thomas Cole, “Cole’s Pictures of the ‘Course of Empire’,” *The Knickerbocker* 8 (November 1836): 629.

Even as the viewer contemplated nature in its most violent and primitive state, they would have understood it as a temporary stage in the history of man; it would, inevitably, be contained.

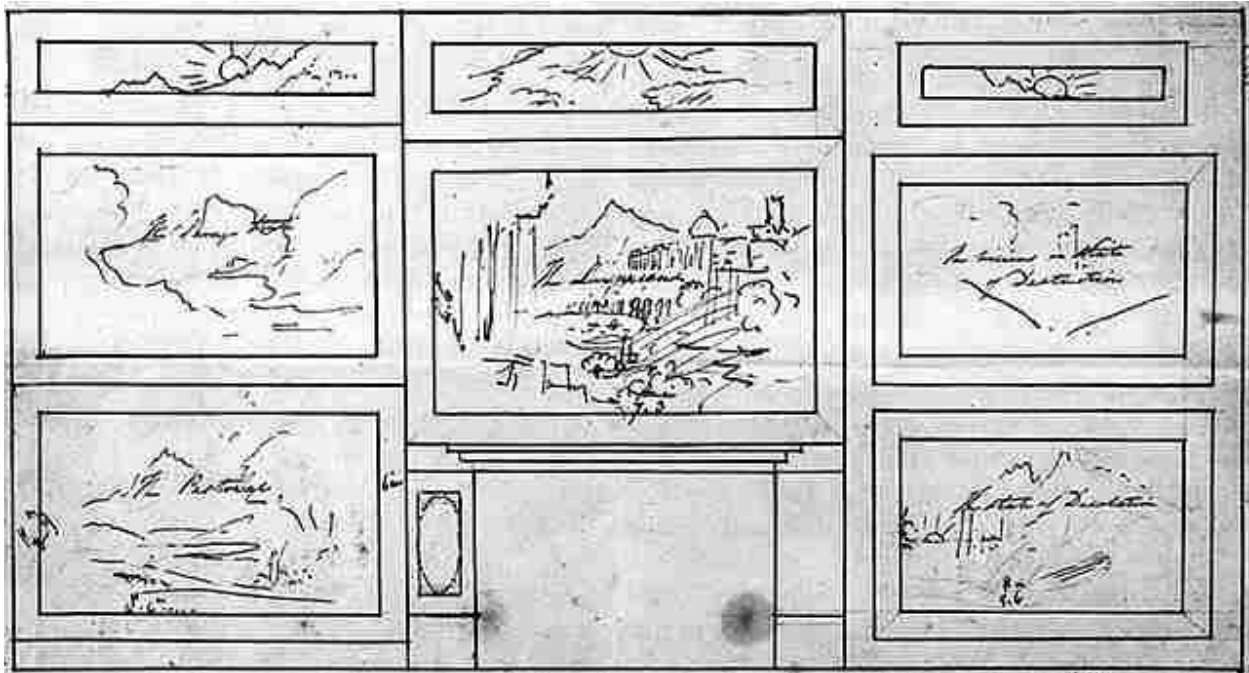


Fig. 3.3. Thomas Cole, *Layout for The Course of Empire*, 1833, pen and brown ink over graphite pencil on off-white wove paper, 8 7/8 x 13 1/8 in., Detroit Institute of Art.

The second canvas, *The Arcadian or Pastoral State* (fig. 3.4), features an idealized and cultivated landscape. A soft morning sun bathes the scene in a warm glow. Gone are the hovering clouds and looming vegetation. Through various visual tropes, Cole indicates the development of civilization: agrarianism, navigation, the cultivation of the arts, learning, and religion. Classically-garbed figures throughout the scene are engaged in archetypal occupations. A man guides a plow across a field in the near distance, while a shepherd tends sheep in a grassy pasture. A soldier with helmet and shield rounds a bend in a road in the foreground, coming upon a barefoot budding artist sketching a crude drawing of a human figure on a piece of stone, while a few feet beyond, a woman spins thread. A few yards farther, a small grouping of figures engage in a mid-morning idyll. A pastoral piper plays a tune as people recline about him, some engage in conversation, while others dance. On the other side of the canvas, a Pythagorean old

man sits at the base of a tree trunk, inscribing a geometric symbol into the dirt at his feet, while men on bridled horses turn to gaze back across the scene. A small village now sits at the base of the harbor in the near distance. A trail of smoke floats above the diminutive buildings. Sailboats flit across the harbor. Where teepees once sat on the cliff in the middle distance a Stonehenge-like temple dominates the landscape. And above it all is the rock outcropping, the unchanging fixture in the painting.



Fig. 3.4. Thomas Cole, *The Arcadian or Pastoral State*, 1834, oil on canvas, 39.5 x 63.5 in., New-York Historical Society, New York.

While *The Pastoral State* abounds with classical references: men and women dressed in the flowing robes of ancient Greece or Rome, allusions to ancient philosophers and Greek myth, all evoking a distinctly Mediterranean setting, the temple on the hill, with its striking resemblance to England's Stonehenge suggested alternative antecedents. In the first several decades of the nineteenth century, archaeological finds in the North American landscape

captured the public imagination. Accounts of mysteriously inscribed rocks in New England and Hebraic petroglyphs along the shores of Lake Champlain circulated, particularly through published works by members of the New-York Historical Society, feeding fantastic speculations that wandering Phoenicians, Tyrians, or Jews had stumbled upon North America three thousand years earlier and were the forefathers of contemporary Native Americans.<sup>90</sup> However in an 1824 article in the *American Journal of Science and Arts*, a visiting Scottish professor of geology, John Finch, disputed these theories arguing rather that Native Americas were the descendants of ancient Celts. He compiled descriptions of mysterious stone outcroppings, including several in upstate New York, as raw evidence of a Celtic past in America. Finch described the siting of a rock near West Point which “has long attracted the notice of those who live in its vicinity...Although weighing many tons...it stands elevated in different parts, from two to five feet above the earth, resting its whole weight upon the apices of seven small conical pillars.” Even closer to Cole’s home in Hudson, Finch described a “Circle of Memorial” that consisted of “nine, twelve, or more rude stones, placed so as to form a circle...that is situated upon a high hill, one mile from the town of Hudson, in the State of New-York.”<sup>91</sup> It may be that Cole was referencing this in an attempt to connect North America to a European past, not so much as to create a deep history for America in this case as to de-exceptionalize the American experience, wanting his audience to recognize the United States as equally prone to the inexorable cycle of empires as the ancient world.

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<sup>90</sup> Douglas Hunter, *The Place of the Stone: Dighton Rock and the Erasure of America’s Indigenous Past* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017) ,130-31.

<sup>91</sup> John Finch, “On the Celtic Antiquities of America,” *American Journal of Science and Arts* 7 (January 1824): 149-162. See also Parry, *The Art of Thomas Cole*, 158-159.



Scholars have tended to understand this painting as a representation of Cole’s own ideal “state”—a nostalgic, agrarian landscape. In this romantic landscape, Cole represented an era of harmony and tranquility just before the decline of civilization begins. It is suggestively a republican era, a scene of a Franklin-esque form of virtue—labor and industry are evident throughout, but there is nothing grossly luxurious; rather, a restrained comfort is evidenced. However, there is an ambivalence in this piece. Man has tamed nature by destroying it. The marks of an axe are clear in the trunks of the trees that towered in the former savage state. For Cole, the axe was a weighted symbol. As he worked on the series in August of 1836, Cole wrote in his journal: “Last evening I took a walk up the Catskill [Creek] above Austin’s Mill where the Rail Road is now making. This was once a favorite walk but now the charm of solitude and quietness is gone.” Because most men were “insensible to the beauty of nature,” he added, they “desecrate whatever they touch. They cut down the forests with a wantonness for which there is no excuse, even gain, & leave the herbless rocks to glimmer in the burning sun.”<sup>92</sup>

Cole explored this theme in a more epic manner in a 245-line poem in 1838, “The Lament of the Forest.” The narrator of the poem is enjoying a reverie sitting beside a serene lake. To his surprise he hears the “voice of the great Forest” lamenting the human impact on nature. Before man had entered history, the voice declared,

All then was harmony and peace—but man  
Arose—he who now vaunts antiquity—  
He the destroyer—amid the shades  
Of oriental realms, destruction’s work began—

Recounting the injury inflicted upon the forest, the voice continued:

the axe—the unresting axe  
Incessant smote our venerable ranks,  
And crashing branches frequent lash’d the ground

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<sup>92</sup> Cole, Journal, Thomas Cole Papers, Manuscript and Archives Division, NYSL.

Stupendous trunks the pride of many years  
Roll'd on the groaning earth with all their umbrage.  
...until the earth  
Our ancient mother lay, blasted and bare  
Beneath the burning sun—

Initially the voice of the great Forest expressed some consolation that there remained “one bright virgin continent,” separated from the Old World by a vast sea, where the native peoples lived in harmony with nature. In word and sentiment, one can discern the opening stanzas of Berkeley’s *Verses*. In Berkeley’s poem, the Muse, disgusted by the decay of Europe, “In distant lands now awaits a better time...where nature guides and virtue rules.” Cole describes this New World paradise as a “land of beauty and of many climes,” paralleling Berkeley: “In happy climes, where from the genial sun And virgin earth such scenes ensue, The force of art by nature seems outdone, And fancied beauties by the true.”<sup>93</sup> But alas, as Cole writes, even that New World was subject to the same forces of destruction:

O peace primeval! Would that thou hadst staid!  
What mov'd thee to unbar thine azure gates  
O mighty oceans when the destroyer came?  
...He came! Few were his numbers first, but soon  
The work of desolation was begun  
...And thus comes rushing on  
This human hurricane...  
...Our doom is near: behold from east to west  
The skies are darkend by ascending smoke;  
Each hill and every valley is become  
An altar unto Mammon, and the gods  
Of man's idolatry—the victims we.

In graphic detail now, the voice details the destruction wrought by industry and improvement across the United States:

We feed ten thousand fires: in our short day  
The woodland growth of centuries is consumed;  
Our crackling limbs the ponderous hammer rouse

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<sup>93</sup> Berkeley, *The Works*, 7:173.

With fervent heat. Tormented by our flame  
Fierce vapors struggling hiss on every hand.  
On Erie's shores, by dusky Arkansas,  
Our ranks are falling like the heavy grain...  
A few short years!—these valleys, greenly clad,  
These slumbering mountains, resting in our arms,  
Shall naked glare beneath the scorching sun...<sup>94</sup>

In this apocalyptic vision, progress toward America's future effectively clear cut its past. In chopping away at the forests, Americans were terminating the noble "savage state" that made America distinctive.<sup>95</sup> It was this vision of an unspoiled America that had first led Berkeley to rhapsodize over it; untouched, innocent nature was the very thing that made America exceptional. Cole understood the implication in Berkeley's poem, undergirding his warning that America would not escape the same cycle of rise and fall: If America had entered into the same artificiality and decay as that of Europe, had corrupted its virgin climes, would its ending be any different? If America was no longer exceptional, would the prophecy still hold? Although the ravages of man in the *Pastoral State* are minor, in even this relatively innocent exertion to manage the landscape, man has already introduced his destructive power. If there is a tension in Cole's series, it is here, on the verge of *The Consummation* of empire, as Cole wrestled with the question of man's incursion into the undefiled wilderness. The contradictory nature of this canvas embodies Cole's ambivalence towards progress, and his fear that in cultivating the land and making it useful for habitation and industry, Americans had swerved away from constructive harmony with God's will towards the destruction of God's created order.<sup>96</sup>

*The Consummation* (fig. 3.5), the third painting in the series, is the largest of the five. In Cole's plan for the hanging of the paintings, it was intended to be the focal point of the series,

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<sup>94</sup> Cole, *Poetry*, 107-112.

<sup>95</sup> Novak, *Nature*, 136.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

hanging as a visual apex above Reed's fireplace, flanked on either side by the other four painting. The placement of the canvas suggests that Cole sought to direct how audiences "read" his paintings. As the central and most elaborate scene, Cole intended that viewers pause the longest before it. If the first two canvases depicted the past, and the final two the future, the suggestion is that the third canvas, *The Consummation*, represented the present, and that Cole intended audiences to stand before *The Consummation* and recognize themselves and their contemporary society within it.



Fig. 3.5. Thomas Cole, *The Consummation*, 1836, oil on canvas, 51 x 76 in., New-York Historical Society, New York.

The multiple stories of the scene and the attention to minute detail provided a visual feast for viewers to note and dissect. Cole shifts the setting of the scene once again. The viewer now looks out from the base of the harbor. The rocky outcrop remains, but now occupies the far-right

edge of the painting. It is high noon in the empire. A primitive wilderness has become a city thronged with people. A glaring light reflects off of the white marble facades of buildings, stacked wedding-cake like along the left side of the canvas. It is a decadent scene, evoking ancient Rome or Greece at the height of glory. Classical columned porticoes proliferate along the banks of the harbor, now thoroughly engineered. Nature has been eradicated, save for manicured planters and flowers strewn about the paths. Gaudy trappings—banners, bunting, gilded statues, elaborate boats with gauzy pink sails—speak to the wealth, commerce, and unabashed materialism of this empire. The monuments of this city commemorate war: golden warriors stand high atop columned bases, their gold spears linked by laurels create an arched gateway into the imperial complex, suggesting not only the power of the empire, but its valorizing of militarism. The atmosphere of the scene is carnivalesque. Revelers populate every visible space of the painting, welcoming the return of the conqueror, whose procession takes up the foreground of the painting. The emperor, styled as a Caesar, leads a procession from atop a chariot pulled by a garishly bedecked elephant. Enslaved Africans prod the animal forward, as soldiers and figures garbed in the manner of ancient Roman senators follow behind. Military trumpeters herald his entrance into the city; women throw garlands and wreaths at his feet. In contrast to the two earlier scenes, this painting depicts no constructive occupations or pursuits. It is a scene turned wholly over to dissipation and enjoyment of the spoils of empire produced by unseen laborers.

Coming on the heels of *The Pastoral State*, a landscape suffused with the ideals of republican virtue, *The Consummation* represents the declension of the republic, as wealth and vanity overtake public virtue. In his notes, Cole described this scene as “the summit of human glory. The architecture, the ornamental embellishments, etc., show that wealth, power, knowledge, and taste have worked together, and accomplished the highest...of human

achievement and empire. As the triumphal fete would indicate, man has conquered man — nations have been subjugated.”<sup>97</sup> In this third and pivotal canvas of the series Cole’s commentary on contemporary political behavior is most apparent. The central figure of the reclining emperor born aloft by slaves and attended by soldiers and citizens of the empire reflected the Whig interpretation of Jackson’s administration, evoking their perception of his demagogic political style and his credulous followers. In the figure of the emperor, Cole played out the Whigs’ explicit fear of Jackson’s presidency—that he not only acted imperiously, but that he in truth saw himself *as king*. “In the eyes of the political opposition, Jackson’s imperious and arbitrary style of leadership made him a modern-day Caesar, prepared to manipulate the citizens of the republic for his own corrupt and self-serving ends.”<sup>98</sup> To an educated American aristocracy familiar with classical analogies, Caesar was a figure who symbolized the greatest danger to the Roman republic. In depicting Jackson as a type of Caesar, Cole suggested that Jackson threatened the delicate balance of republican consensus; like Caesar, he set the stage for the triumph of faction, the concentration of power, and the rise of the corrupt imperial state, proving the unexceptional nature of America’s imperial trajectory.<sup>99</sup>

*Destruction* (fig. 3.6) follows as the fourth canvas in the series. The view shifts once again, and the viewer now sees the opposite side of the harbor rising high on the right side of the canvas. In Cole’s original hanging scheme, this canvas would have been at the same eye level to the right of *Consummation*, thus creating a sort of panoramic effect for the viewer as their gaze moved from left to right, creating a sense that little time has passed between the two paintings.

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<sup>97</sup> Cole, “Cole’s Pictures,” 629-630.

<sup>98</sup> Miller, “Thomas Cole,” 71.

<sup>99</sup> Edwin A. Miles, “The Whig Party and the Menace of Caesar,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 27 (Winter 1968): 362.

But much has changed. Conjuring up the sadistic violence Cole had been repelled by in French art. Writing to Asher Durand as he labored over this canvas, Cole lamented, “I have been engaged in burning and sacking a city...and am well-tired of such bloody work.”<sup>100</sup> The setting sun highlights a nightmarish scene of conflagration and blood bath. As in *Consummation*, the painting teems with figures. But revelry has turned into mayhem, as an enemy army attacks the empire. Soldiers fight one another on every available stage of the scene. People are pushed into the sea to meet their deaths in the stormy waves, while corpses float in the fountain pools. In the gory melee, swords, maces, spears, and arrows spill equally the blood of women, children, and old men—who lie strewn across the foreground. The great edifices of the empire are engulfed in flames. Black clouds of smoke billow into the sky, creating a visual parallel with the *Savage State*, and alluding to the cyclical nature of empire—falling, only to rise once more elsewhere.

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<sup>100</sup> Quoted in James Thomas Flexner, *That Wilder Image: The Painting of America's Native School from Thomas Cole to Winslow Homer* (New York: Dover Publications, 1962, 1970), 46.



Fig. 3.6. Thomas Cole, *Destruction*, 1836, oil on canvas, 39.5 x 63.5 in., New-York Historical Society, New York.

In Cole's first sketch for the painting, he foregrounded a huge statue of a lion acting as a fountain. In the final painting however, a colossal replica of the *Borghese Warrior* stands in place of the lion, who now occupies the lower right corner on a much smaller scale.<sup>101</sup> The figure of the warrior, sculpted in midstride with muscles straining, is all the more striking for the fact that its head has been lopped off and lies in rubble at the base of the statue. For a New York viewer standing before the painting, it would likely have conjured up recent memories of a fire that had swept across lower Manhattan only a few months previously. "How [to] attempt to describe the most awful calamity which has ever visited these United States," the prolific diarist Philip Hone wrote in his journal, the morning after a fire swept lower Manhattan in December of 1835. "The splendid edifice...[of] the Merchants' Exchange...one of the ornaments of the city,

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<sup>101</sup> Parry, *The Art of Thomas Cole*, 180.



took fire in the rear, and is now a heap of ruins. The façade and magnificent marble columns fronting on Wall street are all that remain of this noble building, and resemble the ruins of an ancient temple rather than the new and beautiful resort of the merchants.” Tellingly paralleling Cole’s painting, Hone wrote that when the dome of the building fell in, “the sight was awfully grand; in its fall it demolished the statue of [Alexander] Hamilton” which had been erected by the merchants only months previously.<sup>102</sup>

The final painting, *Desolation* (fig. 3.7) was inspired by the “melancholy desolation” of the Campagna Roman while Cole sat upon a ruined column at sunset after a long walk in 1832. Moonlight gilds the ruins of empire, overrun with ivy. All human turmoil has ceased, and in fact, the scene is entirely unpeopled. Animals have taken up residence in the once triumphant city. “The multitude has sunk in the dust—empire is extinct,” Cole wrote.<sup>103</sup> The viewer is left in meditation, forced to compare what they see with the four successive images of the same place at earlier periods, and, as Cole hoped, to reflect upon their own present.

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<sup>102</sup> Philip Hone, *The Diary of Philip Hone, 1828-1851* ed. Allan Nevins (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1927), 180-81.

<sup>103</sup> Cole, “Cole’s Pictures,” 630.



Fig. 3.7. Thomas Cole, *Desolation*, 1836, oil on canvas, 39.5 x 63.5 in., New-York Historical Society, New York.

When *The Course of Empire* finally debuted in late 1836, it met with a mixed reception. Cole's patron Luman Reed had unexpectedly passed away a few months previously, altering Cole's intention for the paintings. Rather than being installed on the wall of Reed's home, the paintings went on public exhibition at New York's National Academy of Design in the fall of 1836. Reviews of the series were quickly published in the leading New York journals, and Cole was initially gratified, as he noted in his journal, that the paintings gave "universal pleasure."<sup>104</sup> With their compelling epic narrative, sublime landscapes, and wealth of detail, the paintings were ruled "magnificent," "beautiful and poetick." Reviewers wrote of the "well-chosen forms; the rich colouring; the varied and beautiful foliage;...the sky, so finely indicative of the season

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<sup>104</sup> Noble, *Life and Works*, 223.

represented.”<sup>105</sup> But as Cole feared, their message was not comprehended. Before the paintings were exhibited, Cole had glumly predicted to Reed that “very few will understand the whole scheme of them[, or] the philosophy there may be in them.”<sup>106</sup> His assessment of the popular and critical misunderstanding of his series was largely accurate. Cole’s contemporaries correctly read the series as a parable of corrupt empire but were oblivious of its implications for their own situation. Many Americans viewed the progress of the recent years as evidence of America’s rise and movement towards its imperial destiny. The political and social changes abhorred by Cole could appear through different eyes as a salutary sign of increasing democracy and social equality. But whatever the case, the majority of Americans persistently filtered these developments through a sense that America would be the exception to history. The same poem that had inspired Cole’s gloomy ruminations had convinced Americans of this. “[Cole] has accomplished his object: which was to show what has been the history of empires and of man,” ran one obtuse reading, “Will it always be so? Philosophy and religion forbid! Although such as the painter has delineated it, the fate of the individual has been, still the progress of the species is continued, and will be continued, in the road to greater and greater perfection.”<sup>107</sup> Those most critical of the series, interestingly, recognized the allegory, and eviscerated the paintings on those grounds. “We dislike exceedingly Cole’s allegorical landscapes...The pictures themselves are truly beautiful, but the plan of them is against nature...Instead of looking upon beautiful landscapes, we discern that they are sermons in green paint...the moment the discovery is made, we turn from them in disgust.” The reviewer allowed that the final painting of the five was worth

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<sup>105</sup> “The Fine Arts,” *The New-York Mirror* 14 (October 29, 1836): 142.

<sup>106</sup> Thomas Cole to Luman Reed, 6 March 1836, Thomas Cole Papers, Manuscripts and Special Collections, NYSL.

<sup>107</sup> “The Fine Arts,” *The New-York Mirror* 14 (Oct. 22, 1836): 35.

all the others of the series, but it “should, indeed, be exhibited by itself, without any hint being given of its allegorical character, that it might be enjoyed without any uncomfortable feeling of its didacticism.”<sup>108</sup> But more typical was the reviewer who wrote how “parents will bring their children here and explain to them the ‘Course of empire,’ and tell them stories of other lands.”<sup>109</sup> For the most part, viewers seemed largely unaware that the paintings’ warning could apply to them.

While George Berkeley’s famous line that had informed Cole’s series, “Westward the Course of Empire takes its way,” was well-known, well-loved, oft-quoted throughout American society in this era, few seemed to have thought deeply about its central argument or its implications. Fewer still had likely read the poem in its entirety. Cole, however, grasped that the translation of empire was dependent upon virtue, as Berkeley makes clear.<sup>110</sup> In leaning upon an older, traditional understanding of cyclical history with its typical emphasis upon moral conditions as the agents of cyclical change, Cole shared an understanding with Berkeley. This traditional view held that the inexorable rise and fall of nations might well be ordained of God after the pattern of the life cycle of organism, but the Deity in his beneficent wisdom had provided that our own vices and virtues, wisdom and folly, would have a proximate if not immediate effect upon the course of human events.<sup>111</sup> In Berkeley’s poem, it was the moral degeneration of England that sent the Muses looking for virgin, and virtuous, climes in his original formulation. This understanding was grasped by the Revolutionary era—from Adams to

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<sup>108</sup> “The New York Gallery of Fine Arts,” *The Broadway Journal* I, (Feb.15, 1845): 102-03.

<sup>109</sup> “Remarks,” *Catalogue of the Exhibition of the New York Gallery of the Fine Arts*, 5. Thomas Cole Papers, Detroit Institute of Art.

<sup>110</sup> On Berkeley and the *translatio virtus*, see Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, 511.

<sup>111</sup> Stow Persons, “The Cyclical Theory of History in Eighteenth Century America,” *American Quarterly* 6 (Summer 1954): 157.

Paine to the “rising glory” poets of the Revolution. Americans of that generation used Berkeley with an understanding that the advance of empire could be measured in moral terms. And in the heady days of Revolution and early nation-building, amidst pervasive language of civil and religious liberty, they had little doubt of America’s virtue. Standing on the edge of a world begun anew, to borrow Thomas Paine’s phrasing, they believed in a national virtue that would make their history distinct; they expected America to grow in a new and glorious way instead of repeating the past in endless cycles of rise and fall, as long as it clung to those virtuous beginnings.<sup>112</sup> But by the time Cole exhibited his treatise in paint, America had departed from these ideas. For many in his audience, *The Course of Empire* was a story of a past both temporally and theoretically remote. America had slipped free of such mechanistic determinism. God had given white America a unique destiny—a mandate to pursue a westward course of empire—and had granted them the strength and technological skill to fulfill it. His will was irrevocable. Thus, the warning embedded in *The Course of Empire* went largely unheeded by the American public. Confident in their ability to force the continent into submission, and equally certain that ability constituted right, the moral of *The Course of Empire*, for those who could read it, seemed one for a different people, of a different time.<sup>113</sup>

Cole’s disillusionment with American society only intensified over the succeeding decade. Unable to reconcile himself to an expansionist, populist democratic culture, he condemned the behavior of the Jacksonians, supported the Whig candidacy of William Henry Harrison in 1840, and opposed the jingoism and warmongering of the Democratic Polk administration in 1846. In a letter to a friend in July of 1846, he made clear his sentiments about

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<sup>112</sup> Robert A. Ferguson, *Reading the Early Republic* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2009), 175.

<sup>113</sup> Novak, *Nature*, 142.

the Mexican-American war: “The Oregon question is indeed settled; but nobody knows what this vile Mexican War will bring about.”<sup>114</sup> But in this, Cole was radically at odds with the broader culture. By the mid-1840s, a form of expansionism novel in name, but not in theory, made its appearance in the United States. Known as “Manifest Destiny,” the term was a reworking of the idea of a heavenly ordained American empire, expressed repeatedly since the eighteenth century, but best captured in Berkeley’s *Verses* that had by now become as much a slogan as a poem. It signified a divinely-sanctioned expansion over an area of ambiguous parameters. In some minds it meant expansion over the region to the Pacific; in others, over the North American continent; in others, over the hemisphere. But most immediately, the concept of “manifest destiny” helped to remove doubts about the propriety of claiming foreign territories on the North American continent. John O’Sullivan, the coiner of the phrase, had launched a monthly magazine, the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, in October of 1837, whose purpose was “to strike the hitherto silent string of the democratic genius of the age and the country.”<sup>115</sup> To that end, O’Sullivan had written Thomas Cole in the spring of 1837, requesting a few essays for its pages. “I should like some good articles on American Art,” he wrote, “...or in general any writing on the subject proceeding from that eye to see and heart to feel the spirit of American Nature which shew themselves in your paintings.”<sup>116</sup> Cole did not respond. By the 1840s, O’Sullivan’s lively optimism for American genius and the “spirit” of American nature had spilled over into robust belief in America’s exceptionalism, both as a people and as a continental empire, a sentiment echoed across the culture, from the essays of Emerson to the histories of

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<sup>114</sup> Quoted in Miller, “Thomas Cole,” 67-68.

<sup>115</sup> John O’Sullivan, quoted in Julius W. Pratt, “John O’Sullivan and Manifest Destiny,” *New York History* 14 (July 1933) 218.

<sup>116</sup> J.L. O’Sullivan to Thomas Cole, 22 April 1837, Thomas Cole Papers, Detroit Institute of Art.

Bancroft, embedded in the triumph of the party of Jackson, and evidenced in the victorious westward march of the Anglo-Saxon. Doubt in the capacity of the American republic to extend its system to the shores of the Pacific collapsed under the coming of the railroad and the telegraph, while the success of the Texas revolution pointed to an early attainment of continental ambitions. It was in an 1845 editorial on the annexation of Texas, an event that had brought the nation to the brink of war with Mexico, that O’Sullivan coined the potent phrase, “manifest destiny.” “It is time now for the opposition to the Annexation of Texas to cease,” he wrote, “...Texas is now ours.” No longer should American power be hampered either by other nations that dared to interfere in American affairs or by Americans themselves, who failed to do their “common duty of Patriotism to the Country.” No one can “[limit] our greatness [or check] the fulfilment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions...destined to gather beneath the flutter of the stripes and stars, in the fast hastening year of the Lord 1945!”<sup>117</sup>

Cole’s life was abruptly cut short in 1848. He lived to read the words of America’s “manifest destiny,” but did not survive to see its tangible expression in the aftermath of the Mexican American war that concluded that same year. If Cole found anything manifest in America’s destiny it was a fearful certainty that America posed no exception in the history of world empires—that it too would rise and fall in the course of all empires. Cole was hard at work on *Course of Empire* when he recorded a particularly prescient passage in his journal, dated October 21, 1835,

I have of late felt a presentiment that the institutions of the U States will ere long undergo a change—that there will be a separation of the States. ...It appears to me that the moral principle of the nation is much lower than formerly and much less than vanity will allow. Americans are too fond of attributing the great prosperity of the country to their own

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<sup>117</sup> John L. O’Sullivan, “Annexation,” *Democratic Review* XVII (October 1845): 243-48.

good...It is with sorrow that I anticipate the downfall of republican government—its destruction will be a death blow to Freedom—for if the Free government of the U States cannot exist a century where shall we turn? The hope of the wise and the good of past ages will have perished. And the scenes of tyranny and wrong, blood and oppression such as have been acted since the world was created will be again performed as long as man exists. There is no perfectibility in this world. ...May my fears be foolish—a few years will tell.<sup>118</sup>

Cole was not too far off. In America's imperial ambitions lay the seeds of its downfall. A quarter century after the *Course of Empire*, Americans, faced with the tableaux of a country in ruins, would have to ask the question anew: What was America to be?

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<sup>118</sup> Cole, Journal, Thomas Cole Papers, NYSL.



## Chapter 4

### “A New Gospel to this Continent”: Emanuel Leutze’s Capitol Mural in a Time of War

In the spring of 1862, the great American literary luminary Nathaniel Hawthorne arrived in Washington, D.C., escaping what felt to be an interminable Massachusetts winter. Though he welcomed the opportunity to shave off a few weeks of winter in milder climes, his primary purpose in journeying to Washington was to see the war with his own eyes. Southern forces had fired on Fort Sumter almost exactly one year before, commencing a Civil War whose duration and devastation were yet unknown. Though hundreds of miles away from the battlefields, the “general heart-quake of the country” had long since “knocked at my cottage-door,” Hawthorne wrote in an essay for the *Atlantic Monthly* later that year. “There is no remoteness of life and thought, no hermetically sealed seclusion, except, possibly, that of the grave, into which the disturbing influences of this war do not penetrate.” Holed up in a snowbound New England over the preceding months, Hawthorne had followed the war in the newspapers, listened along with his neighbors for the click of the telegraph carrying reports of far-off battles. Nonetheless irked by his relative insulation from the war, Hawthorne determined to throw himself into the heart of the conflict, and with his pen, make some small contribution to the war effort.<sup>1</sup>

As Hawthorne journeyed southward, signs of war steadily increased. The quiet solitude of New England gave way to an uneasy atmosphere filled with the palpable sense of disturbance. In New York City, the shop windows were filled with glittering military regalia. From New York to New Jersey, new passengers joined the journey: a soldier returning from furlough, and a “new-made officer...in his new-made uniform...proud of his eagle-buttons, and likely enough to do them honor before the gilt should be wholly dimmed,” Hawthorne ruminates. Past

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<sup>1</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, “Chiefly About War-Matters,” *Atlantic Monthly* 10 (July 1862): 43-61.

Philadelphia, military guards patrolled the platforms of the railway stations. Between Baltimore and Washington, weather-beaten tents arrayed across hillsides could be spied from the train car, while freshly-built fortifications poked through with cannon muzzles sat atop the hills, a strange and foreign sight for a generation of Americans who had known only peace. Reaching the capital, Hawthorne and his traveling companions filed out of the station between lines of soldiers with carrying muskets. Hawthorne was disconcerted by the sight. This was a spectacle common in European cities, where internal conflict was a “chronic disease” that had long afflicted other nations “save our own,” but war had now pierced America’s exceptionalism.<sup>2</sup>

Hawthorne arrived in Washington just as Union troops headed out across the Potomac, on a fateful march towards Manassas. At loose ends while the army he had come to observe took to the field, Hawthorne and his companions toured the newly-built Capitol Extension housing the Senate and House chambers as they were being diligently adorned by sculptors and artists. Heading for the west staircase leading to the House chamber, they came to a barrier of pine boards built across the stairs. Knocking at a rough door cut into the barrier, and sliding a calling card beneath, Hawthorne soon came face to face with “a person in his shirt-sleeves, a middle-aged figure, neither tall nor short, of Teutonic build and aspect, with an ample beard of a ruddy tinge and chestnut hair.”<sup>3</sup> He had found just the man he was seeking: Emanuel Leutze, the premier history painter in mid-nineteenth-century America.

On that spring day of 1862, Leutze labored with his pencil, sketching in a mural that would eventually fill up the entire wall—a space approximately twenty by thirty feet—the first great fresco in United States’ history. Only the faintest outlines of the painting were in place, but

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 44-45.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 46

Leutze directed his guests to a scaled-down oil study of the final image (fig. 4.1), propped on an easel nearby, “[Helping] us,” Hawthorne wrote, “to form some distant and flickering notion of what the picture will be, a few months hence, when these bare outlines, already so rich in thought and suggestiveness, shall glow with a fire of their own.” The subject of the scene, a pioneer train crossing the Rocky Mountains *en route* to California, struck Hawthorne as “emphatically original and American, embracing characteristics that neither art nor literature have yet dealt with...” Even in reduced form, the scene brimmed with ebullience. “It looked full of energy, hope, progress, irrepressible movement onward, all represented in a momentary pause of triumph,” Hawthorne reported. “It was most cheering to feel its good augury at this dismal time, when our country might seem to have arrived at such a deadly stand-still.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.



Fig. 4.1. Emanuel Leutze, *Study for Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way*, 1861, oil on canvas, 33.2 x 43.3 in., Smithsonian American Art Museum.

Indeed, the juxtaposition would have been jarring: over two years, 1861 and 1862, among the darkest days for the Union in the course of the Civil War, Emanuel Leutze completed his painting, a triumphant, nationalistic monument to, what he called, “the grand peaceable conquest of the great west” by that very same Union whose continued existence now seemed deeply imperiled.<sup>5</sup> Hawthorne found some degree of comfort in finding Leutze so quietly busy at this “great national work” even as Hawthorne speculated as to whether the walls that held it would remain standing or whether “treason shall succeed in subverting the Union which it represents.”

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<sup>5</sup> Emanuel Leutze to Unidentified Recipient, Undated, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress.

Hawthorne was not alone in his dark conjectures. “Other men,” he writes, “doubted and feared, or hoped treacherously, and whispered to one another that the nation would exist only a little longer.” But there Leutze continued, day in and day out, “firm of heart and hand, drawing his outlines with an unwavering pencil, beautifying and idealizing our rude, material life, and thus manifesting that we have an indefeasible claim to a more enduring national existence.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the title Leutze gave his mural was a line that had long captured America’s sense of prophetic national purpose: “Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way.” Leutze interpreted these words in paint, splashing an undaunted vision of United States destiny across the walls of the Capitol—a destiny writ large, in a language readily decipherable to all Americans.

There is no small irony in Leutze painting this vision of the nation’s destiny when the very existence of the United States was in question. But in important ways, Leutze’s painting was composed not in spite of the war, but deeply attuned to it, and to its potential. The national trauma that Cole had anticipated in his *Course of Empire* series had come to pass. In some sense, Leutze’s painting picked up where Cole’s series ended. “Desolation,” the final painting, depicts a landscape in ruins. Although quiet despair is the overarching emotion of this scene, there is nonetheless an ambiguity. The original arrangement of the five paintings suggested a circularity to the tale, a literal rendering of the cyclical course of empire. In this conception, empire is endlessly birthed anew into a new Eden, a new Canaan, or, as Leutze termed it in his painting notes, a “promised land.” But Leutze’s painting is not the birth of something new, it is not an escape from destruction to a new world, but rather a redemption of the old. Through the crucible of war, through the travails of her national history, through the sweat and blood of her people, Leutze’s work illustrated that America emerged with her destiny secured by prophecy and her

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<sup>6</sup> Hawthorne, “Chiefly,” 46.

empire enlarged by the refining fires of war. Out of the embrace the native-born of the North and South, immigrants, and freedmen, Leutze's work reveals not only an early confidence in Union victory and a keen cognizance of the changing meaning of the war, but how the triumph of the North's vision for America's future was a critical component of America's manifest destiny. This first great American fresco continued Berkeley's prophetic argument decades later, that a land of opportunity for any who would take hold whether slave or free, foreign-born or native-born, north or south.

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The westward expansion of Leutze's painting was of course intimately tied to the devastating war that now threatened to rip the nation apart. Among the issues that sectional attitudes towards slavery complicated, westward migration posed a particularly thorny problem, giving rise to an intractable debate over the question of permitting slavery in the western territories. Imperial ambition in the name of 'manifest destiny' had claimed Oregon, Texas, and the entire southwest of modern day America by the end of the 1840s. "Away, away with all these cobweb tissues of rights of discovery, exploration, settlement, contiguity, etc....," the newspaper man John O'Sullivan sniffed dismissively in 1845, "The American claim is by the right of our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federative self-government entrusted to us."<sup>7</sup> This sentiment was echoed in newspapers across the country throughout the 1840s, often rendered in the more familiar language of Bishop Berkeley. The vote to annex Texas and Oregon in 1845 prompted the Ohio paper, *The Spirit of Democracy*, to declare, "East

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<sup>7</sup> *Morning News* (New York, NY) 27 December 1845, quoted in Julius W. Pratt, "The Origin of 'Manifest Destiny,'" *American Historical Review* 32 (July 1927): 796.

and west, we shall then have a boundary about which there can be no dispute...the Atlantic and the Pacific—the boundaries of the republic, defined by the finger of the Great Jehovah.

‘Westward the star of empire takes its way,’ the paper continued, “And it will keep going west, till it circles the EARTH [sic]—the star of the empire of republican government—of the rights of man—the liberties of man—and the sovereignty of man!”<sup>8</sup> With more extensive biblical allusions and greater certainty of divine mission, the Yazoo City *Democrat* suggested that overspreading the continent would bring America closer to God. “‘Westward the Star of Empire takes her way,’” the editorial proclaimed, “With Texas annexed, soon the shores of the Pacific will be the east, and Asia the ‘far-west.’ ‘Subdue the earth and multiply,’ and we shall reach ‘our Father which art in heaven.’”<sup>9</sup> Framed thus, westward expansion could be viewed as the very fulfillment of God’s covenant with humanity in the Garden of Eden, a divine sanction further sealed by the blessing of the Lord’s Prayer.

It was not only florid newspaper editors who invoked Berkeley’s prophecy in the context of active westward expansion. With the question of western lands constantly before Congress in the waning years of the 1840s, as debates raged over the wisdom of annexing Texas, of going to war with Mexico, of arrogating Britain’s claim to the Oregon territory, one correspondent to the *New-York Herald* sardonically reported that there was a “great demand for patriotic poetry” in the halls of Congress lately. “In the progress of [debate] members have indulged in quotations of poetry, who are among the last men we should have suspected of being accessory to the fact.” By way of example, he quoted an Alabama Whig in the House: “By Mr. Hilliard [of Alabama]:

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<sup>8</sup> “Correspondence of the Ohio Statesman.” *The Spirit of Democracy* (Woodsfield OH) 14 February 1845.

<sup>9</sup> “Existence.” *The Yazoo Democrat* (Yazoo City MS) 18 February 1845: 4.

‘Westward the star of empire holds his way.’”<sup>10</sup> In the Senate chamber, the more reticent William Archer of Virginia cautioned his colleagues that a measured approach to western interests was called for. Senator Archer lyricized to his colleagues, “‘Westward the star of empire takes its way,’” averring that the sentiment was “as true as it...was poetic.” Only Archer “desired that that star would shed a benign, not baleful influence.”<sup>11</sup>

The Mexican Cession that the United States wrangled out of the treaty that ended the Mexican War—525,000 square miles of land that included all of what would become California, Nevada, and Utah, as well as most of Arizona, roughly half of New Mexico, a third of Colorado, and a slice of Wyoming—posed a particularly thorny set of questions: How would this territory be divided? How many states would it create? How would their boundaries be drawn? How many states would be free, or slave? None of these questions had easy answers, and slavery was so poisonous a topic that it had been largely avoided since the earliest days of the nation. The issue proved so intractable that only a series of compromises had allowed the nation to hold together for as long as it had. The most recent of these concessions, the Missouri Compromise of 1820, had attempted to settle the question of slavery’s expansion as the nation pushed steadily westward by fixing its boundary at the 36°30’ parallel, ensuring that future states north of this line, with the exception of Missouri, would be forever free. The War with Mexico upended this hard-won equilibrium.

Midway through the war with Mexico, New York Whigs used the platform of their state convention leading up to the presidential election of 1848 to argue that those executing the war had a darker agenda than the mere annexation of territory. “Disguise its intense, purposes and

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<sup>10</sup> “From the Correspondence of the N.Y. Herald.” *Sunbury American and Shomokin Journal* (Sunbury PA) 7 February 1846: 4.

<sup>11</sup> “In Senate.” *The Daily Union* (Washington DC) 18 March 1846: 3.



consequences...the great truth cannot be hidden, that its main object is a conquest of a market for slaves.” Vigorously opposing the spread of slavery into the west, the New York delegation protested, “in the name of the rights of man, and of liberty, against the further extension of slavery in North America. The curse [of slavery] shall never blight the virgin soil of the North Pacific.” To make bald the effrontery of such a possibility, the Whigs turned to a well-worn line, “We feel it would be a horrible mockery for the columns of Anglo-Saxon emigration to be approaching...with Africa enslaved under the banners that head their march, as ‘Westward the star of empire takes its way.’”<sup>12</sup> What place did slavery have in such a noble destiny, the Whigs queried. The pro-slavery Democratic paper the *Winchester Virginian* returned the salvo four months later, confirming anti-slavery advocates deepest fears. “Our ‘manifest destiny’...will not be checked,” the editorial warned. Framing the expansion of slavery as an issue of state sovereignty and civil liberty, the writer insisted that destiny was manifestly on the side of the slaveholder. “Washington, Jefferson, and Madison,” all slaveholders, “foresaw our glorious destiny.” Proving that pro-slavery forces could just as equally rally Berkeley to their side, the editorial continued, “‘Westward the Star of Empire takes its way,’ was the prophecy. The statesman and the poet’s predictions are rapidly being fulfilled. Fidelity to our institutions,” slavery not least of them, “will exemplify that the Anglo-Saxon race will control and mould all other races of men...”<sup>13</sup> The use of Berkeley by pro- and anti-slavery forces indicated that the battle engaged the past as much as the present as each side attempted to define the legacy of liberty bequeathed by the founding fathers.

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<sup>12</sup> “New York Whig State Convention.” *New Hampshire Sentinel* (Keene NH) 21 October 1847: 3.

<sup>13</sup> “Buchanan in Virginia.” *The North-Carolina Standard* (Raleigh NC) 23 February 1848: 1.

For those who opposed slavery in the new territories, the issue was not a moral one about an economic one—the concern centered on the effect of slavery on white labor, not black labor. Free Soilers—as those who favored free territory came to be called—were not, on the whole, abolitionists let alone advocates of black equality. Their opposition to the extension of slavery into the west was rooted in a belief in the superiority of the Northern way of life—a dynamic and expanding capitalist society whose achievements and destiny were almost wholly the result of the dignity and opportunities which it offered the average laboring man.<sup>14</sup> Opportunity and labor were two sides of the same coin in antebellum America. This was an era in which Americans were inordinately oriented towards self-betterment and upward mobility, and displayed a remarkable confidence that they could achieve it through their own hard work if only given the opportunity.

The most visible example of this quest for opportunity and a better life was the steady stream of settlers who abandoned their eastern homes to seek their fortunes in the west.<sup>15</sup> Observers who watched the steady stream of emigrant wagons roll across the landscape saw them as the literal conveyors of empire to the west—the vanguard who made Berkeley’s now ancient prophecy come to fruition. “A wagon load of emigrants with their movables, passed our office to-day,” reported the *Milwaukie Herald* in a brief notice entitled, “Westward the Star of Empire Takes Its Way.” “Their baggage was marked to ‘Sundown,’ which we suppose must be near the ‘jumping off’ place,” the paper wittily surmised.<sup>16</sup> “Westward the star of Empire,” proclaimed the *Time-Picayune* out of New Orleans, “It is thought that more than fifty thousand

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<sup>14</sup> Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995), 11.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>16</sup> “Westward the Star of Empire Takes Its Way.” *Barre Gazette* (Barre MA) 14 June 1844: 2.

people will have emigrated to Missouri during the year 1839.”<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, in Missouri a paper reported that “Numbers of our citizens are preparing to take up their march for Oregon this spring,” as the line of emigration pushed further west. “So long as there is a wilderness in the West, that ‘Westward star of empire will make its way,’ the paper predicted.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, as another paper soon reported, “Some of the emigrants who have reached Oregon are dissatisfied with the country, and contemplate going to California in the spring, so that the star of empire for American emigrants, not only Westward but Southward takes its way.”<sup>19</sup> Such was the story across the 1840s, as tens of thousands of emigrants made their way westward.

Rapid emigration to California after the Mexican War forced a new reckoning with the question of slavery’s extension. In that same year, a miner struck gold in northern California. California could now veritably be called Eldorado. News of the discovery filtered back east. By 1849, Americans were flocking to the new territory. “The late Mexican war, and the recently discovered mineral wealth of California, have had a powerful tendency in bringing matters to a crisis,” *The New York Herald* reported. “It may now be said with truth, ‘Westward the star of empire takes its way.’ In the course of the present year, thousands of hardy, enterprising, chivalrous pioneers of civilization will have been poured in the country bordering on the Pacific.”<sup>20</sup> Between 1848 and 1852, the non-Indian population of California jumped from about 14,000 to more than 220,000.<sup>21</sup> And, as the *Herald* suggested, it brought the situation to a crisis.

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<sup>17</sup> “‘Westward the star of Empire,’ &c.” *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans LA) 3 November 1839: 2.

<sup>18</sup> “Westward Ho!” *The Radical* (Bowling Green MO) 25 March 1843: 2.

<sup>19</sup> “West; Pacific; Oregon; California; American.” *Berkshire County Whig* (Pittsfield MA) 30 November 1843: 3.

<sup>20</sup> “Our Intercourse with the Pacific—The Isthmus of Panama, &c. &c.” *The New York Herald* (New York NY) 23 May 1849: 2.

<sup>21</sup> Richard White, “*It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own*”: *A New History of the American West* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 191.

Overnight, California was ready for statehood. Although the Missouri Compromise line cut through California, Californians, representative of the sort of Free Soil emigrants who flooded West, approved a free-state constitution on their own volition, sparking a renewed sectional crisis back East. Only a new compromise could quell the fury of pro-slavery forces. The Compromise of 1850 that brought California in as a free state but gave jaw-dropping concessions to the South averted a crisis, but in retrospect, merely postponed the disaster.<sup>22</sup>

Between 1850 and 1860, sectional distrust deepened, making additional compromises exceedingly difficult. The attempt to find a suitable route for a proposed transcontinental railroad sparked a new crisis in 1854. To make a transcontinental railroad feasible the Nebraska territory had to be organized to allow for settlement—that would provide both protection and a market for the proposed railroad. The resultant Kansas-Nebraska Act effectively repealed the Missouri Compromise by leaving the question of slavery's expansion into this territory to the will of the voters of these soon-to-be states, a policy known as popular sovereignty. Far from resolving the issue, this clause led to civil war in Kansas, as Free Soil and pro-slavery forces flooded the territory, claiming it for their own. The violence spilled over into the political spectrum—splitting the Democratic party along sectional lines, confirming the demise of the Whig Party, and giving birth to a new explicitly anti-slavery northern party, the Republican Party.<sup>23</sup> The railroad, with its inherent potential to physically bind a loose-jointed and fractious republic into closer unity, served only to drive the wedge deeper. Amidst a growing fear of federal power, and the implications of increasing free states in the west that would tip the federal government

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<sup>22</sup> James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The American Civil War* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990) 64, 66, 71.

<sup>23</sup> David M. Potter, *The Impending Crisis: 1848-1861* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), 145-75.

explicitly against the interests of southern slaveholders, the 1860 election of Abraham Lincoln to the presidency, a member of the recently-created and explicitly anti-slavery Republican party—was enough to convince the South that disunion was not only inevitable, but necessary. A month after Lincoln’s election, the first state, South Carolina, seceded from the Union.

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As the great historian of the antebellum period, David Potter, lamented in his history of the 1850s, it is difficult to escape the knowledge that the decade will terminate in a great civil war. “Seen this way, the decade of the fifties becomes a kind of vortex, whirling the country in ever narrower circles and more rapid revolutions into the pit of war.” But, he insisted, “it should be remembered that most human being during these years went about their daily lives, preoccupied with their personal affairs, with no sense of impending disaster nor any fixation on the issue of slavery.” The federal government in those years dealt with all manner of questions that had little to do with sectional issues—banking policy, public land policy, tariff policy.<sup>24</sup> And, as it happens, the construction of a new Capitol building.

The design for Capitol Extension that would enlarge the U.S. Capitol by adding new wings to either end of the existing building would showcase America’s great progress in her first seventy-five years of existence.<sup>25</sup> When the cornerstone for the extension was laid in 1851, on the seventy-fifth anniversary of the United States, Massachusetts Senator Daniel Webster revisited Berkeley’s poem in his reflections upon the meaning of this expanded Capitol and the territorial progress of the nation that it represented, a nation “now among the most considerable and powerful, spreading over the continent from sea to sea.” “In the early part of the second

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>25</sup> Guy Gugliotta, *Freedom’s Cap: The United States Capitol and the Coming of the Civil War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), 31.

century of our history, Bishop Berkeley...wrote his well-known ‘Verses on the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America,’” Webster reminded his audience. “The last stanza of this little poem seems to have been produced by a high poetical inspiration. ‘Westward the course of empire takes its way...’” Webster marveled at “so clear a vision of what America would become...an intuitive glance into futurity...a grand conception, strong, ardent, glowing, embracing all time since the creation of the world...renders it one of the most striking passages in our language.”<sup>26</sup> The new Capitol Extension would be a worthy edifice for so grand a conception: as the United States expanded, so too must its greatest building. Spacious corridors and fine staircases, a new façade of white marble, a gilded dome and indoor colonnade—the results would be spectacular.<sup>27</sup>

As the construction of the Capitol demanded the expertise of the Army Corps of Engineers, the project fell under the auspices of the War Department, and under the immediate supervision of Captain Montgomery C. Meigs, a highly capable administrator who earned even greater acclaim as the miracle-working Quartermaster General of the Union Army.<sup>28</sup> The original interior design for the Extension called for clean, white-washed walls hung with occasional oil paintings to match the interior of the original building. Meigs had a very different, and highly specific idea for the decoration of the Capitol.<sup>29</sup> In 1854, Meigs wrote to Emanuel Leutze, a German-American artist living in Dusseldorf, Germany, requesting advice on identifying American artists up to the task of executing large-size frescos, and requested advice on design

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<sup>26</sup> Daniel Webster, “The Addition to the Capitol. An Address Delivered at the Laying of the Corner-Stone of the Addition to the Capitol, on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, 1851,” in *The Speeches and Orations of Daniel Webster*, ed. Edwin P. Whipple (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1914) 639-40.

<sup>27</sup> Gugliotta, *Freedom’s Cap*, 36.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

schemes for the new building. Meigs assured him that Congress would support this endeavor to call “to our aid all the best talent and skill in art which our country can boast.”<sup>30</sup> While he awaited Leutze’s reply, Meigs visited New York and chanced upon a painting that Leutze had recently finished, *Washington Rallying the Troops at the Battle of Monmouth*. “I wish I had it for the grand stairway of the Capitol Extension,” Meigs wrote in his diary. “The man who could paint that is quite able to paint for the walls of our people’s palace.”<sup>31</sup> Leutze’s eager interest in the project is evidenced in his cramped six-page reply. American artists had “long cherished and nursed hope” for just such an opportunity “to do something for their country,” he wrote. Leutze could recommend numerous American artists capable of executing a fine painting of so large a size, but no opportunity had yet been offered them. Contrary to popular prejudice, Leutze insisted that “America had twenty times the talent for fine arts than any other country.” “Give us a chance,” Leutze implored Meigs, “and my word on it, we will do what Europe cannot do even with her best artists...*We* will paint ‘*American pictures*’ [sic].” To that end, Leutze included a list of subjects and events that he felt would make for important and effective murals, including ‘Emigration to the West.’<sup>32</sup>

Leutze was already a well-known and well-loved artist on both sides of the Atlantic when Meigs wrote to him. Travelling back and forth between New York and Dusseldorf, Leutze had earned acclaim over the preceding decade with a series of historical paintings that could be best described as “*American pictures*.” Leutze embraced his adopted homeland with a vengeance.

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<sup>30</sup> Montgomery Meigs to Emanuel Leutze, 12 January 1854, in Montgomery C. Meigs, *Letterbooks*, Mar. 1853—Oct. 1859, 1861. U.S. Congress, Architect of the Capitol.

<sup>31</sup> Montgomery Meigs, *Capitol Builder: The Shorthand Journals of Montgomery C. Meigs, 1853-1859, 1861* ed. Wendy Wolff (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 2001), 144.

<sup>32</sup> Emanuel Leutze to Montgomery Meigs, 10 February 1854, US Congress, Architect of the Capitol.

Born in Germany in 1815, Leutze had emigrated with his family to Philadelphia in 1825. Leutze took an early interest in art, and used his skills to support the family when his father died shortly after their arrival in the United States. Leutze eventually returned to Germany in 1841 to pursue a more rigorous art education than he could then receive in America at the prestigious Art Academy of Dusseldorf, the most famous school of art in Europe. Leutze, like nearly every other significant artist of his day, sought to make a name for himself in history painting, then considered the “highest” genre of fine art. Leutze’s affection for his adopted homeland spilled across canvas after canvas that read like pages out of Bancroft’s *History of the United States* (the first five volumes were in Leutze’s possession when he died in 1868). Among his first paintings, Columbus appeared as a repeating motif. The subject, and Leutze’s renditions of it, proved internationally popular. A Philadelphia paper proudly reported that “our townsman, Leutze” had made a splash at the annual exhibition of the National Academy of Arts in New York. “The great pride of the Gallery this year...is Leutze’s picture of the “Return of Columbus in Chains,” which lately gained the first prize at the exhibition in Brussels...Leutze will hold hereafter a high place among American artists.”<sup>33</sup>

A visit to the Swabian Alps, however, permanently altered the trajectory of Leutze’s art. Spending six months wandering through the German countryside, Leutze had an epiphany. Walking among “the romantic ruins of what were once free cities, with their grey walls and frowning towers, in which a few hardy, persevering burghers bade defiance to their noble oppressors,” led Leutze into a contemplation on the “course of freedom from those small isolated manifestations of the love of liberty to where it has unfolded all its splendor in the institutions of” the United States. “Nearly crushed and totally driven from the old world it could not be

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<sup>33</sup> “Fine Arts in New York.” *North American* (Philadelphia, PA) 4 May 1843: 2.



vanquished, and found a new world for its home.” Leutze could envision this course of freedom as a series of pictures forming a long cycle. The cycle would begin with the creation of free institutions in the middle ages; it would continue with the reformation and Civil War in England, the causes for emigration to the New World, including the discovery and settlement of America, the early protestation against tyranny, and conclude with the Revolution and Declaration of Independence.<sup>34</sup> In this vision for the progressive unfolding of world history, Leutze conceived of the United States as the final stage in this progressive movement. While Leutze’s notion of liberty emerging from the ruins of an oppressed people echoed the cyclical theories of history gaining new life in the work of German historians of his day, his perspective took a uniquely American and Berkeleyan, turn. Where Kant and Hegel saw a relentless rise and fall of nation, Leutze saw a teleological movement. History, in Leutze’s view, culminated in the American republic. To illustrate his theory, Leutze subsequently embarked on a pictorial cycle that traced the course of freedom across time and continents.<sup>35</sup> Among the paintings that constituted this grand program is Leutze’s, *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1851) (fig. 4.2), the most acclaimed of his paintings, and to this day, one of the most familiar and iconic pieces of American art.

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<sup>34</sup> “Return of Mr. Leutze,” *Bulletin of the American Art-Union* 6 (September 1851): 95-96.

<sup>35</sup> Jochen Wierich, “Struggling through History: Emanuel Leutze, Hegel, and Empire,” *American Art* 15 (Summer 2001): 55-57.



Fig. 4.2. Emanuel Leutze, *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, 1851, oil on canvas, 149 x 255 in., Metropolitan Museum of Art.

In fact, Leutze had first sought patronage from the United States government with this painting in hand, hoping that Congress would award him a commission to paint a replica and a companion piece depicting Washington rallying the American troops at the Battle of Monmouth. He displayed the painting in the Capitol Rotunda in 1851 for several weeks to drum up support. Senator James Cooper, of Leutze's native Pennsylvania, sponsored a resolution to award Leutze a contract. "Who that has looked upon that admirable picture, and contemplated the majestic form, and composed, yet inflexible, determination which beams from the countenance of the heroic chief, working his perilous way through the ice of the Delaware to reach the enemy to strike a decisive blow for freedom...and not felt his patriotism stimulated?" Cooper demanded. "It was the critical moment, pregnant with the result of the pending contest, with the hopes of

humanity, with the destiny, perhaps, of the world.”<sup>36</sup> Cooper, at least, had comprehended Leutze’s larger vision. However, Leutze’s application was lost in committee and nothing came of it. Leutze shortly thereafter returned to Dusseldorf.<sup>37</sup>

Meigs’ letter reached Leutze three years later. It would take another seven years for the plans to fall into place. By 1861, Leutze had refined his ideas. Though the character of Washington was undoubtedly a fine and heroic subject for a national painting, Leutze had something entirely different in mind. In telling his cycle of the progressive movement of liberty across history, Leutze was now ready to paint the final scene. It would tell the story of the “Emigration to the West.” And would “represent as near and truthfully...the grand, peaceful conquest of the great west.”<sup>38</sup> It would bear the title, “Westward the Course of empire Takes Its Way.” No other line could better comprehend the tale Leutze intended to tell.

In June of 1861, Meigs submitted Leutze’s design for the staircase mural to the Secretary of War, Simon Cameron. It was a critical time in Washington, with the war on its very doorstep and government expenditures focused almost entirely on defense of the capital. Cameron demurred from allowing the work to proceed given the present circumstances. But Meigs suggested that this was precisely the time to pursue the decoration of the Capitol. What could better speak to the government’s confidence in its cause and its soldiers, and in the longevity of the Union than in completing the Capitol. It could have a propagandistic effect. Is it not “a question worthy of consideration whether the Government, by pursuing in some degree the project of completing its Capitol would not give to the people a welcome assurance of its

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<sup>36</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 32nd Cong., 1st Sess. 24 (1852) 1004-5.

<sup>37</sup> Kent Ahrens, "Nineteenth Century History Painting and the United States Capitol," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington, D.C.* 50 (1980): 202.

<sup>38</sup> Emanuel Leutze to Unidentified Recipient, Undated, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress.

confidence in its own strength and in its patriotism of its people,” queried Meigs. At the same time, the more beautiful the Capitol, the more determined the people of the Union would be to prevent the capital from falling into “rebellious hands to deface [it].” For these reasons, Meigs suggested there could be symbolic power in “[seeing] in this time of rebellion one artist at least employed in illustrating our western conquest.”<sup>39</sup> Meigs arguments proved persuasive. In July of 1861, Leutze signed a contract, promising to complete the work within two years in exchange for the princely sum of \$20,000.<sup>40</sup>

In Leutze’s mural, *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way* (fig. 4.3), we find the quintessence of the epic frontier narrative that served as the nation-building myth of America. That it is framed in Berkeley’s words links this nationalism to the many ways Berkeley had been used before to define and shape America, yet further demonstrates how the idea had transformed and become thoroughly appropriated a century and a half after its composition. In the main panel of the painting, a wagon train emerges from a mountain pass in a gorge through which the emigrants can see at long last their destination—extending out as a limitless landscape, the West glows under the rays of the setting sun, settling like a benediction across the land. A predella beneath the panel features a smaller painting of the Golden Gates of San Francisco Bay, indicating that the final destination is California and the Pacific itself. The wide open western plain, the birds wheeling aloft, outlined against wispy clouds, are cumulatively suggestive of freedom and release from the oppressive and perilous darkness through which the emigrants have journeyed on the right side of the painting.

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<sup>39</sup> Montgomery C. Meigs to Simon Cameron, 20 June 1861. U.S. Congress, Architect of the Capitol.

<sup>40</sup> Contract reproduced in Charles E. Fairman, *Art and Artists of the Capitol of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1927).



Fig. 4.3. Emanuel Leutze, *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way*, 1862, stereochromy on plaster, 20 x 30 ft., United States Capitol.

A pyramid-shaped arrangement organizes the scene, drawing the viewer's gaze upward towards a pinnacle of rock on which a diminutive figure looks off to the west, waving his hat and grasping an American flag. Collectively, the figures in the painting lean leftward, "pressing eagerly forward," as Leutze envisioned it, in breathless anticipation of "their promised land," their "Eldorado," and, ultimately, their redemption, in the west.<sup>41</sup> A chaotic collection of wagons, people, and oxen occupy the foreground. A young woman, wrapped in a tartan shawl with a baby in her arms sits on a mule led by a young black man. He gazes out from the panel, his eyes meeting those of the viewer. This mother and child motif is repeated elsewhere. In the right foreground, a woman in a wagon struggles to hold her squirming toddler while her attention

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

is transfixed by the sight of the golden west. More prominently, a woman robed in blue and white—an allusion to the Virgin Mary—sits atop an outcrop at the center of the picture. She holds an infant to her breast, her serene gaze following the outstretched arm of her husband who leans protectively over her. Decked out in buckskin and a coonskin cap, he points unerringly towards the west as if to reassure the nursing mother of the security and plenty of their future. In response, she clasps her hands in thanksgiving. Leutze identified the grouping as a Tennessee farm family, but they are as equally a type of the Holy Family, on their flight to Egypt. At the left corner of the pyramid, a towering figure of an “old trapper” clad in buckskin sits astride a horse dominates. The guide of this train, he looks back at the pioneers and likewise gestures with his arm towards the west. His figure is reminiscent of Daniel Boone, or Moses, leading his people into the land of Canaan.<sup>42</sup>

The right side of the painting stands in stark contrast to the left. Mountain peaks rise in the gloaming darkness. A line of wagons winds endlessly eastward through a valley out to the edge of the panel. In his notes, Leutze described this as “the valley of darkness.” Their view to the west blocked by the outcropping of rock in the middle of the scene, the emigrants are yet engrossed in the travails of the journey—wrangling livestock, prying stuck wheels back into motion. Bleached oxen skulls and broken wagon wheels litter their trail, indicating the perils that threaten. Dangers that pioneers have recently passed through are alluded to by the limping figure of a young boy, his head wrapped in a bandage, in the foreground, wounded “probably in a fight with the Indians,” according to Leutze’s notes. A child riding an ox behind him grasps a bow and

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

feathered arrows in his hand, alluding to this bloody but ultimately victorious run-in with Native Americans.<sup>43</sup>

In the decorative border, Leutze included a series of vignettes that played upon associations that by 1860 were thoroughly engraved on the American psyche. The vignettes brim with symbolism and tie this painting closely to the numerous allusions to sacred and secular history embedded in Berkeley's verse. Across the top of border, the "motto" "Westward the course of Empire takes its way," unfurls in Arabesque script. The images around the border collectively offer "a playfull [sic] introduction from earlier history as a prelude to the subject of the large picture," Leutze wrote in his notes. In effect, Leutze surrounded his larger painting with the precise unfolding of progressive history that he believed led directly to this moment.

Leutze dug deep into the history of western civilization for inspiration. In one scene, Moses leads the Israelites out of Canaan; in another, the spies of Escholl bear an enormous cluster of grapes from Canaan. Elsewhere, Hercules divides the pillar of Gibraltar, "opening the way into the Atlantic Ocean—Path to the west." In another scene, a child paddles a tortoise shell, while a dove with a branch alluding to the "first naval expedition" of Noah and his Ark accompanies "argosy of the golden fleece." Above these images is a small vignette of the three Magi, "following the star to the west." And in embellished medallions on either side of the mural, the portraits of William Clark and Daniel Boone stare out at the viewer, an allusion to "the early history of the crossing—Alleghenies."<sup>44</sup> In these illustrations of adventure, exploration, and Providential guidance towards a promised land, Leutze suggests that his prosaic pioneers, in their ragged beards and coonskin caps and homespun dresses, are in fact part of a

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

cosmic history. Leutze concluded his description of the border noting that the motto of the painting was taken from the last verse of the poem by Bishop Berkeley, which, he wrote, “runs ‘Westward the course of Empire takes its way’ ‘The first four acts already past.’ A fifth shall close the drama with the day.”” Leutze spelled out his interpretation of these lines: “The drama of the Pacific ocean closes our Emigration to the west.”<sup>45</sup> In Leutze’s literal interpretation of the pome, there was no more “westward” left for Berkeley’s empire to go.

There is, however, one notably jarring element in this scene. Relegated to the decorative border, and captured in the tendrils of vines that wrap around these vignettes, are the haunting figures of Native Americans (fig. 4.4). In one such appearance, Leutze describes the Indian as “creeping and flying” before the “superior intelligence” of the allegorical figures of Liberty and Union in the upper border. At another point in the border, an Indian figure is “covering himself with his robe sneeking [sic] away from the light of knowledge.”<sup>46</sup> In Leutze’s interpretation of progressive history, Indians had no place.



Fig. 4.4. Detail showing Native Americans trapped in vines in the upper right border from *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way*, United States Capitol.

Leutze completed two studies of the design before finally transferring it to the wall of the staircase. The two studies for *Westward the Course of Empire* date to the first several months of 1861. Leutze did not start working on the mural until late that fall.<sup>47</sup> In that intervening time, the

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> “A Panel Painting.” *Cincinnati Daily Press* (Cincinnati OH) 1 November 1861: 3. The article reported that Leutze was to begin work on the mural “immediately.”



nation had disintegrated. President Lincoln came into office in March. On April 12, 1861, Confederate forces fired on the federal Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor. By then, seven southern states had joined with South Carolina to form a new nation, the Confederate States of America. Three days after the bombardment on Fort Sumter, Lincoln issued a proclamation calling 75,000 militiamen into national service for ninety days to put down the insurrection. Within a month, four more states seceded. In those early days of war, that summer of 1861, many Americans yet had a romantic idea of the conflict to come. Regiments departing for the front paraded before cheering, flag-waving crowds, with bands playing stirring patriotic music. Many people on both sides believed that the war would be short and glorious.<sup>48</sup> By the time Leutze began work on the mural in the late fall of 1861, that early confidence had faded. Even more worrisome, Union prospects were ebbing. The North had experienced a series of humiliating defeats over the summer. The Battle of Bull Run in July that came within thirty miles of the nation's capital had ended in a stunning rout of Union forces, sending shame despair rippling across the North.<sup>49</sup> Through much of 1861 and 1862, as Leutze labored in the Capitol, both sides dug in.

With Washington functioning as the Union's central command, and the war frequently on his doorstep, Leutze could not have avoided it. The capital was filled with military subjects. For a period of time, several companies of Zouaves were quartered on the floor of the House of Representatives, across the corridor from the Leutze's staircase. His sketchbook suggests that his encounter with the Zouaves prompted an enduring interest. In addition to a drawing of Zouaves lounging in the House chamber, the sketchbook contains drawings of the camp of the same

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<sup>48</sup> McPherson, *Battle Cry*, 274, 332-33.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 344-45.

Zouaves in Alexandria, Virginia.<sup>50</sup> Leutze frequently visited Camp Cameron in Northwest Washington, making sketches and memoranda of military subjects.<sup>51</sup> Over the course of the war, Leutze completed a number of paintings of Civil War generals.<sup>52</sup> And in his spare time, Leutze designed a diploma that the government intended to give soldiers for serving “in defense of the Union.”<sup>53</sup> Meanwhile, Washington hospitals overflowed with the wounded. Newspapers carried lengthy lists of the dead and wounded. In September of 1862, the Battle of Antietam in western Maryland left more than twenty thousand Americans dead or wounded. Leutze intimate acquaintance with the war and his cognizance of the stakes of it registered itself in the final mural, completed in November of 1862.<sup>54</sup>

The finished mural differs from the earlier studies of 1861 in several distinct ways, suggesting how the reality of war shaped Leutze’s final vision. The significant additions—the black man in the foreground leading the woman on a mule (fig. 4.5) and the inclusion of icons representing union and liberty in the border (fig. 4.6)—embodied the changing meanings of the Civil War and “Westward the course of empire” itself. The African American figure in Leutze’s painting is somewhat ambiguous. On first glance, the figure, leading a mule on which a white woman rides, would have appeared unexceptional in his seeming subservience. In the program

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<sup>50</sup> Raymond Stehle, “Five Sketchbooks,” *The Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress* 21 (April 1964): 91-92.

<sup>51</sup> “Military Correspondence, Washington, May 17, 1861,” *Crayon* 8 (1861): 134.

<sup>52</sup> Barbara Groseclose, *Emanuel Leutze, 1816-1868: Freedom Is the Only King* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1975), 119-121.

<sup>53</sup> “A Diploma for the Soldiers.” *Daily Democrat and News* (Davenport IA) 5 June 1861: 2.

<sup>54</sup> Daniel Clayton Lewis, “Emanuel Leutze’s *Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way*: Imagining Manifest Destiny, the “Stars and Stripes,” and the Civil War,” in *The United States Capitol: Designing and Decorating a National Icon*, ed. Donald R. Kennon (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2000), 244-45.

notes for the painting, Leutze identifies the figure only as a “Negro boy.”<sup>55</sup> But context, both in terms of the painting itself as well as Leutze’s larger context of Washington, DC in 1861-1862, suggests that Leutze intended this figure to be read as a freedman. While Leutze painted his mural, Washington became a mecca for thousands of African Americans fleeing slavery. Between 1861 and 1862, the black population in DC jumped nearly forty percent, comprising almost a fifth of city’s wartime population. The influx of migrants was primarily composed of refugee slaves from neighboring Virginia and Maryland. Their presence in Washington would have been highly visible, as they streamed in from the countryside, carrying what little they owned in their flight to freedom.<sup>56</sup> The encounter with slaves in the flesh, making slavery more than a mere abstraction, was a transformative experience for many Northerners in the Civil War. As historian Chandra Manning has extensively documented, contact with slaves convinced many Union troops that the destruction of slavery had to become an objective of the war if the Union was to be preserved. In fact, enlisted Union soldiers, in the first year of the war, became the first major group after black Americans and abolitionists to call for an end to slavery.<sup>57</sup> Although it is impossible to ascertain Leutze’s contact with refugee slaves in Washington, the inclusion of a black figure in the finished mural, depicted with all of his earthly belongings carried on his body, suggests that they had nonetheless made an impression upon him.

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<sup>55</sup> Emanuel Leutze to Unidentified Recipient, Undated, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress.

<sup>56</sup> Allan John Johnston, *Surviving Freedom: The Black Community of Washington, D.C., 1860-1880* (New York: Garland Publishers, 1993), 107-11.

<sup>57</sup> Chandra Manning, *What this Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War* (New York: Vintage, 2007), 47-51.



Fig. 4.5. Detail of African American figure leading immigrant woman on a mule from *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way*, United States Capitol.



Fig. 4.6. Detail of American eagle and allegorical figures of union and liberty in the upper border from *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way*, United States Capitol.

Another interpretive clue lingers in the ornamental border of the painting, another later addition to the design. At the top of the composition, an American eagle spreads his wings around two small allegorical figures. In his program notes, Leutze makes clear that these figures represent liberty and union.<sup>58</sup> The figure of liberty wears a liberty cap on his head and hold another liberty cap aloft on a staff. This image was an ideologically loaded symbol in the era of the Civil War. The meaning of the cap dated to the ancient Roman empire, when freed slaves were ceremonially given a cap to cover their shaved head, symbolizing their emancipation.

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<sup>58</sup> Emanuel Leutze to Unidentified Recipient, Undated, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress.

Eighteenth-century emblem books had familiarized Europeans with the image, while Paul Revere is credited with introducing the image to the colonies when he employed it in 1766 on an obelisk celebrating the repeal of the Stamp Act. Two decades later, the Philadelphia artist Samuel Jennings developed the iconography further by including the liberty cap in his painting, *Liberty Displaying the Arts & Sciences* (1792 (fig. 4.7). Here, the cap is used not as a symbol of political freedom, but as a reference to the emancipation of slaves in the American North, a fitting allusion to the abolitionist activities of the members of the Library Company of Philadelphia, where the painting still hangs.<sup>59</sup>

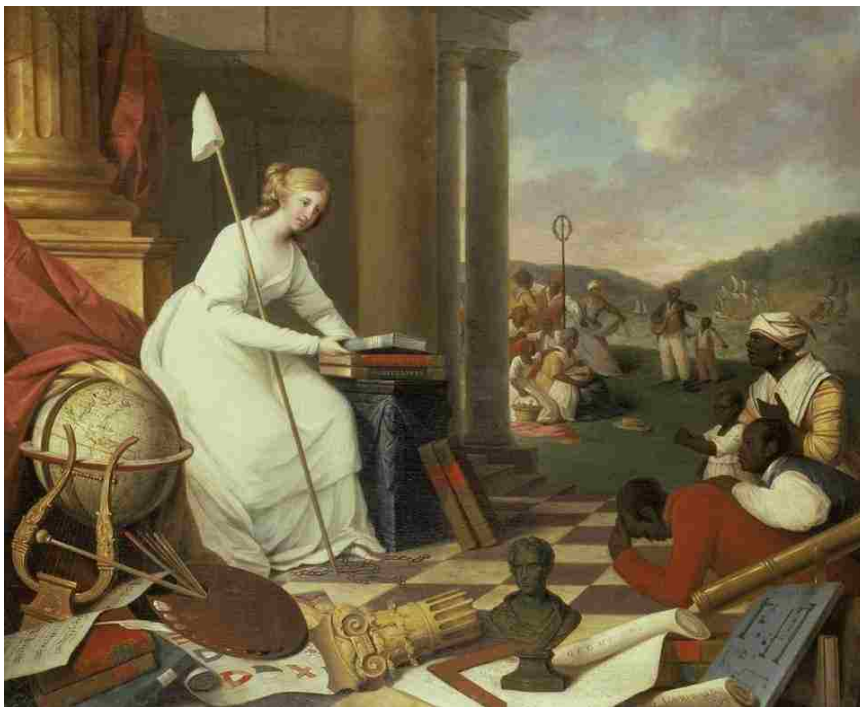


Fig. 4.7. Samuel Jennings. *Liberty Displaying the Arts and Sciences, or The Genius of American Encouraging the Emancipation of the Blacks*, 1792, oil on canvas, 60 ¼ x 74 in., Library Company of Philadelphia.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the association between the liberty cap and emancipation had calcified. In 1854, the sculptor Thomas Crawford submitted designs for a frieze, *Progress of*

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<sup>59</sup> Vivien Green Fryd, *Art and Empire: The Politics of Ethnicity in the United States Capitol, 1815-1860* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1992), 188.

*Civilization*, that would eventually decorate the pediment of the Capitol. The centerpiece of the design featured a female figure of America wearing a liberty cap (fig. 4.8). Jefferson Davis, who as Secretary of War at the time, balked at this detail when he first saw it. Meigs confided to Crawford that Davis “does not like the cap that Liberty introduces into the composition,” he wrote. “American liberty is original and not the liberty of the freed slave, and [Davis said] that the cap so universally adopted and especially in France [where] slavery has spasmodic struggles for freedom—is derived from the Roman custom of liberating slaves then called freedmen and [they are] allowed to wear this cap.”<sup>60</sup> Despite the discouragement, Crawford did not change his design, and by the time Leutze incorporated it into his own ode to liberty, Jefferson Davis was the president of the Confederacy.



Fig. 4.8. Detail from Thomas Crawford, *Progress of Civilization*, 1863, Marble, Senate Pediment, East Front, United States Capitol. (Photo courtesy of the Architect of the United States Capitol.)

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<sup>60</sup> Gugliotta, *Freedom's Cap*, 176-77.

It is also possible that Leutze's figure of the freedman was inspired by the Emancipation Proclamation that Lincoln announced in September of 1862. Although Lincoln's preliminary announcement was limited in its reach—freeing only the slaves in the rebelling states—Leutze's mural anticipates a capacious emancipation, one that would not only allow freedmen to seek their fortunes in the West, but imagined an American destiny in which they were fully incorporated. Leutze was certainly deeply interested and inspired by the subject of emancipation. He intended to complete another full-scale mural as a companion piece that would be an allegorical rendering of Emancipation. Though he sketched out a preliminary cartoon, the project was never commissioned, nor finished.<sup>61</sup>

Leutze's depiction of the African American takes on added meaning as the federal government moved cautiously towards allowing African Americans to serve as soldiers in the Union Army. While Leutze worked on his mural in the summer of 1862, military officials began recruiting African Americans to the war effort.<sup>62</sup> That Leutze fully supported this move is indicated by a small piece in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* in 1864. A petition by black Union soldiers had recently been sent to Congress, asking for “such laws as will put the soldiers of our army on the same footing as to bounty, pay, and pensions, without regard to difference of complexion.” This extraordinary request for pay parity, and in effect, racial equality, was signed by “eight hundred of our prominent citizens,” including Emanuel Leutze.<sup>63</sup>

The inclusion of the freedman, and the ways that this enlarged a sense of America's destiny, is amplified by a companion figure of the Irish woman on the mule. Leutze is not explicit about this figure in his notes, describing her only as “a mother kissing her babe with

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<sup>61</sup> Groseclose, *Emanuel*, 62.

<sup>62</sup> McPherson, *Battle Cry*, 500.

<sup>63</sup> “The Colored Soldiers.” *National Anti-Slavery Standard* (New York NY) 27 February 1864: 3.

tears of joy, mounted on a mule...she hopes to meet the father of her child who preceded them.”<sup>64</sup> But the woman’s tartan shawl, green dress, and dark coloring, in contrast to the other women in the painting who are universally depicted with fair and skin, suggests her immigrant identity. The inclusion of the Irish immigrant woman is significant. Northern society, for all of the high ground it could claim in its opposition to slavery’s expansion, was riven by anti-immigrant attacks throughout the 1850s. Racism was endemic in America in this period. The vast majority of white Americans, both north and south, took black inferiority for granted. But northern nativism went a step further. The new Republican party that had been born out of the ashes of the Northern Whig party in 1854, even as it proudly waved the banner of Free Soil and Free Labor, was as much a vehicle for anti-Catholic and anti-foreign sentiment as it was for anti-slavery.<sup>65</sup> Yankee members of the Republican party, descendants of the early Anglo-Saxon Protestant settlers felt particularly threatened by the waves of immigrants who poured in the country in the 1840s and 1850s—some 2.9 million between 1845 and 1854 alone, the vast majority of whom were Irish Catholics.<sup>66</sup>

Certainly anti-immigrant sentiment was spurred in some small part by residual historic Protestant opposition to the papacy and its tyranny, and a fear that a growing Catholic population could undermine an American system of government founded “on the principle of Protestant liberty,” as one prominent Republican senator phrased it.<sup>67</sup> But it was also the innate “otherness” of these immigrants—with their distinctive cultural ancestry—that offended many Republicans,

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<sup>64</sup> Emanuel Leutze to Unidentified Recipient, Undated, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress.

<sup>65</sup> Foner, *Free Soil*, 227.

<sup>66</sup> Tyler Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know Nothings and the Politics of the 1850s* (New York: Oxford UP, 1992), 3.

<sup>67</sup> John Parker Hale quoted in Foner, *Free Soil*, 228.



who believed immigrants must “Americanize” in order to maintain a homogenous and thus harmonious society. Republicans were drawn to nativism for other reasons as well: immigrants tended to vote with the Democratic party which absorbed them into its powerful political machines in the urban centers where many immigrants first settled; and as crime rates and poverty climbed in these cities, Republicans likewise held immigrants at fault. But nativism was not merely an urban movement; it flowed into rural America as well, where Republican farmers were repelled by the drinking culture of German and Irish immigrants and were further outraged by immigrants’ pro-slavery tendencies.<sup>68</sup> But even more pertinent to Leutze’s present work, anti-nativists in Congress had at various times throughout the 1850s attempted to halt the work on the Capitol because of the preponderance of immigrants among the artisans.<sup>69</sup> Leutze, himself an immigrant, likely felt this prejudice keenly. It was only natural then, when given an opportunity to imagine America’s destiny on the wall of the Capitol, the most “American” of spaces, that Leutze would make room for the foreigner.

In 1868, the art critic for *Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine*, Anne Brewster, attended a soiree in Washington. “I noticed...a middle-sized, thickset, extremely plain-looking man. He had a bristly, red-brown moustache, ill-kept beard and thick, rough hair; a square, hard, German face, with a concentrated expression...; quiet, unobtrusive, but self-possessed and observing.” A small paper book and pencil in his hand, along with the fact that he was engrossed in sketching the head of another member of the party gave his identity away. Brewster approached him and mentioned that she had recently studied his mural painting in the Capitol staircase. They talked about the accuracy of the scenery, and the various groups in the picture. “But allow me to ask

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 229-30.

<sup>69</sup> Gugliotta, *Freedom’s*, 193-94.

you a question,” Brewster begged Leutze. “There is a group almost in the center of your picture—a young Irish woman seated on an ass holding a child—the ass is led by a negro. Did you not mean this group to teach a new gospel to this continent, a new truth which this part of the world is too accept,” she asked. “That the Emigrant and the Freedman are the two great elements which are to be reconciled and worked with?” The artist’s face glowed, Brewster later remembered. And with a look of soft pleasure, Leutze informed her that she was the first American who had understood his picture. As Brewster later learned, Leutze had been flattering her—she was not the first to make this observation. “But no matter. We pleased each other for the time, and had a pleasant talk” which “gratified us both.”<sup>70</sup> In Leutze’s “new gospel,” the emigrant and the freedmen, the northerner and the southerner would, together, carry the empire of liberty westward. Even as war yet raged outside, Leutze was certain: America would be preserved to fulfill this destiny.

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<sup>70</sup> “Emanuel Leutze, the Artist.” *Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine* 2 (November, 1868): 534.

## Chapter 5

### “Empire Takes Its Way”: The Transcontinental Railroad and the Colonization of the West in American Art

In 1879, a subscription publishing firm based in Philadelphia approached the writer Linus Pierpont Brockett with an idea for a book. Brockett had achieved notoriety as something of an official Republican writer—author of one of the first accounts of Abraham Lincoln’s life, as well as subsequent volumes on Generals Ulysses S. Grant and Schuyler Colfax and on the contribution of women during the Civil War. The project in mind entailed an octavo volume of five hundred pages providing the most up-to-date description of the West. With colporteurs based in such far-flung locations as South Dakota, Sacramento, Vermont, and Tennessee, the firm was confident of a pervasive national interest in the topic.<sup>1</sup> The book Brockett ultimately produced, *Our Western Empire* (1882), was an encyclopedic gazetteer of the West, recording the best available information about the region in its heyday, based on thousands of printed sources and an extensive correspondence with hundreds of people who knew the West firsthand. Every detail in its eventual thirteen-hundred pages was epic: the tide of immigration had doubled and then quadrupled since the close of the Civil War; immigrants from Scandinavia, Germany, and England made up almost half of this wave, bringing the Old World into intimate contact with the farthest reaches of the New; two new states had been created out of the Colorado and Nebraska territories, and in just a handful of years, six more western states would join the reconstructed Union. Bonanza wheat farming had appeared from Minnesota to California, while Kansas led the nation in corn production; fat, sleek cattle roamed the plains alongside millions of robust and

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<sup>1</sup> L.P. Brockett, *Our Western Empire* (Philadelphia: Bradley, Garretson & Co., 1882), 3; Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1950; 1978), 184-85.

wooly sheep; mineral wealth streamed out of the slopes of the Rocky Mountains, the Sierra Nevadas, the Cascades, and countless smaller ranges in between: gold and silver, quicksilver and platinum, copper, lead and zinc, coal, salt, and sulfur.<sup>2</sup>

Given this bounty of the West, Brocket scoffed at a longstanding perception of the plains as a wasteland, as a “Great American desert.” Nearly the whole region lying between the 100<sup>th</sup> Meridian and the Rocky Mountains “was regarded fifty years ago as a desert land, incapable of any considerable cultivation, and given over to the buffalo, the panther, and the prairie wolf,” Brocket explained. To the contrary! he insisted. “. . .No part of the vast domain of the United States, and certainly in no other country under the sun, is there a body of land equal in extent, in which there are so few acres unfit for cultivation.” The trans-Mississippi as a whole, he averred, “is destined to be the garden of the world” and a “treasure-house for its mineral wealth.”<sup>3</sup>

Key to these developments was the building of the transcontinental railroad, begun in the midst of war in 1863, and completed six year later. Throughout Brockett’s account, the significance of the railroad for material progress is implicit. Charts record the enormous volume and value of freight carried across and out of the West—the yield of mines and quarries, of farms and forest products, livestock, wool and hides, the flesh of slaughtered animals. At the same time, the significance of the railroad was as much about what it gave as what it took away. It conveyed machinery, dry-goods, groceries, hardware, oils, and medicine, among many other goods, for the hundreds of thousands of people streaming into the west, themselves ferried in by way of the railroad. For immigrants who made their way to New York from Hamburg or Rotterdam, Glasgow or Southampton, they had only to choose a western destination, purchase a

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.; Brockett, *Our Western*, 3.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 131, 54, 497.

ticket at the Castle Garden immigration station in lower Manhattan, “and have no further troubles, except occasionally looking out for his meals and his baggage, till he reaches his destination, or the railway terminus nearest it.”<sup>4</sup> Into all corners, population flowed. One of Brockett’s correspondents reported from North Dakota that the trains “are crowded with newcomers; that the hotels are running over; that the Land Office at Fargo is crowded with applicants for...homestead claims.”<sup>5</sup> What all of this amounted to, this coming and going, this settling and homesteading, this farming and freighting, was, to the minds of nineteenth-century railroad boosters, the advent of civilization itself. “The railways,” Brockett wrote, “[are] now stretching their iron fingers across the continent, pioneers instead of followers of settlement and civilization.”<sup>6</sup>

Looking out from his piles of statistics, charts, and maps exhaustively documenting the explosive growth and economic potential of the West, Brockett believed the evidence incontrovertible: America had realized its continental destiny first articulated by Bishop Berkeley a century and a half earlier. ““Westward the course of empire takes its way,”” Brockett wrote at the beginning of a chapter modestly titled, “The Future, the Glorious Future of this Grand Empire of the West.” Brockett reminded his readers that when Berkeley wrote this line, “this Great Western Empire, which we have endeavored to describe, was utterly unknown to the civilized world.” Hints of it had appeared in reports of adventurers who touched upon its southern or western shores, in journals of Jesuit missionaries in lonely outposts in New Mexico or Texas, in the tall tales of the few hunters and trappers who had penetrated up the Missouri and its tributaries. But, Brockett pointed out, Berkeley knew little of this when he prophesied the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 248-53.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 742.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 3.

future for a backwater of global empire, its population barely pushing half a million. “Yet in this mere handful of people scattered along the Atlantic coast from Maine to Georgia lay the germ of the grandest empire this world has ever seen...Here is, and is to be, *the empire*, in its vastness of extent, its teeming population, its immensity of resources, its ripe and universal culture, and its moral power over the nations of the earth.”<sup>7</sup>

While Americans had long declared Berkeley’s prophecy fulfilled, it is only in the decades after the Civil War that boosters could feasibly lay claim to a vision of ultimate global empire. In this period, from 1865 to 1876, American hegemony over a truly continental empire had become reality. In the same period, the resources and infrastructure required to make the United States a player on the modern global economic stage were realized. Both of these imperial developments—America’s geographic expansion and its capitalistic economic expansion—can be traced to the coming of the transcontinental railroad, linking the Atlantic to the Pacific, and all that lay between. The transcontinental railroad and its attendant effects finally succeeded in subduing the once formidable Native American nations of the Plains, permitting the colonization and settlement of the vast interior of the continent as Indian nations were relegated to federal reservations. And it would be the transcontinental railroad, with its unprecedented scale of operations, that required an entirely new kind of business organization: large, impersonal, hierarchical, capital-intensive corporations run by specially trained professional managers—modern business enterprises, in other words.<sup>8</sup> The transcontinental railroad, in short, was a vehicle of territorial conquest and empire-building of Berkeleyan proportions.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 206-207.

<sup>8</sup> Alfred J. Chandler, Jr., *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1977), 81-93.

Perhaps nowhere was this more clearly evident than in the art of the late 1860s and early 1870s. The years surrounding the building of the transcontinental saw the largest production of visual pieces that used Berkeley's phrase as part of their titles.<sup>9</sup> The art collectively represents the triumph of American civilization over the wilderness, and, both explicitly and implicitly, over so-called native savagery. In depicting the "winning of the West" in this manner, artists reflected the consensus attitudes of their era. This perspective echoed in the writings of western boosters, as the opening example illustrates, and in the work of nineteenth-century historians who chronicled the "winning" of the West in similarly triumphalist terms. At the end of the nineteenth century, the historian Frederick Jackson Turner articulated what would become the predominant scholarly interpretation of this recent history in his 1893 essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." Turner assigned westward expansion the central role in the history of the United States. The enlarging of the nation's territory, Turner argued, simultaneously shaped the character of the American people and their institutions by Americanizing the pioneer and promoting democracy. In the opening lines of his essay, Turner memorably asserted, "The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development."<sup>10</sup> The art of this era is a visual manifestation of this idea, and in naming their pieces after Berkeley's famous line, artists placed "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way" at the heart of this American identity formation.

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<sup>9</sup> These include John Carbutt, *Westward, the Monarch Capital Makes Its Way* (1866); Andrew Melrose, *Westward the Star of Empire Takes Its Way—Near Council Bluffs Iowa* (1867); Theodor Kaufmann, *Westward the Star of Empire* (1867); Frances Palmer, *Across the Continent: Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way* (1868); Thomas Nast, *All hail and farewell to the Pacific Railroad* (1869); John Gast, *American Progress (Star of Empire)* (1872).

<sup>10</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1921), 1.

Turner's thesis had an extremely long-lasting impact, remaining the most convincing and popularly appealing way to explain the American past and American identity well into the latter half of the twentieth century. A sustained revision of Turner's nationalistic and triumphant interpretation did not appear until the late 1980s, when historians of the West rejected the term "frontier" as racist and ethnocentric, and advocated for the studying of the West as the history of a fixed place with geographic parameters, not a mystical moving line of civilization advancing westward.<sup>11</sup> This new history of the West emphasizes exploitation and conquest, and, in a clear-eyed flipping of the script, the savagery at the heart of America's civilizing mission. Among the new frames of analysis that historians have brought to Western history, colonialism and imperialism have offered constructive insights. Of particular salience is the concept of settler colonialism. Popularized by scholars of indigenous studies, settler colonialism represents a distinct form of colonialism. Where the aim of classic colonialism is to extract resources to benefit the metropole, settler colonialism's objective is to acquire land so that colonists can settle permanently and form new communities.<sup>12</sup> It is this practice of settler colonialism that the artists in this chapter detail in their images of the westward course of empire. In these artists' constructions of the conquest of the West, the emphasis is not on the role of the federal government in promoting the railroad as part of its imperial project, nor is the emphasis on the role of the railroad in extracting resources from the land, as in classic colonialism. Rather the

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<sup>11</sup> Patricia Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1987), 72. See also William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the West* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991); Elliott West, *The Last Indian War: The Nez Perce Story* (New York: Oxford UP, 2009); Richard White, "It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": *A History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991); Daniel Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985).

<sup>12</sup> Evelyn Nakano Glenn, "Settler Colonialism as Structure: A Framework for Comparative Studies of U.S. Race and Gender Formation," *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 1 (2015): 57.



railroad is a representative of civilization, both opening the West to settlers as well as shuttling settlers into the West, pioneers who were to be the advance guard of American empire. In the process, artists completely obscured the real and substantial role of the federal government in parceling out land, funding the railroad, managing resources, and enacting Indian policies, thereby perpetuating an enduring myth of the rugged individualist pioneer. The settler colonizer, writes historian Lorenzo Veracini, “moves forward along a story line that cannot be turned back,” a story defined by “penetration into the interior, settlement, endurance, and success.”<sup>13</sup> The nineteenth-century conception of the frontier as a line of settlers steadily pushing westward is the archetypal narrative of settler colonialism, a narrative explicitly rendered in the visual record of “Westward the Course of Empire” produced in the 1860s and 70s.

The differing goals of classic colonialism and settler colonialism are marked in one other way that becomes apparent in this visual record: their confrontation with the indigenous population. In classic colonialism, the goal of resource exploitation applies equally to the native inhabitants who, as human resources, represent a cheap labor source that can be harnessed to help extract materials for export to the metropole and a market for the goods produced in turn by the metropole. In settler colonialism, by contrast, the object is to gain land and control the resources. In order to do so, the indigenous occupants of the land must be eliminated.<sup>14</sup> As the artists studied in this chapter make clear, there is no role for Native Americans in this story of westward empire. Shunted to the edge, caught like deer in the headlight of a train, or displaced altogether, the native inhabitants were rendered obsolete by artists who made visually explicit

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<sup>13</sup> Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (Hampshire, UK: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 98.

<sup>14</sup> Glenn, “Settler,” 57.

that the goals of white settlement and the continued presence of native inhabitants were irreconcilable.

In all of these images, the railroad stands central. By making the connection between the transcontinental railroad and Berkeley's now ubiquitous phrase explicit, producers of popular images played a critical role in making the conquest of the West and the creation of American empire seem both desirable and inevitable. Through inexpensive, popular lithographs and the latest in photographic technology, America's artists created an oeuvre of Westward-the-course-of-empire-building imagery that even the most illiterate of American could read. On the walls of railroad stations and hotels along the route, in photograph shops and barrooms, in New York galleries and in ordinary homes across the country, these images confronted Americans on a regular basis, offering repeated visual confirmation of America's "manifest destiny." But images were not only used to confirm America's imperial intentions, they also critiqued it. While less popular and certainly less circulated, a handful of paintings used Berkeley's line and the railroad to pose subtle moral questions about the effects of America's march across the continent, for people and environment alike. That these critiques *were* subtle, that they could be and were easily misread, indicates how thoroughly a consensus had emerged surrounding the perceived virtue of America's "civilizing" mission. Nevertheless, for good and ill, images of the railroad between 1865 and 1872 were seen as direct expressions of the ideology of Berkeley's poem, as "Westward the course of empire," became once again the site for a debate over American empire.

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Beginning in the 1830s, Americans nurtured a dream of a transcontinental railroad that would unite the nation, extend America's control across the continent, carry civilization to the

Indians, and bring vast wealth from trade with Asia. Writing from the Michigan Territory in 1832, the editor of the Ann Arbor newspaper *Western Emigrant* corralled many of these aspirations into one bombastic statement: “It is in our power...to open an immense interior country to market, to unite our Eastern and Western shores firmly together, to embrace the whole of the fur trade, to pour those furs into India and in return to enrich our interior with the spices and silks and muslins, and teas and coffee and sugar of that country.” It is in our power, he continued, “...to build up an immense city at the mouth of the Oregon, to make it the depot for our East India trade and perhaps for that of Europe—in fact to unite New-York and the Oregon by a railway by which the traveler leaving the city of New-York shall, at the moderate rate of ten miles an hour, place himself in a port right on the shores of the Pacific.”<sup>15</sup> The *Western Emigrant* issued this boast at a time when the United States did not yet have four hundred miles of track, but already the locomotive had begun to capture the imagination of people who believed that the nation’s future would unfold in the far West. It was only a step further to link the railroad to Berkeley’s prophecy of empire. “Are we chimerical in this opinion?” asked the *New Orleans Bee* in 1836 when it told its readers to start purchasing land in California in anticipation of a transcontinental railway. “If we live for 10 years more, we may then exclaim with the poet—Westward the star of empire takes its way.”<sup>16</sup>

The demand for such a railroad intensified in the 1840s and 1850s. The acquisition of Oregon in 1846 and the subsequent annexation of the northern portion of Mexico in 1848 intensified calls for a Pacific railroad as emigration and the Gold Rush sent millions surging

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<sup>15</sup> Quoted in David Bain, *Empire Express: Building the First Transcontinental Railroad* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 17.

<sup>16</sup> “Westward the Star of empire takes its way.” *The North-Carolina Standard* (Raleigh NC) 14 April 1836: 2.

west. Increasingly, voices joined the chorus urging the construction of a railroad that could exploit the resources of the west and open up a global trade that could raise America's international profile. In a memorial to Congress in 1846, New York businessman Asa Whitney outlined the "vast and incalculable results and benefits to flow...to us as a nation and to the world" from a transcontinental railway. It would secure for the United States "the vast commerce of the Pacific...islands, the Indian ocean, and the Chinese seas, throwing at once into our lap the commerce of more than 700,000,000 people." At the same time, Whitney argued, the railroad was "the means, and only means, by which the vast wilderness between civilization and Oregon can be settled."<sup>17</sup> At the time, the idea that 3,000 miles of rails might be laid between New York and Oregon struck many, in Congress and the wider public alike, as quixotic. "That may appear to be rather an Utopian project of Mr. Whitney," the Ohio *Cadiz Sentinel* conceded. Nevertheless, "We honestly believe that such a railroad will be in existence before the fourth of a century will have passed away. Civilization, public spirit and science, are marching onward with wonderful speed, and 'westward the star of empire takes its course.'"<sup>18</sup>

It fell to Thomas Hart Benton, senator from Missouri, to put westward expansion into a truly epic context. Throwing his energies behind a transatlantic railway, Benton framed expansionism in terms of inevitability, reflecting his belief in the heliotropic doctrine of the *translatio imperii*. "The disposition which 'the children of Adam' have always shown to follow the sun,' has never discovered itself more strongly than at present," as America "pours her population from east to west," Benton wrote. All "obey the same impulse—that of going West."

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<sup>17</sup> *Memorial of A. Whitney, Praying a grant of public land to enable him to construct a railroad from lake Michigan to the Pacific Ocean. February 24, 1846. 29<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session (1846), 1.*

<sup>18</sup> "News." *The Cadiz Sentinel* (Cadiz OH) 19 February 1845: 3.

Benton put Berkeley to use, explaining that this westward advance was the law of nature:

“[Westward], from the beginning of time, has been the course of heavenly bodies, of the human race, and of science, civilization, and national power following in their train.”<sup>19</sup> Babylon, Persia, Alexandria, Constantinople, Venice, and Amsterdam all lay on the route which was now coming to termination and completion in America; the wealth of the Far East had traveled this road around the world and would now lavish its riches upon the United States.<sup>20</sup>

To facilitate this march of empire, Benton introduced a bill in 1849 to appropriate funds from the sale of public lands for the construction of a national railroad to the Pacific. “An American road to India through the heart of our country will revive upon its line all the wonder of which we have read—and eclipse them,” Benton urged his fellow senators. “The western wilderness, from the Pacific to the Mississippi, will start into life under its touch.”<sup>21</sup> This imperial destiny was two-sided: global trade and continental conquest went hand in hand, representing both an outward- and inward-looking notion of empire. Anticipating the completion of this national railroad, Benton envisioned an enormous stone monument to mark the accomplishment. Facing the setting sun, it would proclaim the American triumph: “And let [the railroad] be adorned with its crowning honor; the colossal statue of the great Columbus...hewn from the granite mass of a peak of the Rocky Mountain's overlooking the road, the mountain itself the pedestal, and the statue a part of the mountain, pointing with outstretched arm to the western horizon, and saying to the flying passenger, ‘There is the east! There is India!’”<sup>22</sup> In an

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<sup>19</sup> Thomas Hart Benton, *Selection of editorial articles from the St. Louis Enquirer on the subject of Oregon and Texas* (1844), 5.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-17.

<sup>21</sup> Smith, *Virgin Land*, 23-29; 30 Cong., 2 Sess., *Congressional Globe*, Senate (February 7, 1849), 473.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Mark Fiege, *Republic of Nature: An Environmental History of the United States* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012), 234.

era when many Americans believed that civilization had begun in the Far East, Benton saw something wildly poetic in these passengers completing “the circumambulation of the globe, marching to the west until they arrive at the Pacific ocean, in sight of the eastern shore of that Asia in which their first parents were originally planted.”<sup>23</sup> Thus closing the circle, they would make this American empire not only the greatest, but, indeed, the last.

By 1848, five proposals for transcontinental routes were on the table. Northern and Southern congressmen, however, fought bitterly over the route, recognizing that the new line would bring pivotal political and economic power to the region through which it was built.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, by the early 1850s, enthusiasm for a railroad to the Pacific was widespread. So, *The Flag of the Union*, published out of Jackson, Mississippi, reported the speech of Mississippi representative J.D. Freeman to Congress in 1852, who, in making a case for a southern route, added his voice to those who believed, “He was a prophet who declared that ‘Westward the star of empire takes its way.’ With the inexhaustible mines, the numerous and the abundant agricultural productions...with the unruffled surface of the vast Pacific—that great millennium of waters—spread out by nature to receive and secure the commerce of the world...”<sup>25</sup> Likewise Senator Andrew Johnson of Tennessee urged Congress to fulfill America’s destiny by means of a railroad system to the Pacific. “Since the crucifixion of our Savior, emigration has been westward; and the poetic idea might have started long before it did—‘Westward the star of empire takes its way.’ It has been taking its way westward. [...] We are going on to the Pacific

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<sup>23</sup> Smith, *Virgin Land*, 23-25.

<sup>24</sup> Bain, *Empire Express*, 41-43.

<sup>25</sup> “Speech of Hon. J.D. Freeman, of Mississippi, In the House of Representatives.” *Flag of the Union* (Jackson MS) 4 June 1852: 2.

coast.”<sup>26</sup> While out of Bloody Kansas, the anti-slavery newspaper, *The Kansas News*, forecasted the day when the railroad would stream across the prairie, driving back the “minions of slavery” and filling up the west with “Freedom-loving and Labor-honoring” settlers. For, the paper insisted, ““Westward the Star of Empire takes its way,’ and wave after wave of emigration [will roll] on across the American continent...”<sup>27</sup> For all of the fierce sectionalism that surrounded the debate over a railroad route and prevented its development, Americans were remarkably united in both their support for its construction and the ideology that justified it.

The outbreak of the Civil War in 1861 at last removed the impasse. With the South out of the picture, Congress turned its attention to the railroad. All of the nationalist and imperial reasons for it still held, but the war added one more crucially important motivation: the railroad could help to bind the nation together, securing the West to the Union. As California Senator Milton Latham put it, the railroad line would create a “great federative bond,” linking “the whole political fabric from ocean to ocean.”<sup>28</sup> Accordingly, Congress passed the Pacific Railway Act of 1862. The law authorized the construction of a railroad and telegraph line from the Missouri River to the Pacific Ocean. It chartered the Union Pacific Railroad Company to build westward from Nebraska, and authorized an existing corporation, the Central Pacific Railroad Company, to build eastward from the Pacific coast. For every mile built, Congress would compensate each railroad with money and land in alternating sections alongside the track. The railroad could use the natural resources found on their checkerboard pieces of land, or sell the land for cash.<sup>29</sup> At

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<sup>26</sup> “Speech of Hon. Andrew Johnson of Tennessee on the Homestead Bill.” *Nashville Union and American* (Nashville TN) 27 May 1858: 2.

<sup>27</sup> “Organized Emigration.” *The Kansas News* (Emporia KS) 6 June 1857: 2.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in D.W. Meinig, *The Shaping of America: Transcontinental America 1850-1915* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1998), 7.

<sup>29</sup> Pacific Railway Act, July 1, 1862; Enrolled Acts and Resolutions of Congress, 1789-1996, General Records of the United States Government, National Archives; Fiege, *Republic*, 234-35.

the same moment, seeking to fill up the west with Free Soil farmers who could also provide a market and security for the railroad, Congress passed the Homestead Act, granting 160 acres of land for a nominal fee to anyone who pledged to live on the land and improve it for five years. However, much of the so-called “Free land” was bought by a whole variety of speculators, the mining and lumber industries and the railroads, making the Homestead Act less than the sum of its parts.<sup>30</sup>

Construction began simultaneously at Omaha and Sacramento in 1863, although the ongoing Civil War slowed the work for the first two years. After 1865, construction of the railroad became a race between the two corporations for land, investors, and potential markets. As arguably the most potent symbol and agent of change in the nineteenth century, the building of the railroad engendered enormous public interest. After all, as Leo Marx stated, the railroad was “the first important innovation in overland transportation since the time of Julius Caesar...[T]he building of the American railroads coincided with the building of a new society and with the final phase of the European occupation of the continent. Between 1830 and 1860...the line of permanent white settlements moved further west than it had moved in the previous two centuries.”<sup>31</sup> This fascination in the inventiveness of the railroad and its compelling potential was fed by a steady stream of paintings, prints, and photographs that documented its advance. Artists gave texture and meaning to the progress of the railroad about which proponents had waxed eloquently since midcentury. More than merely enhancing the wealth and reputation

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<sup>30</sup> Robert A. Divine, et al., *The American Story* 5<sup>th</sup> edition (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2013), 554; Jan Willem Schulte Nordholt, *The Myth of the West: America as the Last Empire* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), 142.

<sup>31</sup> Leo Marx, “The Railroad-in-the Landscape: An Iconological Reading of a Theme in American Art,” in *The Railroad in American Art: Representations of Technological Change*, eds. Susan Danly and Leo Marx (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 186.



of the nation, boosters—from railroad company officials to politicians to religious leaders to journalists—argued, internal improvement projects would “bind the republic together,” eliminate sectional differences, transform America into a powerful continental empire, and raise up God’s kingdom on earth.<sup>32</sup> The American public widely understood the transcontinental railroad as the key to the development of the United States, entailing expansion, industrialization, and a national commercial culture, forming an inescapable symbol of progress in the minds of many Euro-Americans. Images of the western landscape that featured the railroad were complicit in mythmaking, both of the west and of American imperial power.

Among the oeuvre of this sort of mythologizing railroad imagery, two pieces are representative: John Carbutt’s 1866 photograph, *Westward, the monarch capital makes its way*, and Frances Flora Bond Palmer’s lithograph, *Across the Continent*. “*Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way*” (1868). Both images were created with an eye for the market, intended for resale and wide distribution. Carbutt’s image had an explicit promotional purpose as part of a commissioned set of photographs taken during an 1866 excursion to the Hundredth-Meridian sponsored by the Union Pacific Railroad—in essence, an advertising campaign to attract both publicity and investors for the rail line; Palmer’s design was created for reproduction as a lithograph, sold through the Currier & Ives catalog. Though employing different mediums and different iconographical conventions, both images feature the railroad in the landscape as a symbol of inevitable economic expansionism and humankind’s technological triumph over nature.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ryan Dearing, *The Filth of Progress : Immigrants, Americans, and the Building of Canals and Railroads in the West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 1.

<sup>33</sup> Susan Danly, “Introduction,” in *The Railroad in American Art*, 16.

As representative of a wider visual culture of “Westward the Course of Empire” imagery, the two pieces indicated the ways that the anticipated completion of the transcontinental railroad had effected a change in the visualization of this ubiquitous phrase. A decade separates Leutze’s Capitol mural from Carbutt’s photograph and Palmer’s lithograph. The old romantic notion of the hardy pioneer as a symbol of America’s future and the translator of America’s “westward empire” had given way to the glorification of technology as the agent of progress. While both sets of imagery saw America’s westward progress as a conquest, for Leutze that conquest was the moral and spiritual victory of America’s common people—yeoman farmers, European immigrants, freed slaves—over the disappointments and hardships of the past; while for both Carbutt and Palmer, the conquest was the victory of civilization over the wilderness. Leutze’s image seeks salvation and renewal in a virgin land, linking his image more closely to the poem’s original meaning; Carbutt’s and Palmer’s works are the products of an industrial age, in both form and function, an era in which technology held the key to the future, and material improvement was the standard of success and prosperity.<sup>34</sup>

Photography and the railroad came of age together, and in fact, the railroad was the primary force behind the first burst of landscape photography that took place after the Civil War. Most photographers who captured images of the western landscape of the 1860s were attached to the railroad corporations, as both the Union Pacific and the Central Pacific Railroads commissioned photographers to document the railroad as it proceeded across the country. As visual documents of the successful growth and expansion of the railroad routes, photographs were used to attract financial backing and government support while tempting paying passengers

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<sup>34</sup> Dawn Glanz, “The Iconography of Westward Expansion in American Art, 1820-1870: Selected Topics,” (PhD diss., University of North Carolina, 1978), 168, 181.

to travel to the destinations that were not accessible by train.<sup>35</sup> At the same time, advances in photographic technology after 1860 allowed for the sort of instantaneous capture that outdoor scenery often required.

John Carbutt, a British-born photographer based in Chicago, was an early pioneer in landscape photography, his work well-known through the pages of popular trade magazines where news of his travels and advertisements for his photographs often appeared. Carbutt already had some experience photographing railways, having recently covered the route of the Northwestern Union Packet Company from Chicago to St. Paul in 1865, when he was asked by the Union Pacific Railroad to be the official photographer for a Union Pacific Railroad promotional junket.<sup>36</sup> In the fall of 1866, Thomas Durant, vice president and financial wizard of the Union Pacific Railroad invited a number of distinguished guests for “A Great Excursion from Wall Street to the 100<sup>th</sup> Meridian,” to celebrate the arrival of the railroad at this milestone 250 miles west of Omaha that demarcated the humid east from the arid west. The celebratory excursion promised to be an elaborate affair, made clear by the fact that Durant sent invitations to President Andrew Johnson and his entire Cabinet, every member of Congress, all foreign diplomatic representatives in Washington, top Army and Navy officers, and leading railroad officials and financiers from the East and Midwest. Although the vast majority of invitees replied with regret, Durant still managed to scrape together a respectable party of over two hundred attendees, including a future President of the United States, Ohio Representative Rutherford B. Hayes, and a former President’s son, Robert T. Lincoln, as well as a gaggle of Representatives

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<sup>35</sup> Anne M. Lyden, *Railroad Vision: Photography, Travel, and Perception* (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2003), 7.

<sup>36</sup> Peter E. Palmquist and Thomas R. Kailbourn, *Pioneer Photographers from the Mississippi to the Continental Divide* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2005), 146.

and two senators, Benjamin F. Wade of Ohio and James W. Patterson of New Hampshire. A Scottish earl and a Lafayette descendant added an international gleam to the party, while financial bigwigs included George M. Pullman, of luxurious sleeping car fame; *Chicago Tribune* publisher Joseph Medill; one of Chicago's wealthiest manufacturers, John Crerar; and members of the Union Pacific's board of directors. "The capital represented by the [excursionists] amounts to over fifty millions," reported the *Chicago Tribune*, fittingly tasked with providing readers a day-by-day account of the journey that was picked up by newspapers across the country. Many of the men were joined by their wives for this memorable excursion as the group made their way by rail from points east to Chicago, on two more trains to St. Joseph, Missouri, where they boarded side-wheel steamboats and traveled up the Missouri River to Omaha, the eastern terminus of the Union Pacific Railroad.<sup>37</sup>

At Omaha, the guests were feted with the best that the young city, wholly dependent on the Union Pacific railroad, had to offer. Awed by the scale of the Union Pacific works headquartered there, the *Chicago Tribune* did its own mythologizing, "This Union Pacific Railroad, this spanning in an iron embrace of a whole continent, the construction of this great work...seems more the work of Genii, more a thing of magic, than the stupendous result of human energy and ability." The *Tribune* did not fail to remind readers that this was more than a technological triumph, but a means of "connecting the East and West, for a great national highway, which should give us direct communication with Europe and Asia, which should bring the manufactures of the East to the doors of the miners and agriculturists of the rich and limitless

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<sup>37</sup> Wesley S. Griswold, *A Work of Giants: Building the First Transcontinental Railroad* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1962), 182; "Union Pacific Railroad Excursionists," *Chicago Tribune*. (Chicago IL) 20 October 1866: 1; Silas Seymour, *Incidents of a Trip through the Great Platte Valley, to the Rocky Mountains and Laramie Plains in the Fall of 1866* (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1867), 73-74.

West.”<sup>38</sup> In a few succinct phrases, the Tribune had summed up the entire meaning of the railroad for nineteenth-century boosters.

From Omaha, the excursionists boarded the Union Pacific’s entire stock of first-class passenger cars. Decked out with flags, mottoes, and a pair of antlers, the engine hauled the railroad’s guests at a leisurely pace out to the end of the line and back. Carbutt took pictures of the railroad construction, new towns as well as Indian camps along the route, while fulfilling a steady barrage of requests from members of the party to have their portraits taken with the western scenery as a backdrop.<sup>39</sup> On the way out to the 100<sup>th</sup> Meridian, the train halted at the Pawnee Agency, where Durant had hired Pawnees to dress in war costume and perform a war dance for the excursionists’ entertainment. Much to their dismay, a group of mounted Sioux warriors were suddenly spotted emerging stealthily from a thicket. “Our Pawnees were instantly mounted,” remembered one excursionist, Silas Seymour, in his published account of the journey, “The shock of meeting was grand and terrific...Indian grappled Indian...All was confusion and intense excitement, until at length the victorious Pawnees brought their vanquished enemies into camp.” At which point, the ruse was revealed. The “Sioux” warriors had in fact been Pawnees masquerading; the entire battle had been a sham. This was only the first shock for the excursionists. That evening, the group camped out on the prairie. At three in the morning, the Pawnees, hired by Durant, sneaked back into the sleeping camp and put on a mock raid, causing many guests to flee in terror until the attendant Army officer reassured the excursionists that it had all been staged.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> “The Union Pacific Railroad Excursion.” *Chicago Tribune*. (Chicago IL) 24 October 1866: 1

<sup>39</sup> Palmquist, *Pioneers*, 146.

<sup>40</sup> Mark Van De Logt, *War Party in Blue: Pawnee Scouts in the U.S. Army* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010), 81.

But in these two encounters, as the excursionists and the Pawnees came face to face, Seymour captured what was no doubt a widely shared sentiment among white Americans as they regarded the native occupants of the West: “Perhaps no better illustration could have been given of the extremes of civilized and savage life, standing face to face with each other, than the one now before us. On the one side of the track was the Union Pacific Railroad, upon which stood that great civilizer, the locomotive and train looking westward.” On the opposite side of the track, so to speak, “were grouped these uncouth savages, many of them in their normal state...low and brutal in their habits, and mentally elevated but slightly, if at all, above the level of the beasts that inhabit this vast and beautiful country with them.” The Indians were tragic figures, but the course of empire necessitated that they be trampled under its unstoppable march. “[T]he laws of civilization are such that it must press forward; and it is in vain that these poor ignorant creatures attempt to stay its progress by resisting inch by inch, and foot by foot, its onward march over these lovely plains, where but a few years since, they were ‘monarchs of all they survey.’”<sup>41</sup> Indeed, Indians did resist the coming of the railroad, recognizing that their lives depended on it.

The Union Pacific Excursion occupied an odd liminal moment. The following year, 1867, would mark an extraordinarily violent interlude on the Plains as Native Americans mounted a widespread counterassault on the forces of conquest that were stripping them of land and critical resources, relentlessly driving them into the ground. The Sioux, Cheyenne, Arapaho, Kowa and Comanche released incredible violence through most of 1867, and would for a time threaten to bring the Union Pacific to a halt. The Indians, ranging their Plains in small, guerrilla-like bands of from twenty to two hundred warriors, but occasionally in the thousands, struck viciously at the

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<sup>41</sup> Seymour, *Incidents*, 90.

Union Pacific, for it was a concrete symbol of white encroachment writ large upon the prairie.<sup>42</sup> Indians struck at other symbols of white advance. Stagecoaches in western Nebraska were attacked. Colorado ranches were stripped of horses, mules, and cattle. Stage traffic between Denver and Salt Lake City was halted altogether for several weeks in the face of Indian raids on travelers. Telegraph lines that preceded the railroad route were ripped down by the mile, while repairmen who ventured out to restore service were shot down from the telegraph poles. The Union Pacific was hit successive blows over the course of that year. In May of 1867, warriors sprang out of the prairie grass and killed and scalped all but one man in work party of six who were inspecting a section of track over which the Excursion party had passed just seven months earlier. On the same day, more than a hundred miles westward, a war party attacked a group of rail bed graders, killing four. That June, a band of Arapahos killed a UPRR engineer. His body was found riddled with nineteen arrows and five bullet wounds.<sup>43</sup> And just two months *before* the Excursionists took to the Plains to pose for portraits and play at Indian raids, a young Philadelphia photographer sent out by *Leslie's Illustrated Weekly* magazine to capture Indians and buffalo on film was found scalped on the prairie. Events such as the mock Indian attack staged by Durant for the Excursion party suggested that the region west of the Mississippi was tamed by 1866, but the Glover incident reveals that things were not in as much control as they appeared, making the staged Indian attack all the more absurd.<sup>44</sup>

None of this is apparent from the photographs Carbutt produced on the Excursion. He returned from Nebraska with about three hundred images, many of which were of the

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<sup>42</sup> John Hoyt Williams, *A Great and Shining Road: The Epic Story of the Transcontinental Railroad* (New York: Times Books, 1988), 149.

<sup>43</sup> Griswold, *A Work*, 216-18.

<sup>44</sup> Weston J. Naef and James N. Wood, *Era of Exploration: The Rise of Landscape Photography in the American West, 1860-1885* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1975), 44.

excursionists and their activities. One photograph stands out from the group, entitled *Westward, the monarch capital makes its way* (fig. 5.1). The photograph was produced as a stereograph, a recent and wildly popular innovation that used a dual-lens camera to create paired photographs two and a half inches apart—roughly the distance between average human eyes. The two photographs would then be printed as small squares and mounted side by side on pasteboard cards. When the card was placed in a specially designed binocular device, much like a modern-day Viewfinder, the viewer experienced a 3-D effect. “The first effect of looking at a good photograph through the stereoscope is a surprise such as no painting ever produced. The mind feels its way into the very depths of the picture. The scraggy branches of a tree in the foreground run out at us as if they would scratch our eyes out,” wrote Oliver Wendell Holmes, an early and enthusiastic promoter of the technique, in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1859.<sup>45</sup> For photographers faced with the challenge of offering their audiences a visceral experience of western scale and space, the stereo format was both a creative and a practical tool.<sup>46</sup> The format of the photograph suggests how Carbutt intended, or at least, envisioned the public viewing his work. More than administrative documentation for the railroad, Carbutt’s photographs were intended for consumption in the privacy of a home parlor.

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<sup>45</sup> Oliver Wendell Holmes, “The Stereoscope and the Stereograph,” *Atlantic Monthly* (June 1859): 744.

<sup>46</sup> Douglas Nickels, *Carleton Watkins: The Art of Perception* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1999), 27-28.



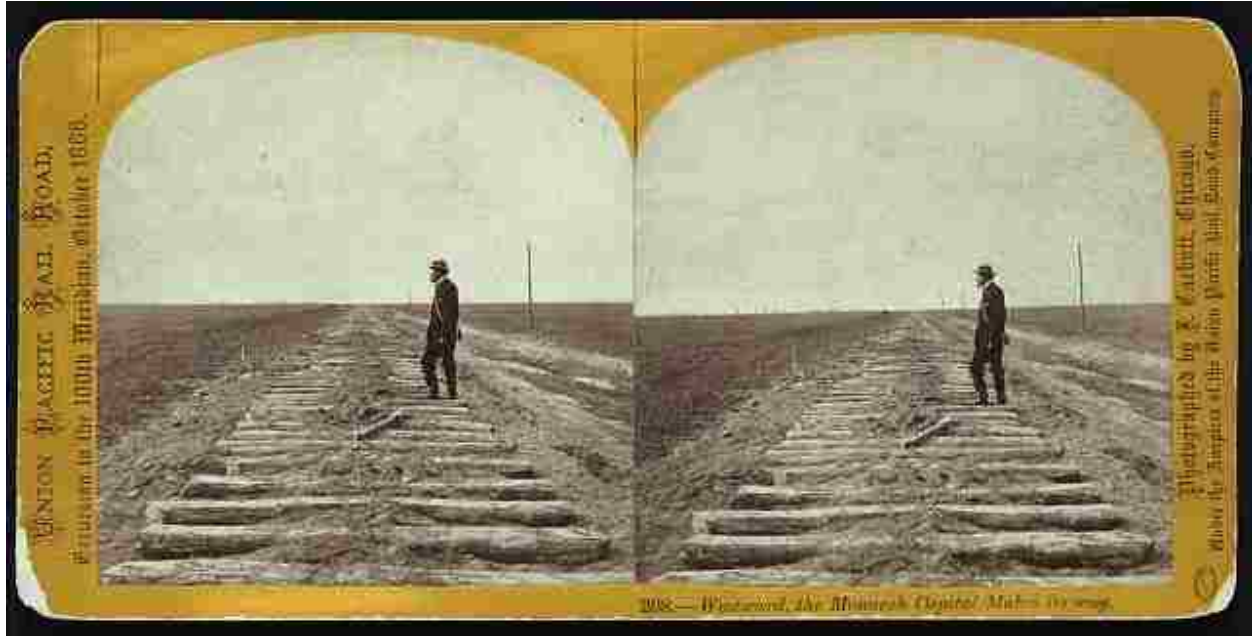


Fig. 5.1. John Carbutt, *Westward, the monarch capital makes its way*, 1866, photographic print on stereo card, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

The photograph features a man artfully posed, foot propped on a railroad tie, face in profile with his gaze turned toward the distance. The framing of the image suggests the effect of staring down the scope of the camera lens, bringing the viewer in, not only to the contemplative mood of the figure in the photograph, but into the eye of photographer himself. The photograph captures the railroad in process—rail ties have been laid down, a tool for gauging the distance between rails lies across the bottom of the photograph, as if only just discarded. The iron rails have yet to be mounted. The centering of the track in the photograph, extending out from the bottom edge, enhances the dramatic impact of stereoscopic space—the railroad shooting out towards the horizon appears limitless.

While the railroad technically linked east and west, the photograph implies a simultaneous linking of north and south. The south lies to the left of the tracks, the north to the right. The Civil War had ended only seventeen months earlier, and in numerous ways, the unfinished business of the war remained. It had only been that spring of 1866 that the United

States government officially declared itself at peace with each of the former Confederate States. Still, all eleven of them remained out of the Union pending the convening of state conventions to write new constitutions that would necessarily include protections for the freed slaves. This was a contentious and roiling time in American politics and society. The building of the transcontinental railroad offered a welcome shift in focus, as the opening of the American west offered Americans, both north and south, the possibility of renewal in a new, innocent landscape. The transcontinental railroad that had been such a source of division and contention as one of the proximate causes of the sectional crisis, was now, transformed by the scourge of war, a means of figuratively and literally reconstructing the nation. The ties, laid vertically on a north/south axis were like stitches on a wound, binding the bloody, gaping continent back together.<sup>47</sup>

But there is a separate more important symbolism in this photograph. As a piece of landscape photography, it is a remarkably blank landscape, not a tree, not a shrub, not a hill in view, just the wide, unvaried expanse of plain. Dry earth mounds up in piles between the ties and in the ruts of the lane that runs parallel to the train path. The flatness of the landscape is interrupted only by the figure of the man, by telegraph poles that stretch into the distance, running alongside the path of the train, and in the merest suggestion of railroad workers in the far distance along the track. The expanse of nothingness in the background could rightfully cause the viewer to pause and ask where this course of empire is taking us. There is something of a hint of this in a candid review of the photographs in the popular trade magazine, the *Philadelphia Photographer*. after viewing Carbutt's stereographic collection from the trip. "We have seen with pleasure a series of stereoscopic views made by Mr. John Carbutt...illustrating the excursion to

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<sup>47</sup> James D. Drake, "A Divide to Heal the Union: The Creation of the Continental Divide," *Pacific Historical Review* 84:4 (2015): 409-47.

the 100<sup>th</sup> Meridian, October, 1866,” the magazine’s editor announced. The blankness of the landscape “[gives] one a fine idea of the tediousness, the loneliness...of a trip across the vast plains of the West.”<sup>48</sup> But that very blankness of the landscape was undoubtedly intentional, and likely even explicitly requested by the UPRR in their instructions to Carbutt. It was to the Union Pacific’s advantage to give investors the impression that the route was an easy and smooth one. Furthermore, the flat, featureless horizon might entice potential settlers, suggesting the comfort and beneficence of the country through which the railroad would be built.

But the photograph, despite its reputation for veracity as a medium, elides as much as it reveals. In this case, it suggests that the west is, in fact, empty. The native inhabitants of the Platte River Valley are absent from the photograph, an omission aligned with the expansionist ideology of “manifest destiny” and its characterization of the lands between the Missouri River and the West Coast as an empty landscape available for European-American development. The railroad companies attempted to entice urban dwellers to leave behind their crowded cities for the large open space of the west, now made accessible by the railroad. Many of the photographs commissioned by the railroad companies exploited the notion of the empty land, primed for ownership and development. As one historian has written, “The railroad was perceived as, and often in fact was, an implement for the penetration of the wilderness, and for taking dominion over the vast spaces of the continent.”<sup>49</sup>

Carbutt manipulates reality in another way. The man pictured is likely Thomas Durant, the president of the Union Pacific Railroad. Durant, with his foot propped on the railroad tie, exudes confidence, conveying ownership and power. In this sense, Carbutt’s photograph is less

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<sup>48</sup> “Editor’s Table,” *Philadelphia Photographer* 4 (1867): 194.

<sup>49</sup> Lyden, *Railroad Vision*, 40-41.

an ode to the empire of the railroad, as it is an ode to the empire of the capitalist. Durant's foot could be on anything, demonstrating his dominance over it-- a railroad tie, a tree stump, a tractor. Images such as these helped to solidify the myth of the self-made man conquering the wilderness. Photographs of labor in the West are virtually nonexistent during this period; patrons preferred portraits of entrepreneurs or impressive landscape constructions uncompromised by labor problems.<sup>50</sup> This railroad construction involved the sweat and labor of countless people— Pawnee women, Irish and Chinese immigrants. But this image suggests rather that the railroad is the triumph of the capitalist, subduing the environment on his way to building a new empire. Where the Indians were once “monarchs of all they surveyed,” Durant is now the monarch, as Carbutt captures in the title of the photograph.

The title is, of course, highly significant. Photographers of the railroad were able to exploit innovations in photography that enabled them to produce photographic prints on paper rather than glass. Mounting the photographs on stiff card stock, photographers could now add descriptive titles and captions to the image. Such printed words allowed Carbutt and his peers to shape the meaning of their images for viewers, further facilitating the movement of photographs in the marketplace of images and ideas.<sup>51</sup> As narrative captions became an integral part of western photographs, and photographic prints began to circulate through multiple channels, photographers were able to capture some of the metaphorical and narrative elements traditionally only available to paintings.<sup>52</sup> Carbutt demonstrated how easy it could be to use words to impute

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<sup>50</sup> Patricia Hills, “Picturing Progress in the Era of Westward Expansion,” in *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920*, ed. William H. Truettner (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 129.

<sup>51</sup> Martha Sandweiss, *Print the Legend: Photography and the American West* (New Haven: Yale, UP, 2002), 11.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

meaning to a picture by titling this image, “Westward, the monarch capital makes its way.” Carbutt was likely familiar with Leutze’s Capitol mural, finished to much acclaim only three years earlier. By appropriating its poetic title Carbutt evokes a similar narrative of westward movement, even though he did not have the same symbolic figures or implausible coincidences of people and events at his disposal to convey his message. Building upon the existing pictorial renderings of the line, Carbutt introduces a new element to the history of the West: the role of the capitalist in subduing the land. In capturing the image of Durant standing over the ultimate symbol in western expansion to communicate the familiar rhetoric of “manifest destiny,” Carbutt presents both westward expansion and capitalist technological incursion into the landscape as a necessary, inevitable, and benign sort of national project.<sup>53</sup>

A more didactic version of this narrative can be seen in a popular print published by Currier & Ives in 1868, a hand-colored lithograph based on a drawing by the English artist Frances Palmer. Like Carbutt’s stereograph, Palmer’s print is a product of technological innovation—lithographs were only perfected as a printing process in the early decades of the nineteenth century, enabling lithograph distributors like Currier & Ives to produce inexpensive but finely detailed and colored prints on a massive scale. As “Printmakers to the American People,” Currier & Ives, the most popular lithographic print firm in America, recorded with a good measure of romanticism and imagination nearly every phase of life in America between 1835 and the 1880s. Currier & Ives produced pictures that appealed to popular taste at prices that would fit practically every budget. In their marketing, they referred to their collection as “cheap and popular prints.”<sup>54</sup> “Pictures have now become a necessity,” the preface to their catalog

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>54</sup> Harry T. Peters, *Currier & Ives: Printmakers to the American People* (New York: Doubleday, Doran Co., 1942), 2; “Reproduction of a letter that accompanied a Currier & Ives catalog.”

informed potential customers, “and the price at which they can be retailed is so low, that everybody can afford to buy them.”<sup>55</sup> In their heyday, Currier & Ives prints could be viewed on the walls of barrooms, firehouses, barbershops, hotels, and thousands of homes through mail-order, traveling agents, and local peddlers selling on consignment. Suggesting a belief that people prefer pictures which harmonize with their ideology, Currier and Ives produced prints whose embodied ideas mirrored the dominant views of the American community.<sup>56</sup>

Seemingly conscious of their role as the preeminent recorders of the mid-nineteenth century scene, Currier & Ives regularly depicted significant changes taking place in American life and culture. Any news events in which the public showed an interest became subjects for the lithographer’s crayon. And in one notable case the firm anticipated the news. Frances Palmer’s print showing the first continental train, *Across the Continent*. “*Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way*” (fig. 5.2), was copyrighted and published in 1868, a year before the last spike was driven into the railroad in 1869.<sup>57</sup> As one of the leading artists in the Currier & Ives stable, Frances Palmer produced the vast majority of their images in the latter half of the nineteenth century; her pictures likely decorated more homes of ordinary Americans than those of any other fine artist.<sup>58</sup> *Across the Continent* would become one of her most popular prints. Palmer’s print is explicitly about the process of western expansionism, and even as she (or more accurately,

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Harriet Endicott Waite research material concerning Currier & Ives, 1923-1956. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>55</sup> “Reproduction of preface to the Currier & Ives Catalog.” Harriet Endicott Waite research material concerning Currier & Ives, 123-1956. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>56</sup> Morton Cronin, “Currier and Ives: A Content Analysis,” *American Quarterly* 4 (Winter, 1952): 330.

<sup>57</sup> Colin Simkin, ed., “Introduction,” in *Currier & Ives’ America* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1952), n.p.

<sup>58</sup> Charlotte Rubinstein, *Fanny Palmer: The Life and Works of a Currier & Ives Artist* (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2018), xiii.

perhaps, her publishers) hearkened back to the same title that Leutze had used, she imbued her picture of Berkeley's line with countless small details that make the print an anecdotally rich if emotionally flattened version of Leutze's grand narrative epic. A steam locomotive pulls a train diagonally across the picture frame, neatly dividing the world that was from the world that will be. Action fills the left side of the picture. The train hurdles along its tracks toward a distant wagon train that will soon be rendered obsolete by this modern form of transport. In the foreground a newly established town testifies to the future of America's West. Workers string telegraph lines alongside the tracks, enabling communication across the continent. Children play in the foreground of a building clearly labeled "Public School." Dominating the buildings surrounding it, the schoolhouse is presented as the principal civilizing agent. Behind the school stands another structure of civilizing significance, a church. Primly dressed women indicate the domestication of the West. While in the foreground, townsmen clear trees to make yet more room for expansion.



Fig. 5.2. Frances Flora Bond Palmer, *Across the Continent*. "Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way," 1868, colored lithograph, 24 1/8 x 32 5/8 in.

In marked contrast to this activity, the right side of the lithograph is serene and passive. Buffalo graze on a distant prairie, a canoe glides across the still waters of a silvery lake, and two mounted Indians rein back in astonishment as the onrushing train blows a cloud of sooty smoke into their faces. In reality, many Indians did show up to such scenes, witnessing the invasion of technology across their hunting grounds. Alfred Hart, a photographer employed by the Central Pacific Railroad, the western half of the transcontinental, famously captured one such scene in California in 1868 (fig. 5.3). Here, a Native American is photographed from the back as he contemplates a terrain laid bare by the dynamite used to blast a pathway for the new train. His reaction to the tableau can only be conjectured, but his stance—rocked back on one leg with hip cocked—suggests a sense of indifferent resignation.



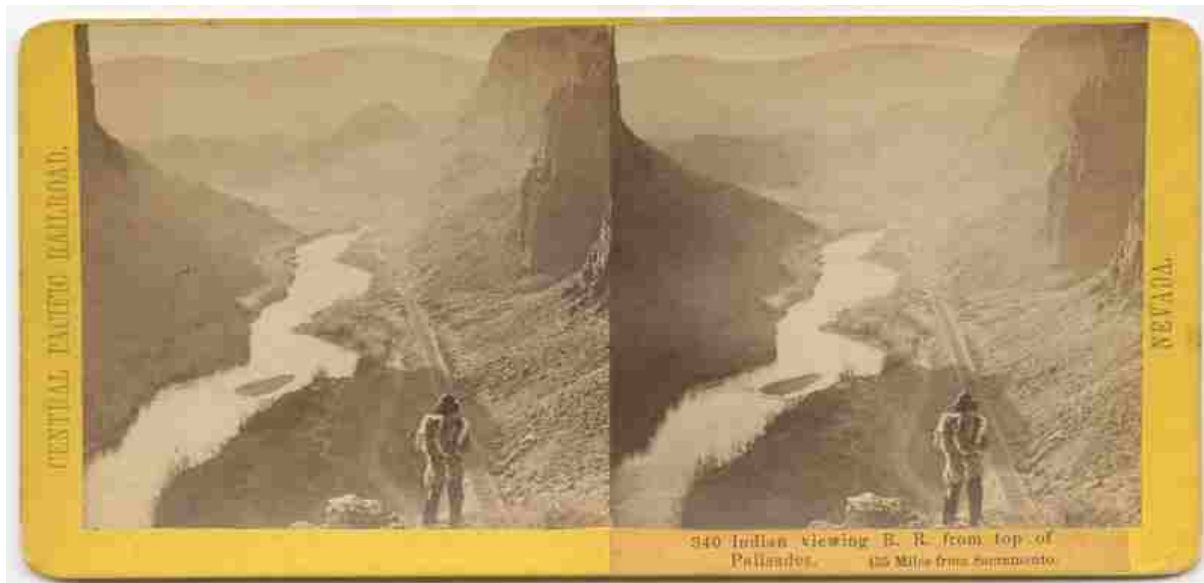


Fig. 5.3. Alfred A. Hart, *Indian viewing R.R. from top of Palisades. 435 Miles from Sacramento*, 1868, photographic print on stereo card, California State Library.

The Native American figures of Frances Palmer's print are included not for veracity's sake, however, but because they embodied the perfect foil for American progress. The symbolism is blatant: the primitive Indian and the buffalo are destined to vanish as white civilization sweeps across the uncultivated wilderness. The sunny aspect of the lithograph suggests little sympathy for their fate, rather setting a beatific glow on the unstoppable drive of American technology in building a new civilization, uniting the continent, and sweeping aside any obstacles in its path. Each detail—the train, church, and schoolhouse—has been selected to convince the viewer that this new technological civilization was inevitable, beneficial, and above all, peaceful.<sup>59</sup>

Such images as Carbutt's and Palmer's were used to further the interests of real estate developers, railroad companies, and other commercial and political groups that stood to benefit from the expansion. But behind the marginalization of Native Americans in Palmer's print and

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<sup>59</sup> William H. Truettner, "Ideology and Image: Justifying Westward Expansion," in *West as America*, 27.

their complete omission from Carbutt's was a brutal struggle taking place between two civilizations, the emerging technological society and the indigenous peoples whose food supply and way of life were being destroyed as the environment itself faced the devastating consequences of technological progress.<sup>60</sup> Though only a minority of Americans acknowledged this reality, artists were nonetheless represented in their ranks, offering a counternarrative for the American public, and indicating that an alternative perspective on the railroad, Indians, and American empire at large was within the realm of possibilities.

Theodor Kaufmann's *Westward the Star of Empire* (1867) (fig. 5.4) stands as an important counterexample, providing a dramatic and complex visualization of the Plains Indians' response to the railroad. The painting depicts a broad Western prairie at night. From the foreground, a railroad track stretches back to the distant horizon, where the light of an approaching train appears, heading straight towards the viewer. A group of Native Americans, decked out in war paint and feathers, emerge from the murky darkness of the foreground. They crouch next to the tracks. Having just removed a rail, they position it across the railbed in an apparent attempt to derail the train. The low vantage point, the receding railway tracks confronting the head-on gaze of the viewer, and the sharp rendering of the Indians' painted faces enhance the theatricality of the scene.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Rubinstein, *Fanny Palmer*, 171.

<sup>61</sup> Ian Kennedy, *The Railway: Art in the Age of Steam* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2008), 129-131.

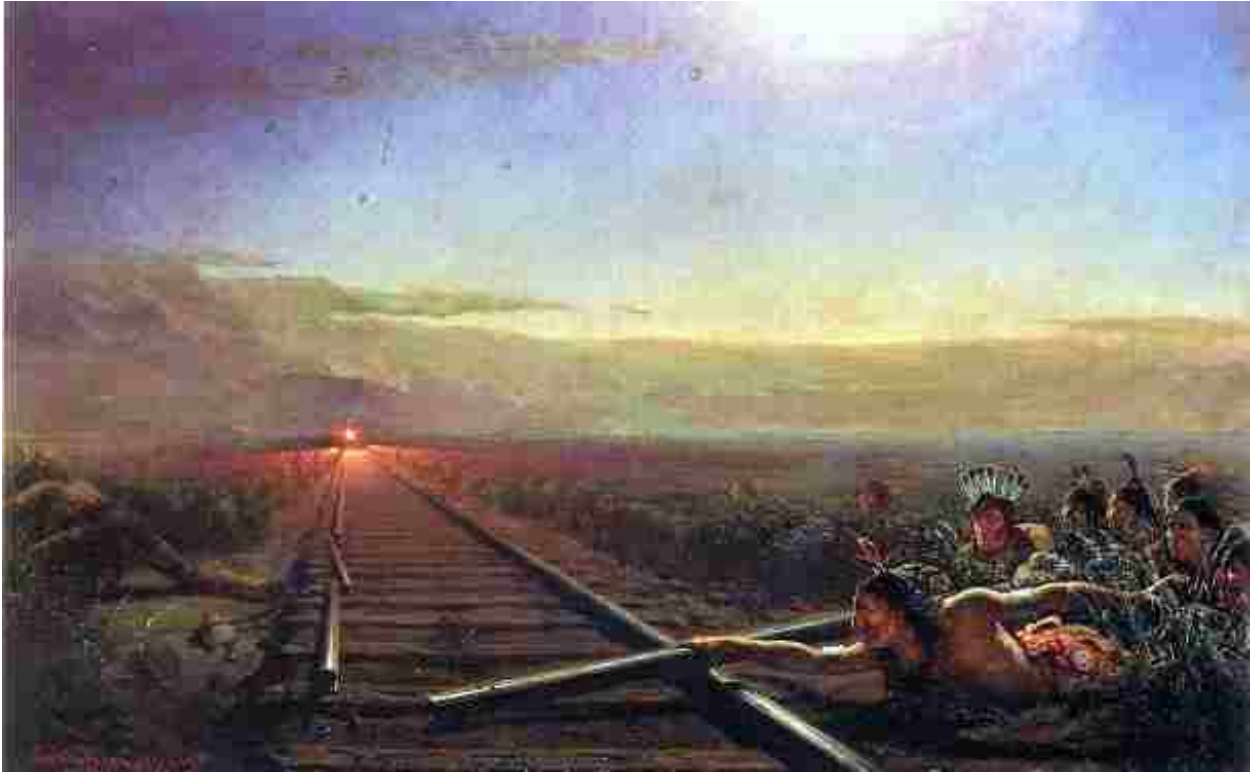


Fig. 5.4. Theodor Kaufmann, *Westward the Star of Empire*, 1867, oil on canvas, 35 ½ x 55 12 in., St. Louis Mercantile Library.

The painting was likely inspired by the only successful train derailment executed by Plains Indians, on the Union Pacific line at Plum Creek, Nebraska, in August, 1867, the same year of the painting. The attack was breathlessly reported by newspapers back east. “INDIAN MURDERS,” screamed the headlines in the *New York Times* and the *Philadelphia Evening Telegraph* on August 5, 1867. “Daring Attack of Indians on Railroad Employees—Seven White Men Killed,” newspapers reported. “It is considered the boldest dash the Indians have made.”<sup>62</sup> The assault came after a recent confrontation between the Sioux and Cheyenne and the US Army. “The troops had defeated us, and taken everything that we had, and made us poor,” a participant in the derailment, a Cheyenne known as Porcupine, later recalled. To avenge their recent defeat, he and his compatriots decided to plunder a train. They reasoned amongst

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<sup>62</sup> “Indian Murders.” *The Evening Telegraph*, (Philadelphia PA) 5 August 1867, 1.

themselves that, “In these big wagons that go on this metal road, there must be things that are valuable—perhaps clothing. If we could throw these wagons off the iron they run on and break them open, we should find out what was in them and could take whatever might be useful to us.” Under cover of darkness, the raiders pulled out the spikes at the end of a rail, bent the rail up, and waited. When a train finally came to the twisted rail, the “locomotive jumped into the air and the cars all came together,” throwing the train off the track. The Cheyennes killed and scalped some of the surviving crew; the rest fled into the night. Scouring the wreck for flour, sugar, coffee, tobacco, and clothing, the Indians then set fire to the broken cars.<sup>63</sup> The Plum Creek raid reflected a yearning for revenge as much as it did the desperate reality that the Cheyennes were beginning to suffer from resource deprivation with bison herds on the verge of extinction on the central Great Plains.<sup>64</sup>

Kaufmann’s painting, capturing the pregnant moment as the train barrels down towards its destruction, has been construed as a typical piece of “manifest destiny” propaganda. Art historian Martin A. Berger has interpreted the piece as a struggle between the advancing light of white civilization on the distant train and the dark foreground “presence” who would see it derailed.<sup>65</sup> In the seminal study *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920*, Julia Schimmel likewise suggests that the Indians are portrayed as uncivilized savages, demonic beasts crawling on their bellies, attacking one of the preeminent symbols of American progress and westward expansion. As the light of civilization approaches, Schimmel suggests, the forces of evil skulk in the darkness, carrying out their devilish plans to derail the

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<sup>63</sup> B.A. Botkin and Alvin F. Harlow, eds. *A Treasury of Railroad Folklore* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1953), 117-19.

<sup>64</sup> Fiege, *Republic*, 256.

<sup>65</sup> Martin A. Berger, *Sight Unseen: Whiteness and American Visual Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 158.

approaching train and, by extension, the progress of white civilization.<sup>66</sup> But there is another possibility, one that subverts this conventional interpretation, suggesting a far more sympathetic rendering of the Indians as people engaged in a quixotic quest to resist the destruction of their living environment by the ruthless expansion of the settlers.

Like Emanuel Leutze, Kaufmann was a Dusseldorf-trained artist and German refugee from the 1848 revolution, having fought as an ardent partisan at the barricades in Dresden. He arrived in New York around 1850, where he taught drawing instruction to support himself. His only pupil was Thomas Nast, who would later achieve fame as a satirical cartoonist. With the outbreak of the Civil War, Kaufmann's idealism drove him to enlist, at the age of forty-six, as a private in the Union Army, joining the fight against human slavery. With all of the optimism of the nineteenth century, Kaufmann felt assured that with Union victory, the world would henceforth be ruled by reason and democracy.<sup>67</sup> After the war, Kaufmann painted a number of subjects that reflect a continued idealism while also suggesting a measure of compassion toward those on the margins of American society. One of his most famous works, *On to Liberty* (1867) (fig. 5.5), portrays a group of fleeing slaves seeking protection under the Union flag; the rock-strewn path they traverse implies the difficulty and peril of their journey to freedom. Kaufmann imbues this scene with gravity, "connecting the specific narrative of this small group's flight to the larger difficulties facing African Americans as they embraced emancipation."<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Julie Schimmel, "Inventing the Indian," in *West as America*, 167-68.

<sup>67</sup> A.E. Zucker, "Theodor Kaufmann, Forty-eight Artist," *The American-German Review* 17 (1950): 17-24.

<sup>68</sup> Margaret C. Conrads, "Stories of War and Reconciliation, 1860-1877," in *American Stories: Paintings of Everyday Life 1765-1915* eds. H. Barbara Weinberg and Carrie Rebora Barratt (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2009), 89.



Fig. 5.5. Theodor Kaufmann, *On to Liberty*, 1867, oil on canvas, 36 x 56 in., Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Kaufmann followed this painting with a portrait of Senator Hiram Revels, the first African American senator and one of the great, if short-lived, symbols of the political triumph of Reconstruction, in 1870. Of this painting, Frederick Douglas once wrote, “This portrait, representing truly, as it does, the face and form of our first colored U.S. Senator, is a historical picture. It marks, with almost startling emphasis, the point dividing our new from our old condition.” He continued, “Every colored householder in the land should have one of these portraits in his parlor, and should explain it to his children, as the dividing line between the darkness and despair that overhung our past, and the light and hope that now beam upon our future as a people.”<sup>69</sup> Of his own work, Kaufmann stated that his chief interest had been in

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<sup>69</sup> Frederick Douglas to Louis Prang, 14 June 1870, reproduced in Katherine Morrison McClinton, *The Chromolithographs of Louis Prang* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1973), 37.

expressing ideas, and that the standards of “art for art’s sake” should not be applied to his paintings.<sup>70</sup> These works embody Kaufmann’s personal convictions of equality and liberty for all, a hope that political and social freedoms would indeed become part of the African American experience.

For some sensitive observers, the plight of African Americans in turn raised to consciousness the situation of American Indians. Among those most sympathetic to their seemingly hopeless plight were, like Kaufmann, German-speaking people hailing from Central Europe. Recently, historians have begun to explore the seeming affinity between Germans and Native Americans, evidenced in an enormous body of scholarly and popular references in nineteenth- and twentieth-century German-speaking culture that centers on the American Indian.<sup>71</sup> A copy of Kaufmann’s *Westward the Star of Empire* circulated through Central Europe, going on view in Berlin, Dusseldorf, and Vienna in 1868.<sup>72</sup> In a review essay in a German magazine published in 1869, the author lauded the American Indians in the painting as desperate individuals utilizing “the weapons of the weak... against the overwhelming power of their opponents.” For the author, the image showed a moment in a tragic conflict in which “the homeland of these ‘legitimate inhabitants’ becomes more and more restricted,” and in which “there is no hope to bring to a standstill this penetrating flood that, with its way of life, takes away the possibility of their continued existence.” In this author’s interpretations Kaufmann’s

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<sup>70</sup> Zucker, “Theodor Kaufmann,” 19.

<sup>71</sup> H. Glenn Penny, *Kindred by Choice: Germans and American Indians since 1800* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); In fact, the most substantive work on Berkeley’s famous stanza and the *translatio imperii* in the West has been done by German scholars. See for example, Klaus Lubbers, *Born for the Shade: Stereotypes of the Native American in United States Literature and the Visual Arts, 1776-1894* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994).

<sup>72</sup> “Notes on Art.” *The New York Herald* (New York NY) 26 January 1868: 3.

work is a vignette of a small and vengeful victory about to take place in a brutal battle that American Indians would ultimately lose.<sup>73</sup>

That this perspective is echoed elsewhere in the 1860s gives further credence to this interpretation. Wendell Phillips, one of the few politicians who resolutely supported the rights of the Indians, argued in a similar vein. In a polemical attack on the Union Pacific line in 1869, he praised the Indian saboteurs, “All hail and farewell to the Pacific Railroad. The telegraph tells us that the Indians have begun to tear up the rails, to shoot passengers and conductors on this road. We see great good in this. At last the poor victim has found the vulnerable spot in his tyrant.” For the past seventy years, Phillips wrote, “the Indian has begged this great nation to attend to his wrongs. His cries have been unheard. Ruthless and unheeding we have trampled him down. To-day the worm turns and stings us.” Suggesting a sense of the international audience for the struggle between the United States and its native inhabitants, Phillips proclaimed, “Every blow struck on those rails is heard round the globe.”<sup>74</sup>

The attacks by Plains Indians on the railroad may have proved ultimately futile but it was a logical response to a threat that imperiled their very existence. A series of councils between the US Army and Plains Indian leaders in the late 1860s indicates the anxiety with which Native nations watched the arrival of the railroad and their attempts to communicate their distress to those who could conceivably ameliorate the threat. In August of 1866, while the nations’ leading capitalists packed their bags for the UPRR Excursion, General William T. Sherman, then commander of the Military Division of the Missouri, which included the northern and central plains, held a council with Sioux and Arapaho leaders near Fort Laramie. This meeting left

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<sup>73</sup> Quoted in Penny, *Kindred*, 46-47.

<sup>74</sup> “The Pacific Railroad,” *National Anti-Slavery Standard* (New York) 12 June 1869: 2.



Sherman in a compassionate mood. Writing to a colleague, he said: “All the Sioux have been driven west from Minnesota and the Missouri River, and the mountain region of Montana, Colorado, and Utah is being settled up with gold miners and ranchers, so that poor Indian finds himself hemmed in. The Indian agents over on the Missouri tell him to come over here for hunting, and from there he is turned to some other quarter, and so the poor devil naturally wriggles against his doom.”<sup>75</sup> From Sherman’s perspective, such resistance was a fool’s errand. Despite his sympathy, Sherman grasped the strategic importance of the railroad for military operations against the Plains Indian tribes. The railroad, Sherman reasoned, would make the string of expensive and difficult-to-supply military posts nearby obsolete. Troops could travel to conflict areas quickly from a few strategically located posts along the railroad. “I regard this road of yours,” Sherman wrote the chief engineer of the UPRR, “as the solution of ‘our Indian affair’ . . . and therefore, give you all the aid I possible can.” The next month, Sherman wrote again to assure the UPRR that the army would do all it could to protect railroad parties, and advanced the opinion that after the road had penetrated the West such Indians as the Sioux and Cheyennes “must die or submit to our dictation.”<sup>76</sup>

A year later, following a season of attacks on the railroad, Sherman’s mood had soured. He and the railroad commissioners held a Grand Council at North Platte, Nebraska, with Sioux and Cheyennes, who objected to the construction of the railroad through their hunting grounds. The Indians made a clear, demonstrable, and rational argument for their position. “The Great Father has made roads stretching east and west. Those roads are the cause of all our troubles,” explained a Sioux. “The country where we live is overrun by whites. All our game is gone. This

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<sup>75</sup> Quoted in Griswold, *The Work*, 179.

<sup>76</sup> Van De Logt, *War Party*, 82-83.

is the cause of great trouble.” Lobbying for reprieve, he continued, “I want these roads stopped...or turned in some other direction. We will then live peacefully together.” A way of life and a culture was at stake, as another Sioux made plain: “Ever since I’ve been born I have eaten wild meat. My father and grandfather ate wild meat before me. We cannot give up quickly the customs of our fathers...These roads...scared all our game away.” His request for reprieve was even more circumscribed, asking only that the road be stopped where it was, before trunk lines could be built making deeper incursions into the Indians’ hunting grounds. “Let our game alone,” he implored. “Don’t disturb it, and then you will have life.” A Cheyenne Chief, Pawnee Killer, seconded this motion, “[In this] little space of country...is our game. That is what we have to live upon. By stopping these roads I know you can get peace. If the Great Father stops [the trunk lines] I know that your people can travel this road [UPRR] without being molested...We are not guilty of these troubles alone.” There, for many of the Indians, lay the heart of the problem. They had found themselves locked in negotiation with a partner who did not act in good faith. “You, after talking and talking, and making treaties, and after we have listened to you, go and make the great evil larger,” intoned another Indian. “You set the prairie on fire.”<sup>77</sup>

Sherman’s response encapsulates what would become federal policy towards the Indians before the decade was out, “We now give you advice...[You] see [the whites] have plenty to eat, that they have fine houses and fine clothes. You can have the same, and we believe the time has come when you should begin to own these things, and we will give you assistance. You can own herds of cattle and horses like the Cherokees and Choctaws,” he continued. “You can have cornfields like the Poncas.” In other words, kill the Indian and save the man. But the as for

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<sup>77</sup> Henry Morton Stanley, *My Early Travels and Adventures in America, and Asia* (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1895), 197-207.

stopping the railroad, the course of empire was inevitable. “This railroad...will be built. [...] And if your young men will interfere, the Great Father, who, out of his love for you, withheld his soldiers, will let loose his young men, and you will be swept away.” As for those treaties, well, Sherman explained, “I am afraid they did not make allowances for the rapid growth of the white race...We build iron roads, and you cannot stop the locomotive any more than you can stop the sun or moon, and you must submit, and do the best you can.” At these words, as one observer at the council recorded, “perfect silence reigned. [...] The features of the Indians exhibited no emotion; they were grave and taciturn throughout, though it was evident that the refusal of the Peace Commissioners to accede to their wishes had displeased them.”<sup>78</sup>

The disastrous impact on the indigenous population of the West was apparent as early as 1867, when J.C. Browne, a prominent Philadelphia photographer, noted: “The railroad is driving the [buffalo] rapidly away, for the locomotive roars louder and runs faster than he; and the Indians on the prairies share his disgust, and will go with him to distant feeding grounds, whenever this “warpath” as they call it, is completed.” Browne, like many photographers, painters, and popular printmakers, felt the urgency of this historical moment before the changes that were about to overtake what remained of the American wilderness.<sup>79</sup> Perhaps this was an impulse shared by many of the artists who took up Berkeley’s line to contemplate the train in the western landscape. Between 1862 and 1872, Congress gave 125 million acres of land to the railroad. The greatest grant went to the transcontinentals. After a decade and more of drought and disease the buffalo herds were dwindling by the time the transcontinentals came barreling through the Plains. The coming of the railroads sounded the death knell for the herds. The

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 211-13.

<sup>79</sup> Susan Danly, *The Railroad*, 21.

railroads provided a new means of getting the bulky skins to market at the same time that a new tanning process made it possible for eastern tanneries to turn the hides into a cheap leather for straps and machine belts. With a new market, a new means of transportation and a new hunting season that stretched throughout the year, professional buffalo hunters moved on the southern plains in the early 1870s. The scale and procedures of this slaughter of nearly 5.5 million buffalo between 1872 and 1874 made it a kind of industrial hunting unlike anything seen in the West before. For the Plains Indians, these developments were catastrophic. The nomadic tribes of the Plains were committed to a way of life that made buffalo central to their survival, both in physical and cosmological terms.<sup>80</sup> The elimination of the buffalo by white hide hunters cut the heart from the Plains Indian economy. Various military commanders encouraged the slaughter of bison for precisely this reason. Without the buffalo, Plains Indians could not effectively resist American expansion. But the loss had a more than economic meaning. The buffalo was crucial to the cosmology of both the Plains Indians. Offerings of buffalo were central to Pawnee ceremonies, and it was only these ceremonies that ensured the continuance of the natural cycles that tallowed humans to live on the planet. Without buffalo there would be no annual renewal, and the corn could not grow. The disappearance of the buffalo marked the final blow to the old life.<sup>81</sup>

For the United States, however, the railroads were a boon. The modern western extractive economy—commercial agriculture, mining, cattle raising, and timber production for a national market—began with the railroads. As literal engines of economic development, the construction

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<sup>80</sup> Richard White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own*, 145, 218-19, 22; Elliott West, *The Way of the West: Essays on the Central Plains* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 73-79.

<sup>81</sup> White, *It's Your Misfortune*, 219.

of the transcontinentals and their feeder lines created the basic infrastructure for the Western economy. Their building, operation, and maintenance consumed enormous amounts of wood and coal, creating a significant market for both the timber industry and western coal mines. Railroads further stimulated economic development by enlarging access to eastern and European markets, replacing the economically prohibitive costs of shipping by wagons and pack trains. By the beginning of the twentieth century the connections between the western economy and larger national and world markets were firmly in place. Underlining the significance of these ties, historian Richard White writes, “The West possessed an extractive economy that depended on outside markets, outside capital, and most often, skills and technologies imported from outside.”<sup>82</sup> The American global commercial empire was born at the moment that a continental American empire was achieved.

Native inhabitants of America had perceived their fate much earlier, registering an incisive understanding of the consequences of living in the midst of a dominant white culture that let “Westward the course of empire take its way” be its guiding maxim. In 1841, a young Seneca chief made an anguished plea in the face of the loss of the Iroquois’ traditional home in upstate New York and forced removal to federal lands in the Kansas territory under the terms of an appallingly biased treaty. The chief outlined the “advances” made among his people in industry, dress, furniture, education, and all of the comforts of “civilized life.” The fields of the Indians “have never been kept in so good order, and managed with so much industry.” Unquestionably, his people had met the standard that entitled them to be called “civilized and Christianized.” The only question, he believed, was whether this ultimate object could be any better accomplished in the “terra incognita” of the Kansas territory. “The right and possession of

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 246, 257-58, 268.

our lands is undisputed...Our lands are fertile, and as well situated for agricultural pursuits, as any we shall get by removal.” Furthermore, the entire life of his people was tied to their traditional homeland. Their ancestors were buried in the land, “and about them still cling our affections and memories. Here is the theatre on which our tribe has thus far acted its part in the drama of its existence.” If the true object of Indian policy were to acculturate Indians to white ways, he argued, then “we are situated here in the midst of facilities for physical, intellectual and moral improvement; we are in the midst of the enlightened; we see their ways and their works, and can thus profit by their example.” The arguments for removal could be easily enumerated: the white man wanted their land; the offer for it was liberal; the Seneca would be better off “to remove from the vicinity of the whites and settle in the neighborhood of our fellow red man...” But the principle question, the chief intoned, is “shall we be better off?” If it were indeed possible “to return to the manners and pursuits of life which characterized our ancestors, and we could be put in a safe, unmolested and durable possession of a wilderness of game, whose streams abound in fish, we might be better off.” But the young chief had little faith in this possibility. “Westward the star of empire takes its way,” he quoted back to the invaders. “Whenever that empire is held by the white man, nothing is safe or unmolested or enduring against his avidity for gain.” He continued, “Population is with rapid strides going beyond the Mississippi, and even casting its eye...for the surf-beaten shore of the western ocean. And in process of time, will not our territory there be as subject to the wants of the whites? Shall we not then be as strongly solicited, and by the same arguments, to remove still farther west?”<sup>83</sup> In 1876,

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<sup>83</sup> “Address On the Present Condition and Prospects of the Aboriginal inhabitants of North America, with particular reference to the Seneca nation.” *Jeffersonian Republican* (Stroudsburg PA) 7 July 1841: 1.

the US Army chased the last independent Indian nation onto a federal reservation, thus clearing the continent for white settlement, industry, and empire.

While Kaufmann's painting highlights the devastating and complicated human consequences of westward expansion, Andrew Melrose's painting, *Westward the Star of Empire Takes Its Way, Near Council Bluffs, Iowa* (1867) (fig. 5.6) focuses attention on the environmental cost of "progress," reflecting an emerging countermovement in the 1860s that placed new value on America's natural environment and sought to protect its last vestiges from the destructive tendencies of white imperialists. Although like Kaufmann, Melrose employs the visual device of an onrushing train to elicit a sense of alarm, his work is compositionally closer to Francis Palmer's, and in this sense provides compelling and instructive contrast.



Fig. 5.6. Andrew Melrose, *Westward the Star of Empire Takes Its Way—Near Council Bluffs, Iowa*, 1867, oil on canvas, 25 ½ x 46 in., Autry Museum of the American West, Los Angeles.

Like Palmer, Melrose depicts the railroad alongside a typical scene of settler colonialism. In Palmer's print, the railroad represents an uncomplicated intrusion into the setting. Palmer's positioning of the train in the foreground, facing away from the viewer and rushing out towards

the horizon creates a sympathy with the audience, as if the train originates from the same place as the viewer, bringing their world to the West. Apart from the shying horses and their astonished Indian riders, there is little to suggest that this process is anything other than good and advantageous. Melrose, whose work was commissioned to commemorate the arrival of the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad at the Missouri River, flips the scene around. Many of the individual elements in the composition echo Palmer's print: a log cabin, homesteaders, tree stumps, wildlife, a train. Melrose even employs a similar narrative device by creating a diagonal divide across the painting. But the sum total tells a very different story. On the left side of the painting, a cabin sits in a cleared field. Smoke puffs from the chimney; a welcoming glow shines through the front doorway. Laundry hangs on a clothesline as cows graze in the front yard. It would be a snug scene of western domesticity were it not for the sickly light of a yellow sky that throws into sharp contrast denuded trees and tree stumps littering the ground like stones in a graveyard. But this is only part of the picture. On the right side, railroad tracks shooting out toward the viewer from between a tight avenue of trees force the viewer's gaze into the headlight of a fast-approaching locomotive, its chimney throwing off fiery sparks in the gloaming darkness. The blankness of the background gives no sense of where the train has been. The emphasis is rather on where it is going, and by the appearance of things, it is on a collision course with the audience, and, perhaps, the artist himself. Deer leap across the tracks in the blaze of the headlamp, fleeing for safety from the iron beast charging down the tracks. The deer's escape is suggestively futile; the forest cleared for settlement offers little refuge. In Frances Palmer's print, the diagonal line serves to separate civilization from the wild. Here, the line separates the pastoral from the sublime, the domesticated from the terrifying. Yet both speak to a certain sense of destruction.



In titling his piece, *Westward the Star of Empire Takes its Way*, Melrose makes an obvious allusion to Berkeley's timeworn prophecy, permitting a straightforward interpretation that was likely the intent of the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad in commissioning the painting. Melrose is equally straightforward in identifying the location for his scene of civilization's advance: near Council Bluffs, Iowa, the western terminus of the Chicago and North-Western railroad. The painting is a contemporaneous commemoration of the completion of the route from Chicago to Council Bluffs in 1867. The headquarters of the Union Pacific Railroad lay just west of Council Bluffs, across the Missouri River. Melrose's painting, then, memorializes not only the linking of the eastern United States with the frontier settlements on the Missouri River via this short segment of railroad, but also anticipates the eventual linking of East and West by way of the transcontinental railroad.<sup>84</sup> For his patrons, Melrose presents a version of the frontier epic. On the surface, the details of the painting—the tree stumps littering the fields, the mangled trunks along the railroad right-of-way, the startled movements of the deer, as well as the simple yeoman homestead and the appearance of the train in this remote place, connecting the frontier to the outside world—seem to illustrate the fulfillment of prophecy: the settledness and prosperity of the East will soon come to this Iowa prairie as well, as the wilderness retreats in the face of encroaching civilization.<sup>85</sup>

Yet this surface reading does little to account for the sublimity of the piece, the latent and dramatic violence of it, or the overall sense of disquiet. Unlike Palmer's print, there is no attempt to reconcile the advent of civilization to the land, whether in the form of a yeoman homestead or

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<sup>84</sup> Dawn Glanz, *How the West Was Drawn: American Art and the Settling of the Frontier* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1982), 82-83.

<sup>85</sup> William Cronon, "Telling Tales on Canvas: Landscapes of Frontier Change," in *Discovered Lands, Invented Pasts: Transforming Visions of the American West*, ed. Jules David Prown, et al. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1992), 73.

an industrial machine. Both unleash environmental devastation and dislocation. In this light, if Melrose's work parallels any other usages of Berkeley's prophetic line, it is philosophically and emotionally aligned with Thomas Cole's series, *Course of Empire*, where progress is a menace rather than the implied promise of Palmer's piece.<sup>86</sup> But where Cole's allegory is a cyclical tale of the repeated rise, destructiveness, and fall of empire, with America as the implied site for the latest iteration of this story, Melrose's interpretation is far more specific. Replacing "course" with "star" removes the idea of a timeless cycle and suggests instead a linearity that is echoed in the physicality of the train itself; it functions as the vehicle of empire. At the same time, Melrose grounds the prophecy in a specific location: Council Bluffs, Iowa. Westward to Iowa the railroad brings empire, and its results are catastrophic to landscape and animals alike. This landscape in effect literalizes the popular rhetoric of the era, depicting the railroad and the civilization it animates as a weapon in a cruel but inescapable "conquest of nature."<sup>87</sup>

Melrose's antagonistic relationship to the railroad in the wilderness reflects a changing attitude towards nature in the 1860s, as Americans began to grapple with the loss of America's storied "virgin climes." By and large, the American people lauded the developers and celebrated the growth of the railroads, but not everyone went along wholeheartedly with the accompanying intrusion of technology on scenes of incomparable beauty. As early as the 1830s, American artists and writers began to register a sense of foreboding as rapid industrial development left its mark on the American landscape. As a counter movement began to take shape, Thomas Cole emerged as one of the earliest and most strident voices. While Cole had particularly decried the

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<sup>86</sup> Melrose, a landscape painter based in New York, was aware of Cole's series; he had even played with similar themes in an earlier piece, *The March of American Civilization* (n.d.), a painting heavily influenced by Cole's motif of the savage wilderness juxtaposed with the advance of civilization.

<sup>87</sup> Marx, "The Railroad-in-the-Landscape," 203.

effects of the axe in clearcutting ancient forests, as seen both in his *Course of Empire* series as well as in his poetry, the advent of the railroad in his native Hudson Valley drew particular ire. In 1836, as Cole was completing *Course of Empire*, he became incensed when the builders of a small railroad line in his neighborhood ruined a view he had often painted. He inveighed against the “copper-hearted barbarians” in a letter to his patron Luman Reed: “Among the inhabitants of this village, he must be dull indeed, who has not observed how, within the last ten years, the beauty of its environs has been shorn away; year by year the groves that adorned the banks of the Catskill wasted away... This is a spot that in Europe would be considered as one of the gems of the earth; it would be sought for by the lovers of the beautiful, and protected by law from desecration. But its beauty is gone, and that which a century cannot restore is cut down; what remains? Steep arid banks, incapable of cultivation... Where once was beauty, there is now barrenness.”<sup>88</sup> This theme was taken up with increasing regularity over the following decades, primarily by writers like William Cullen Bryant, Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, and Henry David Thoreau.<sup>89</sup> For Thoreau, the railroad was a “devilish Iron Horse, whose ear-rending neigh is heard throughout the town, [he] has muddied the Boiling Spring with his foot, and he it is that has browsed off all the woods on Walden shore, that Trojan horse, with a

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<sup>88</sup> Thomas Cole quoted in Alan Wallach, “Thomas Cole’s ‘River in the Catskills’ as Antipastoral,” *The Art Bulletin* 84 (June 2002): 340.

<sup>89</sup> See for example James Fenimore Cooper, *The Prairie* (1827); William Cullen Bryant, *Letters of a Traveller; or Notes of Things Seen in Europe and America* (New York, 1850), 302; Washington Irving, *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville USA in the Rocky Mountains and the Far West, digested from his journal by Washington Irving*, ed. Edgely W. Todd (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961), 372; Henry David Thoreau, *Maine Woods, Writings, Volume 3, 1848-1851* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1906), 208.

thousand men in his belly, introduced by the mercenary Greeks!”<sup>90</sup> “We do not ride the railroad,” Thoreau wrote, “it rides upon us.”<sup>91</sup>

Nevertheless, it was not until the passage of the Pacific Railroad Act in 1863, and its impending opening of the West, that serious attempts to preserve the wilderness began to work their way through the federal government. That same year Frederick Law Olmsted, having just completed his design of Central Park and well on his way to becoming the leading American landscape architect of his time, visited the Yosemite Valley. Enamored of the natural beauty of the land, Olmsted feared that even the sublime wonders of Yosemite and the Sierras would be heedlessly overrun by the railroad and their beauty destroyed. Olmsted, along with others who sought to preserve the sublime landscape of the West, pressured President Lincoln and Congress to sign legislation in 1864 securing a ten-square-mile area of Yosemite in perpetuity for the people “for public use, resort and recreation.” A flourishing tourist business soon altered the wild character of the park, but the legal preservation of part of the public domain for purely aesthetic and recreational purposes created a significant precedent in American environmental history, marking the beginning of the state and national park systems.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, 174.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>92</sup> Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1967; 2014), 106-07. Popular lithograph artists like Fanny Palmer began to produce images that expressly celebrated the virgin wilderness of the West. See for example *Yosemite Valley—California. The “Bridal Veil” Fall* (1866) and *The Mountain Pass. Sierra Nevada* (1867). These prints reflect the public’s growing interest in these majestic regions and a desire to protect them. In Palmer’s romanticized images, no stumps or axes scar the scene; trees grow thick and tall. At the same time, these prints promoted the burgeoning tourism that soon became a source of income from the railroads and other business interests. One other famous and enormously popular image that features the star of empire, although is not titled as such, was also commissioned for a tourist guide by the western booster George Crofutt, John Gast’s *American Progress or Westward Ho!* (1872).

A year after Melrose completed his painterly “celebration” of the arrival of the transcontinental railroad, a young Scottish immigrant named John Muir made his way to the Yosemite Valley. Riding the train across the Great Plains, he would later describe his astonishment as he watched enormous tracts of lands carelessly set on fire by the sparks from steam engines. When sparks set the dry fields ablaze, “nobody was in sight to prevent them from spreading [...] into the adjacent forests and burn the timber from hundreds of square miles.”<sup>93</sup> Muir wrote a parody of the advertisements of the transcontinental lines that he felt better captured their true character. The railroad advertisements whose “gorgeous many-colored folders” each described its “scenic route,” should read instead, “‘The route of superior desolation’ — the smoke, dust, and ashes route — would be a more truthful description. Every train rolls on through dismal smoke and barbarous melancholy ruins, and the companies might well cry in their advertisements: ‘Come! travel our way. Ours is the blackest.’”<sup>94</sup> Once arriving in the Yosemite Valley, Muir would spend the rest of his life in California, eventually becoming the leader of a wilderness movement that sought to preserve natural areas from exploitation and the impact of human beings.<sup>95</sup> But as Muir and subsequent generations of American environmentalists would discover, it would be astoundingly difficult to arrest this particular star of empire.

The dislocations of this new technological era were immense. By the latter decades of the nineteenth century, a revolution in transportation and communication led by the extraordinary expansion of the railroad had transformed a nation so recently striven by Civil War.

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<sup>93</sup> Quoted in David E. Nye, “Foundational Space, Technological Narrative,” in *Space in America: Theory-History-Culture* (New York: Rodopi, 2005), 134.

<sup>94</sup> John Muir, “The American Forests,” in *Nature Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1997), 716.

<sup>95</sup> Howard Lamar, “An Overview of Westward Expansion,” in *West as America*, 19

Technological forces had united what had seemed alienated, and had converted a collection of far-flung communities into a centralized nation with vital links throughout the world. In little more than a decade, the transcontinental railroad had conquered the West. The railroad both demanded and enabled the United States government to make colonial dependencies out of the once sovereign Indian nations that had long called the vast Plains home. And in making the West accessible, the railroad had finally conquered the wilderness that had once loomed both frightening and fantastic in the eyes of intrepid colonists two centuries earlier, subduing its “virgin climes” with the progress and technological prowess of man. The fact that Americans had extended their empire across the continent became prima facia evidence that they were justified in doing so. By now, the philosophical implications of Berkeley’s poem had long since been forgotten. Extracting the one line that they fancied, Americans transformed its meaning to better fit their own aspirations. No longer a tale of the course of human history, it became a motto, a promise of perpetual progress and boundless future wealth.

## Conclusion

*Passage to India!*

*Lo, soul, seest thou not God's purpose from the first?  
The earth to be spann'd, connected by network,  
The races, neighbors, to marry and be given in marriage,  
The oceans to be cross'd, the distant brought near,  
The lands to be welded together.*

—Walt Whitman, *Passage to India*, 1870

*“This is the ‘empire’ of which the prophetic voice declared “Westward the Star of Empire takes its Way”—the star of empire of liberty and law, of commerce and communication, of social order and the Gospel of our Lord—the star of the empire of the civilization of the world. Westward that star of empire takes its course.”*

—Senator Albert J. Beveridge, “The Star of Empire” speech, 1900

*“In this springtime of hope, some lights seem eternal; America's is.”*

—President Ronald Reagan, Republican Convention Address, 1984

The United States census of 1890 revealed the scope of America's westward expansion over the previous hundred years: the western part of the country had so many pockets of settled area that a frontier line could no longer be said to exist. Over the course of a long nineteenth century, thirteen states clinging to the rim of the Atlantic had swallowed up an entire continent. The agents of American empire—bureaucrats, technocrats, soldiers, and homesteaders alike—had pierced the howling wilderness, surveying and settling vast swaths of territory, and effectively colonizing the indigenous peoples who resided between the Atlantic and the Pacific. The conquest had been costly. A war with Mexico in 1848, a Civil War, prolonged and formidable warfare with Native Americans, and radical incursions into America's natural landscape, had exacted a price. But the cost was born with a certainty that Providential history ordained it. “Like the star in the East which guided the three kings with their treasures westward until at length it stood still over the cradle of the young Christ,” wrote Josiah Strong, a Congregational minister and rabid expansionist, in his 1886 treatise *Our Country: Its Possible*

*Future and Its Present Crisis*, “so the star of empire, rising in the East has ever beckoned the wealth and power of the nations westward, until today it stands over the cradle of the young empire of the West.”<sup>1</sup> *Our Country*, with its fervid conviction that Protestant America was God’s instrument for the regeneration of the world, achieved instant popularity. “Our plea is not America for America’s sake,” Strong reassured his readers, “but America for the world’s sake.” Never had the superiority of American culture and society been so certain than the moment that Berkeley’s prophecy was ostensibly fulfilled with the closing of the frontier. “If human progress follows a law of development,” Strong wrote, “if ‘Time’s noblest offspring is the last,’ our civilization should be the noblest; for we are ‘The heirs of all the ages in the foremost files of time.’”<sup>2</sup>

With the conviction that American civilization represented the pinnacle of human achievement, and the acknowledgement that it had successfully and thoroughly colonized the North American continent to the extent that a frontier no longer existed, there was but one place left for it to go: global. The historian Frederick Jackson Turner laid out the rationale for this policy shift in an article for the *Atlantic* in September of 1896, making clear the relationship between the closing of the frontier and the enlarging of America’s international footprint: “For nearly three hundred years the dominant fact of American life has been expansion. With the settlement of the Pacific Coast and the occupation of the free lands, this movement has come to a check.” Yet, Turner, believed, this impulse could not be stopped. “The demands for a vigorous foreign policy, for an interoceanic canal, for a revival of our power upon the seas, and for the extension of American influence to outlying islands and adjoining countries are indications that

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<sup>1</sup> Josiah Strong, *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis* (New York: The Baker & Taylor Co., 1885), 29.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.



the movement will continue.”<sup>3</sup> There was little question that America, the star of empire, must continue to roll forward.

This sense of America’s unique and benevolent role in the world, a sense deeply informed by Berkeley’s words, “Westward the course of empire,” provided for the stanza one final act in American history. The opportunity came just eight years after the frontier was officially declared closed in 1890. What began as a bid for Cuban independence from Spain provided an opening for American expansionists to press their case. American intervention in the affairs of this colonial island just seventy miles off the coast of Florida contributed to a chain events that saw American naval ships sailing into Manila Harbor in May of 1898. There, they proceeded to demolish the entire Spanish fleet. Under the conditions of the Treaty of Paris signed by the United States and Spain later that same year, the United States found itself the possessor of a global empire: Puerto Rico, the Pacific Island of Guam, four months later, the Philippines were added to America’s imperial portfolio. By February of 1899, Congress had mustered enough votes to ratify the treaty.<sup>4</sup>

Over the past half century, historians have debated whether the Spanish-American War and the United States’ emergence onto the world stage represented a disjuncture in American history. The traditional narrative of the War has framed it as an aberration in America’s territorial expansion. In recent decades, however, a growing number of scholars have asserted an essential continuity between America’s continental expansion and its imperial expansion.

Arguing that America had long been in the business of colonization, historians in this revisionist

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860-1898* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1963), 70.

<sup>4</sup> Allan Keller, *The Spanish American War: A Compact History* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1969).

historiography have demonstrated that the pattern of colonial relations abroad was predicated on domestic Indian policy.<sup>5</sup> Nor was this the first time America had thought in imperial ways about the rest of the world. Beginning in the early republic, Americans expressed a missionizing impulse predicated upon a sense of exceptionalism that took them to all corners of the globe. Some went as merchants and diplomats, others as missionaries, but all went as evangelists of United States empire.<sup>6</sup> It is a misnomer then to suggest that America had practiced any sort of isolationist policy up until 1898.

There is, in addition, a discursive continuity between the two periods. The rhetoric that shaped and drove forward American continental expansion, that justified the subjugation of the indigenous inhabitants of the continent, proved equally useful in making a case for global empire and subjugation of new indigenous peoples. On September 25, 1900, Albert Beveridge, Senator from Indiana and an impassioned supporter of empire, delivered a Republican campaign speech on “The Star of Empire” to a Chicago audience. The jingoistic oration revolved around the prosaic quotation, “Westward the Star of Empire takes its Way.” Beveridge opened his speech by

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<sup>5</sup> See Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire*; Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998); Walter L. Williams, “United States Indian Policy and the Debate over Philippine annexation: Implications for the Origins of American Imperialism,” *Journal of American History* 66:4 (1980): 810-31; Katharine Bjork, *Prairie Imperialists: The Indian Country Origins of American Empire* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> An increasing body of literature has challenged the periodization of American empire, revealing that Americans in the early republic were already thinking and acting in global terms. See for example, Rosemarie Zagari, “The Significance of the ‘Global Turn’ for the Early American Republic: Globalization in the Age of Nation-Building,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 31:1 (Spring 2011): 1-37; Emily Conroy-Krutz, *Christian Imperialism: Converting the World in the Early Republic* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2015); Lawrence A. Peskin, *Captives and Countrymen: Barbary Slavery and the American Public, 1785-1816* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2009); Michael A. Verney, “An Eye for Prices, an Eye for Souls: Americans in the Indian Subcontinent, 1784-1838,” *Journal of the Early Republic*, 33:3 (Fall 2013): 397-432; James R. Fichter, *So Great a Proffit: How the East Indies Trade Transformed Anglo-American Capitalism* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2010).

first defining what this empire was *not*. The Star of Empire referred neither to kingly power (because monarchy was an obsolete form of government) nor to autocratic oppression (because civil liberties were gaining ground worldwide), but “to the star of empire, as Washington used the word, when he called this Republic an ‘empire,’” and to the star of empire “as Thomas Jefferson understood it, when he declared our form of government ideal for extending ‘our empire.’” This is the empire the “prophetic” Bishop Berkeley spoke of when he declared, “Westward the Star of Empire takes its Way.” Beveridge defined it as “the star of the empire of liberty and law,” “the star of the empire of commerce and communication,” “the star of the empire of social order and the Gospel of our Lord,” in sum, it was “the star of empire of the civilization of the world.” “Westward *that* star of empire takes its course” (emphasis his). For the ardent imperialist Beveridge, the boundaries of the United States imposed no limits on this star’s progress. To the contrary, the star of empire “illumines our path of duty across the Pacific in the islands and lands where Providence has called us.” America had a God-given duty to “every race without instruction and guidance,” whether they be American Indian or Filipino, Beveridge made clear. Taking over the Philippines was no act of imperialistic occupation, therefore, but rather an extension of America’s mission as ordained by the divinely led star of empire of Berkeley’s famous verse.<sup>7</sup>

For all of the discontinuities of American history, there is a persistent through line from the colonial period to the turn of the twentieth century. “Westward the course of empire takes its way,” adapted to unique circumstances in America and modified by national experience, remained a guiding theory in American literature, art, and political rhetoric for over 150 years.

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<sup>7</sup> Albert Beveridge, *The Meaning of the Times and Other Speeches* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1908), 118-119.

Though the roots of this transatlantic idea trace back to seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Anglo-American religio-historical literature, the idea outlasted those works. Prior to independence, American uses of Berkeley's poem pointed towards a future fulfillment. With the success of the American Revolution, confidence increased that America's rise to imperial glory was imminent. As America developed over the middle decades of the nineteenth century, with its rapidly expanding economy, industry, as well as geography, Americans found welcome proof that the old bishop had indeed been prophetic. Fact seemed to confirm philosophy. "Manifest destiny," the nationalist slogan that presumed America's God-given mission to spread its civilization, depended on this theme. By the turn of the twentieth century, as Americans looked out over a growing overseas colonial empire, Berkeley's line legitimized the nation's ascent to the global stage. The use of Berkeley's poem over the course of a hundred and fifty years provides an ideological coherence to a history that can too often appear fragmented and rife with discontinuities. Its appeal and ready malleability to a variety of disparate circumstances made "Westward the course of empire," a thoroughly American idea—and a remarkably persistent one.

In the twentieth century, George Berkeley's name as well as his famous stanza faded from national memory. Yet for a century and a half, Berkeley's words gave to a new nation the courage to move westward, believing that in doing so it would not fall off the edge of civilization or lapse into irrelevance; on the contrary, those who crossed the mountains and the plains were the advance troops of an empire that "by future Poets shall be sung."<sup>8</sup> Berkeley's *Verses* had accomplished their ends, conveying a singular ideology of America, informing America's sense of self, and had given life to a rich system of symbols and metaphors. Americans no longer

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<sup>8</sup> Edwin S. Gaustad, *George Berkeley in America* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979), 204.

needed Berkeley's words because the ideology had so thoroughly penetrated American thought and culture. Americans do not have to know the poem, or in fact, see any of the paintings to grasp the outlines of this ideology. They have only to look to New York Harbor, where the Star of Empire holds up her lamp, shining enlightenment across the oceans. Her greened visage crowned with a celestial diadem is a symbol for the American project first conceived in the days of Revolution. Her meaning has been determined from the layers of meaning Berkeley's *Verses* accumulated in the past two and a half centuries—she is shorthand for the triumph of an American form of government, an American gospel, and, for better or worse, an American empire.

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