BYU Studies Quarterly

Volume 51 | Issue 4 Article 14

12-1-2012

Hell on the Range: A Story of Honor, Conscience, and the American West

Daniel J. Herman

Taunalyn F. Rutherford

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq

Part of the Mormon Studies Commons, and the Religious Education Commons

Recommended Citation

Herman, Daniel J. and Rutherford, Taunalyn F. (2012) "Hell on the Range: A Story of Honor, Conscience, and the American West," *BYU Studies Quarterly*: Vol. 51 : Iss. 4 , Article 14.
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol51/iss4/14

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in BYU Studies Quarterly by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

BOOK REVIEW

Daniel Justin Herman. *Hell on the Range: A Story of Honor, Conscience, and the American West.*
New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010.

Reviewed by Taunalyn F. Rutherford

In the introduction to *Hell on the Range,* Daniel Justin Herman informs readers that his account of Arizona's Rim Country War of the 1880s is more than revisionist critique; it is self-critique. Herman, an associate professor of history at Central Washington University, is an Arizonan who, like many growing up in the western United States, was "raised on its romance," and in his youth he viewed "Arizonans—especially cowboys—[as] made of sterner, stronger stuff than people who grew up elsewhere" (xxii). His view of Mormons and Mormonism—an important undercurrent animating much of this book—was informed by his experiences as a non-Mormon in an LDS-sponsored Boy Scout troop when he was young and his realization years later that his Mormon friends and fellow scouts had ancestors who had settled the Rim Country. Herman, who is also the author of the award-winning book *Hunting and the American Imagination,* places his study of the Rim Country in conversation with the mythic West as depicted in the novels of Zane Grey and in the images and narratives of the magazine *Arizona Highways*.

Hell on the Range, also an award-winner, is a cultural history featuring Texas cowboys, Mormons, New Mexican sheepherders, mixed-blood ranchers, and Jewish merchants, all jockeying for control over various segments of the free range in Arizona. It weaves together scholarship from New Western history and borderlands studies and has much in common with recent works on nineteenth-century American vigilantism, religion, and violence. Herman's central argument is that the Rim Country War, in addition to being a battle for terrain and resources, was complicated by family feuds, racial tensions, and religious differences—a "manifestation of a battle between honor and conscience." Herman, drawing on the work of Bertram Wyatt-Brown, refers to the "nineteenth-century culture of honor epitomized by physical courage, loyalty to kin, fierce defense of family and personal reputation, conspicuous display of wealth, eager hospitality,

Published by BYU ScholarsArchive, 2012

gambling, drinking, . . . and communal shaming" (xiv). Conversely, Herman defines conscience as "a worldview that placed moral courage above physical courage; individual piety above family reputation; frugality and work above displays of wealth and luxury; sobriety and rectitude above drinking and gambling; exhortation and rehabilitation above punishment and shaming" (xv).

Herman deftly manages, for the most part, to place his theory of honor versus conscience in conversation with the various factions involved in the Arizona Rim Country conflict. He begins with the feud between the Graham and Tewksbury families in Pleasant Valley, which he describes as a conflict over cattle and resources as well as behaviors of honor. Large and small cattle operators and sheepherders entered the conflict and created alliances with various parties within the two factions. Herman explains how the conflict expanded because of economic catastrophe as well as racial and religious tensions. Ranch owners hired Texas cowboys who clearly exemplified honor in all the ways Wyatt-Brown enumerated. Arizona Mormons, argues Herman, were the embodiment of the culture of conscience in the narrative. Latter-day Saints initially resisted the use of violence when cowboys and New Mexicans threatened them, robbed them, and jumped their claims.

In 1887 the Aztec Land and Cattle Company formed an alliance with the Mormons and some other small ranchers to eliminate crime and gain government control. This alliance caused the Aztec Company to fire cowboys who had been hostile to Mormons. Newly formed alliances resulted in the cowboys joining the conflict on the Graham side, or what was considered by those in power to be the criminal side. A perfect storm of economic volatility, conflicting ideology, and divergent understandings of masculinity underpinned the shifting of alliances.

Ultimately, in an effort to rid the country of criminals, vigilantes killed men who were mistakenly accused of cattle rustling. Mormons, Aztec managers, and smaller ranchers, who believed in such conscience-oriented values as law and order and hard work, banded together in these vigilante groups and enlisted men to carry out violent lynching to bring order to the range. Herman makes an important intervention in local histories and lore by proving that the conflict was not confined to Pleasant Valley but was like "a contagious fever" that "spilled across three counties—Apache, Yavapai, and Gila—each of which added fuel to the flame" (201).

Herman's application of his conscience-versus-honor thesis is especially helpful in analyzing the aftermath of the war. To this end, chapter 11 illuminates the life and policies of George W. P. Hunt, the first governor of Arizona, who served a total of seven terms between 1912 and 1933. Hunt,

according to Herman, made great strides in fomenting a culture of conscience in the state during the Progressive Era. The succeeding chapter chronicles the circuitous path of the tropes of honor and conscience as manifest in the works of popular novelist Zane Grey who, Herman argues, resurrected the culture of honor for succeeding generations of readers keen to embrace the mythic West of heroes and villains. Grey's honor, argues Herman, was not an honor marred by slavery, and it still maintained some elements of conscience, but it "sought to resolve problems with a six-shooter or, at the least, with a hard fist." Herman argues that this was what the nation sought at the time: "Grey's heroes displayed no interest in Progressive reforms. . . . They represented a new blend of honor and conscience that prescribed assertive manliness—and submissive womanliness—for the twentieth century" (285). It is this image of the West that would prevail in pulp fiction and Hollywood films.

BYU Studies readers will be especially interested in Herman's treatment of Mormon history in Arizona. One of the strengths of *Hell on the Range* is the way in which Herman weaves Mormonism into the story. He neither demonizes nor romanticizes; he approaches his subjects with respect, and his scholarship concerning Mormon history is thoughtful and sound. Herman's discussion of the various Latter-day Saints who answered the call to the Arizona mission is an important biographical intervention that expands our knowledge and deepens our understanding of the connections between LDS experiences and regional and national developments. Herman reminds us of the importance of Mormon history and of Mormons in American history.

It is, however, in his discussion of Mormons in Arizona that Herman's use of the honor/conscience trope seems somewhat limiting. For example, William Flake, cofounder of Snowflake, Arizona, figures prominently in the book, and Herman places Flake in the culture of honor camp merely because his parents, James and Agnes Flake, were Southerners and slaveholders who continued to hold slaves long after their conversion to the LDS faith. They even offered the services of their slave Green to Brigham Young during the trek west. Herman notes that it is not surprising that the Flake family "imbibed the honor culture of the Old South, a culture premised on the idea of white honor and black shame. What is more interesting is that they entered a religious culture tied so closely with honor's contrary: conscience" (27).

Herman begins Flake's narrative in 1857, the same year as the Mountain Meadows Massacre, when Flake was stationed as a soldier in Cedar City. Referencing Walker, Turley, and Leonard, who confirm that militiamen from Cedar City participated in the massacre, Herman suggests that it is

possible that Flake was among those involved.[1] Herman calls the anomalies of Mormon aggression "the violence of conscience" (30). He describes William Flake as peaceful and leaning more toward the conscience side, yet in the end identifies him as an accessory to the lynching of innocent men who were considered cattle thieves.

Herman's theory—while illuminating in some respects—ultimately overgeneralizes. He places Mormons squarely within the culture of conscience in order to illustrate how they defy this culture by seeking violent solutions to conflict. This reasoning fails to recognize how elements of both honor and conscience were, perhaps, in constant tension for all inhabitants of the Rim region. For this reviewer, Herman's analysis is less compelling when he addresses Arizona Mormons and Mormonism generally.

Herman does make an important and thought-provoking assertion that "Mormon emphasis on their own perfection—and the corresponding wickedness of gentiles—brought them into conflict" (48). Wilford Woodruff predicted that "by 1890 . . . the U.S. would go just as the Jaredites of *The Book of Mormon* had gone: in civil war, in fire and blood"(48). Herman compares this statement with the Rim Country War, asserting that "Pleasant Valley—like much of the cattle country of the West—befit the Mormon description of the wars of the Jaredites. The ranchers and cowboys of Pleasant Valley saw one another not as friends but as enemies. They were competitors for the fruits of the earth. They suspected one another of stealing stock. They hated one another for 'stealing' range. And in 1887 they fell into civil war" (66). Herman's conclusion is that Mormons saw themselves not as Jaredites and not succumbing to civil war but living as people of conscience; yet this same thinking led them to see Gentiles as the evil other and, subsequently, to rationalize conflict and justify violence.

Herman argues further that in the aftermath of the war, "Mormon accommodation to cowboy honor was part of a larger movement by Mormons into mainstream American life. . . . By emphasizing their cowboy heritage, Arizona Mormons emphasized their similarity with Western non-Mormons" (211). Anyone who has ever wondered why rodeos are such a central feature in modern Mormon Pioneer Day celebrations can appreciate Herman's argument in this regard.

Hell on the Range is an important book for all of the reasons discussed here and one other: It offers a lens through which to view the current political and cultural landscape of the United States. According to Herman, "Conscience and honor continue to form the yin and yang of American politics, with the Republican Party typically steering toward honor and the Democratic Party steering toward humanitarian conscience" (288). Readers will have a range of reactions to Herman's assertion, but as Mormons

and Mormonism continue to be prominent players in politics, as well as the object of ongoing media scrutiny, Herman offers up a thoughtful and lively consideration of the continuities between past and present. *Hell on the Range* will appeal to those with an interest in western American history as well as Mormon history. It will have particular appeal to those who have roots or interest in Arizona's Rim Country. Those who appreciate Zane Grey novels and the Hollywood westerns that his books inspired—as well as those who wonder about the mythic power of such cultural texts—should not miss Herman's book.

Taunalyn F. Rutherford (who can be contacted via email at byustudies@byu.edu) is a PhD student at Claremont Graduate University studying the history of Christianity and religions of North America with an emphasis in Mormon studies. She received her MA from Brigham Young University in humanities.

1. Ronald W. Walker, Richard E. Turley Jr., and Glen M. Leonard, *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 193. ^