"Michael A. Verney, *A Great and Rising Nation: Naval Exploration and Global Empire in the Early US Republic*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022."

Zoltán Peterecz

It is a well-known fact that right from the moment the United States of America declared and won its independence, it wished to achieve a prestige comparable to that of the traditional European powers, first and foremost the British. It was a manifold issue. In the foreign policy domain, toward the Europeans the young American state needed to prove that the young republic was treaty worthy and was an equal in the international arena, while on the domestic front the new state had to produce economic prosperity and cultural development. All these were supposed to show that the USA, if not by divine providence, was a positive addition to the family of nations and possessed an already large segment of the North American continent. With the passing years—and surviving the first turbulent years both in domestic and foreign policy—, the American appetite grew to be seen as a growing power. This naturally stemmed from the general point of view of most individuals in the United States: they believed they were exceptional and brought something new to the world, therefore they were to play an ever increasing role in the fate of the world.

Michael Verney's book examines the aforementioned topic. While it is true that on the continent Lewis and Clark's famous journey in 1804–06 mapped a lot of the territory west of the Mississippi, the realm of naval expeditions was still in store. And this is what the author uncovers: the American naval expeditions in the middle section of the 19th century, and he tries to prove how America through these episodes wished to become a member of the elite imperialist club of European powers. The various chapters are case studies from the almanac of American sea exploration, each one of which shines a light on how the United States tried and stepped on the imperial path from 1830 on. In the author's words, the more than a dozen expeditions contributed to the "process of imperialization." (5)

The first such story introduces Jeremiah Reynolds's efforts, who wished to organize an expedition to the southern parts of the Pacific Ocean. The ambitious Reynolds—partly thanks to the influence of the explorer Alexander von Humboldt—tried to connect the desire for knowledge together with glory for his home country, which was a sensitive issue for many of his compatriots during this

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era. This was the period when, for example, John Quincy Adams wanted to unfurl the banner of American knowledge and expansion as a way to prove how civilized the United States was. Reynolds was in many ways the walking embodiment of Adams's plans, and with time, he managed to secure many supporters all throughout the country. In the end, he also needed the financial support from Congress. Although the House of Representatives voted for it, the Senate refused such a plan, which was the outcome of politics, of course. Adams, who supported the plan, had lost the 1828 elections, while the incoming Andrew Jackson initially opposed it. But there were other forces as well: the question of what it meant to be a republic, the ongoing tension between North and South on account of the question of slavery, the larger support for trade than for science. Therefore, the first ambitious plan for naval expedition failed in early 1829.

The next case study in many ways is the outgrowth of the first one in the sense that although the Reynolds-Adams axis suffered defeat, later Jackson began to help the plan. The unquestionable leader of the Democratic Party believed in free market and capitalism in addition to his conviction of white supremacy. These sentiments paved the way for a long-distance naval expedition (finally coming to fruition under the presidency of Martin van Buren in 1838), and which roamed the seas for four long years. The small fleet of six ships (a larger assemblage than the usual European expeditions) had a complex task: to make a well-detailed map of the Pacific Ocean that would aid future American trips (first and foremost whale hunting enjoyed primacy in this field), to fight if necessary the local peoples and prove to them that it was unwise to anger Washington, and also to make scientific notes to be published at home in volumes so as to widen the knowledge of the republic. The appearance of the American ships often triggered opposition and violence. The Americans—similarly to their approach to the Natives living on the North American continent—looked down on these Natives as well and many times forced them into a subordinated role thereby proving their superiority and securing American trading goals.

One of the outcomes of this expedition was that the collected data—whether in museums or in publications—were introduced to the American public, which meant the middle and upper class of the white society. While the exhibited objects at the National Gallery were seen by relatively few visitors—and the collection from the Fiji Islands was the overwhelming favorite among them—the published works reached a much larger audience. Among these the most significant was Charles Wilkes's, the captain of the lead ship, five volumes that came out in 1844 as one of the most quality books of the decade, and found its way to the middle class that during the era devoured travel literature. The most important aspect of this phenomenon was to prove to Americans the success of the expedition thereby

strengthening the burgeoning feeling of nationalism and exceptionalism. On the other hand, this was a thinly veiled message to the major European powers that the United States was capable and wished to compete with them. At the same time, the various publications and exhibits solidified the prevalent belief in white supremacy, therefore they served a double purpose: ensured the readers and visitors of their craved hegemony over "lesser" peoples, and served the general thirst for knowledge. But the most outstanding angle was the positive effect that gave impetus for further American expeditions in the 1840s and 1850s to far corners of the world. The nationalist and imperialist faith propelled the desire for new possibilities to aid American trade and prove the excellence of the country.

One such expedition took place in 1848, when the participants travelled to the Dead Sea along the River Jordan. The goal of this tour was somewhat surprising: the ostensibly scientific exploration was at heart a religious undertaking that wanted to prove that the Dead Sea was indeed the result of God's wrath striking Sodom and Gomorrah as the story is known from the Bible. What is more, this happened with the financial support of the U.S. government. Verney well illustrates that behind such a decision there lurked both domestic and foreign policy explanations. The Protestant evangelist groups that played a key role in organizing the expedition felt that because of the ongoing denominational changes in America—mainly because of the mass migration of the Catholic Irish, but certain Unitarian tenets discarded the literal interpretation of the Bible—they needed to prove their superior place in society, and the hoped-for result of the trip might have served that purpose. As for the foreign policy domain aspect, the scientific element of the expedition was to display the exceptional nature of the United States that was to provide advantages regarding trade and hegemony. The Calvinist William Francis Lynch, an officer of the U.S. Navy, embodied the aforementioned aspects, therefore he was the perfect man for this job. The Navy supported the undertaking to counterbalance the limelight and glory that the Army had received in the wake of the Mexican-American War (1846–48). This hybrid expedition of scientific exploration and theology was not perplexing in those days since these two were not strange bedfellows. As Verney points out, the representatives of a supposedly exceptional Christian country would not have achieved anything had it not been for the local Muslims' help. Although the results of the expedition could not prove beyond doubt the truth of the biblical story, Lynch presented the findings in such a way in his book that became popular—especially among the Evangelists—, and if nothing else, it brought his fellow believers closer to the world of explorations.

The next chapter was another expedition that sailed toward South America in the 1850s. This undertaking was closely connected to the interests and aims of Southern slaveholders. The domestic and international pressure against the

institution of slavery had become stronger by that time, and many slaveholders and supporters of the "Peculiar Institution" wanted to have insurance for any exigencies. This led to an exploration on the Amazonas and La Plata rivers and their tributaries—with the support of the federal government, which hoped that in case of success, a scenario like this might defuse the tense domestic situation. The ostensibly scientific exploration that was also to help bring about bilateral trade agreements in reality had one real underlying goal: to set up a possible slave holding enclave in one of the states in the region. This would have served not only the expansion of slavery but could have diminished the threat of slave revolts. By transporting a great number of slaves to these South American countries, the number of home slaves would have decreased, which would have reduced the possibility of further slave rebellions. As for the elite of these South American countries, they saw an opportunity in the arrival of white American settlers to boost their economy. Despite all this planning, neither in Brazil nor in Bolivia did any of such endeavor come to pass.

The last chapter of the book tells the story of those American expeditions in the first half of the 1850s that were sent to find a British ship in the Arctic region—which all ended in frustration. But as a diplomatic tool, the American efforts worked very well. The positive American response to the British call for help did not only demonstrate that the United States was a civilized nation of good will, but it also helped to put the until then volatile relationship between the two countries on a much friendlier base. Verney details why the idea of a rescue mission was important for many Americans. On the one hand, there was the still palpable notion of chivalry among the members of the upper and middle class. On the other hand, many Americans shared the opinion that in the realm of arts and science their "chosen" nation still played the role of a second fiddle to Great Britain or other European countries. But there was also a geopolitical aspect. Although in 1846 the two countries decided the fate of the Oregon Territory by treaty, the two nations found themselves at loggerheads in Central America and the Caribbean, but neither side wanted a possible war.

Verney's book well presents how popular the various naval expeditions were in the three decades before the Civil War, and how significant this was for the white population of the United States. First and foremost, their role in shaping the American identity must be singled out since they embodied those values that Americans liked to think of themselves: a society stemming from European Anglo-Saxon roots and European culture, and acknowledged by it, flourishing capitalism, a middle class with a distinct self-consciousness in addition to conservative Christianity. In the 19th century with the heated race of imperialist powers for the overwhelming majority of Americans these aspects were attractive. The devastating

Civil War, however, put an end to such a path of explorations. They practically vanished, while the European powers looked at and spoke of the United States more appreciatively, and the American-British friendship—with minor episodes aside—started to become really close. In light of such processes, no wonder that naval expeditions were relegated to the sidelines at best.

Verney's volume is a great example of how to bring together the diplomatic background of history with episodes of cultural history. The colorful and at places exciting case studies are based on thorough research and a wide range of sources, and the author provides a well-balanced picture of the individual and societal aspects, expectations, and consequences. For those who wish to understand the ever-clearer contours of American identity in the 19th century, the book will be a pleasing companion.