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# Path of Empire: Panama and the California Gold Rush

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For Int'l History Review, Simon Fraser U., Burnaby BCIHR BOOKS <ihrbooks@sfu.ca>

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McGuinness, Aims. *Path of Empire: Panama and the California Gold Rush*. Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press 2008. Pp. xiii, 249. \$35.00 (US).

The story of the early United States presence in the Isthmus of Panama, in the 1840s and 50s, as portrayed in this book, is woven around an account of Panamanians' role in the construction of the Panama Railroad, the first transcontinental line in the world. Neither story has been told in this detail, for which we must thank author Aims McGuinness.

Taking some narrative liberties, McGuinness anchors his book on an 1856 incident famous in Panamanian history, the war of the watermelon slice. Then backtracking to show how Panama became the preferred route for U.S. and other travelers to reach California during the Gold Rush, he develops a sweeping history of the U.S. annexation of California, the flood of immigrants into the gold region, U.S. expansion into Central America (businessmen, filibusters, soldiers, diplomats, etc.), and the tensions these developments caused within Panama and with its national government in Bogotá. In the course of the book he also provides the most definitive picture of the watermelon incident that will likely ever emerge.

Panamanians had long dreamed of restoring prosperity on the Isthmus by attracting trade, as it had once done in the heyday of the Spanish empire. But the lack of a safe, economical crossing at Panama frustrated these hopes. In 1948, however, an extraordinary coincidence occurred, in which Colombia (of which Panama was a province) ceded to the Panama Railroad Company of New York a concession to build a railroad there at the same time California was annexed and gold was discovered there. Now the future railroad promised not only to convey cargo and passengers across the narrow ribbon of land, it would become the indispensable link between the east coast of the United States and its newly-acquired territories on the west coast.

The political situation in Panama has not been told before with this detail, showing how individuals and parties lined up vis-à-vis the major issues of the day: its federal relations with Colombia, its role hosting an international corporation, its conduct of elections under the progressive 1853 Constitution, and creation of a viable government that could protect the citizenry and maintain law and order. Events moved quickly in these years, forcing leaders to take action without fully knowing what situations they confronted or what resources they had at their disposal.

The most powerful cause of the socioeconomic tensions that erupted in riots in April 1956 was the completion of the railroad a year earlier and its successful provision of through service to passengers traveling to and from California. This threw out of work thousands of laborers and persons who earned livings helping passengers cross before the railroad was finished. It also eliminated the lucrative hotel, food, and entertainment business that catered to travelers, once the latter could embark almost immediately on their next voyage. Panamanians, in short, saw their hopes of prosperity evaporate before their eyes.

The incident itself occurred when an inebriated American refused to pay for a slice of watermelon from a street vendor and insulted him. Weapons were brandished, a chase ensued, and a number of U.S. travelers found themselves caught in a shootout between local citizens, police, and railroad security agents. In the end, a dozen and a half died, mostly U.S. travelers.

The subsequent investigations led to counteraccusations between the two governments and the landing of U.S. marines for several days. This crucible of violence forged long-lasting traditions: repeated U.S.

military interventions, Panamanian nationalism, ineffectual support from the government in Bogotá, and a heterogeneous mix of peoples along the transit route. Many of these features remained throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, until the U.S. turned over the Panama Canal in 1999.

McGuinness tells this fairly complex history with clarity and verve, bringing to life characters we only knew before as vague presences: Mariano and Justo Arosemena, José Domingo Espinar, Francisco de Fábrega, Pedro Goytía, Ran Runnels, Bartolomé Calvo, José Manuel Luna, and others. He shows how Panama was swept up into the vortex not only of the gold rush but of the transportation revolution and U.S. Manifest Destiny.

McGuinness conducted research that can only be termed exhaustive, in the archives of Panama, Colombia, and the United States. In a coda, McGuinness notes how he almost missed documents Noriega's people tried to use to build a case against U.S. imperialism prior to the 1989 invasion. Finally, he painstakingly combed the rich newspaper sources from the 1850s. In all, very thorough and convincing research.

My only criticism is McGuinness's unwillingness to draw comparisons with similar incidents in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially the 1964 canal riots that disrupted relations yet led eventually to a new treaty and relinquishment of the canal. But that aside, I certainly recommend this book to students of Panama, U.S.-Latin American relations, and indeed world history.

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