Missouri River to friends left behind in Indiana. Although in his letters the Chinese pheasant replaces the buffalo described by the explorers, the sky remains clear, the river long, the plains wide, and the mountains tall.

The letters and related documents cover a period of seventy years. Earliest in time is Thomas Jefferson’s pessimistic inquiry of 1783 to George Rogers Clark as to whether the latter would be interested in leading a party to explore the country “from the Mississippi to California”; the latest is an 1854 affidavit of Patrick Gass, survivor of the famous exploration. Research students, Lewis and Clark buffs, and present inhabitants of the country described will find here worthwhile supplements to the much-perused journals of the expedition. Realizing that letters from the frontier were usually published in the eastern newspapers, their writers often included more narrative, detail, and explanation than one might expect to find in private correspondence. The editorial notes are well done and should be helpful to all types of readers.

Four values to be obtained from a patient reading of these papers should be mentioned. First, a scattering of new information is provided in such special fields as financing. Second, the larger purpose of the journey becomes even more apparent from the letters than from the expedition’s journals. It is clear that the sponsors envisioned far more than a mere exploration of the area recently purchased from France; they were interested in the lands to the west of that area, as well. A third fruit of these letters is an increased realization of the prime role of President Jefferson in the expedition. Finally, this collection brings out clearly the cordial relationship between Lewis and Clark which survived all temptations toward disharmony.

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Manifést Destiny and Mission in American History: A Reinterpretation.


Historians have long differed over the meaning, the significance, and even the existence of the American phenomenon of expansion called Manifest Destiny. Since the concept of Manifest Destiny did encompass the acquisition of territory by conquest, some critics have called it aggression under the guise of pious sentiment, or merely an American form of imperialism. Some sensitive historians have defended the doctrine, saying that American expansion despoiled no one unjustly. Samuel F. Bemis, for example, has called it “Manifest Opportunity.” Not long ago, on the other hand, Norman A. Graehner, in his book Empire on the Pacific (1955), virtually denied the existence of Manifest Destiny as a calculated expansionist movement. Now Frederick Merk, professor emeritus of American history, Harvard University, has come along with a reinterpretation not only of Manifest Destiny—which he insists was a force that existed in American politics with believers in every section of the nation and in all levels of intelligence—but also of scholarly opinion regarding various aspects of American expansionism in the nineteenth century.
Basing his analysis on a wide use of newspaper editorials, speeches in the Congress, and campaign oratory, and also on diaries and private correspondence, Merk calls this a study in public opinion. He admits that his tools of measurement may not be precise but maintains that they are nonetheless valid for his purpose—the study of expansionist agitation. Even though the expansionist fervor of the 1890's is analyzed, most of the book deals with the period of the 1840's, the era to which the author has devoted many years of his scholarly career.

As might be expected from a mature scholar dealing with the area of his acknowledged competence, this book bristles with shrewd insights, revisions of past interpretations, and provocative new interpretations. Merk's views are woven into two main themes: the desire of some expansionists to extend the nation's boundaries over the entire North American continent, particularly during the 1840's, and the relationship of this expansionist agitation to the surge to the Pacific. In the era of James K. Polk, in fact, Merk sees two levels of expansionist agitation, that which sought the entire continent and that which wanted only a shoreline on the Pacific. He admits, however, that in this period Manifest Destiny meant expansion ordained by heaven over an area not clearly defined, hence the latitude for the varying interpretations of this doctrine.

The author contends that since slogans serve politicians, historians should not slight them. As a slogan, he says, Manifest Destiny served Polk well. It was a factor in the territorial advance to the Pacific. Merk also points out that Manifest Destiny was the product of many forces, and challenges the view that it was an expression of nationalism. The era of the 1840's, he asserts, exhibited little nationalism. Powerful among the forces comprising Manifest Destiny, he maintains, was the doctrine of states' rights, for which expansionists had a strong taste. Because Manifest Destiny did not reflect the national spirit, it gained little support, even at the outset. It never acquired national, sectional, or party following commensurate with its bigness.

On the other hand, Merk recognizes nationalism as an element in the New Manifest Destiny, which he calls the imperialism of the 1890's. He argues that this imperialism was not merely a variant of the ideology of the 1840's; indeed, the expansionism of the 1890's was the antithesis of Manifest Destiny. The expansionism of the 1890's was insular, imperialistic, and involved the acquisition of colonial subjects. In the 1840's expansionism was continental and offered the conquered the equality implicit in statehood. According to this thesis, "Manifest Destiny and imperialism were traps into which the nation was led in 1846 and in 1899, and from which it extricated itself as well as it could afterward" (p. 261).

In Merk's view—his major thesis in fact—a truer expression of the national spirit was the concept of America's Mission. This ideal of Mission, meaning that America was the light of liberty for Europe, indeed for the world, was present from the beginning of American history and still lives, whereas Manifest Destiny expired at the end of the nineteenth century. Although this sense of Mission to redeem the Old World by setting a high example of freedom in the New was idealistic and Manifest Destiny seemed selfish, the two concepts were linked in the nineteenth century. If Manifest Destiny were fulfilled and American freedom spread itself over the entire continent, then the
light of liberty would be a brighter guide than ever for the peoples of the Old World. Mission, it is claimed, later broke the link and even curbed the crusading, aggressive expansionism of Manifest Destiny.

However one looks at it, this is an important book. Its ideas, whether or not one accepts them, are challenging. Despite the many excellent features in this study and regardless of the explanation in the preface, one questions the wisdom of even so capable a historian as Professor Merk in placing long undigested quotations from his sources throughout the narrative. One wonders, too, why he chose to overlook the writings of Professor Graebner which bear directly on this subject. Nonetheless, all students of history, and particularly those interested in the development of national character and the ideas of American diplomacy, should be grateful to Professor Merk for bringing together the thinking and scholarship of many years in this fine volume. He has given us what may now be considered the major interpretive work on the subject.

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Alexander DeConde


In almost every important respect The Tolerant Populists is an ideal monograph. The author has brought his problem into a sharp focus and has stated it clearly. In addition to using a broad range of manuscript, pamphlet, and archival source materials, he has sought "to sample newspapers representing every area, faction, ethnic group, or special viewpoint, if it existed in print, that related to the problem of Populism and nativism or immigrants in any significant way" (p. 246). Finally, he has stated his conclusions clearly and has confined them to the limits of his study and his materials.

The sharp focus of the book is made clear in the opening sentence of the Preface. It was to investigate "the attitudes of the Populists of Kansas to foreign-born people and to foreign groups and institutions" and "the participation of the foreign-born in the People's or Populist party in Kansas from about 1888 to about 1900." In concluding an analysis of the view of Populism presented in Richard Hofstadter's Age of Reform with the assertion that a corrective is needed, the author contents himself with the hope that his book is "a step in the right direction." Again, at the conclusion of an historiographical summary that is almost certain to find a place on required reading lists, the limited scope and sharp focus of the study are adumbrated. It is the Kansas Populists that are being studied. The results of the study "apply only to Kansas."

The point of departure for the analysis of the available material is a condensation of what historians, behavioral scientists, and social critics have written about the Populists. Among others, the names of Lee J. Levinger, Carey McWilliams, Humphrey J. Desmond, Barbara Miller Solomon, Victor C. Ferkis, Edward A. Shils, and Peter Viereck appear in the text or in the footnotes. More familiar to historians among the recent critics of Populism are Max Lerner, Oscar Handlin, and Richard Hofstadter. The revisers of the revisionists whose articles