Counterpunch: The Cultural Battles over Heavyweight Prizefighting in the American West
by Meg Frisbee

x + 245 pages, illustrations, notes, index, bibliography.

Historian Meg Frisbee has written a lively and engaging book about boxing in the American West, with a particular focus on the turn-of-the-century Progressive Era. Counterpunch “considers the symbolic, social, and political conflict between heavyweight prizefighters and anti-fight reformers as they tussled over national values and moral economies from the 1850s to the 1980s” (p. 3). Frisbee argues that the West provided a space that “enabled the prizefight business to continue its expansion, and eventually earn a stature that put it out of reach of the power of the purity reformers” (p. 15).

San Francisco, a cosmopolitan Pacific Rim city, was at the center of western boxing from the 1850s to the mid-1890s. But when California progressives passed antiprizefighting legislation, fighters and promoters began looking for more out-of-the-way sites. In February 1896, for instance, notorious West Texas lawman Judge Roy Bean (the self-proclaimed “Law West of the Pecos”) flouted both Texas and Mexican law by allowing a match between Bob Fitzsimmons and Peter Maher on a strip of land in Coahuila, Mexico. The following year Nevada—then suffering decline due to stagnation in mining and ranching—decided to legalize prizefighting. Westerners frequently defended their bucking of national trends by arguing that boxing was no more violent than college football, which had plenty of supporters in the East.

Through such analyses, Frisbee demonstrates the regional and contested nature of progressivism. While reformers in Washington (or Sacramento or Austin) might try to ban prizefighting, local officials would just as soon make money off the fistic spectacle. Early-1900s new media, especially film, made matches in sparsely populated and morally lax western locales accessible to viewers located far from the ring. Such collapsing of space—as well as racial boundaries—via communications technologies prompted Congress to outlaw “the interstate transportation of fighting films” after the 1910 Johnson-Jeffries fight in Reno incited race riots throughout America (p. 152).

Frisbee pays significant attention to gender and race. Boxing was a form of “white male physical culture” (p. 23) frequently opposed by progressive women and ministers. Yet it still appealed to Americans of various “ethnicities, classes, and ages, as well as both sexes” (p. 12). By the early 1900s new rules had made prizefighting somewhat more respectable, and the so-called manly art started to become a profession. As the career of controversial black boxer Jack Johnson showed, however, many Americans thought the profession should be open only to white men.

Despite opposition, boxing was regulated rather than prohibited in the early 1900s, and World War I led to its resurgence during the 1920s’ “Golden Age of Sport.” Frisbee’s final chapter breezily takes the reader from the Progressive Era to the 1990s, showing how federal infrastructure improvements implemented from the New Deal to the post–World War II era led to the West’s growth and its return to boxing prominence. By the later twentieth century a confluence of factors—especially television, organized crime, the West’s flourishing leisure economy, and flashy promoters such as Don King—helped Las Vegas become the new capital of heavyweight prizefighting in the era of Mike Tyson and Evander Holyfield.

Frisbee’s study is based on an impressive range of sources, including archival collections located in California, Nevada, New Mexico, Texas, and Washington, DC, as well as a significant number of government documents, national periodicals (including Collier’s and the National Police Gazette), and daily newspapers. The monograph, though, is a bit unbalanced geographically. The case studies focus on California, Nevada, and Texas with occasional forays into New York and other eastern locales; the chapters tend to jump from location to location, which somewhat obscures the narrative. Except for a few brief cameos, moreover, Kansas and the Central Plains do not appear in the book. Such criticisms aside, Counterpunch is a finely researched, nuanced, and well-written study that deserves a wide readership among historians of sports, the West, and Progressive Era America.

Reviewed by Brian M. Ingrassia, assistant professor of history, West Texas A&M University, Canyon.
Ancestral Mounds: Vitality and Volatility of Native America

by Jay Miller

ix + 187 pages, notes, bibliography, index. 
Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015, cloth $55.00.

Jay Miller wears his status as a scholarly outsider proudly. He describes himself as "ruggedly independent" and a "rogue scholar" (p. xv) and mentions in the preface to Ancestral Mounds that several of his works did not make it past the peer-review process. He has eschewed the professional conference circuit, citing his devotion to his craft, his involvement with modern Native nations, and the fact that he probably would not receive a "fair hearing" among "entrenched professional turf defenders" (p. xv). This last may or may not be true, but the fact remains that Miller has given students of Native American history a lot to think about in this short book. The greatest strength of Ancestral Mounds lies in its author's willingness to take Native stories about mounds seriously and his insistence that other scholars do the same.

The book unfolds in an unorthodox manner, befitting Miller's approach. After a preface, the author moves on to a brief consideration of the language conventions he will use, the chronological scope of the work, some codes referring to kin relations, and a system of symbols that feature in the text (for "similar, related, comparable, variant, overlapping, parallel, linked, also known as" and that "transposed, changed to, becomes," p. xxvii). Then the book begins in earnest.

Five chapters examine the practice of mound building from multiple perspectives. The first, "Mounding Up," traces the effects of mounds on Native communities and posits some reasons for their placement and construction. The second, "Breaking Ground," contrasts tribal understandings of earthworks with those of European or Euroamerican observers and explores regional and historical variations on the theme. "Seeing Mounds" follows the story into the Southeast (SE), from the dispersal of Mississippian towns to the emergence of modern nations. "Modern Mounding" treats mounding practices among Muskogee Creeks in the East and in Oklahoma into the present. Finally, "Mounds in Full" provides a variety of angles from which to view mounds.

Certain aspects of Miller's work may give readers—especially those whom Miller would consider "entrenched . . . turf defenders," the specialist denizens of the traditional academic world— pause. Miller uses pokwa, a term of his own devising derived from Eastern Algonquian and Numic roots, to refer to the power that many Native peoples believe flows through the universe and uses Indian rather than "Indian," citing the former's derivation from the Indians rather than India. Ancestral Mounds ranges quite widely compared to other scholarly monographs, with forays into South America, North Africa, and even, briefly, Ireland. If one approaches this text expecting a comprehensive overview of mound building or a deep historical or archaeological investigation of this striking architecture, one will be disappointed. But to judge the book harshly along those lines misses the point.

Miller is correct when he asserts that history and archaeology as traditionally practiced in Europe and the Eurocentric American academy have artificially disconnected Native nations from their past and have failed to take Native stories about that past seriously, when they consider them at all. Ancestral Mounds offers an important, perhaps even essential corrective to this deep-seated bias. The most valuable sections of the book are those that explain not what mounds meant, as symbols of power and stability in a volatile and sometimes threatening world, but what they meant to the people who carried pieces of their homelands with them during the trauma of ethnic cleansing in the nineteenth century and what they mean to the people who still build them every year at revitalized square mounds in Oklahoma and elsewhere. As an extended meditation on the power of mound architecture and its continued significance to living, vital, communities, Ancestral Mounds is without parallel.

Reviewed by Matthew Jennings, associate professor of history, Middle Georgia State University, Macon.
The Small-Town Midwest: Resilience and Hope in the Twenty-First Century

by Julianne Couch

230 pages, notes, index.
Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2016, paperback $35.00.

The Small-Town Midwest: Resilience and Hope in the Twenty-First Century by Julianne Couch lets the reader see, up close, the ins and outs, ups and downs, of rural midwestern life. The author and narrator, Couch (a Kansas City native), is our unflappable and insatiable tour guide, and you, dear reader, are her tagalong buddy. Couch takes readers on a road trip in her 1996 Toyota through nine midwestern rural towns in Nebraska, Kansas, Missouri, Iowa, and Wyoming.

The backbone of this book is the people whom Couch profiles, a mixture of small-business owners, town leaders, parents of young children, and “always helpful folks who like to chat in grocery store lines” (p. 5). She asks all the right questions of the people she meets, such as “Why did you come here? Why would anyone want to live here? How do you make a living? What needs to happen to help this town?” Just as compelling is the variety of answers to these questions. People in these rural communities come from all over and stay for many different reasons; it does a person good to realize how much diversity is in the small pockets of the country.

Couch has a gift for connecting with people and introduces us to a cast of characters who make these towns come alive. One example is Mary, whom we meet in the chapter that profiles Sedan, Kansas. Mary grew up in Sedan, then moved to San Francisco for many years before coming back to help her parents with their ranch. We witness the many frustrations that came with this transition, such as the lack of free Wi-Fi—something that people in larger towns and cities consider a necessity—in Sedan’s coffee shops and cafés. We learn that when Mary moved back to her hometown, unmarried to her partner and without children or a desire to go to church, she had to overcome local prejudice by getting to know residents of Sedan one neighbor at a time.

The shrinkage of rural towns and what to do about it is a common thread of tension that connects all of the locales featured in The Small-Town Midwest. The reasons community members give for why residents leave are eerily similar from place to place: rural towns have few jobs and infrastructure, so after kids graduate from high school they have no reason to stick around. It is heartbreaking to learn about what the decline of population does to these towns and heartwarming to see the efforts their citizens make to combat it. One example is the idea, brought to life by a few volunteers, of a Yellow Brick Road in Sedan to attract tourists traveling on highway US 160. This is how tourism works in the rural Midwest.

One of the conclusions Couch comes to is that if rural towns are going to grow their populations, it will take the commitment of individuals to make it happen. In other words, there must be townspeople who have the determination, personality, and gumption to sustain living in the rural Midwest.

Through its engaging format and focus on individuals, The Small-Town Midwest is a useful book for anyone who cares about the fabric of rural life in the Midwest.

Reviewed by Louise Krug, assistant professor of English, Washburn University, Topeka, Kansas.
Uncle Sam's Policemen: The Pursuit of Fugitives across Borders

by Katherine Unterman

280 pages, illustrations, notes, index.
Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015, cloth $35.00.

If one was a boodler in the late 1880s, the only place to go was Canada. Really. Boodlers were white-collar criminals, embezzlers, who escaped across international borders. Katherine Unterman argues in Uncle Sam’s Policemen: The Pursuit of Fugitives across Borders that a revolution in mobility in the latter decades of the nineteenth century facilitated corporate and financial capitalism. The same revolution created new crimes and new ways to escape—boodling. Canada (whose foreign policy was controlled by the British) was boodler heaven because it did not have an extradition treaty for embezzling with the United States. This confluence of circumstances presents a lens through which one can see the paradox of borders, transnationalism, and U.S. policy and practice in the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries.

The boodling phenomenon showed that no problem was strictly one nation’s problem. U.S. boodlers prompted serious parliamentary and social debate in Canada, where boodlers settled, integrated, and invested in communities. Deporting or extraditing them, Canadian supporters of boodlers suggested, could cause social and economic damage to Canadian communities where boodlers lived. A treaty with Britain solved the extradition problem with Canada by the 1890s, but embezzlers went elsewhere. The boodling brouhaha points to other foreign policy paradoxes. Treaties solved problems where developed nations were involved. When dealing with developing nations, the United States did not always resort to legal solutions.

Unterman’s analysis of boodling is one piece in her masterful analysis of how U.S. legal policy and practice in the realm of international crime fostered U.S. imperialism. In an era when empire building was still controversial for some, international law enforcement was not. Unterman argues,

Obscuring the international ramifications of their missions, law enforcers generally defined and legitimized cross-border policing as a matter of national criminal justice. Reaching out beyond borders of the United States... was a project with domestic aims, not international or imperialistic ones. Thus, Americans often treated international policing as a unilateral project, without fully acknowledging the ways their actions affected other nations. Policy makers justified it as an extension of domestic criminal justice, jurists legitimized it in the authoritative language of law, and journalists praised it as stabilizing society. In the name of law and order within the boundaries of the nation, it was necessary to reach beyond the nation’s physical borders.

Policing beyond boundaries had the effect of creating and enforcing empire in ways so transparent and normal that the U.S. public did not challenge the legitimacy of an “empire of justice” (p. 8) wherein the extent of U.S. law reached far beyond the nation’s physical borders.

Crucial in the construction of this empire were the agents of empire building: Pinkertons—private security agents accountable to their employers, not the U.S. population. Pinkertons and others who pursued criminals beyond borders used legal means to “get their man” but just as frequently resorted to irregular means—kidnapping or unofficial surrender outside of existing treaty terms. Indeed, perhaps the most potent part of Unterman’s work is her analysis of the evolution of an 1886 Supreme Court decision (Ker v. Illinois) used then to justify international kidnappings in the name of empire and U.S. justice. The precedent set by Ker v. Illinois has been used to justify chasing Nazis, Cold War-era Soviet spies, drug traffickers, and terrorists. However, the way the state utilizes the precedent in the twenty-first century is dramatically different from before. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Pinkertons employed Ker v. Illinois to chase white-collar criminals for business (private) purposes. Extraordinary rendition now justified by Ker v. Illinois is twenty-first-century state policy.

The United States in the nineteenth century flexed its muscles rather than reached out helping hands and created an empire not of law but above the law. Unterman’s extraordinary analysis of the concrete consequences of the evolution of transnationalism, law, and empire building reminds readers that no nation exists in isolation, and that is exactly what empire builders wanted. Boodlers beware.

Reviewed by Kim Morse, professor of history, Washburn University, Topeka, Kansas.
Nicodemus: Post-Reconstruction Politics and Racial Justice in Western Kansas

by Charlotte Hinger

xv + 264 pages, illustrations, notes, bibliography.

Charlotte Hinger’s exploration of Nicodemus, Kansas, is a welcome contribution to the scholarship on post-Reconstruction racial politics in the United States. This work is the first full-length scholarly study of the complexities facing the all-black town’s settlers and its leaders.

Nicodemus was founded in 1877, before the famed Exoduster movement of African Americans from the South to the “unsettled frontiers” of Oklahoma and Kansas in 1879. It was settled by pioneers from Tennessee and Kentucky; the later wave of Exodusters, propelled out of the South by the 1878 election in which whites brutally limited African American rights to vote and hold property, came from Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, and Tennessee. Hinger argues that Nicodemus, as an all-black farming community, reflected the disparate approaches black leaders adopted to navigate the demands of the predominantly white nation.

She focuses on three leaders who emerged in Nicodemus: Abram Thompson Hall Jr., Edward Preston McCabe, and John W. Niles. Hall worked from a racial-uplift model and tended to cooperate with whites in the surrounding county and area; McCabe, also freeborn in the pre–Civil War period, viewed politics as the way to secure rights and equality. Later in life he adopted explicitly Black Nationalist views. Niles, the only former slave of the trio, was the boldest in his approach, dedicated to securing reparations for slavery and unafraid of showmanship and sharp tactics. Although contemporaneous portrayals of each man are clouded by racist depictions, which Hinger consistently critiques, they differed from one another in personality, self-presentation, goals, and political strategies.

The public, male-dominated worlds of the political and legal sphere are thoroughly detailed and argued here. Through the three case studies of Hall, McCabe, and Niles, Hinger provides a sophisticated analysis of the challenges, strategies, and outcomes facing African American leaders. Newspaper accounts, congressional reports, and other institutional sources provide ample evidence to support the discussion. This evidence is used by Hinger to construct an engaging and dramatic narrative. For example, the account of the founding of the town’s schools involves glimpses into the physical and psychological sadism of slavery and the extraordinary lengths enslaved men took to educate themselves. This vivid tale was drawn almost entirely from remarks made to the Voorhees Senate Commission in 1880 regarding the Exoduster migration.

There are the limits to this evidence base: women, for example, rarely emerge as historical actors. Several women, Hinger relates, made their way to Ellis, Kansas, a forty-mile distance, after the first brutal winter and hired themselves out. There is no further discussion of this incident, and one is left to wonder: Did the women ever do this again? Is there other evidence of these women’s “double life”? Family histories, oral histories, and memoir manuscripts provide some of the more interesting details not fully explored in the book. For example, informal historical sources suggest that the townspeople, due to cultural traditions and pressing need, pooled access to tools and machinery, seed, and provisions. This is not fully explored, in part because the focus of the book on leaders and the political and legal worlds they maneuvered within does not lend itself to discussions of family household life or communal strategies.

A strong contribution to the scholarship on African American life post-Reconstruction, Hinger’s book is also a good read, engaging and energetic and rife with memorable characters and incidents. It is invaluable as the first full-length scholarly examination of one of Kansas’s most famed communities, a carefully argued, detailed narrative for those interested in the history of the state as well as the nation.

Reviewed by Helen Sheumaker, lecturer of history and global and intercultural studies, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio.
The Collapse of Price’s Raid: The Beginning of the End of the Civil War in Missouri

by Mark Lause


Sterling Price (1809–1867) was born in Virginia and moved to Missouri in 1831. He was active in politics and held several offices, including those of governor and congressman. A loyal supporter of Missouri sovereignty, Price recruited and trained militia for Confederate service. He joined the Confederate army in 1862 and was involved in several encounters with Union forces in Mississippi and Arkansas. In August 1864 Confederate Major General Edmund Kirby Smith ordered Price and his men to retake Missouri for the Confederacy. Confederates hoped to capture key locations such as St. Louis and Jefferson City and thereby influence the outcome of the 1864 presidential election.

Lause presents detailed descriptions of the Confederates moving through small Missouri towns such as Pilot Knob, where they looted and brutalized the citizens—the people whom they were supposed to be protecting. Many of Price’s men were poorly trained and lacked discipline, and the troops were inadequately supplied. Another negative force that prevented Confederate victory was the fact that Price was constantly plagued by beliefs—often false—that Union forces outnumbered his. Battles and skirmishes across western Missouri eventually led to the defeat of Price’s forces at Westport on October 23 by Union forces led by General Alfred Pleasonton and James G. Blunt. After the Confederate defeat, Price retreated into Arkansas.

The author includes discussion of the social, military, and political aspects of the fighting in Missouri. This includes the question of enlisting African American and Native American men as soldiers; Lause suggests that the issue of race was a major component of every decision made during the conflict. Lause also incorporates the plight of individuals caught in the cross fire of war, whether due to a loss of farmland, general food shortage, or the experience of having their home turned into a hospital. At the end of the war came the remembering and the what-ifs. Soldiers and officers writing their memories often posed conflicting views of the same event. Price was no different.

This volume, a part of the Shades of Blue and Gray Series—books that appeal to Civil War history buffs and scholars—is a follow-up to Lause’s previous book on Price, Price’s Lost Campaign: The 1864 Invasion of Missouri. Readers of that book will surely want to peruse this volume to complete the story. The author relied on official government reports, personal accounts, and newspapers, and the resulting story is well documented, although there is no bibliography included. The text is filled with countless names, both Union and Confederate, which presents a challenge to general readers unfamiliar with Civil War history.

The most troubling aspect of the book is that there is not one map in the entire volume. This is a huge distraction and lessens the quality and readability of this university-press publication. Readers not familiar with the geography of Missouri will need an atlas to follow the troops as they traverse Missouri.

Students of Kansas history will find references to Governor Thomas Carney and his political battles with Union General Samuel Curtis over troop deployment. Anyone interested in the Civil War in the western states will find this volume informative.