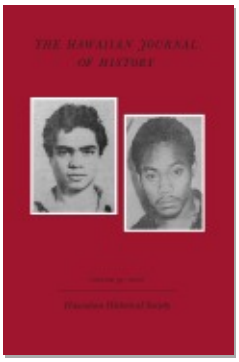
Aloha Rodeo: Three Hawaiian Cowboys, the World's Greatest Rodeo, and a Hidden History of the American West by David Wolman and Julian Smith (review)



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Book Reviews

Aloha Rodeo: Three Hawaiian Cowboys, the World's Greatest Rodeo, and a Hidden History of the American West. By David Wolman and Julian Smith. New York: William Morrow, 2019. 242 pp. Bibliography. Index. Illustrated $27.99 cloth

In *Aloha Rodeo: Three Hawaiian Cowboys, the World's Greatest Rodeo, and a Hidden History of the American West*, David Wolman and Julian Smith aim to tell the story of Hawai'i and the broader American West through the experience of Hawaiian cowboys Ikua Purdy, Jack Low, and Archie Ka'au'a at the 1908 Cheyenne Frontier Days rodeo in Wyoming. Wolman and Smith state that this moment changed the story of the American West. In their words, "[i]t overturns simplistic notions of cowboys and Indians, and explores questions of identity, imperialism, and race. Most of all, though, it is a tale about people: warriors, ranchers, showmen, cowgirls, missionaries, immigrants, royalty, and countless unnamed individuals whose lives, through the micro-accidents of history, intertwine in this little-known saga of the American West" (p. 3). This statement about the American West and American expansion to Hawai'i is almost all-encompassing, and it is this very broad scope that makes it difficult for Wolman and Smith to tell a focused story about the 1908 contest or upend traditional conceptions of the West.

The book is divided into three parts. The first examines the American development of Hawai'i and the West and the emergence of ranching in both areas. The focus of the second part is less clear but does provide a background on the Native Hawaiian ranching families—the forefathers of the three men who went to Cheyenne. This section also includes many asides with stories that range from the Western U.S. to Hawai'i and back again. The last part finally brings the focus to the title characters, their voyage to Cheyenne, the Frontier Days competition, and their life when they returned home.

Written in the vein of Erik Larson in *The Devil in the White City*, Wolman and Smith attempt to balance a historical, researched book with an engaging story. Their approach is most effective in the biographical moments that dive into the personal stories of Hawai‘i’s burgeoning cattle industry. John Palmer Parker’s transition from post-revolutionary war New England to bullock (cattle) hunter and ranch owner in Hawai‘i is fascinating to see, and Eben Low’s stature as one of the legendary early Hawaiian cowboys is made clear with stories of his experience working Hawai‘i’s famed wild cattle and the dramatic tale of how he lost his hand riding on the ranch. Yet these stories are too infrequent and focus little on the cowboys Ikua Purdy, Jack Low, and Archie Ka‘au‘a who should be at the center.

After the introduction, the book follows a winding path from the geological formation of the islands to the first arrival of cattle and the eventual development of ranching in Hawai‘i. Throughout, side stories from the American West—the development of wild west shows, the economic depression that led Cheyenne to establish the Frontier Days, and the role of women and African Americans in rodeo—can offer important historical context, but their placement and role is not always clear and often serves to distract from the primary story rather than support it. It is through these historical tangents that Wolman and Smith overreach. By trying to do too much, the book lacks focus and is unable to accomplish the many claims made in its introduction.

Despite these shortcomings, Wolman and Smith are gifted story tellers, and their background as award-winning journalists attests to this. Rather than tell a truly new story about Hawai‘i or the American West, Wolman and Smith instead embed their tale within the existing literature. There is a limited amount of scholarship on Hawaiian ranching and rodeo, and the authors refer to much of that material, most notably, Virginia Cowan-Smith and Bonnie Domrose Stone’s similarly named *Aloha Cowboy* (1988), Billy Bergin’s *Loyal to the Land* (2004), John Ryan Fischer’s *Cattle Colonialism* (2015). The bibliography also includes many newspaper and magazine articles, sources that are central to telling the story of these Hawaiians in Cheyenne and seeing the way their success was portrayed in both Hawai‘i and the American mainland. The authors also use quotes from various primary sources, like the travel journals from George Vancouver and Isabella Bird in 18th and 19th centuries, but these sources are not listed in the bibliographic material. Even though *Aloha Rodeo* is not intended to be a scholarly book, these source inconsistencies are problematic.

While *Aloha Rodeo* contains little that is new for a scholar of Hawaiian history, rodeo or ranching history, or the history of the American West, the book offers a popular audience a well-researched and engaging book on this surprising moment in American history. It was a time when the Hawaiian cow-

boy emerged from the colonial empire to beat Western cowboys at what the Americans believed to be their own game, and it is a story that more Americans should know.

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Unsustainable Empire: Alternative Histories of Hawai'i Statehood. By Dean Itsuji Saranillio. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018. xxvi + 282 p. Illustrated. Notes. Bibliography. Index. $26.95 paper; $99.95 cloth

Unsustainable Empire works to de-naturalize the popular story of Hawai'i statehood, in which a long-deserving United States territory overcame racism to become an equal part of the American nation. Instead, Dean Saranillio frames statehood as part of a longer history of U.S. settler colonialism in Hawai'i, a project that required constant effort to maintain its legitimacy in the face of recurrent opposition. He divides his focus between elites in Hawai'i who were engaged in "manufacturing consent" for statehood and a group of defiant "unexpected individuals," among them "historical revisionists, unruly women, subversives, communists, con men, gays, and criminals" (pp. 6, 8). Significantly, most of these figures were active in the era before the emergence of an organized Hawaiian sovereignty movement.

Saranillio traces the discursive roots of the statehood campaign to the 1890s. After the settlers' overthrow of Queen Lili'uokalani in 1893, the haole elite were determined to erase any trace of Hawai'i's recent status as an independent nation in order to secure American support for annexation to the U.S. Lorrin Thurston, a third-generation settler, newspaper publisher, and one of the men behind the recent coup, helped lead this public relations campaign at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. The Hawai'i exhibit—the "Cyclorama of Kilauea," a huge encircling painting of the Big Island volcano with a giant statue of the Hawaiian goddess Pele standing above its entrance—suited the overall tone of the fair, whose displays help chronicle the transition of the U.S. from a continental settler nation to an emerging global empire. Thurston hoped that the cyclorama would bolster the annexationist cause by portraying Hawai'i as "an exotic island frontier zone, a primitive space to be made anew with the joint help of white settlers in Hawai'i and a newly industrialized United States" (p. 31).