Book review:

Saving Yellowstone: Exploration and preservation in reconstruction America

Liz Finch

Southern Utah University

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Ryan Paul

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Author Megan Kate Nelson brings a serious historical pedigree to her latest book, *Saving Yellowstone: Exploration and preservation in reconstruction America.* After all, this is someone who already has two books under her belt – *Ruin nation: Destruction and the American Civil War* and *The three-cornered war: The union, the confederacy, and native peoples in the fight for the west* – as well as a regular column for *Civil War Monitor* that burrow deeply into a harrowing and seismic period of American history.

She covers the same well-trodden ground in *Saving Yellowstone* by contextualizing the explorations of the Montana Territory amid the destruction and reconstruction surrounding the Civil War. In doing so, Nelson offers a unique perspective on Yellowstone's role as the country's first national park. Rather than focusing through the lens of conservation, recreation, and arguments about the best use of natural riches, Nelson presents her story via that of three individuals, each driven by a blend of altruism and selfish motivation. As they – and countless other characters woven into the story – struggle to discover and/or recover personal and national fortune and success, they lay out a pathway to the creation of Yellowstone as we know it today.

Three threads of *Saving Yellowstone*'s storytelling

While the prologue begins with the tale of the hapless Truman Everts, who became lost in the wilderness for over a month during Nathaniel Langford's 1870 Yellowstone expedition, neither man is a key figure in the book. In fact, one could argue that the inclusion of Everts' tale was only because it personified the perils of the wilds – perils that Frederick V. Hayden's expedition

to the same area did not suffer the following year. That, or because it engendered the kind of public excitement and interest that was partially responsible for making Hayden's 1871 trip possible.

Hayden is quite a human hero in this tale, given as he is to various flaws. He is competitive, self-absorbed, and fairly intolerant of others. He is also single-minded in his pursuit of success following the failure of a previous journey to the Yellowstone during pre-Civil War military expeditions. He jealously guards his right to survey and lay claim of discovery to the wonders of Yellowstone.

Toward the end of the book, he still expresses little empathy for his fellow explorers. Those Nelson hints at his sense of loss at topographer Anton Schonborn's suicide, his immediate action is to make haste to collect Schonborn's maps so he can continue the collection and synthesis of data. Likewise, he shows annoyance when burdened by the work he has to undertake to account for the loss of specimens and maps during the Great Chicago Fire – a conflagration that devastated one of the largest cities in the country at the time.

Nevertheless, Hayden may be the hero Yellowstone needed. A child of poverty and divorce who "learned early on that he had to hustle to make his way in the world" (Nelson, p. 3), his hustle serves him well in the race for resources against figures such as John Wesley Powell and the dashing mountaineer Clarence King. Through his relentless efforts – and by virtue of a having friends in high places – Hayden secured both an unheard-of sum of $40,000 to fund his journey and an array of the most talented men to accompany him.

The second of the leading triad of figures in the book is financier Jay Cooke, a fiercely competitive banker and millionaire in the thick of funding the expansion of the Pacific Northwest

Railroad. Not surprisingly, he also strongly supported Hayden's work. The results of the Yellowstone survey held endless possibilities to inspire other investors to continue the railroad all the way to the coast, where Cooke had his eye on further riches via trade to China.

The third key figure is Lakota chief Sitting Bull, though there are definite shortcomings to this component of Nelson's storytelling. Though the author frequently mentions the active work to sanitize the United States and wipe clean all traces of the Indigenous peoples standing in the way of Manifest Destiny, Sitting Bull does not get to speak for his people until Chapter 7. His presence is also fairly brief (though, to be fair, Cooke likewise occupies a fairly slight percentage of the pages). Nelson uses the sections devoted to Sitting Bull to make mention as well of the political machinations moving to steal Indigenous land at the time. Most notably, that includes the Indian Removal Act of the 1830s and subsequent creation of the Indian Peace Commission in 1867-1868, which existed to negotiate land grabs, cease recognition of Indigenous sovereignty, and force tribes onto reservation land.

Granted, the tale of what the tribes suffered during this period of history make up volumes of nonfiction and literature, but it feels like short shrift here – or a cursory nod, at best, to an important undercurrent. What is also missing, since the subject here *is* Yellowstone's value is any recognition of the importance of the land to the Indigenous peoples who had been visiting for centuries. As the Greater Yellowstone Coalition notes,

> Since long before the arrival of Europeans and the beginning of the Western conservation movement, the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem has been stewarded by Indigenous people who view its lands, waters, and wildlife as sacred…Today, close to 50 tribes, including the Apsáalooke/Crow, Cheyenne, Blackfeet, Shoshone, Bannock, Arapaho, and other

> Indigenous peoples are keepers of this knowledge and retain deep connections to this remarkable place. (Greater Yellowstone Coalition, n.d.)

Alas, one would not know it from Nelson's text.

One component in a frenzied tapestry

In keeping with the aim to show the exploration of Yellowstone as but one monumental undertaking happening during the late 1870s, Nelson makes forays into other crucial events as well. Included is the struggle to provide protections for Black southerners from the Civil War's fallout. Despite the confederacy's loss, Black residents of the southern states faced loss of their hard-won rights via implementation of the Black Codes, which doled out fines, punishment, or even death at the hands of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). Nelson covers the eventual unprecedented suspension of the writ of habeas corpus by President Ulysses S. Grant to bring the hammer of law down on KKK members, and she touches on his early efforts to preserve the vision of the abolitionists. In the end, however, this led only to capture of the foot soldiers and not the prominent leaders of the movement. Eventually, Grant pulled back on his efforts, leaving an opening for many more generations to suffer racial inequity.

Even as Grant attempted to uphold Lincoln's vision and protect Americans regardless of color, however, he struggled with Congress for adequate resources to support all the work underway in the nation. In addition to Western exploration, there was clamor for support of settlement efforts via the Homestead Act, the hard costs of Reconstruction after wartime destruction of property, and completion of several railways across the continent (to name a few). There was also a push for patronage of literary and artistic efforts, which were able to capture the glittering progress of all these efforts and more. Eventually, those works – particularly Thomas Moran's massive

"Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone" – were able to capture the attention of a public pulled in many directions as well and helped to cement the emerging new identify of America.

Again, however, there is a perspective blatantly absent here: that of women. Photographer William Henry Jackson's wife surely sacrificed much when her husband left to accompany Hayden's party for months, leaving her to manage their business. And there is but the briefest mention of Lucy McMillan, a former slave whose attendance at political gatherings caused her to become a target of the KKK, who burned her home to the ground in retaliation. She is only fleetingly acknowledged even though her brave Congressional testimony was critical to wrangling support for Grant's protective inclinations.

A complex story woven together

Where Nelson excels, however, is in planting the reader in the middle of a frenetic time in history and square in the saddles of Hayden's expedition. By jumping back and forth between varying threads, she risks the loss of her narrative. But in the end, it mimics the disparate needs of the country at the time and keeps up a steady forward momentum. (One which might have been derailed with more sections like Chapter 6, which goes into eventually exhausting detail about the geology of the region.)

It is this synthesis of a tremendous amount of historic detail that is Nelson's true achievement with *Saving Yellowstone*. While certainly not an exhaustive text, the book serves to tie together many threads that contributed to Yellowstone's eventual christening as our first national park six months after the conclusion of Hayden's trip. It is a refreshing take on that most notable achievement.

References

Greater Yellowstone Coalition. (n.d.). Our Work section. Retrieved 2/5/2023 from https://greateryellowstone.org/tribal

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