

# RUINS, REVOLUTION, AND MANIFEST DESTINY

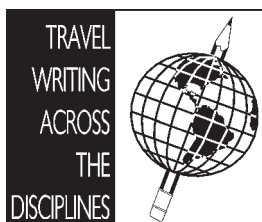
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John Lloyd Stephens  
Creates the Maya



WILLIAM E. LENZ

**RUINS, REVOLUTION,  
AND MANIFEST DESTINY**



THEORY AND PEDAGOGY

Kristi E. Siegel  
*General Editor*

Vol. 15



PETER LANG

New York · Washington, D.C./Baltimore · Bern  
Frankfurt am Main · Berlin · Brussels · Vienna · Oxford

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For my wife,  
my fellow traveler forever

“He is a real amateur in the art of traveling; going hundreds of miles to hear the murmuring waves of the Pacific Ocean, as they undulate on the western coast of our continent, or climbing half a day alone, or in the company of some ignorant Indian, to see the interior of a volcano; and yet, every where, he is a true American.”

—REVIEW OF STEPHENS' *INCIDENTS OF TRAVEL IN CENTRAL AMERICA*,  
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January 21, 2013  
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

# Introduction

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For I very well remembered staring at a man myself, who was pointed out to me by my aunt one Sunday in Church, as the person who had been in Stony Arabia, and passed through strange adventures there, all of which with my own eyes I had read in the book which he wrote, an arid-looking book in a pale yellow cover.

“See what big eyes he has,” whispered my aunt, “they got so big, because when he was almost dead with famishing in the desert, he all at once caught sight of a date tree, with the ripe fruit hanging on it.”

Upon this, I stared at him till I thought his eyes were really of an uncommon size, and stuck out from his head like those of a lobster. I am sure my own eyes must have magnified as I stared. When church was out, I wanted my aunt to take me along and follow the traveler home. But she said the constables would take us up, if we did; and so I never saw this wonderful Arabian traveler again. But he long haunted me; and several times I dreamt of him, and thought his great eyes were grown still larger and rounder; and once I had a vision of the date tree.

—HERMAN MELVILLE, *REDBURN* (1849)

On December 21, 2012, the Maya Long Count concludes a great cycle of time—the end of the 13th *baktún*, 5,125 years and 132 days—begun on August 13, 3114 B.C.E. The Maya recorded this date of origin, 4 *A’hau* 8 *Kumk’u*, the first ever written in the New World, on a stela at Toniná, in Chiapas; it then appears

on another at Quiriguá, and on yet another at Palenque. That many Americans today are aware of this date reveals a fascination with Mayan culture and its more exotic features: prophetic hieroglyphic books, lost stone cities in tropical jungles, bloodletting rituals and human sacrifice, and the apocalyptic warning of the end of time. Though we know now that one great cycle of 13 *baktún* gyres smoothly into another, our cultural interest in the Maya can be precisely traced to another specific date, the year 1841, the year Harper & Brothers published John Lloyd Stephens' *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan* in New York, bringing the temples, idols, and mysterious inscriptions of these *antiguos* into the living rooms of well-to-do nineteenth-century American readers. In 1843 Harper & Brothers published *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan*, Stephens' companion narrative of his follow-up journey of exploration. As Mary Ellen Miller writes in *Maya Art and Architecture*, "With the voyages of John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood to the tropical rainforests of Honduras, Guatemala, what is now called Belize, and the southern states of Mexico, the vast range of ancient Maya art and architecture suddenly came to the attention of the modern world" (12). The "modern world" at first meant the world of the nineteenth century, but the modern world we currently inhabit still pays attention to the Maya. Why do twenty-first-century Americans care about a calendar prediction of the end of time from a civilization whose ruined stone cities lie beneath the jungles of Central America? What draws our attention to the altars and pyramids of the Maya? And what happened to their discoverer and popularizer, John Lloyd Stephens?

The *New York Observer and Chronicle* wrote at his death in 1852 that Stephens' books on Central America "won a great deal of fame as well of money" (338), highlighting two of the markers recognized in nineteenth-century American society for personal success. The obituary in the *German Reformed Messenger* duplicates almost verbatim this language (3778), while *The New York Times* notes "the death of John L. Stephens, the accomplished traveler and author" ("News of the Morning"). In January 1853, *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* published a lengthy reflective essay on "The Late John L. Stephens" that summarizes his impact on his audience: "In truth, he eschewed trickery of all kinds, and was as incapable of employing it as he wrote, as he was of carrying it into the business transactions of life." For many readers, as for this *Putnam's* writer, the connection between Stephens the man and Stephens the writer is crucial to understanding. They are one and the same, and that is a very good thing. "And it is precisely this naturalness of manner, added to the truthfulness of his character, which have made his writings so universally popular." Unlike some of his more literary colleagues, Stephens is never artificial in style nor guilty of shallow contrivance; his prose, like his character, is clear, clean, and transparent. Naturalness and truthfulness result in popularity. "With a quick and keen observation, an appreciative and good-natured sense of the ludicrous, and

a remarkable faculty of retaining vividly to the last the freshness of first impressions, he sat down and told his story with the pen very much as he would have told it to his intimates with the tongue, had he encountered them just after emerging from one of his many adventures” (66–67). Stephens creates an intimate connection with his reader that makes each feel he (or she) is part of his personal circle of friends.

These were the qualities which he carried into the work of an explorer among our buried cities; and the results of the employment of these qualities, told in his own unpretending manner, often relieved by an outbreak of his quick sense of the ludicrous, have made, and will long continue to make, his books of American travels a source at once of information and amusement, that will last until a fresher interest is created by fresh explorations and newer discoveries; but let who will succeed him in the field, not one will be more truthful than John L. Stephens. (67)

It was not simply his “great eyes,” as Melville noted in *Redburn*, which impressed. Speaking for a generation of Americans, Melville concluded, “he haunted me.”

This study examines representations of ruins, revolution, and Manifest Destiny in the travel narratives of John Lloyd Stephens, nineteenth-century American author of *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan* (1841) and *Incidents of Travel in the Yucatan* (1843). Stephens had already won the title of “the American Traveller” for his earlier works *Incidents of Travel in Egypt and Arabia Petraea* (1837) and *Incidents of Travel in Greece, Turkey, Russia, and Poland* (1838). In 1841 and 1843 Stephens creates and popularizes the Maya for an appreciative American audience. He constructs personal and public identity as he leads readers through a Central American landscape characterized by civil war, lost cities, and opportunities for self-promotion. As American literary and cultural scholars reconsider the foundations of US relations with other nations, this study locates in Stephens’ narratives the literary and cultural roots of American perceptions of Central America and contributes directly to current redefinitions of American nationalism, Manifest Destiny, and hemispheric imperialism.

Popular travel narratives embody the shared cultural attitudes of nineteenth-century American society. Part of their appeal was the exotic landscape they constructed, managed for American readers by a normative narrative persona. Edgar Allan Poe, writing in *Graham’s Magazine*, echoes a legion of Stephens’ reviewers from the *North American Review* to *Arcturus*: “No one can deny his personal merits as a traveller, his enthusiasm, boldness, acuteness, courage in danger, and perseverance under difficulty. His manner of narration is also exceedingly pleasing—frank, unembarrassed, and direct, without pretension or attempt at effect” (179). Review after review claims that Stephens articulates widely held national values. My close readings of Stephens profit from New Historicist, postcolonial,



formalist, and feminist theory, and I will always find myself indebted to Jane Tompkins' *Sensational Designs* as I ask what "cultural work" Stephens' texts performed for nineteenth-century American readers? Why were his travel narratives so popular? How did Stephens' representations of Central American ruins reflect national anxieties? How did his narratives function in nineteenth-century American culture?

Stephens' success makes his Central American travel narratives a perfect subject for study. Current scholarship on Stephens is limited yet developing.<sup>1</sup> Victor Wolfgang von Hagen pioneered the biographical recording of Stephens' and Catherwood's lives, most notably and accessibly in *Maya Explorer: John Lloyd Stephens and the Lost Cities of the Yucatan* (1947), in *F. Catherwood: Architect-Explorer of Two Worlds* (1968), and in *Search for the Maya: The Story of Stephens & Catherwood* (1973). In 1993 Karl Ackerman edited a glossy, condensed version of *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan*, containing a clear, concise introduction and many historic photographs from Smithsonian collections. In an effort to reach a wide audience, however, Ackerman "tightened the prose, eliminated repetition, and excised the long historical digressions and anecdotes that Stephens addressed to the readers of his day" (8). Larzer Ziff, in *Return Passages: Great American Travel Writing, 1780–1910* (2000), devoted an entire chapter to Stephens' literary career, concluding his section on Stephens' Central American narratives with the assertion that he devalued the indigenous Indians: ". . . he came to think of them as alien to the promise of the land they occupied rather than in natural coherence with it and in so thinking was perilously close to recapitulating the kind of reasoning that at home justified the dispossession of North American Indian tribes with the claim that since they were not fulfilling the land's economic potential it was only right that they give way to those who would" (103). R. Tripp Evans, in his 2004 study *Romancing the Maya: Mexican Antiquity in the American Imagination 1820–1915*, after a thorough and thoughtful review of early exploration in Central America, determines that "the power of Stephens and Catherwood's work lay in the way it addressed the contradictory longings of urban, white America of the 1840s—a demographic that romanticized the daring of the pioneer while yearning for the security of historical roots. To this readership, Stephens represented both Daniel Boone and cultural redeemer; as the *Knickerbocker Magazine* critic boasted, 'what discoveries of the present century can compare with those laid bare by Stephens?'" (70). And Daniel Cooper Alarcón in "The Ruins of Manifest Destiny: John L. Stephens's *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan*" (2005), charts the conflicting impulses toward economic exploitation and sentimental representation that drive Stephens' narrative (336). Linking both to the larger concept of Manifest Destiny, he concludes that "In Stephens' account . . . survival is attributed to

patriotic, not religious, devotion. . . . [I]t is a powerful government, rather than a powerful deity, that protects and watches over the American traveler" (340–341).

My study of Stephens' narratives challenges modern readers to examine critically the cultural stereotypes that the nineteenth century embraced, and that often formed the basis for national policy. By reading Stephens closely, by locating him with a larger cultural dialogue about such crucial issues as national identity, race relations, Manifest Destiny, and historical representation, we can better understand past and present national attitudes toward peoples and nations south of the US territorial border. Anticipating many of the issues that would give rise to the war with Mexico and then to the US Civil War, Stephens sees the racial landscape of Central America in stark categories: he is culturally superior to decadent Spaniards, lazy "Mestitzoes," childlike mulattos, and fanatical Indians. Stephens presents the ancient ruins of Central America to his readers as mystical creations of an unknown people; thus he disconnects Copan from not only the living Indians around him but also from the indigenous people of North America displaced by the progressive engine of Manifest Destiny. By looking at how Stephens' books functioned within American society, we can also learn much about reading practices and their influence upon politics and diplomacy. And by studying Stephens' individual recorded and represented reactions to other cultures, we can better understand the impulses driving nineteenth-century Americans' cultural imperialism. Writing travel narratives about Central America, and reading narratives written by an American traveling in Central America, are acts of cultural imperialism supported by Manifest Destiny that result in both writer and reader implicitly and imaginatively possessing Central America, absorbing its Mayan history and contemporary diversity into an American national mythology. Central America becomes, through Stephens' acts of exploring and inscribing, an imaginative extension of the United States, and the Maya, the original New World Americans. Stephens, through the act of writing, constructs for himself and his readers Central America and its various past histories as a newly discovered, yet ancient slate upon which Americans can write a new chapter in their ever-expanding national mythology. *Ruins, Revolution, and Manifest Destiny* encourages twenty-first-century readers to untangle these often conflicting and competing acts of exploration, inscription, and imagination.

\* \* \*

In the Prologue, I reflect upon my own experiences as a scholar, teacher, and "American Traveller." I suggest that Stephens embodies the spirit of nineteenth-century optimism prevalent in the antebellum era, demonstrating in his journeying out, in his search for ruined cities, his search for a government in Central America, his search for meaning amid the chaos of contemporary life, a hope for the future

undamaged by bank failures in boom and bust economies, a faith in a patriotic nationalism despite growing sectionalism and discontent, and a clarity of purpose that defined his government mission and his individual moral character throughout his global adventures. And as I entered the Mayan ruins of Copan, as I re-read Stephens' *Incidents*, as I traveled with students to Central America for study, I rediscovered his faith, his hope, his excitement in the new country he explored, the new connections he perceived, the new sense of American origins he understood, and his hope for an American rebirth.

In Chapter I, I read closely Stephens' *Incidents of Travel in Central America*, arguing that he appeals to his readers as a representative figure of national identity. The book's two main themes, the search for a government of the Republic of Central America and the search for lost Mayan cities, initially suggest public and private motives, and seem discrete. But as he and Catherwood encounter the warring armies of Generals Morazán and Carrera, the multi-racial populations of Belize, Honduras, and Guatemala, the smoking women of Gualan, and the magnificent ruins of the Maya, their motives blur and their binaries splinter. At one moment Stephens is caught up in an operation to buy the ruins of Copan, while in the next he invites the officers of the rebel army to join him for breakfast.

In Chapter II, I examine nineteenth-century reviews of *Incidents* to gain an understanding of how readers read this work in its cultural context, and to establish a nineteenth-century range of responses to this very popular narrative. Reviews construct a set of cultural values that are clearly articulated and commonly shared by their readers.

In Chapter III, I analyze closely Stephens' *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan*, focusing on the rationale in Stephens' national narrative for appropriating Mayan sites as "American cities." He visits 44 sites throughout the Yucatan, from Uxmal to Chichen Itza, undisturbed on this second journey by civil war; Stephens finds, in fact, that he is a celebrity in some parts, as his first Central American book had been translated into Spanish. Concentrating on the ruins, he catalogs site after site, collecting artifacts that he will transport to Catherwood's Rotunda in New York. I use the red handprints that Stephens discovers on many of the Mayan structures as a device for engaging in speculation about Stephens' thoughts, and the skulls and bones he unearths as keys to his moral position.

In Chapter IV, I again turn to contemporary reviews, this time of *Yucatan*, to read nineteenth-century readers' comments about Stephens' adventures and reflections. His readers appreciate his personal power and style and understand his agenda of Mayan acquisition and American mythologizing.

In Chapter V, I read the illustrations of Frederick Catherwood as a parallel visual text to Stephens' narrative literary text in *Incidents of Travel in Central America*. Though nineteenth-century and modern readers all comment on the

beauty and precision of Catherwood's illustrations, no scholar has paid special attention to them as a complementary text. I read the visual text of *Incidents* as a material object, a set of illustrations, and a separate yet supporting "text."

In Chapter VI, I read Catherwood's own sole published book, *Views of Ancient Monuments* (1844), as a coda to Stephens' *Incidents*. Catherwood writes 3 inter-related "texts" in this one impressive folio volume: the Introduction, the individual descriptions of each plate, and the 25 plate illustrations themselves. I see this book as a summary of Stephens' and Catherwood's Mayan explorations.

In the Epilogue, I bring the lives of Stephens and Catherwood to their tragic conclusions, away from the silent power of the ancient Maya, chasing instead the modern rewards of Manifest Destiny and American Boosterism that came to dominate the imaginations of so many mid-century Americans. And I bring as well my own research journey full circle.

