

TAKING THE FIELD

SOLDIERS, NATURE,
AND EMPIRE ON
AMERICAN FRONTIERS

AMY KOHOUT



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Many Wests

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TAKING THE FIELD

Introduction

Preparation

A SCALPEL IS NOT A TYPICAL HISTORIAN'S TOOL. WE MIGHT hope to wield our pens like scalpels, but our tools are different. Our instruments—however sharp—are for writing, not slicing, and especially not for cutting into once-alive flesh.

Nevertheless, several years ago I found myself wearing a white coat and holding a blade. I was in a lab at the National Museum of Natural History in Washington DC with a dead Brewer's blackbird on the table in front of me. It had been collected—killed—the previous summer in North Dakota on a Smithsonian-sponsored expedition. It was put on ice for transport, and then placed in a freezer to await preparation. Blackbirds, I was told, are good birds to learn on. They are big enough to allow you to see what you are doing and small enough that a beginner might be able to complete a preparation, from start to finish, in a single day.

Christina Gebhard, my teacher and one of the museum's bird specialists, sat across from me with her own bird. We arranged our tools: the scalpel, along with a ruler, forceps, cotton, a dowel, needle and thread. She would start and I would follow, mimicking her movements. We were making scientific study skins, a process that involves removing the animal's insides, filling the skull and body cavity with stuffing, and suturing the belly shut.

Study skins are not taxidermy. They aren't mounted or posed in lifelike stances, perched on branches, grasping unlucky prey in their talons. They are soft. Their internal organs and musculature, and most of their skeletons, have been removed from

their bodies and replaced with cotton. Most of these specimens are stored on their backs in shallow drawers, wings relaxed and tucked in, claws crossed. Once prepared and labeled, our birds would join others of their species in the cabinets of the Smithsonian to await future study.

We made the first incision—she on her bird, I on mine—and looked inside. Christina helped me identify and measure the tiny parts and talked me through the process of removing them. Blood and guts don't bother me; they never have. But when it was time to pick up the forceps and break my blackbird's bones below the knees, I was suddenly queasy. The sensation surprised me. Something about my size and strength, the ease with which the bones snapped, the fragility of that once-live bird—I felt it.¹

I HAD COME TO THE MUSEUM TO SEE THE PAPERS OF Lt. Col. Edgar Alexander Mearns, a soldier who had served in both the U.S. West and the Philippines in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as part of my research into the intersection of American ideas about nature and empire. Mearns worked as a surgeon in the U.S. Army from 1883 to 1909. He completed assignments in the Southwest borderlands during the Apache wars and multiple tours of duty in the Philippines. But because Mearns was also an ornithologist, most of his materials were housed at the museum rather than at the Smithsonian Institution Archives, where I had expected to find his papers. So I made an appointment at the Division of Birds.

The Division of Birds is unlike any other archive I have ever visited. Instead of a reading room separated from the manuscripts and materials, lab tables are tucked between rows of cabinets containing the division's central resource: the birds themselves. On my first visit I sat in a small reference library off the main collection and began to look through boxes of Mearns's field notes and correspondence. Reading Mearns's papers meant reading about birds observed, birds collected, birds prepared, as well as birds missed and birds spoiled. It didn't take long for me to ask if I might be able to see one of the more than nine thou-

sand specimens Mearns had contributed to the Smithsonian's collection. I wasn't sure what to ask for. Something important to ornithology? Something colorful? Something pretty? I also wasn't sure how to begin looking for it.

In archives of manuscripts and papers, I refer to finding aids or card catalogs to identify what I'd like to see, and then an archivist locates those items in the collection and brings them to a centralized reading room. In the Division of Birds, however, locating a specific bird begins with a database, searchable by fields including species, date, collector, expedition, and place of collection. You can also search by sex, stage of development, or kind of preparation, since a study skin is one of several ways to prepare and preserve a bird. The database reveals what is in the collection but not where to find it—at least, not exactly.

To locate a bird in the collection, you need to know something about taxonomy. Birds aren't organized by collector or by chronology but rather by species classification, which means that Mearns's birds are spread throughout the rows of drawer-filled cabinets, each in the appropriate spot for its species and perhaps sorted into more specific locations according to sex, maturity, and month of collection. Thus birds from vastly different times and climes might be found next to each other, and birds from the same time and clime are rarely nearby unless they are taxonomically quite similar. This, of course, makes perfect sense for scientific study. Like near like enables the study of categories such as species and subspecies, as well as questions related to migration and range.² But for a historian interested in the work of a particular collector—a historian who, at the time, was not yet even a novice birder—this organizational structure presented some challenges.

Christina and I decided to look for a few of the birds Mearns collected while serving in the Philippines. We settled on *Bolbopsittacus lunulatus*, the guaiabero, a small green bird in the parrot family, and *Ardea purpurea*, the purple heron. When Christina was looking at our database search results, she was paying attention to the taxonomic order and family for these birds, which corresponded to particular aisles and cabinets



1. Drawer of *Bolbopsittacus lunulatus*. National Museum of Natural History, 2011. Author photo.

within the Division of Birds. We walked through the collection to the parrots. After Christina pulled out a full drawer of guaiaberos (fig. 1), we went to look for the heron. We located the *Ardea* (the genus for herons) drawers and began reading each tag to find a bird labeled with Mearns's name. Familiar with his field books, I'd already begun to recognize his handwriting. When we found the correct heron, Christina gently lifted it from the drawer and carried it to a table for closer examination (fig. 2).

The conversation we had about that first bird changed the direction of this book. Up until that point I'd been thinking of the birds as interesting but still peripheral to my questions about soldiers' contributions to U.S. notions of nature and empire. Then Christina and I began to discuss what we could see, what we could know, and what we could wonder from examining the bird on the table between us. She explained the techniques Mearns likely used and the continuities between his approach and the current preparation practices of the museum.³ She pointed out how to tell that Mearns had done a good job: the carefully arranged feather tracks, the neat incision, the heron's full but not overstuffed body cavity.



2. *Ardea purpurea* specimen collected by Mearns. USNM 201664.
National Museum of Natural History, 2011. Author photo.

All at once Mearns's birds made material the questions that I had been considering only in the realm of ideas. They added dimension to Mearns's lifetime of military service. Suddenly I could see how his medical training had made him expertly suited for his work as both an army surgeon and an ornithologist. Our conversation turned to the challenges of preparation outside a museum lab. What did it mean to do this work in the field, especially when that field might also be a battlefield? What could the birds reveal about the intersection of military and scientific work for Mearns, as well as for others who documented and collected nature in spaces they understood to be American frontiers?

The birds offered encouragement, too, to keep following soldiers and their ideas about the natural world across the geographic boundaries that often guide historical study.⁴ Mearns was a man in constant motion, much like the birds he devoted himself to observing and collecting. Mearns's movements, however, were mostly dictated by the U.S. Army. This might be one

of the reasons he can be hard to place and also hard to find in existing historical narratives. He doesn't quite fit into any single story; instead, his life and work cross—and sometimes connect—stories that are usually studied separately.

In this way Mearns is like many other soldiers who served in the frontier army. Their work took them to and through Indigenous homelands in service of an imperial vision. It also took them across the Pacific to the Philippines, where they fought first Spanish and then Filipino forces in a war that solidified U.S. empire in the Pacific before they returned home again. These men moved through landscapes—and histories—often considered in isolation. But soldiers' lives tie them together. Many soldiers moved back and forth across the boundaries that often divide our contemporary fields of historical inquiry, and their complex stories encourage scholars to pursue the connections between fields such as imperial history, environmental history, cultural history, military history, and the history of science.

In this book I follow Mearns and other U.S. soldiers across a range of material and cultural terrain—over land on the Great Plains and in the Southwest, across the Pacific Ocean to the Philippines, and even back to St. Louis, Missouri, where a particular set of ideas about nature and empire were displayed at the 1904 World's Fair. I also follow what soldiers sent across the landscapes of their service: details and descriptions of new-to-them people and places; articulations of love, excitement, fear, and sometimes deep ambivalence; and, in the case of Mearns, birds.

Following soldiers, it turns out, expands our understanding of how American ideas about nature and empire have been entangled. In fact, the bodies of Mearns's birds—and the experience of preparing my own bird body—showed me something that I now see unfolding almost everywhere in the period I study: that preservation, long thought of in relation to parks and protected places, as a set of processes that keep species and systems thriving, can also involve creatures long dead, unnaturally resting in drawers far from where they roamed in life. For many Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth

eth centuries, preservation was a much more capacious—and more violent—concept than our popular narratives capture.

When Americans think about preservation in the context of the nation's history, we tend to center on land—on national parks, on the West, on the grand vistas both created and reinforced by generations of landscape painters, photographers, and tourists. This is especially true for the late nineteenth century, when the first national parks were created, the first environmental advocacy groups were established, and conversations about resource scarcity and the so-called end of the frontier rose to national prominence.⁵

But these decades also mark the expansion and acceleration of U.S. empire. Precisely at the time in U.S. history when industrialization and urbanization led to many Americans becoming increasingly alienated from the natural world, soldiers were uniquely positioned to understand and construct nature's ongoing significance for the work they were doing and for the nation as a whole. During the same period often framed as foundational for contemporary environmentalism, U.S. soldiers offered the nation an expansive picture of the nature of the North American West. Their private letters and official reports reveal ideas about nature laden with assumptions about U.S. imperial power over Indigenous peoples and their land. Preservation—of Indigenous cultures thought by many Americans to be vanishing (without attention paid to the ways federal Indian policy actively displaced Native nations and disrupted their cultural practices), of new plant and animal species encountered in the West, and of land for American uses, whether under settler ownership or federal management—was inseparable from conquest. Only recently have we seen more mainstream attention given to Indigenous history and U.S. settler colonialism. That the violent dispossession of Native nations from their homelands preceded the creation of parks in these same landscapes is often left out of our national narratives.⁶ Soldiers did this work at the behest of the U.S. government. They then were tasked with managing both the land they had taken and the people they had displaced.

As U.S. military actions shifted from the West to the Pacific, the role of empire in soldiers' ideas about nature became even more pronounced: the unfamiliar tropical context heightened links between new environments and imperial work, and words used to describe American environments and opportunities to enjoy them were redeployed in the Pacific. As they had done in the U.S. West, soldiers described the possibilities they saw in Philippine landscapes even as they also devoted paragraph upon paragraph to the difficulties of tropical military service. They bound together the strenuous work of climbing Philippine mountains with the violent work of warfare against a hard-to-find enemy under the heading "hiking."⁷ They marveled at the beauty of this unfamiliar place even as they carried out acts of destruction. And throughout, Mearns continued his collecting, in contexts where the boundaries of scientific inquiry and military duty became increasingly blurred, all of it contained within the growing work of U.S. empire.

CALLS TO CONNECT U.S. COLONIALISM IN NORTH AMERICA and across the Pacific in the Philippines are not new. In a landmark 1980 article Walter L. Williams linked federal Indian policy in the U.S. West to the nation's imperial designs in the Philippines by emphasizing the way politicians in 1898 drew on their almost universal belief in the righteousness of U.S. actions toward Indigenous nations in the previous century. "To admit doubt," he wrote, "would have undercut the whole history of the nation."⁸ Indeed, reframing what many white nineteenth-century Americans would have named westward expansion as an imperial and settler-colonial project requires sustained attention to the violence at the heart of U.S. history—violence that has often been imperial in nature. Ned Blackhawk has argued that "despite an outpouring of work over the past decades, those investigating American Indian history and U.S. history more generally have failed to reckon with the violence upon which the continent was built."⁹ Studying U.S. soldiers—and their words, their ideas—is one way to reckon with their violent work. It is also an approach that illuminates the shape and reach of U.S. empire.

The observations Williams made in 1980 about the continuities of U.S. colonialism on multiple frontiers are in dialogue with recent charges to more critically examine U.S. history—and U.S. imperialism—everywhere it leads. While Williams focused on how imperialist politicians linked conquest in the U.S. West and the Philippines, studies of U.S. imperialism have moved beyond statesmen to consider the experiences of those who lived within, labored in the service of, or actively resisted U.S. empire. Following the lead of several scholars interested in thinking about the imperial history of the United States, I suggest that returning to U.S. soldiers can show us more about how U.S. empire operated on both sides of the Pacific.¹⁰ Paul Kramer has argued for the imperial as an analytical category—an approach that can help historians think “about power, connection, and comparison.”¹¹ Daniel Bender and Jana Lipman, in the introduction to their edited volume, *Making the Empire Work*, push scholars “to consider the labor that formed, worked, and rendered the U.S. empire visible.”¹² Though there is “a persistent case of empire denial” in many accounts of U.S. history, Kristin Hoganson and Jay Sexton advocate for moving beyond naming empire where it exists to “ask what empire does.”¹³ Attending to empire’s actions directs our gaze away from high politics, and toward on-the-ground, in-the-field experience.

I take up this challenge by examining how soldiers, whose labor was crucial to the material work of U.S. empire on both sides of the Pacific, made sense of the landscapes of their service, and then described and narrated these landscapes for both intimate and more public audiences. The work of empire, soldiers reveal, was not just physical. Imperial work was not limited to military tasks, as soldiers who were also writers and collectors make clear. Agents of empire followed well-traveled pathways, imperial circuits that carried people and ideas. In the sites this project links, local people participated in the work of empire: Indigenous North Americans served as scouts, translators, and guides for the U.S. Army during its campaigns against Native nations, and similarly, Filipinos participated in constabulary units and worked as porters and guides during the Philippine-

American War and later U.S. occupation of the archipelago. While some of these figures appear in these pages, they are not the focus of this study. Instead, this book looks at how the labor of U.S. soldiers made the empire work and how imperial visions both shaped and relied on a set of nineteenth-century ideas about the natural world.¹⁴

Linda Nash suggests that “by and large, American environmental histories are still written as if the nation’s imperial engagements mattered little to domestic stories, and conversely, as if environments mattered little to the culture and politics of American imperialism.”¹⁵ Soldiers offer the opportunity to write a different story, one that centers voices we usually hear only within military history. Mary Renda writes that “imperialism can never be an unmediated expression of armed might. Culture, consciousness, and identity both direct and are affected by, among other things, the taking up of arms and the harming of human bodies.”¹⁶ I suggest here that soldiers—officers and enlisted men—expand the resources we rely on to make sense of American ideas about nature, and that they demonstrate how their experiences in the service of empire shaped and were shaped by these ideas.

Soldiers’ words and their work make visible some of U.S. empire’s most persistent features: the kind of labor it required, often in new and challenging environments; the violence those working in its service meted out; and the way its narratives were told and retold in different places and contexts. Ann Stoler emphasizes the importance of “the familiar, strange, and unarticulated ways in which empire has appeared and disappeared from the intimate and public spaces of United States history,” including “how relations of empire . . . indelibly permeate—or sometimes graze with only a scarred trace—institutions and the landscapes of people’s lives.”¹⁷ Soldiers, through their writing about and work in the landscapes of their service, reveal a much broader set of ideas and attitudes about nature than a purely continental story of U.S. environmental thinking provides.¹⁸ Their on-the-ground perspectives (sometimes also about the ground they moved through) show us how soldiers’ notions

of nature intermingled with their understandings of their work and with how they saw their roles within a growing U.S. empire on both sides of the Pacific.¹⁹

As empire's direct agents, U.S. soldiers exercised power over other peoples, their homelands, and their resources. Soldiers in the frontier army employed what Patrick Wolfe has called a "logic of elimination": they dispossessed Native nations of their homelands, furthered genocidal policies, and actively protected Anglo settlements on stolen land.²⁰ They also carried out "eliminatory" work through less material means: official reports, articles, and prose meant for a variety of publics. Later some of these men remembered their frontier service with nostalgia—for an older West, for the ways their experiences affirmed a particular kind of manhood—even as they lamented changes that they had enabled.²¹

Taking the Field begins on the plains in the 1870s, with soldiers serving in campaigns of genocidal violence and dispossession against Lakotas and Cheyennes. Soldiers' perspectives remain mostly white and mostly male, but in contrast to the artists and travelers who have shaped our understanding of how nineteenth-century Americans thought about nature, soldiers were working in—not just looking at—new environments.²² And their work regularly brought them into direct confrontation with the people who lived in these landscapes. Soldiers sometimes concluded that places they were expected to think were "splendid" should be left to the Indigenous peoples who already lived there.²³ At other times soldiers used official reports to figuratively empty Native homelands in anticipation of white settlement and resource exploitation, effectively reproducing popular narratives of what the West was "supposed" to be. The material transformation of the landscapes of their service, landscapes that were anything but empty, was often accompanied by a figurative reworking of these places in prose.

Soldiers' private letters, official correspondence, and published reports reveal the many modes through which western landscapes were remade. Their words make clear that soldiers, not often the sources we rely on to understand cultural pro-

duction, made critical contributions to American ideas about the landscapes of the West by shoring up and sometimes critiquing the ideologies underpinning their work, even as they continued to do it.²⁴

Imperial violence took many forms. Edgar Mearns was assigned to serve as a medical officer in what the United States called Arizona Territory. As he traveled on official army business with Gen. George Crook through Apache and Yavapai homelands, he documented and preserved birds, generating an archive of specimens that later found a home in the Smithsonian. This natural history work was dependent on and shaped by U.S. military power. Across Native homelands the U.S. Army established territorial control and enabled colonial science, a set of practices that emerged from the strategies global empires regularly used to describe and categorize the world's resources and cultures. The natural history techniques Mearns employed—collecting, categorizing, describing, and labeling—resemble the tactics Crook used to regulate and contain Apache and Yavapai people. Indigenous people resisted these new tactics, just as they had fought against other strategies of removal and control. These resonances between the techniques used by nineteenth-century naturalists and the U.S. Army signal the pervasive, violent, and multidimensional nature of American empire in the U.S. West.

Soldiers continued the work of empire across the Pacific, bringing their ideas and assumptions with them to the Philippines and sending home letters, artifacts, and in Mearns's case, specimens to museum curators and collaborators. These materials helped shape American ideas about Philippine nature—and Filipino people. Many of these soldiers, career army men and volunteers brand new to soldiering, made rhetorical moves linking their service in the Philippines with earlier campaigns against Indigenous nations in the U.S. West. Some signaled the destructive nature of their work with words more commonly associated with the natural world. In an imperial context “wilderness” took on other, unsettling meanings: it could be something soldiers made with force.

Though U.S. empire took different forms on opposite sides

of the Pacific Ocean—and had separate goals—key similarities connect landscapes and imperial projects too often considered in isolation.²⁵ These similarities stretch from the extractive designs the United States brought to both frontiers to the strategies employed and struggles experienced by soldiers, many of whom had served in both places.²⁶ They extend to the rhetorical choices and cultural framing these men used to make sense of their work, including the violence they carried out in the service of U.S. empire. These continuities all suggest that connecting histories of empire, nature, and labor in the U.S. West and in the Philippines can help us understand how and through whom empire worked, as well as how ideas about the natural world figured into U.S. imperial visions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In fact, nature and empire are impossible to separate; even in death they remain intertwined. Mearns's work as soldier, surgeon, and collector animates these connections. By the time he was deployed to the Philippines in 1903, he had strong relationships with Smithsonian curators, who had high hopes for what his new assignment could do for their collections. But in these Pacific landscapes, military and scientific work became even more tangled: Mearns fought Moro people with his collecting gun, skinned specimens while bullets flew around him, and looted ethnographic materials from villages made accessible by force. Once collected, his Philippine specimens still needed to survive a long journey to be of use to the museum. But Mearns didn't just preserve natural history specimens—he took skulls from Filipino graves and preserved the bodies of U.S. soldiers killed in action. The bodies of birds, of Filipinos, and of U.S. soldiers all traveled the same route: back across the Pacific in boxes.

Imperial pathways connect multiple “fields” with intersecting meanings. Specialists develop expertise in different fields of study. Scientists conduct fieldwork away from homes and labs. Soldiers serving away from posts or bases are deployed to the field, and the violent work of war takes place on the battlefield—though not only there. To take the field is to occupy a space. In

this book what constitutes a “field” is blurred; ideas, actions, orders, and assumptions layer it with meaning. And sometimes the spaces between fields—whether battlefields or fields of study—momentarily collapse, creating unexpected narrative opportunities.

Taking the Field concludes by returning to the U.S. West, to St. Louis and the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition. There the book’s two frontiers and their many fields were no longer separated by the vast Pacific but only by temporary walls of staff and plaster. Fairgoers could cross over a replica of the Bridge of Spain to enter the fair’s version of the old walled city of Manila, and then cross back again to exhibits on western landscapes so recently transformed by soldiers’ labor. People and materials were transported across the Pacific so that traditional homes could be constructed, displayed, and inhabited by Filipinos in living exhibits. North American Indigenous people were exhibited, too, positioned within a story that drew a straight line from continental to Pacific empire. This narrative, one that seamlessly linked the Louisiana Purchase, campaigns to dispossess and eliminate Indigenous peoples, and the U.S. colonial project in the Philippines, was the fair’s central display. And soldiers, laboring across many fields and on both sides of the Pacific, played their parts and sometimes even helped tell this story. As workers and writers, as collectors of specimens and souvenirs, and as agents of empire moving within patterns and structures not of their own making, soldiers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries show us their roles in the production of American notions of nature and demand that we more fully acknowledge the centrality of empire to those ideas.

SOLDIERS TOOK—AND TOOK FROM—MULTIPLE FIELDS IN the service of the U.S. Army and, more broadly, the U.S. imperial regime. Their taking, and their documentation of it, forms the backbone of this book, which opens up critical questions about sources, where they come from, and how we interpret them. Jean O’Brien talks about reading and interpreting sources produced by colonizers: “We cannot and should not simply

toss out this colonial archive. Instead, we need to find ways to use it judiciously.”²⁷ In *Taking the Field*, I argue that historians have overlooked what U.S. soldiers have said about their work as imperial agents, about the landscapes of their service, and about the nature of empire itself. These perspectives illuminate continuities between U.S. empire on both sides of the Pacific, but beyond that, they reveal the shape, reach, and texture of U.S. empire and especially how ideas about nature became further entangled with understandings of imperial work, even in sites far from fields and battlefields.

These sites include museums. Following soldiers whose service carried them across the North American continent to the Philippines and back again has carried me to many different places too. But at the start of this project I hadn’t imagined that it would take me to natural history collections. Museums are key sites for reckoning with colonial violence; these institutions hold art, ancestors, historical artifacts, cultural belongings, scientific specimens, and so many people and objects gathered, purchased, prepared, and taken. As I write this there are ongoing efforts to hold these institutions to account—to rework the narratives they display but also to return, to repatriate, to make restitution—not just for the initial violence that built these collections but for the ongoing display and interpretation of these materials.²⁸ Bird collections, though often housed within institutions that need to grapple with these critiques, open up different, if related, questions.

When I first visited the National Museum of Natural History’s Division of Birds, I could not believe the scale of the collection: more than 640,000 specimens, reflecting roughly 85 percent of the world’s birds known to scientists.²⁹ They are here primarily for scientific study, available by appointment or loan request for use by staff researchers, visiting scholars, and a historian who arrived to see field books and then asked to see birds.

To view these drawers full of birds from across time and space is to be overwhelmed, at least at first. There are so many. But it is through comparison that species and subspecies are dif-

ferentiated, that migratory patterns become visible, and that home ranges are defined. Their movements make them harder to understand; their frequent motion—governed by forces larger than a single bird on the wing or an individual surgeon in the U.S. Army—interferes with our attempts to know them until their circuits and pathways become clear.

Scientists study birds in museum collections to understand their lifeways; I have come to realize that as a historian, my focus is on how they came to be in the museum itself: on their death, their preparation as specimens, their journeys to the museum, and their service to science as parts of these collections, constructed and preserved through centuries of care and carefulness. The unending care work that ensures the birds' continued preservation—work that makes them timeless or perhaps pulls them out of time—may have an unintended effect: it separates them from the specific contexts of their collection, from the large-scale processes and individual choices that brought these birds to the museum.

Examining the interplay of military service and imperial science has shown me that empire is everywhere. It may be harder to see in drawers of birds than in the histories of wars fought to create empire and then extend it. But there it is, shaping what was seen and collected, and shaping possibilities for future study. These birds are an extraordinary record. They embody a tangle of nature and empire and labor that has become so naturalized that it can be difficult to recognize. Spend some time with a drawer of ornithological study skins, though, and you will see it all: the beauty of centuries-old feathers, the institutions named on multiple labels, the handwriting on each tag, notes and measurements on tag backs hinting at additional contextual clues, the careful work it took to empty and then suture the bellies of all these birds. These clues reveal where the birds have been—and also where agents of empire traveled to collect them. These links between birds and their collectors, between institutions and their agents, and between empires and the fields they took from are all visible in a drawer full of birds, if you know to look for them.

My blackbird, though a twenty-first-century specimen, is also part of this tangle. His presence—his unnatural permanence—encourages us to think about the practices and the ideologies that allow him to remain. My complicated and incomplete relationship with my blackbird is encoded in his body, in the labor of transforming him from dead thing to preserved specimen.³⁰ My specific moves are written there—each incision, each stitch sewn—but so much of what I know to be there is hard to see. Skinning and stuffing a blackbird forced me to pay attention to my own embodied experience, to the intimacy and violence bound up in this particular form of preservation work. Breaking a bird's bones in order to preserve its body might be a metaphor for the story of this book. Writ large, it demonstrates how agents of empire carried out the work of conquest over and over, in the U.S. West, in the Philippines, and then again in miniature at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair. Conquest and preservation are two sides of the same story; thinking with them together affirms the driving thread of this book: to understand American ideas about nature we must grapple with U.S. empire. And to do this we need to be willing to follow soldiers, their stories, and their specimens wherever they lead: west and farther west, across the Pacific and back again, into an archive of birds.

1

The Nature of Frontier Army Work

“YOU HAVE NEVER BEEN STATIONED IN A COUNTRY AS MEAN as that at Powder River,” wrote Capt. Samuel Ovenshine in an August 1876 letter to his wife, Sallie, who was back at Fort Leavenworth. Ovenshine was camped with the Fifth Infantry where the Powder River flows into the Yellowstone, near what is now Terry, Montana. As the Fifth made its way west to the site of a future army post where the Tongue and Yellowstone Rivers meet, Samuel had much to say to Sallie about the landscapes of his military service: “You may count on the miserable Yellowstone, out of God’s world, as your future home.”¹ Lt. Frank Dwight Baldwin, stationed elsewhere in Dakota Territory, characterized the landscape similarly. To his wife, Alice, he wrote in July 1876, “The country up here is not as fine as I had expected to see.” A few weeks later, from a camp at the mouth of Rosebud Creek, he told Alice that what she’d heard “about this country by parties who have been up here telling how beautiful + etc, well it has all been exaggerated.” In the two hundred miles he’d traveled from the Missouri River, he’d seen “a most dreary + desolate country.” Baldwin continued, “They all say that a little farther up the country improves. But I have seen enough.”²

These letters from Samuel Ovenshine and Frank Baldwin to their wives, like those of so many other soldiers in the field to their loved ones back home, are a window into the social world of the U.S. Army. Soldiers’ letters reflect the often-challenging working conditions soldiers navigate, as well as a range of social and cultural histories and norms. And the letters sol-

diers received from loved ones reflect their contexts, too—the daily rhythms of life at a frontier army post. These letter writers had news to share and also relationships to preserve, to strengthen despite periods of long separation.

We do not have equal access to both sides of these conversations; in fact, the conditions of frontier army service have materially shaped contemporary archives.³ Think about it: a letter from home reaches a soldier like Ovenshine, stationed in a place he calls “one of the most desolate and forlorn looking places you ever saw.”⁴ He reads it and tucks it away somewhere—a chest pocket, a saddlebag, or maybe even the driest corner of his makeshift home on the banks of a remote river at the site of a soon-to-be-built army post. Samuel’s letters, by contrast, travel across the Yellowstone River and down the Missouri on a steamboat, arriving at a fixed address at Fort Leavenworth, where they are safe from weather, if not wear. Given these different pathways and circumstances, it is a wonder that both sides of any personal correspondence between soldiers and their families survived for historians to examine. The letters between Samuel and Sallie that remain—a flurry of correspondence back and forth for a short period in time—offer a brief glimpse of the life of a military family between the U.S. Civil War and the Philippine-American War. To read these letters from summer and early fall 1876 is to wish for all the pages not in the archives.

Still, what exists is evocative. Captain Ovenshine’s description of the confluence of the Yellowstone and the Tongue—“mean,” “miserable,” “out of God’s world”—got so stuck in my head that I drove to see the country for myself, to have one of what William Wyckoff, in his field guide to reading the U.S. West, calls “tactile, terrestrial encounters.”⁵ With Ovenshine’s words in my mind, I marveled at Montana’s big sky, at the green of the cottonwoods near the confluence, at the flow of both rivers. Where Ovenshine saw “as miserable [a] part of the U.S. as we could get into,” I saw beauty.⁶ And I took pictures (figs. 3 and 4).

Of course, we were not looking at the same place; the natural world is not constant, even without the human-driven changes



3. Confluence of the Tongue and Yellowstone Rivers, June 2017.
Author photo.

that transformed an 1876 winter army camp into part of the contemporary riverfront of Miles City, Montana. And even if Owenshine and I had, by some magic, been there at the same time, our perspectives as viewers would likely have generated different perceptions of the same space. Landscapes, as scholars of environmental history, geography, and aesthetics have



4. Probable former site of the Tongue River Cantonment, the 1876 camp that later became Fort Keogh, on the south side of the confluence (though the site for the construction of the fort was shifted a bit farther away from the river), June 2017. Author photo.

shown us, are constructed through the act of looking. “A landscape, unlike an environment, with its strong scientific connotation of the objectively material and scientific, is always a profoundly human creation made out of profoundly nonhuman stuff,” writes Daegan Miller.⁷ This distinction helps sepa-

rate what I saw when I looked at the confluence of the Tongue and Yellowstone in 2017, on a trip to celebrate the seventieth wedding anniversary of my now-husband's grandparents, from what Samuel Ovenshine saw and chose to describe almost a century and a half earlier. Simon Schama writes, "It is our shaping perception that makes the difference between raw matter and landscape."⁸ I can reflect on what I brought to that beautiful bend joining two rivers. But Captain Ovenshine and the Fifth Infantry were doing far more than looking: they were working, and that work remade the West—as both material environment and cultural landscape.

The nineteenth-century U.S. West was a place filled with the work of reshaping terrain. While the most persistent imagery of this period might be of agrarian families farming and home-making, others toiled for low wages in mines, along railroads, and in industries providing services to those who came west in search of new opportunities. But soldiers in the frontier army were also workers whose labor was deeply tied to the material transformation and cultural construction of the landscapes of what became the American West.⁹

Conceptualizing soldiers as workers opens up new ways of understanding the complexity of their labor. First, they were carrying out the violent work of war, what nineteenth-century Americans routinely called "Indian fighting." Soldiers were also tasked with literal state building: army post construction, route making and roadbuilding, and management of both newly created national parks and reservations where Indigenous people were incarcerated. Elsewhere, U.S. soldiers were also tasked with other kinds of labor: the work of enforcing Reconstruction in the South and strikebreaking and enforcement during the large labor conflicts of the Progressive Era.¹⁰

Cultural terrain was being remade too. In the late nineteenth century ideas about both identity and whiteness in the United States became far more rigid; many Americans united around imperial expansion and settler colonialism in Native homelands, and the political and cultural transformations of the post-Civil War nation foregrounded clashes over labor, cit-

izenship, empire, and modernity.¹¹ U.S. soldiers lived these changes, bringing ideas encountered earlier in their lives west with them to the sites of their military service.

Soldiers assigned to frontier outposts occupied a hybrid position in the western landscapes where they served: temporary, though not tourists; stationed in these landscapes, though not stationary. They moved west, sometimes with their families, and made homes and lives at army posts. But they weren't settled there; new orders could arrive anytime. In some ways they were placeless, grounded instead in routines and protocols, in communities defined by rank and regiment. Despite this, many soldiers developed deep attachments to the West—certainly as a place but as an idea too, a kind of imaginary that took hold in their minds as well as in the mythology of the nation.¹² Whether more recent immigrants or Civil War veterans who had already fought to preserve or advance their vision of the nation, soldiers in the U.S. Army had been steeped in ideas about what America was and could be—and about the role of the West in those visions. Though these men were not separate from notions of progress and ideas about the future circulating in American culture in the late nineteenth century, they didn't universally embrace them.¹³

As representatives of the United States, soldiers legitimated settlers' claims to the West, first with their presence and then with their actions. But some had concerns. And while these concerns did not lead to a full-scale critique of American empire and the worldview sustaining it, they do demonstrate that anxieties about the particular shape of American progress in the late nineteenth century extended beyond the sectors of society where we tend to look for and locate alternative perspectives. Some soldiers were unsure of this work. Still, they continued it.

Soldiers were often the first to describe western landscapes for American audiences, whether privately, as in Captain Ovenshine's letters to Sallie, or publicly, as in official reports and published accounts of expeditions through Yellowstone and the Black Hills. In both private and public writing U.S. soldiers represented landscapes transformed by their physical labor as

well as by their work with the pen to a variety of readers. Here I bring together the writing of soldiers who worked in different plains landscapes: Ovenshine at the confluence of the Yellowstone and Tongue Rivers, Lt. Gustavus Doane at the future site of Yellowstone National Park, and Col. Richard Irving Dodge in the Black Hills. I pull from the writings of other officers and enlisted men to flesh out what frontier army service was like and how soldiers remembered it, how they interacted with the natural world, and what they, as a group, offer both environmental and imperial history. The things they wrote, the stories they told, reveal not simply agents of empire, carrying out the work of conquest and colonization—though they certainly show us this—but also soldiers expressing curiosity, frustration, and sometimes ambivalence about both their assigned tasks and the landscapes of their service. Centering soldiers' stories makes visible the deep roots of a more capacious and complex constellation of ideas about preservation. These ideas were at the heart of U.S. imperial expansion.

Wonderland?

"It is spoken of as a splendid country but Leavenworth will suit me. I have seen enough of these splendid countries. They rarely ever turn out to be what they are said to."¹⁴ Capt. Samuel Ovenshine wrote these words to his wife, Sallie, in late July 1876. When Ovenshine spoke of the Yellowstone, he meant the Yellowstone River, an almost seven-hundred-mile-long tributary of the Missouri River that flows north out of the Rockies, through Yellowstone National Park and then north and east across present-day Montana and into North Dakota. There it reaches the Missouri. Though north and east of Yellowstone National Park, the site Ovenshine was heading toward, a future post at the confluence of the Tongue and Yellowstone, might easily have been linked with ideas and images of the park in both the popular and military imagination.

While many marveled at the landscapes they encountered as part of their military service, some, like Ovenshine, reacted differently. Douglas McChristian suggests it was unfamiliarity that

prompted some soldiers to express ambivalence or even displeasure about these landscapes.¹⁵ In contrast to voices expressing wonder—"It is as beautiful and rich a country as I ever saw," wrote Cpl. Maurice H. Wolfe in 1867—others offered different impressions. "Dakota I do not like at all," wrote Pvt. Henry Hubman in 1881. And Pvt. Herman S. Searl wrote to his parents in 1868, "It seems as though this country was made for the Indians, what us[e] is it to the United States I have not seen any yet."¹⁶ In McChristian's project, these examples help prepare the reader to imagine leaving an army post and entering the field. In that context they work quite well to suggest the newness of western landscapes. But they also suggest that when U.S. soldiers critiqued the aesthetic qualities of these landscapes, they were also commenting on the ways the West had been represented to them in popular culture.

Myriad texts and images about the West were in wide circulation by the time men like Wolfe, Hubman, Searl, and Ovenshine wrote from their posts on the plains. Martha Sandweiss describes how the West "was for many nineteenth-century Americans a fabled place of fantastic topography, exotic peoples, the place where the nation's future would unfold."¹⁷ Soldiers in the U.S. Army were, in fact, tasked with enabling a particular version of that future.

While we cannot know what exactly soldiers had read or seen before the army sent them to experience the West for themselves, nineteenth-century American landscape painting, which linked nationalism and nature, provides one set of sources for the ideas that pervaded the white American culture that produced these men. From Hudson River School artist Thomas Cole's work, which could be quite ambivalent about the balance of the country and the city, as in *The Oxbow* (1836), to the work of later landscape painters who focused on particularly imperial representations of the West, such as Albert Bierstadt, especially his paintings of the Rocky Mountains and the Sierras, visual representations of American landscapes were deeply connected to American culture, even as the artists had different ideas about the relationships between nature

and the state. They reflected these ideas in their paintings. So whereas Cole explored the tensions between American nature and the American nation, for the next generation of painters the American landscape, especially the western landscape—as they chose to represent it—contained none of these contradictions.¹⁸ Instead, they depicted western places as naturalized landscapes where imperial expansion and Native dispossession had already occurred. Even as U.S. soldiers were tasked with emptying the West and readying it for settlement, artists were painting the West as if these soldiers had already finished this work.¹⁹ Enabled by prose, paintings, and photographs, tourists were primed to look for—and to see—certain qualities in the landscapes of the U.S. West.²⁰ Soldiers were too.

When army men like Ovenshine articulated a critique of “splendid countries,” they were revealing the gaps between the artistic representations they had consumed and the landscapes they encountered in their work as soldiers. And when they suggested in private letters that the territory where they served should be left to Indigenous people, they were speaking against pervasive narratives that presented the West as destined to be American, rather than already Native. These glimpses of unease, these personal articulations in opposition to nationalistic framings of the West, remind us that alongside the artistic and literary renderings of the West as wonderland were other impressions and observations about what western landscapes were like and whom they were for. I highlight these gentle critiques, these moments of ambiguity, to make visible the work of constructing and crystallizing the West as wonderland. Glimpses of doubt about the on-the-ground reality of American cultural understandings animate the active work of constructing these assumptions about land and landscapes.

Yellowstone National Park was created by Congress and signed into existence by President Grant in 1872. Yellowstone was to be “set apart as a public park or pleasuring ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people.”²¹ This designation set a significant preservation precedent, though the decision was less about a commitment to wilderness than it was about limiting