



# Defiant Peacemaker: Nicholas Trist in the Mexican War (Elma Dill Russell Spencer Series in the West and Southwest)

Wallace L. Ohrt

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However much the extending of America's borders may have seemed like destiny at the time, much of the process was not as noble as its early proponents declared, and in the Southwest it represented at least partially a deliberate land grab. The work of one rather eccentric idealist, a Virginian named Nicholas Philip Trist, allows modern Americans to consider what happened during the years 1846-48 without what one writer called "a thorough revulsion." Nicholas Trist (1800-74) was one of those rare public figures who really live dangerously, prepared to risk everything for principle. Generally unknown today, and slighted or scorned when mentioned at all, he was a man of importance in his time, for he defied a presidential recall order and negotiated with Mexico the treaty that won for the United States the vast Southwest. Trist was closely acquainted with the great ones of his time—including Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Andrew Jackson—and was esteemed by those who really knew him. This well-written biography of Trist is also, then, a story of many of the important people and movements of his time. Trist was an idealist, more uncompromising than his idol, Thomas Jefferson (who was also the grandfather of Trist's wife). Trist was respected by many of his contemporaries and, surprisingly for a man of his unbending character, befriended by many. Yet there were many who despised him. On two unrelated occasions, eight years apart, he stood as the most controversial figure in America. In some ways, he was his own worst enemy, as Ohrt skillfully shows. An astonishing haughtiness in a man of relatively modest station enabled him to condescend to presidents, quarrel with military commanders, and hurl insults at the House of Lords. Yet the diplomats with whom he worked in Mexico admired and respected him for his unfailing patience and courtesy under the most trying conditions. Ultimately, his career was thoroughly destroyed by its one great, defining achievement: the negotiation of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the peace that ended the Mexican War. Ohrt demonstrates that Trist's quintessential character can best be distilled in a tribute he paid to another: "He is . . . a true lover of justice." Only one Trist biography has appeared to date, and it does not cover the full life and relationships as this one does. Sources for this imminently readable biography include the voluminous correspondence of the Trist and Randolph families of Virginia, biographies of notables mentioned, and the most respected histories of the times and events. Those interested in the diplomacy of the era and especially of the U.S.-Mexican War will read with interest the story of the intrigues and rivalries behind the political and military activities of the war, which are vividly presented here.

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