

CITIES OF GOLD San Francisco and Denver Despoil Their Hinterland

GRAY BRECHIN, *Imperial San Francisco: Urban Power, Earthly Ruin*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999, pp. xiii, 402, maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index, \$17.95 paper.

KATHLEEN BROSANAN, *Uniting Mountain and Plain: Cities, Law, and Environmental Change along the Front Range*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002, pp. xii, 276, maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index, \$29.95 cloth.

For fifteen years, urban environmental history has been a field both enviable and marginal. At times (notably following publication of William Cronon's masterpiece, *Nature's Metropolis*), this subdiscipline within a subdiscipline seems ascendant.¹ In such moments, urban historians grapple with the power and significance of nature in cities, and environmental historians show signs of forsaking an overwhelming bias toward wild or pastoral landscapes. But at other times, most of the time really, many urbanists continue to see the natural world and the urban realm as incompatible ends of a spectrum: the protean concept of "culture" is identified with the city, and "nature" (whatever that might mean) is outside of town. Most environmental historians, having been forced as graduate students to recite passages of Cronon from memory, tut-tut about this false dichotomy as they tacitly signal agreement by relegating urban spaces to second-class status in their work. So one has to admire Kathleen Brosnan and Gray Brechin for bringing nature to the city while at the same time pulling the city to the mythical state of nature that is the American West. What makes such a complicated double move possible? It is gold that has such motive power.

Brechin's *Imperial San Francisco: Urban Power, Earthly Ruin* examines the rise of San Francisco in the years after the gold rush of 1849. While the city matters here, Brechin is far more concerned with the impact of San Francisco on its surroundings, what he calls the urban *contado*. A rather slippery concept, Brechin allows in his introduction that there is no exact English translation for this Italian word, but apparently "countryside, territory, and hinterland all

approximate its meanings" (p. xxv). *Hinterland* seems closest to the mark, as *Imperial San Francisco* chronicles how the city's growth spelled ruin for the surrounding environs. Because "a city's parasitism inevitably increases with its size and ambition," San Francisco is a huge leech on the regional landscape, sucking its *contado* dry (p. 17).

If this is not quite the picture you have of one of the nation's most admired urban areas, such dissonance is exactly what Brechin intends. Readers should be prepared to understand the city's darker side throughout this book. Brechin, who thinks San Francisco has used its wiles to mesmerize less canny observers, is not taken in so easily. He is fed up with depictions that ignore the city's warts: "World-famed for the beauty of its setting and for its romantic history, San Francisco has largely escaped the harsh judgment to which less lovable cities are subject" (p. xxiii). Brechin's corrective includes nothing beautiful or romantic; he is harsh as he uncovers the city's multiple crimes against nature. Somewhere Tony Bennett is cringing.

Early in this story of degradation, Brechin locates the source of San Francisco's abusive relationship with its surroundings. In what might be *Imperial San Francisco's* most important section, Brechin suggests he will "reveal a structure that . . . precedes and supercedes the economic system known as capitalism—an invisible structure that [he calls] the Pyramid of Mining" (p. xxiv). The key to this passage is the verb *reveal*, which suggests that Brechin sees himself as unmasking a hidden villain. The author then explains the depths of the conspiracy:

[B]ecause this artifice [again, the pyramid of mining] is so vast and complex in its operation, I have tried to embody it in a series of stories that can only hint at the dynastic, corporate, and political alliances that enable some cities to claim and acquire empires as their rightful due. (p. xxiv)

As the introduction makes clear, this is a book that is more impassioned than measured.

At certain points, this material is a touch paranoid. Brechin will throw back the curtain on the devious wizard, or something to that effect. But that is somewhat unfair. Although *Imperial San Francisco* is filled with intrigue, and more than a few scenes are set in back rooms filled with cigar-smoking fat cats, the book is rarely shrill. Most cases are compelling in many ways. Capitalism is always complicated and messy, but Brechin points out the particular ways in which mining—far more ancient than any market revolution—is one of the mainsprings of history and a great devastator of the environment, both social and natural. He then applies these insights to San Francisco through a series of case studies.

The book begins with two chapters on the ground: the first about the discovery of gold and its mining; the second about San Francisco's tragicomic efforts to secure pure, potable water. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 are devoted to

“thought shapers,” journalists whose publications moved readers hither and yon. The final two chapters explore energy production—first conventional, then nuclear. Whether intended or not, this structure runs the gamut of themes typical of environmental history: the impact people have on nature, the ways nature shapes history, and how people’s perceptions of nature change throughout time. The interdisciplinary character of Brechin’s scholarship demands a sweep that is sometimes daunting but also impressive.

Equally impressive is the author’s prose, which is dramatic and vivid. Of San Francisco’s founding, Brechin writes, “Like the great cities of the past that it hoped to emulate and surpass, the self-styled Mistress of the Pacific was conceived and born of the union of iron and gold” (p. xxv). The city’s financial district is an “inverted minescape,” an image that provides some sense of how the author’s writing serves his argument (p. 66). This is not merely artistic flourish, although there is plenty of that (likely too much for some scholars), but also a way to persuade readers that the essential points here about the pyramid of mining and the impact of San Francisco on its *contado* are correct. And not just correct but also worthy of the outrage that the author musters and demands of his audience. Ultimately, *Imperial San Francisco* is a fine polemic, and it should be judged as such. The book is quite powerful and usually persuasive.

But this is also a work of history, and it fails in this regard. Unfortunately, Brechin’s fealty to his thesis often obscures more than it reveals. The notion that cities are antithetical to the natural world is not new. Lewis Mumford articulated this argument more than half a century ago.² And the idea that mining economies are prone to great inequities and to devastate the environment is even more venerable than that. For Brechin, though, these arguments are absolute. They permeate every small space in his thinking about San Francisco’s rich history, crowding out nuance. By the book’s end, readers are left thinking that even in a city renowned for its fog, surely the sun must shine sometimes. But no, there are no shades of gray in a sky made black by San Francisco’s smelters; water, polluted by hydraulic mining, will never run clear; and an intellectual climate, dominated by urban oligarchs, can never produce enlightened thought. This is portraiture unrelenting in its bleakness. Even Frank Norris, who cast his unsparing eye on San Francisco a century ago, was more charitable than this.³

The results, for students of history if not rhetoric, are as unfortunate as they are unnecessary. It is, after all, possible to write a thoughtful work of urban history that is also polemical; Mike Davis’s *City of Quartz* and Robert Caro’s *The Power Broker* leap to mind.⁴ Missing from *Imperial San Francisco* is a willingness to entertain counterargument. To be sure, Davis’s critique of Los Angeles’s elites is venomous and tendentious in places, and Caro’s hatred for Robert Moses is barely hidden. But both authors allow the totality of their complicated subjects to emerge. In *City of Quartz*, for instance, nonelites

have power and wield it, suggesting there is some hope for a flawed metropolis. And in *The Power Broker*, Robert Moses does many things that are great while doing some that are good, even if only by accident. This is not just a cry for a happy ending to Brechin's story, but also a demand to view the urban scene's complexities. As Brechin rightly suggests, a city's history should not be scrubbed because it is a great place for a date. The reverse should be true also: San Francisco should not be uniformly damned because it hosted nasty residents, despoiled its hinterland, or served as a hub for nuclear science.

In fairness, Brechin's grim tone may be a function not only of his overwhelming argument but also of a persistent thread that runs through much environmental history: the tendency to invoke declension narratives when describing the impact of humans on their surroundings. In part, this is a product of the discipline's roots in the environmental movement. Explicitly activist in its earliest iterations, environmental history had a reform agenda from its foundation. Recently, though, the trend has shifted. Environmental historians have hardly become positivists, but they think more critically about myths of a lost golden age while writing more nuanced stories. Brechin, apparently, has not sampled this new fare.

What results is a narrative that is not merely critical or unfair, but also myopic. For example, Brechin's retelling of the Hetch Hetchy story, San Francisco's battle to divert its drinking water from within the confines of Yosemite National Park, is a fascinating instance of greed, malfeasance, and corruption. As he demonstrates, this tale is on a par with the more famous Owens Valley water grab, dramatized in Roman Polanski's *Chinatown*. What is missing here, though, is the other side of this story, which would be of great interest to students of the urban environment. After San Francisco dammed Hetch Hetchy, the Sierra Club grew in national stature and power, and the National Park Service became a federal entity—designed, in part, to counteract the more utilitarian leanings of the Department of the Interior. And although John Muir, one of the founders of modern environmentalism and the father of the Sierra Club, died (some observers said of a broken heart) in the wake of the battle for Hetch Hetchy, his star burned even brighter as a result of this decade-long fight.

In other words, the loss of what was one of the nation's most beautiful valleys—now one of the West's more tragic mountain reservoirs—is undoubtedly a melancholy tale, but it also contains an element of triumph missing from Brechin's reading of the events. John Muir appears, but as little more than a marginal naysayer. Brechin does little to flesh out this complicated character. In the end, San Francisco is depicted as uniformly rapacious without considering how one of the hotbeds of twentieth-century environmental activism sponsored such a grim moment in the nation's environmental history.

If *Imperial San Francisco* is a tale of steady unraveling, it is also remarkably top-down in approach, again a function of Brechin's unwavering application

of the pyramid of mining as the lens through which to view history. Uncontested hegemonic analysis is out of favor among environmental historians, who increasingly try to weave social history into their scholarship. *Imperial San Francisco* is a story of towering figures dominating the city stage on which they play out their aspirations. Brechin's treatment of journalistic feuds, for instance, is outstanding theater. The battle among the Hearsts, the de Youngs, and other wealthy publishing families is filled with intrigue but also marked by a surprising acceptance that newspapers shape thought, that most people believe what they read and act accordingly. And, yes, Berkeley was one of the centers of the nation's nuclear program. But what of the antinuclear, antiwar, proenvironment movements spawned in this locale—often organized to counter so-called big science? There is no discussion of protest here, just the potentially world-destroying technologies that typify some of the environmental abuses of the past century.

Even more troublesome for urban and environmental historians is the depiction of nature in *Imperial San Francisco*. If one accepts, as Brechin does, Mumford's suggestion that "as the pavement spreads, nature is pushed away," it is easy to miss how nature shapes urban life—in other words, the ways in which the natural world pushes back against encroaching pavement, the weeds cracking the concrete. Recent urban-environmental histories, including Adam Rome's prize-winning study of suburbanization, *The Bulldozer in the Countryside*, and Matthew Gandy's brilliant look at nature in New York, *Concrete and Clay*, have found greater influence in Jane Jacobs and Ian McHarg than Mumford.⁵ Both Jacobs and McHarg argue that it was possible for the urban and the natural to mingle, and believe that nature was vital to the health of cities.⁶

Brechin, particularly in his discussion of mining practices, tilts toward Mumford. After whole mountains in the Sierras were blown apart with hydraulic cannons at the behest of urban capital, streams became so polluted with silt that they flooded, washing out cities they ostensibly served. For Brechin, this is another case in which San Francisco blighted its *contado*. But again, there is a side to this story that goes untold. As Andrew Isenberg argues in his just-published history of gold rush-era California, flooding in cities like Sacramento eventually prompted discussion of mining practices, an example of how ecological realities raised political consciousnesses. In another more glaring case, the great San Francisco earthquake hardly merits discussion for Brechin. If ever there was an example of nature playing a critical role in city life—much of San Francisco was rebuilt after the quake and fire, leaving people's perceptions of the environment forever changed—this was it. But Brechin does not engage this episode, a glaring omission that demonstrates how the author's thesis leaves him no room to grapple with events that fall outside the structures the pyramid of mining.

Ultimately, *Imperial San Francisco* remains an interesting book, well written and forcefully argued. The illustrations, which are voluminous and

well chosen, are themselves worth the price of admission. Indeed, Brechin is a master at iconographic analysis, beginning many of his chapters by reading San Francisco's cultural landscapes, especially the monuments and memorials that dot the city. In these sections, the author's passion is his ally, as stone come alive. Still, as urban-environmental history, this book is a lost opportunity, and San Francisco remains an exciting urban laboratory awaiting a scholar willing to seek a more complete picture of nature in the city.

It is hard to imagine a book as similar to *Imperial San Francisco* in subject and conception as Kathleen Brosnan's *Uniting Mountain and Plain: Cities, Law, and Environmental Change along the Front Range* could be so different in its conclusions. But it is. Brosnan explores metropolitan growth in Colorado, casting her gaze from as far north as Fort Collins to as far south as Pueblo (encompassing the entire "Front Range" of Colorado's Rocky Mountains). The time in question includes the years between 1858 and the start of the twentieth century, when a series of mineral rushes drew hundreds of thousands of prospectors and settlers to boom towns that grew up overnight in Colorado. The instant cities Brosnan studies all hoped to serve as markets for one of the savage miracles of modern capitalism: the comprehensive mining, instant urbanization, and eventual permanent Anglo settlement of a place that had for centuries been the exclusive domain of Hispanos and seminomadic Native American communities.

Brosnan, more than Brechin, emphasizes urban networks, but above all, she chronicles the rise and eventual dominance of Denver in the region. And like Brechin, Brosnan examines her subject city's ecological impact on its vast hinterland. That impact is nothing short of brutal. The city and its residents were hungry for capital, which they found in the land. As Brosnan notes of the Front Range urban centers, "[T]heir growth and survival depended on the extraction, processing, and marketing of the region's natural capital—precious metals, industrial ores, livestock, produce" (p. 1). That the prose here is more understated than Brechin's should not diminish readers' anticipation of environmental devastation.

For three chapters—on Denver's founding, its sponsorship of the eradication of local Native Americans, and attempts to diversify Denver's economy by developing an agricultural hinterland—Brosnan demonstrates how a city lays waste to its surroundings. Here, readers will find stories, familiar to Western and environmental historians, about the inherent degradation of mining economies, the brutality of Indian removal, and the exploitation of farmers by metropolitan interests. Although well told, these cautionary tales are unsurprising at first glance, and other historians have treated some of this material as effectively as Brosnan does.

But more than building an argument about the exploitation of land and people, Brosnan argues that urban history must lie at the center of Western history. She makes her case convincingly by suggesting that city building "became the central synthetic means . . . through which modern life emerged

on the periphery and the region became less peripheral” (p. 5). In other words, modernization in the West happened through urbanization, and the emergence of cities like Denver made the region more central to national narratives. For historians of the West, this is a departure from more traditional stories of regional development driven by happenings in rural areas and wide-open spaces. In making this point, Brosnan joins a new wave of Western and environmental historians, including David Iglar and Jared Orsi, who place cities at the core of their regional analyses.⁷ It remains to be seen if, other than in studies of Los Angeles, a future generation of scholars will place the West at the center of urban studies.

Brosnan also breaks new ground by taking on the persistent declension narrative that is so much a part of environmental history and that forms the foundation of Brechin’s work. *Uniting Mountain and Plain* grapples with the most complex facets of mining, particularly the precedent-setting legal dimensions of land-use disputes that sprang up in Colorado as a result of mineral extraction. Here, Brosnan never avoids documenting the brutal environmental consequences of mining or the glaring inequities of a mining economy. She also suggests that the story was often more complicated than received wisdom would have it.

In one especially compelling instance, Brosnan demonstrates that mining laws were never purely instrumental, as James Willard Hurst states, nor were they just tools for unfettered capitalist development, as Morton Horowitz argues about most nineteenth-century jurisprudence.⁸ Even in the case of the infamous apex doctrine—in which a proprietor could follow veins of gold from the top, or apex, of a claim, including when veins ran into other claims—Brosnan suggests that “tenets of localism and systems of self-imposed regulations persisted into the 1890s,” marking the “transition to a modern capitalist society in this region” as “contested, inconsistent, and incomplete” (p. 6). Most accounts of this legal doctrine, enacted in 1872, fail to mention that it was not enforced by Colorado courts until more than a decade later, as localities determined how they wished to be governed and by whom, and who could become rich. For Brosnan, capitalism ultimately carries the day, but it moves in fits and starts, leaving room for all manner of actors to demonstrate agency in the face of massive economic trends.

This attention to surprising outcomes and historical irony extends to Brosnan’s material on the environment. In the end, the environment does suffer terribly in *Uniting Mountain and Plain*, but the story here, too, is complicated. In a chapter on Colorado Springs, for example, Brosnan explores the impact of an early tourist economy on the land. Driven by consumption rather than production, Colorado Springs developed as a haven for seekers of healthy air and beautiful scenery. What resulted was a curious combination of local preservation, driven by economic imperatives, and a willingness to clear any unsightly elements of the nonhuman realm that might have detracted from tourists’ interactions with the “natural” world. For instance, if “prairie

dogs obstructed or destroyed visitors' experiences with the pristine wilderness of their imaginations, they became expendable" (p. 117). In the end, tourism was a double-edged sword, because consumer-driven environmentalism could be capricious but often was more benevolent to the land than the producerist ethics found in mining camps outside Denver or the smelters of Pueblo, the final Front Range community explored by Brosnan.

Brosnan's willingness, actually eagerness, to embrace complexity makes *Uniting Mountain and Plain* a far more satisfying work of history than *Imperial San Francisco*. Although Brosnan uses little of the lively prose typical of Brechin—she prefers a more traditional, scholarly tone—*Uniting Mountain and Plain* is uniformly well written, even graceful in several sections, and beautifully illustrated.

Ultimately, these books share an emphasis on the impact cities have on their surroundings—they are bad for nature. It seems likely that, as with so much else in urban-environmental history, this focus can be traced back to William Cronon, who could not have known what a long shadow his scholarship would cast. Nor, probably, could Cronon have known that so many scholars would produce work taking up his central argument on the usually deleterious relationship between the metropolis and its hinterland. As both *Uniting Mountain and Plain* and *Imperial San Francisco* demonstrate, this is no doubt a rich vein, and it has not yet been exhausted. The next step for students of the urban environment may be to move into these cities, to begin to explore the role of nature in town. The gold might be found in the hills, but it should be woven into the urban fabric itself.

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NOTES

1. William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York, 1991).
2. Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (New York, 1938), 252.
3. Frank Norris, *McTeague: A Story of San Francisco* (New York, 1899).
4. Robert Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York, 1974); and Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London, 1999).
5. Matthew Gandy, *Concrete and Clay: Reworking Nature in New York City* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002); and Adam Rome, *The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism* (Cambridge, 2001).
6. Ian McHarg, *Design with Nature* (New York, 1969), 54-57; and Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York, 1961), 444.
7. David Iglar, *Industrial Cowboys: Miller & Lux and the Transformation of the Far West, 1850-1920* (Berkeley, Calif., 2001); and Jared Orsi, *Hazardous Metropolis: Flooding and Urban Ecology in Los Angeles* (Berkeley, Calif., 2004).
8. Morton Horowitz, *The Transformation of American Law, 1780-1860* (Cambridge, Mass., 1977); and James Willard Hurst, *Law and the Conditions of Freedom in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (Madison, Wisc., 1956), 50-69.

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