

A fecund conundrum

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VISIONS OF PARADISE. Glimpses of our landscape's legacy.
 John Warfield Simpson.

400pp. Berkeley: University of California Press; distributed in the UK by Wiley. Pounds 21.95. 0 520 21364 5.

CALIFORNIA AND THE FICTIONS OF CAPITAL. George L. Henderson. 265pp. Oxford University Press. Pounds 36.
 0 19 510890 6.

CREATING COLORADO. William Wyckoff. The making of a Western American landscape,

1860-1940. 336pp. Yale University Press. Pounds 20. 0 300 07118 3.

Ten years ago, the Journal of American

History hosted a round table entitled "Environmental History". Six leading scholars in the field concluded that: environmental historians needed to be social historians, science historians, historians of technology, husbandry, art and the weather; they needed to be "gifted amateurs" and "intelligent generalizers". All this without ever overlooking the crucial categories of

"gender, race, class, and ethnicity". From this work, we would understand the impact of nature on culture, and culture on nature, as well as human perceptions of the non-human world; all this while being reminded just how slippery such concepts - "nature", "culture" - really were.

Amazingly, in the ten years since then,

environmental historians have gone a long way towards making good on their vast claims. John Warfield Simpson's *Visions of Paradise: Glimpses of our landscape's legacy* offers readers a vivid survey of the production of landscapes throughout United States history: the story of the settlement of the Great Plains, the creation of the first National Parks, the processes of urbanization and suburbanization in the twentieth century. Simpson crafts fine sentences and tells his stories well. His vignettes should captivate newcomers to the dramatic encounters between US history and American nature. He examines his material through a focus on "landscape values", or shared principles, that, he argues, have shaped the ways Euro-Americans have understood their environment: that land is best organized as private property, that land should serve people's needs, that people are separate from the land, that land is a boundless resource. While Simpson admits that these values have "softened" in the United States over time, he none the less posits that they "have remained remarkably constant at their core".

Visions of Paradise is occasionally marred by Simpson's decision primarily to synthesize the research of others, and one wishes a few more social histories had found their way into his considerable reading: he underplays the role of

racial and ethnic minorities in producing landscapes; women rarely appear in the text. In describing the origins of New York City's Central Park, for instance, Simpson lets his en-

thusiasm influence his rhetoric; before construction began, he claims, the environs were a "foul, dank place". Tell that to the inhabitants of the vibrant African-American community known as Seneca Village, which had earlier occupied the grounds. Planners razed that community so that the citizens of Manhattan could breathe deeply from the "greensward" transplanted into the centre of the island.

George L. Henderson's *California and the Fictions of Capital* and William Wyckoff's

Creating Colorado are narrower in scope.

Henderson examines "representations" of "the capitalist transformation of California" in the years between the end of the Gold Rush and the start of the Great Depression. He does so by offering readings of period literature - some quite well known, such as *The Octopus* by Frank Norris (1901) - but most far more obscure. Henderson is at his best when discussing books such as *Blood Money* by William Chambers Morrow (1882), *The Winning of*

Barbara Worth by Harold Bell Wright (1911) and *The Ford* by Mary Austin (1917), among others. Not much interested in the literary merits of these texts, he focuses on what they reveal about contemporary attitudes towards a revolution in Western agriculture: the rise and triumph of big capital in California farming. They may portray capitalists as rapacious and ruthless, but they also acknowledge that capitalism often maximized agricultural profits while, importantly, anglicizing vast portions of the state. This, for many late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Anglo-Californians, was called progress.

One has a long trail to follow before arriving at Henderson's vivid explorations of these quirky and oft-ignored texts. More than half of his book is devoted to an arid history of capitalist agriculture's rise in California, coupled with a dense, though occasionally brilliant, exploration of Marxist and post-Marxist theories of agricultural development.

In the Rocky Mountains of Colorado it is easy to imagine that one's every step falls on virgin terrain: the vast, craggy vistas seem to echo the myths of the American wilderness. Paths, though, are made by earlier footsteps, and it is the chief strength of Wyckoff's *Creating Colorado* that it shows how thoroughly these mountains have been permeated by human presences: from the Utes, Cheyenne, Comanches and Arapahoe, to the prospectors, scouts, ranchers, Hispanic settlers, railwaymen, Chinese immigrants and East Coast ladies of fashion, all of whom, in different ways, called Colorado into being.

Of these three books, *Creating Colorado* most resembles historical geography. No tricks here: five main chapters look at five geographical regions within the boundaries of the modern state, tracing changes in population, perception and patterns of land use and land change over a sixty-year period from 1860 to

1920; bookend chapters sketch earlier and later developments. The dramatic encounters that shaped Colorado included: hydraulic mining techniques that, as early as the 1870s, could turn a hillside to pebbles and silt; full-scale wars between cattlemen and sheep herders in the 1890s, for which troops had to be mustered; the all-out wrangling over the course of irrigation channels and railway lines and the opening up of commercial arteries, on which many lives (and fortunes) came to depend. One wishes for finer-grained treatments of those lives that do appear. The few characters whom Wyckoff introduces merely whet the appetite for more stories of rogues, survivors and mountain sharps.

What makes these books environmental histories? Each author has told a story of place through time, while suggesting that places

themselves can be used as primary sources for history, which would seem to put *Creating Colorado*, *California and the Fictions of Capital* and *Visions of Paradise* firmly within the field. And yet, each author might demur, insisting that he

has written a work of either literary criticism, landscape studies, or historical geography. It is a testimony to the rapid expansion of environmental history that it has just about enclosed these neighbouring terrains.

Does a discipline that has spread so fast and so far retain any coherent, unifying project? If environmental historians share anything, it would seem that they have in common a notion of nature that is a fecund conundrum: nature is both the physical organization of living and non-living entities, and it is our invention. The fascinating paradox of environmental history - that nature must be treated as independent and autonomous (as “not us”) at the same time that it is precisely us (our creation, a product of our hands and minds) - reflects a central preoccupation of Western intellectual life: to find an other that is, at the same time, ourselves. Deus sive natura indeed.