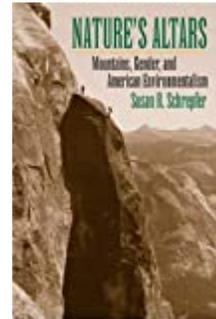




Susan R. Schrepfer. *Nature's Altars: Mountains, Gender, and American Environmentalism.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005. xii + 316 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1369-4.



Reviewed by Nancy Unger (Departments of History, Women's and Gender Studies, and Environmental Studies, Santa Clara University)

Published on H-Women (December, 2005)

Heeding the Call: Towards an Understanding of Gender in American Environmental History

In February of 2001, the *Pacific Historical Review* featured a forum entitled "Environmental History, Retrospect and Prospect" in which leading scholars Samuel Hays, Char Miller, J. Donald Hughes, Richard White, and Vera Norwood provided a thoughtful assessment of the state of the discipline.[1] Both Norwood and White confirmed the need for broader and more thoughtful and analytic investigations into the powerful relationship between gender and the environment throughout American history.[2] White, however, added a warning: "The danger ... is not that gendering will be ignored in environmental history but that it will become predictable—An endless rediscovery that humans have often made nature female. Gender has more work to do than that." [3]

Scholars are responding to the call, with varying degrees of success. The thirteen essays in Virginia Scharff's *Seeing Nature Through Gender* provide an excellent start, showing how a gendered understanding of nature has consistently pervaded American perceptions of and responses to the natural world.[4] As an edited collection,

however, it necessarily lacks the coherence and thoroughness of a monograph. Recent single-author studies have appeared primarily as journal articles rather than books, and are focused on much smaller pieces of the story at the confluence of gender and environment in American history. Other monographs and edited collections offer fascinating global, gendered perspectives and profound philosophical insight, but are not sufficiently focused for the reader specifically interested in American history.

Susan R. Schrepfer, associate professor of history at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, and prize-winning environmental historian, has made an important contribution in meeting the challenge offered by Norwood and White, and has done it exceedingly well. She skillfully weaves three strands of the story (mountaineering, gender, and American environmentalism) into a coherent yet complex tale of interaction and development. Readers attracted by Schrepfer's title may, however, be disappointed to find that this is a study of only approximately one hundred years of that struggle. Adding "1860s to

1960s” to the subtitle would help to clarify the scope of this work.

Although Schrepfer states that her book is “a story of how mountains were made wilderness,” it is her observation that “the physical features of any and all landscapes are construed through the cultural assumptions of the viewer” that speaks to the real contribution of this volume (p. 2). She shows how American men and women, primarily but not exclusively of the white middle class, viewed mountains through the very gendered lenses prescribed by their particular era, and responded accordingly. Her first chapter, “Place Naming in the High Sierra,” vividly illustrates that, beginning in the 1850s, the names that were given to various topographic features, including innumerable mountain peaks, were powerful political, economic, and cultural tools establishing Euro-American male mastery and control of western landscapes. In this chapter and in several others, Schrepfer succeeds in placing what is happening in a particular region into national and even international contexts.

Schrepfer further establishes that, although both men and women around the turn of the twentieth century viewed nature as “sublime,” that term meant something very different to the two sexes. For men “mountains were personal, malevolent, and feminine enemies” to be mastered, for in so doing, they proved mastery of themselves. In contrast, “the feminine sublime coalesced in moments of almost overpowering intimacy with place, moment of keen awareness of the life forces that flowed through the physical world and themselves, verifying the values of nurturance and reproduction that society expected of women” (p. 233). Although these quotes may suggest that Schrepfer falls victim to sweeping stereotypes, she is in fact careful to point out many exceptions and nuances within the gendered perspectives she details.

The masculine and feminine sublimines established in part 1, “(En)gendering the Wilderness, 1860s-1914,” provide the necessary background for part 2, “Outdoor Experiences and the Politics of Conservation, 1914-1944.” The three chapters in this second section trace the rise of women’s mountaineering, frequently cloaked in the “language of sweet domesticity” (p. 115) rather than “the male rhetoric of assault and attack, risk and mastery” (p. 118). Women’s participation in mountaineering declined sharply in the late 1930s, as did their leadership positions in the Sierra Club and other alpine organizations. Schrepfer offers several plausible reasons for this decline, but wisely refrains from asserting any one explanation with certainty. In chapter 5, “Mountains as the

Measure of Men,” she investigates the type of men who came to dominate America’s alpine clubs beginning in the 1930s, as male mountaineers increasingly focused on risk (and fear) reduction through teamwork, technology, and careful planning.

The final chapter in part 2 includes some fascinating descriptions of how outdoor activities for boys and girls were designed to perpetuate socially prescribed gender spheres. In perhaps the most vivid example, Boy Scouts were told that the campfire stood for “the camaraderie of the battlefield, factory, and office,” while Campfire Girls “learned that fire represented hearth and home” (p. 155). Schrepfer also traces how women, deterred from mountain climbing outright, found acceptance for their outdoor activities by forming leagues and societies promoting wilderness preservation, especially the protection of wildflowers.

In part 3, “In Wilderness is the Preservation of the Nation, and the World, 1945-1964,” Schrepfer asserts that “World War II had cast a patriotic glow over America’s landscapes and conflated them with family,” paving the way for the widespread popularity of preservation and conservation movements, a popularity fed by Cold War fears (p. 181). Women’s visibility was diminished as they served in supportive roles, primarily as volunteers rather than paid professionals within those organizations. Even mountaineering women felt compelled to emphasize their femininity. In keeping with this distribution of power and visibility, Schrepfer’s final chapter, which traces the rise of the modern conservation movement, focuses heavily on David Brower, long-term executive director of the Sierra Club and three-time Nobel Prize nominee, who strove to popularize wilderness conservation as an issue of human health and safety.[5] Rachel Carson’s 1962 *Silent Spring*, which utilized some of the gendered notions described by Schrepfer and has since been frequently hailed as one of the most influential books of the twentieth century, receives comparatively little attention.[6]

Schrepfer is, of course, entitled to limit her study as she sees fit. It is nonetheless a disappointment that she chose to end her narrative with the mid-1960s, referring only briefly in her epilogue to the subsequent impact of women’s liberation and feminism. Although Schrepfer’s endnotes are thorough, the lack of a bibliography will be a particular disappointment to scholars eager to build and expand upon this important work.

Nature’s Altars is written for an exclusively scholarly audience, which is both a strength and a weak-

ness. Schrepfer's sophisticated analysis of gendered approaches to nature over time would perhaps not appeal to general audiences under any circumstances, but sentences like "Mountaineering also offered the opportunity to merge the romantic aesthetic with the social topographies of gender" are sure to discourage all but the most scholarly readers (p. 41). This is a shame, because Schrepfer is otherwise a good story teller whose extensive research unearthed tales of many colorful, interesting characters and events with the potential to appeal to a much broader audience, particularly mountaineering and wilderness enthusiasts. The intriguing illustrations sprinkled throughout the text also contribute significantly to the narrative's appeal. Schrepfer eschews the standard formal portraits of the main movers and shakers in favor of photographs of individuals and groups camping and climbing, as well as artists' depictions of nature.

Despite the limitations of *Nature's Altars*, scholars and students of both American women's history and environmental history will find much in this ambitious and important study to ponder, debate, and celebrate.

Notes

- [1]. "Environmental History, Retrospect and Prospect," *Pacific Historical Review* 70 (2001): pp. 55-57.
- [2]. Vera Norwood, "Disturbed Landscape/Disturbing Process: Environmental History for the Twenty-First Century," *Pacific Historical Review* 70 (2001): pp. 77-89.
- [3]. Richard White, "Environmental History: Watching a Historical Field Mature," *Pacific Historical Review* 70 (2001): pp. 103-111.
- [4]. Virginia Scharff, *Seeing Nature Through Gender* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003).
- [5]. David Brower and Steve Chapple, *Let the Mountains Talk, Let the Rivers Run* (New Society Publishers, 2000).
- [6]. Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-women>

Citation: Nancy Unger. Review of Schrepfer, Susan R., *Nature's Altars: Mountains, Gender, and American Environmentalism*. H-Women, H-Net Reviews. December, 2005.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10970>

Copyright © 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.