



William Deverell, Greg Hise, eds. *Land of Sunshine: An Environmental History of Metropolitan Los Angeles*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005. viii + 350 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8229-4254-2.



Reviewed by Philip Dreyfus (Department of History, San Francisco State University)

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Sunshine on Urban Environmental History

Land of Sunshine is the sixth release from the University of Pittsburgh's History of the Urban Environment series, edited by Martin Melosi and Joel Tarr. The book's structure is consistent with the series' publicized goal of showcasing some of the best scholarship in the field of urban environmental history. A varied and interdisciplinary collection of essays and image folios, the book is designed to stimulate consideration of how Los Angeles has taken its contemporary shape. *Land of Sunshine's* editors, William Deverell and Greg Hise, have solicited contributions whose overarching focus is the interaction between the city's setting and the human beings whose environmental manipulations produced modern metropolitan Los Angeles. In their introduction, Deverell and Hise establish the book's intention to provide some scholarly perspective on the question of Los Angeles's environmental sustainability, and by extension, on the general role of cities in "nature."

Because of the topical and temporal variety encompassed by this book, the editors have chosen to avoid imposing a forced chronology on the sequence of its component essays. Rather, Deverell and Hise have grouped

the authors' contributions into three thematic sections titled "Analysis of Place," "Land Use and Governance," and "Nature and Culture."

Part 1, "Analysis of Place," begins with a collection of early-twentieth-century Los Angeles photographs, selected by William McClung, followed by three essays written by L. Mark Raab, an anthropologist, Paula Schiffman, a biologist, and economists Karen Clay and Werner Troesken. Despite the editors' caveat regarding *Land of Sunshine's* lack of strict chronology, it is evident that they felt compelled as historians to start their book at the "beginning of the story," so to speak. Consequently, these first three essays paint a partial portrait of Los Angeles's pre-urban site. Raab introduces us to the area's first human inhabitants, and consistent with current approaches to Native American history, he tries to rescue these hunter-gatherers from common stereotypes. They were, the author says, neither passive elements of their natural environment nor omniscient eco-engineers. While eschewing environmental determinism, Raab points nonetheless to osteological research that posits an increase in violence during prehistoric peri-

ods of prolonged drought, triggering the reader's consideration of how long-term climatic patterns have affected the fate of southern Californians since time immemorial. Schiffman's essay is a description of the Los Angeles prairie ecosystem that quickly disappeared after European settlement began. Climate comes to the fore in this essay as well, as Schiffman notes that similarities between the Californian and Spanish environments facilitated not only Spanish occupation and farming techniques but also biotic transfers. Finally, Clay and Troesken offer a quantitative analysis of Mexican land claims in California with the goal of determining the fairness of the Land Act of 1851. The authors conclude that California did fairly well in recognizing the validity of land rights established during prior national regimes, but that the data is complicated by non-political factors that affected property retention. It is on this point that the essay's principal environmental argument is made with respect to the effect of drought in the 1860s on the rancheros' persistence. While this essay is a very good piece of economic history, its minor attention to natural phenomena, especially given its placement directly after the Schiffman article, makes its inclusion seem an obligatory move by the editors to fill a transitional space between pre-contact California and the essays in part 2, all of which cover specifically urban topics set in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Part 2, "Land Use and Governance," makes up the bulk of the book. After Terry Harkness's aerial graphics depicting changing land uses over time, the seven essays that appear here are joined in their attention to policy and planning, and to contests between social classes and economic interest groups over uses of urban space. Historian Daniel Johnson launches this section with his essay on pollution and reform in the early twentieth century. Johnson demonstrates that working-class Angelenos, enjoying a high rate of homeownership, resisted the affront to their property values caused by industrial pollution, and balanced this as best they could with their interest in preserving the jobs that polluting industries provided. In so doing, they found themselves in shifting alliances with other members of their urban community, as business interests conflicted over the merits of beauty and tourism on the one hand and industrial productivity with its consequent environmental costs on the other. Paul Sabin, a specialist in energy politics, follows up with a related essay on beaches versus oil that highlights the contest between extractive industry and tourism, recreation, and residential real estate. The author shows that even during the depression of the 1930s, majorities of Californi-

ans consistently voted to protect their beaches against private exploitation. Sabin also examines the political struggles of the 1920s and 1930s over the distribution of the economic benefits of oil revenues.

In contrast to Sabin's tale of protection, geographer Blake Gumprecht chronicles the gradual destruction of the Los Angeles River on account of its perceived irrelevance to the residents of the city that grew up around it. The river, which was the very reason for the pueblo of Los Angeles's location, lost value as the water needs of the expanding metropolis outpaced its ability to meet them. In comparison to Angelenos' attachment to their beaches, their view of their river as just an occasional hazard to be controlled speaks volumes of the impact of perceptions on how urban environments are crafted. Sticking to the theme of water, historian Jared Orsi's essay on flood control addresses in part the treadmill on which flood control engineers find themselves as the expansion of the urban environment makes flooding more likely and its prevention ever more essential. Focusing on flood control efforts spanning the period from the 1930s to the 1990s, Orsi admonishes that engineering alone is insufficient to address the problem of trying to force an "unruly" nature to conform to the needs of an "ordered" urban environment.

In the next essay, Tom Sitton, an urban historian, describes the role of progressive-minded private organizations composed of leading citizens in promoting urban environmental planning. This article is in large part a testament to the Haynes Foundation, which provided the grant to *Land of Sunshine's* editors that funded the authors' honoraria. While Sitton concludes that the Foundation's impact is hard to measure, he credits civic associations of this sort with providing the public with an invaluable educational service toward the goal of making rational environmental choices. Following Sitton, urban geographer Christopher Boone seems to underscore the idea that we need to disentangle our notions of public interest from the realities of class interest when examining urban environmental choices. Boone's case study of L.A.'s industrial East Side demonstrates that the placement of noxious industries and working-class ethnic minority housing—in this case Latino—go hand in hand. His history, though, places industrial development first in time, followed by residential growth. The resulting environmental inequities appear to be a consequence of unequal political power between communities and of a history of economic and racial segregation. One is reminded at this point of the first article in this section of the book, and of the potential for an intergenerational comparison

of the struggle for healthy urban neighborhoods.

The concluding essay in part 2 is written by *New Yorker* staff writer John McPhee. It is the very moving story of Angelenos' perpetual contest with regional geology. This reviewer asks forgiveness of his colleagues for wishing that historians were required by a professional code of conduct to write stories as compelling as McPhee's. McPhee begins with the horrifying tale of a family pinned in their home by a debris flow, and then weaves together a collection of valuable anecdotes, scientific information and history that leave the reader with an image of Los Angeles as a collective Sisyphus. By the end of the story, one doubts that Angelenos will ever master the San Gabriel Mountains, but one is touched by the irony and perhaps even the futility of their battle.

Part 3, "Nature and Culture," includes a visually appealing folio of landscape photographs with commentary by book dealer and photographic literature enthusiast Michael Dawson, followed by three final essays and an epilogue. Jennifer Price, a free lance writer and environmental historian, gives us thirteen ways of looking at nature in Los Angeles, guided by the principle that we need to look for nature within the everyday life of the city rather than seeing nature and the metropolis as strictly antithetical. One of her proposals, that we should see Los Angeles's nature as an ecology that urbanites build in and manage, certainly has utility if conceptual clarity can be turned into effective policy. The next essay is historian Douglas Sackman's appraisal of Los Angeles's Edenic image and the consequences of imposing paradisiacal expectations on the region's geography and its people. With a strong focus on the gardening of exotic species and the industrial farming of oranges, Sackman concludes that the human reinvention of southern California's nature has borne and concealed substantial social costs. While Sackman analyzes the relationship between people and plant cultivation, geographers Unna Lassiter and Jennifer Wolch address animal domestication, and particularly the role of animals in the lives of Los Angeles's Chicana and Latina population. Their essay, based on interviews, emphasizes the attachment of Chicanas and Latinas to a wide array of animals, not all of which are typically considered appropriate to dense urban settings. Lassiter and Wolch find that the women in their study reject human domination of animals, have strong sentimental attachments to both household pets and livestock, and also view their animals as a link to their rural ancestry. One wonders if some comparison might not be made to all those many successive waves of peasant immigrants from around the world who have

been flowing to America's cities since the 1840s. The cultural contest over "proper" uses of urban space, especially regarding the place of domesticated animals in the city, is an old one.

Robert Gottlieb, an urban and environmental policy expert, offers *Land of Sunshine's* brief epilogue. Gottlieb brings the book to its conclusion with a note of optimism regarding the potential for a productive urban environmental awareness. Gottlieb cites the eventual emergence of a watershed management policy in Los Angeles after the state's voters defeated plans for a Peripheral Canal. He also notes that Los Angeles has become home to several community food system initiatives, including community-supported agriculture and farm-to-school distribution networks. The author's admission that many of these changes are occurring at the margins of Los Angeles's community leaves us hoping that a set of new urban environmental debates and models will reach the city's heart before too long.

As evident from the extraordinary range of subjects described above, *Land of Sunshine* should be approached by its readers as an excellent anthology—no more and no less. Its strength lies in the quality of its component essays, each of which provides a taste of an aspect of Los Angeles's environmental history that one might hope to savor at greater length. On the other hand, the book's weakness is one that is currently endemic to much of the urban environmental history genre. While the scholarship of *Land of Sunshine's* authors and editors cannot be faulted, the anthology format itself suggests the field's immaturity. *Land of Sunshine* now joins a number of other anthologies of urban environmental history, including *Common Fields: An Environmental History of St. Louis* (1997), edited by Andrew Hurley; *On the Border: An Environmental History of San Antonio* (2001), edited by Char Miller; *Devastation and Renewal: An Environmental History of Pittsburgh and its Region* (2004), edited by Joel Tarr; and others. These essay collections are entirely appropriate ways of showcasing the various efforts of multiple scholars with different interests and perspectives, but they also reveal the difficulty of defining precisely what urban environmental history is.

Is urban environmental history the study of the transformation of the "nature" of an urban site? Is it an examination of the interaction between cities and their hinterlands? Is it about environmental policy, private land use, or the struggle between classes, ethnic groups, and economic interest groups for control over urban space? Is it about the challenges of establishing water and food

distribution systems? Does it concern waste removal or perhaps industrial pollution? Should it treat cities as inevitable or as avoidable? Will the approach historians take to urban environmental problems be declensionist or open-ended? Urban environmental historians are either unsure of the answers to these questions or would prefer to answer “all of the above.” If urban environmental history can be all of these things, the daunting task of integration and synthesis drives us into the anthology mode, where the ultimate challenge of the field is temporarily skirted. If one can imagine taking the risk of moving a collection like *Land of Sunshine* forward into a cohesive narrative history, the questions one should like to see raised about Los Angeles are the same as one would ask for the environmental history of any city: How did this place come to be here? How have successive generations of human occupants transformed it and the larger world with which it interacts? What have been the unanticipated environmental consequences of their actions? And finally, how can Angelenos’ specific strug-

gles within their own unique environment shed light on the universal aspects of urbanization? This last question is of great significance lest our accumulation of case studies distract us from our efforts, however halting and uncertain, to craft some overarching means of treating the process of urban development as a general phenomenon in which human beings engage non-human nature. Comparisons across time and space would be extraordinarily useful. With few exceptions, each of the essays in *Land of Sunshine* addresses a concern that has its counterpart in the history of other cities. Perhaps either the editors or the individual authors could have taken on the task of pointing that out.

On the merits of its essays, *Land of Sunshine* is highly recommended to readers interested in Los Angeles or California history, urban and environmental history, and urban planning. It is a fine and eminently readable addition to the growing collection of anthologies on the environmental history of American cities.

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