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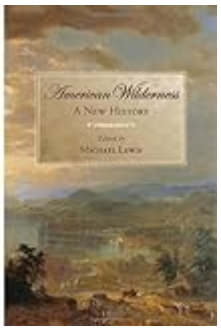

Michael Lewis, ed. *American Wilderness: A New History.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. viii + 290 pp. $19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-517414-4; $99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-517415-1.

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The Great–Recurring–Wilderness Debates

Ever since Roderick Nash published *Wilderness and the American Mind* in 1967, historians have been augmenting, disputing, and grappling with his influential analysis. Nash documented a cultural evolution from distaste for wilderness in the Judeo-Christian belief system to an appreciation of wilderness that commenced among urban elites. Nash also highlighted stark contrasts between the preservation movement's valuation of scenic vistas for recreation and the conservation movement's valuation of resources for the "greatest good." This dichotomy was epitomized by the battle between John Muir and Gifford Pinchot over Hetch Hetchy Valley in the early twentieth century. In later editions, Nash professed his unabashed fondness for wilderness and urged fellow enthusiasts to continue fighting to safeguard it.[1]

Environmental justice activists in the 1980s unveiled more sinister, imperialistic aspects of the American "wilderness cult." A postcolonial backlash against impositions of U.S. style wilderness preservation in the third world indicated the frequency with which indigenous peoples were expelled from their land and denied access to supplies as national parks were fenced off. Critics also noted the extent to which industrial capitalist nations publicly professed the value of pristine wilderness reserves, but selfishly and voraciously exploited supplies of natural resources.

In the 1990s, explorations of wilderness as both an ontological and epistemological construction led to different interpretations. Greater recognition of nature-culture hybrids displaced ideals of "pure" wilderness; the focus on a stewardship ethic enlarged assumptions that domination over "evil" wilderness reigned supreme in the Christian heritage; and similarities between preservation and conservation were revealed. In *The Great New Wilderness Debate* (1998), scholars found value in both traditional and revisionist interpretations of wilderness history.[2]

Despite being ambitiously titled with respect to its novelty, *American Wilderness: A New History* covers much familiar ground of recurring debates. Major themes in this collection of essays include conflicts between preservation efforts and indigenous people; philosophical roots of major wilderness advocacy organizations; and analyses of social conditions that have shaped

American wilderness thought and practices. New emphases include the links between wilderness and nationalism, and suggestions that wilderness is a key not just to U.S. history but also to the global history of modernity. The book is valuable for both its synthesis and innovation.

Michael Lewis, in the introduction, notes the contradictory ways in which Americans have simultaneously romanticized and abused wilderness. He refers to a "national schizophrenia," epitomized by citizens who passionately oppose oil-drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, yet brashly drive hundreds of miles in gas-chugging vehicles to hike in national parks. Despite its high standards of wilderness legislation, the United States has experienced a net loss of wild areas. Vacations may be based on wilderness excursions, but daily life is filled with environmental degradation.

Melanie Perreault's chapter describes European encounters with an environment that had already been significantly transformed by natives, yet appeared to them as a "blank slate." In early seventeenth-century colonies, such asVirginia, Massachusetts, and Canada, fences and farms were welcomed as aesthetically pleasing replacements for the barren, desolate wilderness. Perreault asserts that domestic animals heralded a symbolic end to wilderness during the contact period.

Mark Stoll's chapter avows that part of the Puritan legacy was a spiritualized wilderness tradition, characterized by reverence for nature. To some Christians, the American wilderness seemed to offer a chance to live in a second Eden. Although the Puritans believed they had been charged with subduing the earth, the Bible also offered the paradigm of wilderness as a refuge for God's chosen people. In the early nineteenth century, wilderness served as the New England diaspora. Stoll finds remnants of Puritan-style wilderness spirituality in the work of Ansel Adams, Eliot Porter, Annie Dillard, Rachel Carson, and other noteworthy environmental figures.

Steven Stoll indicates the extent to which agricultural expansion came at the expense of both wilderness and American Indians in his chapter, "Farm against Forest." As farmers continually sought new territory, they served as the shock troops of environmental transformation. Most Romantic thinkers found positive qualities in the domesticated countryside. Thomas Cole's 1847 painting, "Home in the Woods," presented a counternarrative, in which families maintaining a wilderness existence still lived a civilized, stable life. It was the totalizing grid of the U.S. land survey, however, that symbolically ratified the agrarian errand into the wilderness. Bradley Dean and Angela Miller both address literary and artistic manifestations of Romanticism. Dean focuses on the inspiration Henry David Thoreau found at Mount Katahdin and his definition of wilderness as unexplored, unknown territory. Miller provides examples of several Hudson River School painters whose landscapes conveyed the ideals of wilderness as an untouched, nonhuman source of moral authority. Further illustrating the consequences of viewing wilderness as unspoiled terrain, Benjamin Johnson discusses how conflicts between wilderness advocates and local people over subsistence practices left a legacy of hostility to wilderness in many rural communities.

Chapters helping to re-write conventional wilderness history include Char Miller's, which outlines the common ground shared by Muir and Pinchot, and Kimberly Jarvis's, which shows the critical role women played in the conservation movement. Although gender politics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries linked wilderness and masculinity, women were foot soldiers and "municipal housekeepers" in the nationalistic zeal to save manhood by saving wilderness.

The difference between Progressive Era wilderness politics and the "modern wilderness idea" that developed during the interwar years was, according to Paul Sutter, based on the growth of automobile ownership and road development. Aldo Leopold, Robert Sterling Yard, Benton MacKaye, and Bob Marshall formed the Wilderness Society to oppose recreational trends in the 1920s and 1930s. Unlike earlier campaigners, they did not juxtapose nature preservation with economic progress. In his chapter on "Loving the Wild in Postwar America," however, Mark Harvey records how recreational wilderness users led the march towards the 1964 Wilderness Act. Popular magazines, films, recreational equipment companies, nature writers, and environmental organizations elevated the status of wilderness into a high moral cause deserving federal protection.

Michael Lewis's chapter discloses the uncertain relationship between science and wilderness that has existed since Aldo Leopold added ecology to the intellectual traditions he inherited from Muir and Pinchot. As many assumptions of ecological studies–such as the timeless "balance of nature"–have been overturned since the 1940s, conservation biology and restoration ecology have emerged. Conservation biologists argue that removing human pressures will allow nature to manage itself. Restoration ecologists counter that humans can and must manage nature. Both subfields are successors

to Leopold's notion of "intelligent tinkering."

Christopher Conte concentrates on the internationalization of the American wilderness model. Conte relies on the example of struggles around the Amani Nature Reserve, established in 1997 by the Tanzania government to protect biologically rich forests. The rigid preservationist model overlooks the extent to which indigenous peoples have seen domestication in the same places where colonial states have imposed their visions of wildness. Conflicts over access to forests that stem from the U.S. national park archetype illustrate the need for community-based conservation projects.

James Morton Turner's chapter details modern wilderness politics from the 1960s to 1990s. Among the most contentious issues have been the bitter political stand-off in the 1970s, that culminated in the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, and opposition to greater restrictions on Bureau of Land Management (BLM) wilderness lands, that was led by the Sagebrush Rebellion and Wise Use movement in the 1980s. In the ensuing decade, violence in response to environmental policies came both from opponents and radical supporters of wilderness legislation.

Donald Worster's epilogue ties protection of wild nature to modern liberal, democratic ideals held by "ordinary people." He shows that defense of wilderness has been most successful in nations that support democratic principles, human rights, and freedom of speech–e.g., Costa Rica, Panama, New Zealand, Australia, the United States, Canada, Norway, and Scotland. In these countries, wilderness is perceived as a place of freedom, worthy of respect. In more authoritarian nations, Worster contends, wilderness is a threat to dictatorial control. He optimistically believes that there is plenty of wild nature left for liberal democracies to protect.

From clear-cutting in old growth forests to backcountry camping in isolated mountain ranges, people have imagined and interacted with "wilderness" in multiple ways. Imperialism, capitalism, religion, science, and other ideological imperatives have shaped perspectives on the environment. *American Wilderness: A New History* successfully draws together essays that explore the paradoxes and controversies that continue to plague this mercurial concept.

Notes

[1]. Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

[2]. J. Baird Callicott and M. P. Nelson, eds., *The Great New Wilderness Debate* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998).