

**Philip J. Dreyfus.** *Our Better Nature: Environment and the Making of San Francisco.* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008. xiii + 226 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8061-3958-6.



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## Greening San Francisco

It might seem odd to have a rural historian review an environmental history of San Francisco, an urban metropolis. Yet as a rural historian, I have argued that agricultural and rural history is the study of people and nature. Moreover, I have had to make the point that it is also often the study of urbanization and people's constant renegotiation of the changing landscape—whether it is physical, economic, or cultural—in response to emerging cities and the folks that spur that growth. Philip J. Dreyfus adds an interesting dimension to his study of a city by placing San Francisco in its rural context. In *Our Better Nature: Environment and the Making of San Francisco* (2008), Dreyfus examines the "nature/human nexus" that existed between local Indians, especially the Yelamu, the Spanish and Mexicans, and Americans in the various stages of San Francisco's development. In all three cases, these people transformed the land because of their perceptions of its use and their need for sustenance, with widely different consequences. In the case of the Americans, he demonstrates that their "mastery" of the natural environment also led to their "alienation"

from it (p. 4). Because of this alienation and the detrimental effects thereof, San Franciscans were led to embark on various causes that could be dismissed just as a part of the larger national environmental movement, but which he argues were the next evolutions of enhancing the city's landscape for human needs. Dreyfus clearly identifies the mastery of the city's environment as people trying to achieve a "better nature" but also alludes to the environmental movement as a positive form of "our [San Franciscans] better nature" to save what was being lost (p. 148).

In most cases, Dreyfus achieves what he set out to do. As a synthetic work, many of his subarguments are not new, but he effectively documents the transformations made by the various groups. In chapter 1, the author outlines Indian life on the land, Spanish colonization, and the Mexican secularization of the missions. Clearly, as the administrators of colonial/frontier California, the Spanish and then Mexicans had different perspectives on how California's resources were to be used and distributed. But what makes this work useful for the lay reader or

a classroom setting is how Dreyfus details the results of the shifts in perspective. In this case, for example, the Yelamu, as many other tribes, used fire to create edge environments to attract game, quell the spread of disease, and otherwise manage the environment for their greatest benefit. The Spanish, Mexicans, and Americans conversely feared the dangers of fire to domestic herds and man-made structures and banned the use of fire among Indians. As a result, seed-bearing plants reappeared, causing the later folks to deal with the same vegetation in a different manner. The Yelamu then lost much of their source of subsistence and were forced to look to the missions for support, creating a new set of problems for the environment and cultural change. Again, much of this is not new, but we see how the story unfolds clearly and as a part of the larger story of San Francisco's environment.

In chapter 2, the author develops a clear story of how Americans laid the groundwork for the city's physical character in response to the needs of the gold rush, American ideals of order, and the natural obstacles of sand and water inherent in the landscape. This chapter also introduces San Francisco's ascent into modernity in order to set the scene for Americans' alienation from nature and thus the nineteenth-century greening of San Francisco in chapter 3 and the environmental movement of the twentieth century in chapter 5. Many of the author's arguments come together in chapter 4, "Water." Everyone connected to the city—urban dwellers, miners, farmers, conservationists, and preservationists—needed water and had distinct ideas about who or what deserved priority. Dreyfus summarizes basic water law, the Hetch Hetchy battle, and California's role in the larger conservation debate of the early 1900s.

Dreyfus intended to write a book useful for historians but also suitable for lay readers, which he has done. This book could easily be read by anyone interested in California history and certainly is accessible to undergraduate readers in an undergraduate environmental or California history course. He does not assume too much knowledge and gives important details in a narrative form. In addition to what he promised to give his readers, Dreyfus also presents several themes—intentionally or not, I cannot tell—that are intriguing. First is the issue of whether California is exceptional or not.<sup>[1]</sup> In chapter 3, "Green-

ing the City," for example, Dreyfus argues that San Franciscans faced many of the same problems and concerns as other urbanites in the late nineteenth century—political corruption, immorality, slums, and vice. But, on the other hand, San Francisco's case was different because of its natural environment and youth in comparison to other cities such as New York or Boston. Thus the movement to create Golden Gate Park did not lead to the same types of political or social contests as in those places. California was exceptional for its aridity and its history as a gold rush state but not for its origination as a nonurban place or the rise of the environmental movement. As a synthetic work, the book presents both sides of the issue, giving credence to both interpretations. Dreyfus also spends considerable time exploring the failures and the events that did not occur to demonstrate the importance of the actual events that did happen. For instance, he spends five pages describing the efforts of Alexis von Schmidt to tap the waters of Lake Tahoe for use in San Francisco. The plan failed but nonetheless points to the considerable effort of individuals to master San Francisco's environment for their purposes.

The author hoped not to write a paean to the city but argue that cities are more than just engines of efficient progress or alternatively consummate destroyers, and as he said, "it is time to reintegrate cities into our natural history" (p. 10). Dreyfus has successfully done this, and one can only hope that San Franciscans assume the full mantle of responsibility for the city's environment which he concludes is necessary to achieve his vision of "our better nature" (p. 193).

#### Note

[1]. Carey McWilliams's interpretation of California's labor and agriculture has dominated California historiography. See McWilliams, *California: the Great Exception* (New York: Current Books, 1949). There are a few authors who have examined California agriculture in terms of adaptation of Midwestern and eastern perspectives, especially David Vaught and myself. See Vaught, *Cultivating California: Growers, Specialty Crops, and Labor, 1875-1920* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); and Kindell, *Settling the Sunset Land: California and its Family Farmers, 1850s-1890s* (Ph.D. diss., Iowa State University, 2006).

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