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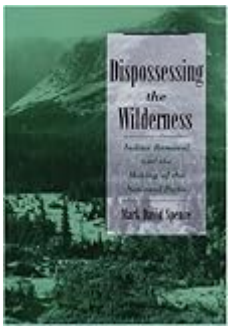

Mark David Spence. *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks.* New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. x + 200 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-511882-7.

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Indians and the American National Park

The American effort to preserve wilderness has been a popular topic with historians. My own bookshelves sag with biographies and histories that tell the heroic story of the struggle to protect and defend wild places, especially America's great national parks. Recently though, a number of historians, with William Cronon leading the charge, have made a strong case that the "wilderness" one finds in a national park is not a pre-existing state of nature that is found or discovered and then preserved and defended, but an all-too-human cultural and historical construct.[1] In his book, *Dispossessing the Wilderness*, historian Mark Spence follows Cronon's lead and shows that far from preserving an uninhabited and untouched wilderness, advocates of American national parks often created innocent "wilderness" through a sometimes violent and frequently underhanded policy of Indian removal.

Spence begins with the definition of wilderness found in the 1964 Wilderness Act: Wilderness, according to the Act, is a place where "man himself is a visitor who does not remain."[2] In the first two chapters of his book, Spence traces this definition of wilderness back to the mid nineteenth century. The last three quarters of the book provide the details of Indian removal from Yellowstone, Glacier, and Yosemite National Parks. While Spence's discussion of Indians' relationship to "wilderness" at these three national parks is excellent, his main historical argument – outlined in the first quarter of his study – is unconvincing.

In chapter one, Spence argues that after the War of 1812 and before the Civil War many Americans romanticized an "Indian wilderness." According to Spence, this romanticism for an Indian wilderness can be best seen in the painter George Catlin's 1833 call for a "nation's park" where tourists could come and see the Indian "in his classic attire, galloping his horse ... amid the fleeting herds of elks and buffaloes."[3] Spence explains that while Catlin's idea about preserving both wilderness and Indians in parks might seem strange to us now, such romanticism for an Indian wilderness was quite common during the first half of the nineteenth century. "Catlin," writes Spence, "differed from his contemporaries only in the strength of his convictions, not in the substance of his ideas" (10). Spence explains that many Americans saw

the existence of a vast Indian Territory west of the Mississippi as a mark of national distinction and that Indian Territory served as a de facto national park for "a whole generation of writers, artists, and travelers" (17). Quite appropriately, Spence is critical of Catlin's call for the preservation of an Indian wilderness park, which he says would have created a "monstrous combination of outdoor museum, human zoo, and wild animal park" (11). Still, Spence asks, why is it that late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century preservationists abandoned Catlin's idea for a national park inclusive of both Indians and nature?

The answer, according to chapter two, has to do with the Mexican War, the emergence of the ideology of Manifest Destiny, and the subsequent Indian wars on the Plains. Spence argues that westward expansion changed Americans' notions about Indians and wilderness. He writes that "the conflation of racial, political, and geographic 'destinies' with the cant of conquest effectively erased the human history of western North America and replaced it with an atemporal *natural* history that somehow prefigured the American conquests of these lands" (29). Unlike earlier visitors such as Catlin, late-nineteenth-and twentieth-century tourists and preservationists did not romanticize an Indian wilderness. Quite the contrary, they found that the presence of Indians marred the experience of wilderness. Spence tells us that this ideology of Indian-free wilderness first became manifest during the creation of Yellowstone National Park in 1872. He writes that Indian removal in Yellowstone stands as the "first example of removing a native population in order to 'preserve' nature," and that this ideal of pure nature became the model for other national parks, both within the United States and abroad (70).

Not surprising, the relationship between Indians and Yellowstone National Park is the subject of Spence's first case study. Spence starts by telling the story of Indian use of what would, after 1872, become Yellowstone "wilderness," beginning with the Paleo-Indians and continuing up to the Shosone, Bannock, and Mountain Crow in the middle third of the nineteenth century. He discusses how Indian groups used the area of the park for collecting obsidian, hunting, plant gathering, and vision quests, and he argues that far from fearing the geysers and hot springs of Yellowstone (a myth that has served the National Park Service well), Indians left offerings at these sites and used thermal energy for cooking. Interestingly, Spence argues that Indians made greater use of Yellowstone as bison herds diminished and Euro-American settlement increased on the land surrounding the park; in fact, he writes that Indians probably outnumbered Euro-American tourists during the early years of the park.

Spence shows that starting in the late 1870s, park officials and the U.S. military produced "wilderness" by driving Indians off the park landscape at Yellowstone. Park officials believed that the presence of Indians scared away tourists, especially after widespread publicity of an 1877 encounter between park tourists and bands of Nez Perce fleeing the U.S. Army. Park officials also blamed Indian hunting and fires for the destruction of wilderness and game. Spence's case study of Yellowstone concludes with a description of an 1899 scheme to create a living Indian exhibit on Dot Island in Yellowstone Lake. The proposed Dot Island Indian village seems to contradict Spence's argument that postwar tourists found Indians and wilderness irreconcilable. He deals with this discrepancy by suggesting that this display represented the last vestige of Catlin's old idea of an Indian wilderness park. He writes that when the Indian village plan failed, Yellowstone "finally became the non-Indian wilderness it was always intended to be – both in fact and in the historical imaginings of tourists and park officials" (69).

In his second case study, Spence gives a history of the stormy relationship between the Blackfeet Indians and officials at Glacier National Park. He shows that long before Glacier National Park became "wilderness," the Blackfeet used this mountainous Montana landscape to gather plants, to hunt, and later to collect timber for the construction of cabins and corrals. Spence also describes the profound spiritual and mythological relationship that the Blackfeet had and have with the landscape that became Glacier. The "backbone of the world" is home to a number of supernatural beings, and the mountain landscape figures prominently in the Blackfeet origin story. Old Man, the trickster figure who created the Blackfeet and the mountains, made the peaks now inside the park his final home. Spence tells the story of how the Blackfeet, facing starvation, agreed in 1895 to sell "the backbone of the world" to the United States government for $1.5 million, with the stipulation that tribal members could use the ceded land for fishing, hunting, and timber collection. It is this land that would, in 1910, become the eastern half of Glacier National Park.

In violation of the terms of the 1895 agreement, park officials tried to prevent the Blackfeet from using the natural resources of their former homeland and even made several unsuccessful attempts to lay claim to even more Blackfeet land. Spence does a wonderful job of showing how the Blackfeet used the U.S. District Court in Mon-

tana, the U.S. Court of Claims, and the new political centralization authorized by the Indian Reorganization Act to fight the colonial impulses of the park service, and he argues that opposition to the National Park Service "became a fundamental expression of Blackfeet national identity" (98). Ironically, while the National Park Service tried to purge Indians from Glacier, Louis Hill of the Great Northern Railroad paid Blackfeet Indians to "play Indian" for tourists at Glacier Park Hotel and at the park railroad depot, and the railroad line made the Blackfeet into the "Glacier Indians" in a national advertising campaign. Again, this appearance of Indians in the national park wilderness seems to undermine Spence's own argument. He explains, though, that park administrators chafed at this introduction of Indians into the wilderness, and while tourists might encounter Indians at the entrance to Glacier, "park officials eagerly sought to exclude any sign of the Blackfeet from the Glacier backcountry" (85).

In the last and best section of the book, Spence tells the story of the Yosemite Indians and their expulsion from Yosemite Valley. The Awahneechee Indians' original removal from the Valley coincided with the "discovery" of Yosemite in 1851 by state militias. The soldiers expelled the Indians from the Valley, but, as Spence's research makes clear, the Awhaneechee Indians quietly returned. For the Ahwahneechee, the Valley, which they believed had been given to them by the Creator at the beginning of time, served as a rich storehouse of acorns, fish, plants, and deer. Spence also notes that the valley floor provided some protection from newly arrived prospectors and settlers. The Awahneechee and the other Yosemite Indians survived on the park's natural bounty, but they also survived on tourist dollars, especially after the park grew in popularity during the last third of the nineteenth century. Male and female Yosemite Indians worked for the hotels, served as guides, and sold berries and freshly caught fish to visitors, but they also made a living selling "authentic" Indian culture. They danced, sang, told fortunes, and sold baskets, all of which generated profit because early tourists, explains Spence, still "associated Indians with wilderness" (105). In the twentieth century, the National Park Service capitalized on this lingering nostalgia for Indians by staging "Indian Field Days," an annual event in which the park paid Yosemite Indians to dress up like Plains Indians and gave prizes to winning basket makers and equestrians. Again, this introduction of Indians into the wilderness seems to pose problems for Spence's overarching historical argument. Spence argues, though, that the staging of the Yosemite Indians does not mean that the National Park Service embraced the concept of the Indian wilderness. Rather, park officials cynically used the Indians as tourist bait during the late summer when attendance was low. The park service may have occasionally used Indians to attract tourists, but as a "general rule," Spence writes, "park officials preferred to keep Indians outside the tourists' gaze" (119).

Spence claims that as the ideal of uninhabited wilderness took greater hold during the 1930s, the status of those Indians who called Yosemite home became more precarious. In an effort to drive the remaining Yosemite Indians out of their permanent residences on the valley floor, the park service relocated the Indians to new dwellings, increased the rent, enforced new rules, and evicted those who did not work for the park. Spence shows how the Yosemite Indians used the courts to try to protect their hold on the land, but to no avail. The park service successfully forced Indian residents out of the valley one by one; finally park officials destroyed the remaining homes of the Yosemite Indians during a firefighting drill in 1969.

While the discussion of Indian removal from the parks is well executed, the larger historical argument Spence makes in his first two chapters is problematic. First, he overstates the breadth and intensity of antebellum romanticism for an Indian wilderness. It is true that Catlin hoped to preserve a vast Indian wilderness in a national park, but it is a mistake to make an outlier like Catlin representative of widely held views of Indians and wilderness. Reading Spence's account, one gets the sense that Americans eagerly sought out an Indian wilderness experience. Certainly some antebellum Americans enjoyed plays, novels, and paintings that depicted an Indian wilderness, but very few Americans actually wanted to visit such a place, much less preserve an Indian wilderness in a national park. Most early-nineteenth-century American tourists approached actual wild or sublime landscapes with apprehension, some fear, and even terror rather than with nostalgia. And when antebellum tourists did seek sublime or wild scenes, most did not, like Catlin, hope for a chance Indian encounter. Catlin represents an extreme position, and by foregrounding Catlin, his travels west, and his call for an Indian national park, Spence ends up with a narrative of antebellum romanticism for Indians and wild places that is overdrawn.

Second, Spence overstates the degree to which Americans, after the Civil War, disassociated wilderness from Indians. Certainly Spence is right that park officials

drove away Indians who used national park land to live, hunt, or gather plants and timber. His book provides a wealth of evidence to substantiate this claim. But far from erasing signs of an Indian presence in the wilderness, park officials very actively tried to imbue national park wildernesses with signs of a vanished Indian past, especially during and after the 1890s when many Americans perceived the frontier as closed. Just think of the Indian past preserved at Mesa Verde National Park, or the Indian-inspired architecture and Indian ruins of Mary Colter at Grand Canyon National Park, or the use of Indian legends and myths in early National Park Service publicity. Or think of the examples from Spence's own case studies: the planned Indian village at Dot Island, the Blackfeet encampment and dances outside of Glacier National Park, or the Indian Field Days held during the late teens and 1920s in Yosemite Valley. This summoning of an Indian presence on the landscape cannot be explained away as a vestige of earlier nostalgia for an Indian wilderness. Nor can these examples be explained away as aberrations from the standard operating procedure of the park service. Clearly the park service drove permanent and temporary Indian residents out of the parks while they simultaneously used the national park wilderness as a site to invoke a noble and vanishing Indian past. To more fully understand the troubled relationship between national parks and various Native American groups, this fascinating, ironic, and damaging cultural formation needs to be confronted head on.

Third, Spence is historically inaccurate when he states that Yellowstone National Park is "the first example of removing a native population in order to 'preserve' nature" (70). As Oliver Goldsmith reminds us in his poem *The Deserted Village*, eighteenth-century English aristocrats often removed peasants and even whole villages when they made their pastoral landscape parks.[4] I mention this neither to quibble with Spence nor to root the American national park experience in English soil, but because the English case is instructive. Just as national park officials tried to invoke the dead ancestors of the people the park service dispossessed, late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century English park owners displaced the rural poor both inside and outside their parks while they simultaneously expressed nostalgia for the "picturesque" lives of English peasants prior to the Enclosure Movement. By examining some of the English literature on parks and dispossession, Spence might have found useful models and theoretical tools for dealing with some of the ironies that arise in his own study.[5]

The strength of Spence's book lies not in his overarching argument about wilderness and Indians, but in his three case studies, each of which stands on its own and each of which is excellent. In these case studies, he makes plain the effects of wilderness preservation on various Indian groups, but he does not make Indians into passive victims. He shows how Native Americans fought for access to the Indian Country that lay within national parks, and he describes the ways in which groups like the Yosemite Indians creatively responded to and even profited from the rise of Euro-American tourism in the West. Spence is also at his best when he describes how the Euro-American National Park Service and various Indian groups used the same landscape to fashion very different cultural meanings. For all of these reasons and despite its flaws, Spence's book is an important contribution to U.S. Indian history, American landscape studies, and the literature on national parks.

Notes

[1]. William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1996), 69-90.

[2] The Wilderness Act, 1964; available from `http://www.wilderness.net/nwps/legis/nwps_act.cfm`; INTERNET.

[3] George Catlin, *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Conditions of the North American Indians*, vol 1 (New York: Dover, 1973), 261.

[4] Oliver Goldsmith, *The Deserted Village* (1770) (Philadelphia: Porter and Coates, n.d.).

[5] The literature on English parks is vast. For parks and dispossession, a good place to start is Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 22, 96-107, 120-126, 141. On nostalgia for the English poor prior to the Enclosure Movement, see John Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting, 1730-1840 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); and Ann Bermingham,* Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition, 1740-1860 *(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986). For a clever discussion of these issues, also see Kenneth R. Olwig, "Reinventing Common Nature: Yosemite and Mount Rushmore – A Meandering Tale of a Double Nature," in* Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature_, ed. William Cronon (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1996), 379-408.

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