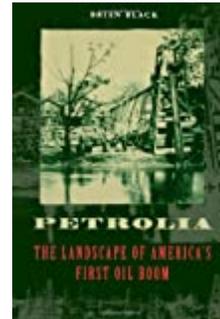




Brian Black. *Petrolia: The Landscape of America's First Oil Boom.* Creating the North American Landscape Series. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000. xii + 235 pp. \$42.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-6317-2.



Reviewed by Robert Rakoff (Professor of Politics and Environmental Studies, Hampshire College, Amherst)

Published on H-Environment (July, 2001)

Oil on the Brain

Oil on the Brain

Alaska's North Slope. Northern New Jersey. Harlan County. Chernobyl. Industrial landscapes are a common part of our experience of the world. As environmentalists we see (and hear and smell and taste) them with a mixture of outrage and fear; as consumers, with wonder and appreciation for the material life they help make possible. For historians, such sites are repositories of the cultures and institutions that shaped their conception, operation, and demise. A sensitive scholar/writer can mine these lodes for insight into the ways we have altered the natural world and the meanings we have imposed on it.

Brian Black, fortunately, is such a scholar. He has revisited the oil fields of western Pennsylvania, the site of our first industrial boom towns in the 1860s and 1870s, with the sensibility of a modern historian of cultural landscapes. Black offers us a multi-layered portrait of this area, which seeks to capture the energy and danger of early oil exploration and to understand the myths of progress and opportunity that Americans wove in response to this new phenomenon. Besides providing a description of technological and administrative innova-

tions and a basic account of the events and personalities that stand out in the story of Petrolia's rise and fall, Black seeks to understand how Americans turned the utter destruction of a peaceful rural valley and its communities into a cause for national celebration. Why did we get "oil on the brain", as a popular song had it, and how did it fuel support for what Black calls a "culture of massive disturbance" that created this "sacrificial landscape"?

Black shows in some detail how the logic of capitalist production, property relations, early corporate organization, and absentee speculation provided the institutional foundation for the commodification of the valley, its land and water, and its towns. Black's account is a good addition to the literature on law, environment, and industrialization in the nineteenth century. But Black's most original contribution is his analysis of contemporary photographs and media accounts of the boom years. Black makes excellent use of the work of a local photographer, John Mather, who documented the impact of the oil industry on the land and towns of the region, to demonstrate vividly how business decisions thoroughly overrode local culture to create a wholly instrumental land-

scape. Black nicely contrasts the starkness of Mather's images of a world of derricks, shanties, and oil slicks with the romanticized lithographs of national magazines that portrayed an industry growing in harmony with nature. This contrast complements Black's reading of newspapers and magazines, including major national publications, which documents the creation of a mythical Petrolia that legitimized the destruction of nature and community in the name of national economic progress. Black shows how popular journals contributed to an ideology of manifest, industrial destiny through publication of gothic tales of horror and danger alongside bald appeals to greed and nationalism.

Black provides a subtle picture of places and processes that could easily be stereotyped and dismissed. He shows, for example, that while the aptly named Oil Creek became merely part of the industrial mechanism of resource extraction, and while the even more aptly named company town of Pithole became a model for future corporate-controlled boom towns, some communities resisted the short-run mind-set of the fat years. Black makes good use of newspapers and other local sources to show that a few pre-existing towns sought to control the pace and impact of industrial development in order to maintain some semblance of a permanent community.

Underlying Black's analysis of these cultural and environmental transformations is the notion that the meaning of the places we inhabit has increasingly become a product of national forces rather than the organic out-

growth of an intimate, local sense of place. This line of analysis is introduced only at the end of the book in an ironic assessment of the fact that Pithole is now a national historic site, and so has gained meaning as a place that had no intrinsic meaning. I would have liked to see this line of thought developed earlier on and in more depth. Black assumes throughout that the residents of the area had constructed an indigenous, sustainable, agrarian sense of this place's meaning before the oil era, and that it was overwhelmed by oil fever. To avoid the trap of positing a golden age destroyed by the forces of modernity, it would be good to learn more about life in that pre-industrial period. After all, local farmers and landowners rarely hesitated to climb aboard when the oil exploration bandwagon pulled into town; the appeal of traditional farm life must have been as thin as the soil on the steep slopes of Petrolia. And it is important to remember that nineteenth-century American farmsteads were themselves landscapes instrumentalized for economic purposes (though obviously not to the degree we see in the oil boom years).

This is an engaging book. Besides the lavish use of photographs, Black skillfully varies his prose style. He puts us "on scene" in a variety of ways, using the present tense and second person sparingly and effectively, and he weaves the stories of local heroes and villains and other colorful characters into his narrative. Black combines this attention to style with solid research and imaginative analysis to give us a monograph that students of both industrial and landscape history will want to read.

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

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

Citation: Robert Rakoff. Review of Black, Brian, *Petrolia: The Landscape of America's First Oil Boom*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. July, 2001.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5347>

Copyright © 2001 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.