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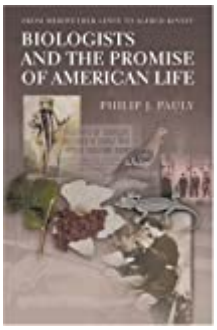

Philip J. Pauly. *Biologists and the Promise of American Life: From Meriwether Lewis to Alfred Kinsey.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000. xvi + 313 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-04977-9.

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In 1909 Herbert Croly contemplated the "promise of American life," a phrase that captured the essence of the Progressive movement.[1] Almost a century later, Philip J. Pauly uses this phrase to shape his excellent history of American biology, *Biologists and the Promise of American Life: >From Meriwether Lewis to Alfred Kinsey.* Although Pauly's work begins decades before Croly and other Progressives considered ways of improving the American condition, the use of the phrase is apt. Pauly's use of the Progressive appeal is a powerful and effective narrative device that reminds us that the American discipline of biology–like the Progressive agenda–was developed both in the context of and in response to a nation that was undergoing remarkable changes in its physical environment, population, and worldview. The Croly-inspired title also points to one of the few weaknesses of this book: the few connections the author draws between science and politics. Overall, however, this book is a major accomplishment, a synthesis that organizes a large and often disparate body of literature and provides a compelling central narrative. In the process, Pauly has made *Biologists and the Promise of American Life* the starting point for any serious inquiry into the history of American biology.

Pauly has three major goals in writing this book: "to sketch the contours of the landscape of American biological science, to see how the people who occupied that territory worked to change it, and to understand the degree to which they used their science to shape the country in which they lived" (p. xiii). He fulfills the first two goals very effectively, tracing the creation and development of the field of American biology as well as following a host of the most significant practitioners. He also succeeds in constructing a "cultural history of American biology, extending from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century" (p. 7). Pauly should especially be credited for covering a very wide range of scientific ideas and theories and making them accessible to non-specialists. Any book that can traverse the scientific terrain between the explorations of Lewis and Clark and the controversial theories of human sexuality of Alfred Kinsey, with such intervening figures as the eugenicist Charles Davenport, the botanist Louis Agassiz, and many others, risks getting bogged down in the hard details of science, but Pauly's concise and elegant writing allows him to avoid such a problem. Many histories of science are aimed at a narrow range of specialists, but this work is also intended for a larger audience. For example, Pauly provides an excellent overview of the introduction of Darwinism in American scientific circles in the mid-19th century, which created an intellectual schism exacerbated by the sectional crisis that was dividing the nation. It is a simple but powerful reminder

of how changing scientific paradigms are not produced in a historical vacuum.

Such parallels between events in the biological community and larger changes in American society and politics are frequently and effectively drawn in *Biologists and the Promise of American Life*. Pauly is especially skilled at describing the changing nature of the social world of American biologists, a world that ranged from the Gilded Age social club atmosphere of Washington D.C. and genteel rivalries in Cambridge to the development of summer communities in the woods and coasts of the Northeast. Indeed, less of the formative work of American biology took place in ivy-covered universities than in moss-covered and sandy summer cottages. One of Pauly's major contributions is conveying a sense of place and community as the setting for significant intellectual debates.

Methodologically, much of this book is an institutional history that relies on a large body of secondary literature as well as a surprising amount of primary sources. Although primarily a work of synthesis, Pauly's publications appear in several places across a surprisingly wide range of topics, from the summer scientific colonies to the movement to suppress Japanese cherry trees. It is as if Pauly has spent years doing discrete studies of American biology and he has finally decided that a narrative was needed to tie the history of the discipline together. Pauly has also done an impressive amount of new research using institutional reports, government bulletins, scientific journals, and personal papers. Although the book has no bibliography, the footnotes provide a clear guide to the literature.

The only goal that Pauly is unable to quite reach is ascertaining the impact that biologists had on America. There are several significant insights here, including the revelation that the Scopes trial was seen as far less urgent by biologists than the general public, and that the eugenics movement had little chance to thrive in America because of the decentralized nature of biology in the early-to-mid 20th century. Pauly also notes how the concerns and language of biologists mirrored that of the nativist movement. Yet what is needed are more direct causal ties that would make clear the degree to which the development of the discipline of biology drove the larger intellectual, cultural, and political debates of the day. This is not to say that Pauly fails to provide some suggestive hints. For example, Pauly demonstrates how biologists wrote high school textbooks that addressed central Progressive ideas of hygiene and public health. Yet one must remember that *Biologists and the Promise of American Life* is primarily a work of synthesis. If Pauly is unable to provide sufficient connections between the practice of American biology and American politics and culture, this has more to do with the historiography than with Pauly's own scholarship. This lack of connections is to be seen as a call for further research, for Pauly has distilled the literature extremely well, adding his own scholarly work and insights. The final result is an important new narrative for understanding American science and society, and the beginning of significant new research examining the nexus of biology and the development of American thought, culture, and politics.

Although this book will certainly be read by historians of science and probably assigned in their survey courses, it also deserves a larger audience. In recent years, debates over the meaning and origins of Progressivism, for example, have been notably fruitful, and although this book may not attract the same attention as Daniel Rodgers' *Atlantic Crossings* it surely should be added to the debates about American Progressivism.[2] Similarly, those who consider the impact of Darwinism and evolution on American thought will profit from Pauly's overview of the introduction and resistance to Darwinism in America.

Notes

[1]. Herbert Croly, *The Promise of American Life* (New York: Macmillan, 1909).

[2]. Daniel Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age.* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).