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Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past. William Cronon,

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Environmental studies is a growing field that brings new knowledge almost every day and certainly with every press's new listings. Many Western social scientists are attracted to it as a means of explicating the past, present, and future of North America. It is not new to Western historians. James C. Malin and Walter Prescott Webb were two pathfinders in studies of the environment over five to seven decades ago, but ecological impacts on human actions were somewhat forgotten by historians in the interim. During the past fifteen years environmental history has become a staple in studies of the American West. What is new is the importance of environmental history to an overall understanding of the American legacy and the placement of it within mainstream considerations of the social sciences. With this in mind, Under an Open Sky offers the reader several important environmental considerations to ponder.

As a parallel to this rediscovery of environmental themes and others that have come to represent a "new" Western history, some historians have proved
resistant and downright contentious. In a recent issue of *Journal of the West* Gerald Nash, University of New Mexico historian, served notice on Western historians that he wasn’t going to take “it” anymore. “It” was revisions to Western history, and he was showing his displeasure with the “new” Western history. In the process of sharing his unhappiness with us, he posited a bizarre theory that Yale University was behind this evil movement, a movement that has fascist and Marxist tendencies.

When I read Nash in astonishment, I was reminded of a family incident in my rural Iowa hometown. The time was 1964; I had just returned from my first year in college, and my mother, a former high school teacher and principal, announced that David, a fifteen-year-old neighborhood boy who had recently grown long hair and sported sandals, had obviously evolved into a card-carrying fascist-communist. Now I had just finished Western Civilization at the University of Iowa, and I reminded my mother she was an educated woman and that this could not possibly be true, that fascists and communists were not compatible. What all this, of course, meant was that the young man was different, that he was confident and independent, and that he had ideas of his own. My mother later understood this, but Nash doesn’t appear to grasp this basic premise.

The Nash outburst, however, was followed up with newspaper articles, one in the *Denver Post* quoting William Savage from the University of Oklahoma who was in general agreement with Nash although he curiously admitted he hadn’t read Nash’s essay, and another in the *Los Angeles Times* where William Goetzmann of the University of Texas suggested that Western historians who did not agree with him, and presumably Nash and Savage, should go to Russia and stay there. There is a great deal of mean-spirited Cold War rhetoric in all of this.

So it was with some trepidation that I opened the covers of *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America’s Western Past*. Since it was written by Yale-educated and/or Yale-employed historians, one had expectations that fascist primers, communist class struggles, and generally pink images and totalitarian ranting would emanate from the pages. Of course, that is not the case (indeed, Nash’s work is discussed quite respectfully), and this review will not continue along these rather sarcastic lines. But as a historian who respects argument and the presentation of evidence without innuendo and wild accusations, it is important to state categorically that scholars who accuse other scholars of ideological incompatibility and lack of patriotism are no laughing matter. It was not too long ago that people lost jobs and were blacklisted for lesser accusations. Make no mistake about this; those who write about the environment as well as Indians, labor, African Americans, religion, Latinos,
Western society, Asian Americans, women—i.e. social history in general—are the subjects of this attack. Nash, Savage, and Goetzmann should clarify their intentions and identify what evidence they have for this kind of McCarthyite activity, and if they cannot, if they simply are not able to handle the heat of the historical argument regarding America’s most dynamic region with a most significant past without reasoned discourse, then they ought to rectify matters and call upon our colleagues for forgiveness. Disagreement with specific ideas and factual meaning is one thing and also a time-honored tradition in the academy; a vicious and vague attack is quite another.

*Under an Open Sky* is neither vicious nor vague. It is a noteworthy collection of readings penned to honor a respected political and cultural Western historian of Yale, Howard Lamar. It is carefully edited and skillfully organized. There are thirteen essays plus a concluding summary essay by Lamar. All are well-written; all embrace new and profound ways to look at Western history. Among the topics considered along with environmental studies are Native American history, western diplomacy, community studies, race relations, gender studies, religion, Western myth, Western art, the notion of “westerner,” commercialization, and the twentieth-century West. The editors plus John Mack Faragher, Sarah Deutsch, Katherine Morrissey, Michael Quinn, Patricia Limerick, Martha Sandweiss, Clyde Milner, Ann Fabian, Michael McGerr, and Howard Lamar are to be congratulated on their stimulating prose.

The environment in Western history is a featured part of the new Western history. In the opening essay, the editors make plain that they accept portions of what Frederick Jackson Turner had to offer, particularly the notion of “comparative study of parallel regional changes” (p. 6). It is the processes of the West that are important to study, they say, and these include six: species shifting, market making, land taking, boundary setting, state forming, and self-shaping. The environment is a significant actor in three of the six and especially the first. The editors convincingly argue that to understand the West is to understand the nonhuman invaders—“strange crops, new weeds, tame animals, and—worst of all—lethal microorganisms” (p. 11). Above all, markets, empires, and settlement were strongly influenced by environment.

The most important essay that directly addresses the role of environment in the West is William Cronon’s “Kennecott Journey.” No stranger to environmental history, Cronon has written an invigorating essay on how environmental change in Alaska’s copper mining country had an impact on the ecology of people, their political economy, and cultural values. Writes Cronon, “The chief innovation of environmental history has been to assert that discussions
of natural context cannot be relegated to an isolated chapter but must be integral to the human history of which they are so fundamental a part” (p. 33). Shelter, food, equipment, and the natural world all come together in the Wrangell Mountains with the inhabitants—Ahtna Indians, European explorers, American miners and their families—who stretch the abilities of the ecosystem.

Understanding the role of the environment is the subject of other essays, albeit less so than Cronon’s. John Mack Faragher, in a thoughtful challenge to historians to look to community studies as a way to view more clearly the West’s past, sees distinctive environmental relationships as a crucial element along with social structures, collective actions, values and beliefs in a community model (p. 94). Michael McGerr, in a somewhat contrary article about whether a distinctive West exists in the twentieth century, notes that knowledge of the land will help mark the West’s distinctiveness but it alone cannot explain the West as unique (pp. 245-6). McGerr takes on Donald Worster, Webb, and Nash, and turns each of their arguments about the West and environment upside down by suggesting that the recent and current West is still in a frontier stage of development and that is what makes it truly distinctive.

After all is read and said, this is an important and provocative book. It deserves attention and thoughtful reflection not only for the emphasis it places upon understanding the environment within the context of human actions but for the many creative nuances that permeate the pages on other aspects of the Western experience. As Ann Fabian has said, contests still trouble historians of the American West, contests between “the scholarly and the popular,” and between what has been thought to be true and what may be a different or additional truth (p. 225). One should not expect to agree with everything that is found in this book, but everything is worthy of careful consideration. John R. Wunder, Department of History, University of Nebraska-Lincoln.