Review of *Proving Up: Domesticating Land in US. History* by Lisi Krall

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Lisi Krall seeks to place homesteading and later public-land policies in the larger context
of American efforts to digest the huge western land mass that the United States came to control through purchase and conquest. She employs an evolutionary economics framework to explain why things turned out the way they did.

Krall begins her book with a startling personal anecdote: in 1920 her grandfather, a young Wyoming homesteader, was shot and killed by a neighbor in a dispute over water rights. The dire consequences of his murder for the family’s subsequent generations connect Krall intimately to the struggles of homesteaders.

More broadly, reexamining homesteading is a worthy goal, because scholarship on homesteading, except for a few specific topics (notably women’s role in homesteading), virtually ceased after Paul W. Gates published his 1968 magisterial opus, *History of Public Land Law Development*. Significant and authoritative as Gates’s study was and is, it nonetheless is more than four decades old and suffers from its research having been completed before modern methods of data analysis became available. With homesteading records now being-digitized, we are ready for a complete restudy of what homesteading was about.

Krall does not attempt that task; rather, she seeks to clear some of the theoretical and interpretive brush away, perhaps a necessary precondition to a full rethinking of homesteading. She counterposes what she terms “agrarian man” (sometimes styled as “the agrarian ideal” or other variations) with the emerging marketplace dynamics of laissez-faire capitalism, stating that “it is important to interpret the history of early nineteenth-century land policy in the context of a co-evolutionary dance of the agrarian ideal/ethos and a maturing market economy.”

Gates famously claimed, in a mostly unchallenged article from 1936 reused in his 1968 book, that homesteading was grafted onto an existing public-land-dispersal system with which it was “ill-fated and incongruous.” Krall challenges this view, arguing, “the Homestead Act was neither ill fated nor incongruous. It was entirely consistent with the forces at play, not at odds with them.” The conflict here may be less than Krall thinks: Krall wants to argue that to the extent that homesteading represented something different from ordinary public land dispersal and its attendant speculation, it sat incongruously in a land market dominated by capitalist forces. Krall’s approach is at least clearer. But both would agree, I think, that the simple home-spun story of homesteading as free land for poor people is seriously incomplete.

Krall extends her analysis to the present by exploring the emergence of a “wilderness ethos” as a third force beside the agrarian ideal and the market economy. Many of our current land-policy disputes will continue and even intensify until policy adopts a more fully ecological view of land.

Krall has skillfully blended passion and analysis, and she writes well. *Proving Up* is a welcome contribution to what I hope will become the “New History of Homesteading.”

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