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Review of Ronald Reagan and the Public Lands: America's Conservation Debate, 1979-1984

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BOOK REVIEWS

Ronald Reagan and the Public Lands: America's Conservation Debate, 1979-1984. By C. Brant Short. Environmental History Series, No. 10. College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1989. Notes, bibliography, index. xi + 178 pp. \$27.50 cloth, \$9.95 paper.

The Reagan years, having magically passed into history, are now the subjects of articles and books by historians, political scientists, and in this case an academic journalist, who builds a tightly constructed book out of the press releases of the period.

While concentrating primarily on the 1980s, Short is attentive to the schisms in the conservation movement and the myth and facts of public land alienation in the nineteenth century. There is little question that since the beginning of the Republic the disposal and the use of public lands has sparked intensive debate. The end of the frontier proclaimed by Fredrick Jackson Turner in 1893 did not halt the debate,

which turned to the role of public lands in conservation, forest, stream, and range protection. Herein the utilitarians of the Gifford Pinchot stripe jostled with the aesthetic conservationists of the Muir camp trying to define the new role of public lands. Offering a plague upon both their houses stood the traditional American frontier capitalist wedded to the concept of resource development and use without the considerations of conservation, beauty, or environment. The utilitarians won limited victories in this debate with policies following accordingly.

The standoff between utilitarians and aesthetic conservationists remained until the 1960s when a consensus emerged, spawning the wilderness movement, the Environmental Policy Act of 1969, and Earth Day 1970. None of this is new. It is standard fare in Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind*. But all of it is necessary for an understanding of the rhetoric and origins of the public land debate when the ecological conservation consensus broke down in the Reagan years.

The Philistines emerged in the form of the New Right. Their Goliath was Reagan's appointee, Secretary of the Interior James Watt, who claimed that the resource bureaucracies and their environmental allies represented elitist views that wanted to keep people from making a living through the development of the West's resources. Lesser Philistines in the Nevada state legislature had already launched the ill-starred Sagebrush Rebellion, which touched the politically attractive theme of reducing the public land bureaucracy in the West. The Reagan administration at first claimed to be an ally but soon abandoned the rebels in favor of privatizing public lands and offering resource users, i.e., energy corporations, greater and cheaper access to public lands. Now the battle was joined by the conservation and environmental forces.

The give and take of argument are the meat of this book, but the concrete results of arguments and ideas are not lost on this author. The environmental organizations grew in membership, Secretary Watt resigned, and the Reagan Administration backed away from land privat-

ization. In the final chapter and on a loftier plane the ideals of the New Deal do battle with the New Right. Presumably, and this is not clear, the author means the planning aspects of the New Deal battle with the laissez-faire ideals of the New Right in the debates over the public land. Presumably also, there were other concrete results of this battle that are not addressed here, such as an institutional weakening of the resource bureaucracies through directives and fund cutting. Was the result to make them more sympathetic to resource users and less interested in resource protection? All of these questions make the book an excellent choice to cap a course in American environmental history or policy.

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