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Review of Under Western Skies: Nature and History in the American West

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Under Western Skies: Nature and History in the American West. By Donald Worster. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. Notes, index. 292 pp. \$27.50.

No one is a more powerful spokesman for the New Western History than Donald Worster, and no western historian is a better storyteller. He writes with passion and eloquence, with deep concern for the future of the region as well as its past. Readers will find these essays thoughtful, stimulating, and contentious.

The book builds on several assumptions at the heart of the New Western History. First, "the invaded and subject peoples of the West must be given a voice in the region's history" (p. 12). Second, historians must show how the "drive for economic development of the West was often a ruthless assault on nature, and . . . left behind it much death, depletion, and ruin" (p. 13). And, finally, they should demonstrate how "the West has been ruled by concentrated power, though here, as in other places, power has often hidden itself behind beguiling masks" (p. 15). This is an angry book, a direct challenge to Frederick Jackson Turner's heroic frontier process.

Six of the volume's eleven selections have been published before, including "Beyond the Agrarian Myth," the opening piece in which Worster discusses some of the blind spots in older western histories. Two essays, "New West, True West" and "Grounds for Identity," explain why the West deserves to be considered as a separate region with a distinctive history. The most important reason is aridity,

which Worster thinks does far more to explain the West than Turner's frontier thesis. "Cowboy Ecology" provides an overview of the livestock industry's impact on the western environment. "Hydraulic Society in California" argues that California's social and economic orders have been shaped by the need to centralize power over water. "Hoover Dam: A Study in Domination" explores a variation on this theme: how the will to subjugate nature helped to concentrate power in the Bureau of Reclamation and other institutions of government. "Freedom and Want: The Western Paradox" contrasts the myth of the West as an edenic state of nature with the scarcity aridity imposes on the region. "Grassland Follies: Agricultural Capitalism on the Plains" looks at the cultural reasons for the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, challenging those historians who see this natural disaster essentially as the work of nature. Agricultural capitalism was responsible, not the protracted drought of the early 1930s. "The Black Hills: Sacred or Profane?" traces Indian-White negotiations over the Black Hills, particularly in the years since World War II when the Lakota Sioux have proclaimed the land as sacred and demanded its return to the tribe. "Alaska: The Underworld Erupts" tells the story of the Exxon-Valdez oil spill as an example of how their dependence on fossil fuels contributes to cutting westerners off from nature. The final piece, "A Country Without Secrets," questions the popular view that human dominance over the land has transformed nature into a cultural landscape. No matter how hard human beings try to escape nature, Worster insists, they can never achieve total dominance over insects, plants, and bacteria.

No brief review can capture the richness of these essays—or their importance to this generation of Americans. Worster is not afraid to say what he thinks, and no one has made the field of environmental history more accessible to the "average" American. *Under Western Skies* is not happy reading, nor is it meant to be. It is an extended jeremiad—more of a statement on the modern condition than an explo-

ration of the past. Some will be irritated by the preachiness in these essays, but no one can deny the significance of the subjects addressed.

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