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Review of *A Country in the Mind: Wallace Stegner, Bernard DeVoto, History, and the American Land* By John L. Thomas

Frank J. Popper

Rutgers University, fpopper@rci.rutgers.edu

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A Country in the Mind: Wallace Stegner, Bernard DeVoto, History, and the American Land. By John L. Thomas. New York: Routledge, 2000. Illustrations, notes, sources, index. vii + 256 pp. \$20.00.

John Thomas, a historian at Brown University, offers a conservation-focused portrait of two of the last century's most distinguished men of American Western letters, Bernard DeVoto (1897-1955) and Wallace Stegner (1909-1993). Both grew up amid the ambivalent legacy of the boomer frontier. Both became prolific historians, novelists, journalists, and public intellectuals with touchy ties to academia. Both rank among the creators of modern environmentalism.

Thomas's sharply written, often evocative account of their life, work, and friendship deals largely with their efforts to preserve the public domain—that is, the federal lands of the intermountain West, what Thomas calls the national commons. DeVoto, for instance, when he was “Easy Chair” columnist at *Harper's* in the late 1940s and early 1950s, helped squelch early versions of the Sagebrush Rebellion. Stegner served as an adviser to David Brower and Stewart Udall and as a Sierra Club board member in the 1950s and

1960s. Federal agencies like the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management have some holdings on the western edges of the Great Plains, but most of their lands show up from the Rockies westward. Thus more of Thomas's book takes place in southern Utah than in, say, eastern Colorado.

But the volume does have worthwhile Plains content and implications. It presents an excellent analysis of *Wolf Willow*, Stegner's 1962 memoir of his childhood in Eastend, Saskatchewan, still one of the best accounts of growing up in the region—a sort of boy's nonfiction counterpart of Willa Cather's finest fiction. Similarly, Thomas offers a sharp explication of DeVoto's 1943 history of Western settlement, *The Year of Decision: 1846*, especially his vivid descriptions of the pioneers crossing the Plains.

I wish Thomas had emphasized a bit more his subjects' roles as early environmental historians of the West. The two were old enough, for example, to have been impressed by the Bureau of Reclamation's dam and water projects during the Depression, but repelled by them after World War II. A sense of the limits created by the region's aridity, whether in Kansas or California, eventually came to pervade both men's environmental work. "You may deny [the aridity] for a while," Stegner wrote. "Then you must try to engineer it out of existence or adapt to it." Both men believed that history suggested adaptation as preferable. They considered John Wesley Powell heroic for his late-nineteenth-century adaptationism, and Stegner wrote a superb 1954 biography of him.

DeVoto and Stegner shared a specific concept of environmental history. Their approach, Thomas writes, "was not intended for academicians and trained specialists but for the common reader with a taste for romantic adventure and monumental history, grand spectacle and heroic undertakings. Theirs would be history as a form of art for all Americans." One can see why they had a hard time in universities. It is uncertain whether they would last there today.

Stegner was clearly the better novelist, winning the Pulitzer Prize for *Angle of Repose* in 1972. DeVoto was probably the better historian and journalist. Stegner is more widely known today, perhaps because he lived longer (and more recently) and published more. DeVoto may in his time have had greater public influence; his combativeness and neuroses meant that he lacked what Thomas terms "the artist's distaste for political bickering" that came to distinguish the more stable, more aesthetically influential Stegner. But Thomas's wonderful book does not force us to choose between them. Instead it presents a rare account of two intellectuals whose friendship changed conservation history.

FRANK J. POPPER
Department of Urban Studies and
Community Health
Rutgers University