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## Review of *Sight Unseen: How Frémont's Expedition Changed the American Landscape* By Andrew Menard.

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## BOOK REVIEWS

*Sight Unseen: How Frémont's Expedition Changed the American Landscape.* By Andrew Menard. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012. xxix + 249 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, index. \$29.95.

*Sight Unseen*, Andrew Menard's crisply written, deliciously illustrated, deeply sourced, and somewhat repetitive new book, contends that America has always been both an imaginative space where aesthetics, politics, and culture mingle, and the congeries of material environments to which those discourses respond. The text's central figure, Captain John C. Frémont, evidently thought the same, and this conviction fueled an optimism that was rare at the time. In retrospect, the Louisiana Purchase was a good deal. But in 1842, when Frémont set out to survey the area between eastern Kansas and southern Wyoming, much of the territory we now call the Great Plains was considered, in the words of an earlier explorer, a wind-stripped expanse of "hopeless and irreclaimable sterility" that would be difficult to absorb into the young republic.

Frémont changed this assumption on two fronts. First, his summative 1843 report to Congress proffered an environmental aesthetics that depicted not an alien waste but a region whose native attributes and radical difference from lands east of the Mississippi actually enriched the nation. Frémont was a keen naturalist who liked what he saw in the Plains (subtly complex grasslands, for instance), and his report contested a Eurocentric landscape ideology that deemed "picturesque" areas like the much-painted Hudson River Valley the ultimate in American beauty. (One wishes Menard had incorporated the scholarship of environmental historians like Donald Worster and William Cronon, but this is a minor flaw.) Second, because it presented the Plains as tantalizing ground, his work helped legitimize the steroidal expansion that went by the name "manifest destiny."

Menard calls Americans "ideologues of the

future"; in the 1800s the future meant land, always more of it, and in astonishing contrast to Europe. Like Jefferson, Frémont believed that the nation's vigor was tied to the variety of environments within its borders. The West offered "a horizon of perfectibility," a persuasive claim Menard rephrases and repeats more than he needs to; even the Rockies, once a fearsome impediment to expansion, became central to our destiny. When Frémont's men planted an American flag atop the Wind River Range—an image he would later use in a failed presidential campaign—they affirmed that politics is geography and vice versa. Ultimately Frémont's labor embodies American idealism about enlightened progress as well as the "often horrifying, rapacious, expedient, immoral, and technical pursuit of that end."

While Menard could have said more about those appalling costs (Native Americans and the bison herds do not show up much), *Sight Unseen* does what historical scholarship should: it complicates the past to clarify the present. In 2012, its borders long established, the United States continues to have dreams that are both gorgeous and destructive.

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