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The Land No One Knows

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BOOK REVIEWS

THE LANDS NO ONE KNOWS

By T. H. WATKINS and CHARLES S. WATSON, JR.
San Francisco: Sierra Club. 1975. Pp. 256. \$9.95.

This "story of a squandered inheritance, an inheritance vouchsafed by the citizens of this country nearly two hundred years ago: the public domain" is the result of an effective collaboration sponsored by the Sierra Club. Watson, a former federal employee and tireless student of land use, is credited as the chief source of information. Watkins, a writer with a record of interest in regional matters, presents this information with skill and concern far above mere ghost-writing.

His account, richly illustrated with good photographs, is divided into two sections—The Inheritance and The Inheritors. The actual structure, however, is better seen in an appendix entitled "A chronology of major land laws," 1790 to 1974 inclusive. Although not listed, the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, with its sobering effect on the kind of enterprises that too often have been slipped past the American people, is discussed in the text.

Beginning in 1780 all public lands owned by the original states (six of which had no claims westward) were ceded to the federal government as the price of unity. Thereafter comes the monotonous sequence of speculation, evasion and manipulation of law to defeat its intent, and a massive amount of downright fraud.

The victims of this assault, apart from backfire on grabbers for the quick buck, were, as often happens, many of those least able to withstand adversity, but also and most notably the land itself and because of its pillage, the ultimate economy of the nation.

From the 2,100,000,000 acres once common property of the public, only some 765,000,000 remain; we are given glimpses of how it went. By 1792 five million acres had been distributed for pennies an acre. By 1860 300 million—the amount of public land originally owned by the thirteen colonies "had disappeared down a path of good intentions littered with venality, speculation, and, at times it must be said, irresponsibility." Before the twentieth century 80 million had gone for homesteads (see "Old Jules" by Marie Sandoz or Svoboda's "Empire of Dust" for perspective). The Timber Culture Act of 1885 distributed ten million acres in lots of 160 acres to settlers who agreed to plant forty (later only ten) in trees. Thirty years after the law was passed I saw many of these so-called Timber Claims whose trees, struggling against a hostile climate and lack of care, were a sorry sight.

In addition millions of acres went for other equally plausible

reasons—timber and stone, mining, irrigation, Indian reservations, and nearly one hundred million in grants to encourage the building of railroads, some of which today owe their solvency less to traffic than to the value of these grants.

Government began under leaders of such diverse philosophies as those of Jefferson, Hamilton, Washington, Franklin, Monroe (sympathetic with the Indians), and Jackson, ruthless spokesman for the “common man.” If there was a common bond, it lay in consent of the governed (Cf. the percentages of those who bother to vote). Available for this experiment was a continent whose soils, vegetation, and minerals were virtually intact at a time when powerful techniques of war and peace-time exploitation were developing.

Complicating this challenge were two hard facts not considered by the authors. (1) The pioneer British colonists, like those from Spain, not yet reached by the agricultural revolution, with its canons of good husbandry that had begun in the Netherlands in the 15th century and (2) the fear of a landed class that had controlled feudal Europe until its hold was later broken by the industrial revolution. This fear soon led to legislation in the infant nation that made it extremely difficult to keep control of land through the generations ahead. In consequence the prevailing attitude toward land was one of getting while the getting was good, instead of conserving for the future.

Yet paradoxically the protest against a landed gentry did not come into court with clean hands. The greed of the con man becomes effective by arousing that of his victims. To both the public domain was a highly visible opportunity for quick profit, but the ultimate advantage usually rested with the big operator. Meanwhile legitimate public policy—encouraging settlement of vacant lands, increasing the opportunity for citizens to become self-supporting, and raising funds through the sale of public assets—actually played into the hands of exploiters rather than restraining them as sound policy should have done.

Watkins and Watson document the long slow struggle for an enlightened land ethic. Their account includes circumstantial reporting of the devious tactics and derogatory language used against those seeking to protect the public interest, for example muzzling them in public hearings. That the tide is turning is evident from the reluctant admission of that staunch advocate of agribusiness, the present secretary of agriculture that “the conservation movement is here to stay and we’re going to have to learn to live with it” (p. 93). Equally interesting are the efforts of powerful corporations to advertise their good intentions with respect to environmental problems.

Despite current progress, grave problems remain. Management of public lands is sadly understaffed. In contrast to a Danish forest preserve which keeps fifty men employed profitably the year around, the average Forest Service employee seldom has less than twenty thousand acres, his Bureau of Land Management counterpart about ninety six thousand to look after. Again the commendable move to charge grazing fees on public land that are more in line with value received obscures the basic problem of insuring that this privilege will not be abused.

At issue with respect to the public domain as well as with resources under any ownership are two very different concepts of economic policy—immediate advantage versus long range sustained productivity. One of the first measures to prevent disaster is the mapping of land use potential. Not only is this kind of information shockingly meager, but when proposed under the title of “classification” has often been sabotaged (pp. 146-150).

However hopeful present trends, their ultimate success will rest largely upon the attention given to *The Lands No One Knows* and the growing number of books of its genre.

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