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Book Review: Visions of the Land: Science, Literature, and the American Environment from the Era of Exploration to the Age of Ecology

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of documents, ranging from technical reports and exploration narratives to essays, utopian fiction, autobiography, and popular scientific literature. The seven whose visions of the land he seeks to capture are Richard Byrd, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Susan Cooper, Rachel Carson, John Charles Frémont, John Wesley Powell, and Loren Eiseley. While the work of the latter three is most directly related to the interests of this journal, Bryson's skillful weaving together of the various skeins has rendered them all of a piece.

Working within a long tradition of wilderness exploration in America by various countries and individuals, John Charles Frémont represents the scientist as explorer-hero, the very antithesis of the laboratory-bound experimentalist familiar to the public mind. Yet underlying his work in cartography, paleontology, and surveying was the emerging impact of technology and, most important, the empirical study of nature. No matter where he roamed, Frémont could no more separate himself from the "cool rationality of science" than could his contemporary and fellow myth-maker, the great lyrical trickster Henry David Thoreau.

John Wesley Powell, too, made his reputation as a one-armed conquistador of the wilderness, most especially the heretofore unnavigated Grand Canyon of the Colorado. Yet underlying Powell's hard-earned reputation was an internal struggle regarding the place of science in new and future communities spawned by the pioneer movement, what Bryson terms "reimagining the West." It was Powell who audaciously proposed that those who contemplated settling in certain parts of the Great Plains take a second, or even third, look. Based on years of hydrological and other scientific study, the explorer-cum-bureaucrat counseled extreme caution, a view greeted with little enthusiasm in the halls of Congress, where the mantra of "California or bust!" drowned out virtually all dissent.

Loren Eiseley, by contrast, was very much a stay-at-home anthropologist, one whose early fieldwork gradually decreased to a trickle un-

Visions of the Land: Science, Literature, and the American Environment from the Era of Exploration to the Age of Ecology. By Michael A. Bryson. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002. xvii + 228 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$45.00 cloth, \$16.50 paper.

Michael A. Bryson has undertaken an ambitious study of the connections between the representation of nature and the practice of science in America. Covering the hundred-and-thirty-year period from the 1840s to the 1960s, the author dissects the work of seven distinguished writers through a diverse array

til, by the time he reached middle age, he rarely ventured beyond his apartment in a suburb of Philadelphia, except to follow the lecture tour or to vacation on Florida's tony Sanibel Island. A popular writer of unusual gifts, Eiseley was prone to exaggeration and myth, a trait with which Bryson does not credit him sufficiently. Indeed, he pairs Eiseley in the book with the government scientist Rachel Carson, who spent a great deal of time in the field practicing her calling, then writing about it in both eloquent and disturbing bestsellers that changed the world. Eiseley, on the other hand, took no active part in the emerging environmental movement. Indeed, he was pretty much content to envision the coming of the next great ice age when all would be swept clean, creating yet another tabula rasa on which nature would write a new blueprint for evolution.

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