Spring 2011

Review of *Paradise Found: Nature in America at the Time of Discovery*. By Steve Nicholls

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Paradise Found: Nature in America at the Time of Discovery. By Steve Nicholls. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009. x + 524 pp. Notes, index. $30.00 cloth.

Covering 500 years in 500 pages, *Paradise Found* details the amazing abundance of the natural world that greeted the first European arrivals to North America. Such a perspective is not wholly original; pre-Columbian biodiversity has been a popular topic of investigation for two generations of scholars. But as filmmaker, entomologist, and author Steve Nicholls explains, past catalogs of plenty have, if anything, underestimated the bounty of the precontact physical world. Explaining in full detail the transition from ecological complexity to fragile instability makes the narrative of loss all the more powerful. *Paradise Found* is short on silver linings. This account is not a celebration of what once was, but a declensionist narrative. As Nicholls explains, European mercantilists arrived on a continent rich in resources, paused for a brief moment, and then went to work. Studying this process does have value, however, as a "deep perspective" on the ecological past can, the author insists, help us better manage our "modern environmental crises."

Paradise Found is arranged by geography, opening on the Atlantic coast and marching forward to a western finish. In each locale, Nicholls begins with an accounting of early exploration and discovery and then shifts to an analysis of environmental exploitation. In all of this, readers focused on the Great Plains will find much of interest. Countering the long-accepted notion that the apparently monotonous landscape of the Plains is marked foremost by a "great stillness," *Paradise Found* reveals a regional ecological mosaic that is "incomprehensibly complicated."

This is a work of synthesis; readers familiar with environmental history, especially the work of Donald Worster, will find little unexpected in *Paradise Found*. What is more welcome is the amount of natural science that informs the narrative. Even a casual glance at his notes reveals that Nicholls has made good use of science to reconstruct lost environmental worlds. He also does a fine job of explaining the masked connections between environmental destruction and free market capitalism. The operators of New England factories, for instance, ran machines with leather belts made from Great Plains bison, and yet they never saw the ecological or social transformations that resulted from the near extermination of these animals. Nicholls intends his book as a corrective. The idea is to reveal these linkages as a way to show readers how ecosystems really work—an important step in the creation of a balanced environmental ethic. **John Herron**, *Department of History, University of Missouri–Kansas City.*