

## Martin V. Melosi and Philip Scarpino, *Public History and the Environment*

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Melosi, Martin V. and Philip Scarpino, eds. *Public History and the Environment*. Malabar, Florida: Krieger Publishing Company, 2004. 291 pp., illus., maps, cloth, US\$39.50, ISBN 1-57524-071-8.

This is a very practical book. The fifteen articles commissioned for this volume address the relationship between public history and environmental issues. As the editors explain in their introduction, there is an obvious link between the two approaches, both of which have emerged since the 1960s. Public history engages historians in communication with a broader non-academic audience. Environmental history links natural sciences and historical research. The combination of the two sub-disciplines provides “a tool for studying human interaction with the physical environment (natural and built) that emphasizes communication and audience” (ix). The chapters in this book all deal with case studies from the United States, and the contributors include both academics located in History and Geography departments and public historians.

The introductory essays provide broad reflections on the relationship between historical understandings and the environment. Rebecca Conard provides an overview of the impulse to re-create “natural” environments. As she points out, “A phenomenon of the twentieth century is that we have by and large separated the places where we live from the places we want to be” (4). She shows how one must resist placing humans outside environment, but should instead emphasize the dynamic relations between humans and the natural world. For David Glassberg, public historians are particularly well placed to carry out this task, for they provide interpretations of landscape to a broad audience.

In some of the most interesting essays, the historians place themselves at the centre of the story. Susan Flader reflects on her involvement in community-based activism helping to stop hydroelectric development that threatened Missouri’s Taum Sauk Creek. Flader’s knowledge of the public use of the area and its cultural significance contributed to the withdrawal of the proposed development. While environmental issues can lead one to an activist stance, this approach can also be typified as conservative. Robert R. Archibald provides a reflective account on the links between people’s sense of place and history: “My work with historical change in communities has convinced

me that although change is inevitable, change that is too rapid is destructive of human relationships and community life” (168).

In the most pessimistic contribution to this volume, Hal K. Rothman takes a jaundiced view of evolving attitudes to cultural tourism. His analysis of an American Orient Express train tour of national parks for a well-heeled audience shifts into a rant about “postmodernity.” For Rothman, the “no-brow” audience of the post-MTV world has little appreciation of the transcendent significance of history, although he concedes that better education can possibly help.

Other contributors explore what their contributions to non-academic modes of communicating research have shown them. Philip V. Scarpino discusses his consultative work on the Mississippi River Museum in Dubuque, Iowa, in developing an exhibit to show the changing environment of the river. The exhibit was able to illustrate how places that many members of the public might have perceived as “natural” were in fact the result of specific environmental actions, such as dredging. Likewise, Char Miller looks at documentary films as a way of exploring environmental issues, in this case examining some classic films like *Nanook of the North* (1922) and comparing them with more recent films for which he contributed advice. The manipulative devices of film serve as very useful heuristic tools for understanding environmental arguments.

Some of the essays deal with specific instances of how historians have played or can play a role in contributing to deeper environmental understanding. Lisa Mighetto examines the impact of the *Endangered Species Act* (1973). Following this legislation, specific species have come to represent changing values of the environment, for instance, the marbled murrelet in the forests of the Pacific Northwest in the 1990s. The federal statute of 1976 defining “hazardous wastes” provides examples of the importance of historical knowledge, Craig E. Colten contends. As the law to enforce clean-up has no statute of limitations, historical documentation provides essential evidence for ongoing attempts at remediation. But providing expert advice is not an easy task, as Alan S. Newell shows in his article on the role of historian as expert witness in court trials. He argues that environmental historians can make important contributions to litigation, but need to engage fully with legal rules and practices.

Finally, a number of the essays illustrate the opportunities that are available to public historians. The National Park Service has created many instances where historical evidence has contributed to better public policy. Carol Shull and Dwight Pitcaithley examine what they term “the maturation” of the National Park Service. The National Register of Historic Places has created greater public interest in historical and environmental activism. Christopher Clarke looks at the role of museums as a point of engagement between public historians and the wider public, and argues that museum exhibits offer many important ways of communicating environmental issues.

Beyond lending their expertise to commemorative processes, historians have generally been reluctant to contribute to public policy. Martin Ruess and Hugh Gorman both contend that historians can make a vital impact: in the words of the latter, “in making connections, identifying trends, and providing context, historians raise the quality of decision making” (220).

The concept of “environmental justice” provides a spur to activism based on historical knowledge. Christopher H. Foreman and Martin V. Melosi explore that term, and the related concepts of “environmental equity” and “environmental racism.” The latter term emerged in the early 1980s when the Rev. Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr joined a battle of the mostly African-American residents in North Carolina against the establishment of a PCB dump near their homes. The authors argue that historians can contribute their broader understanding of context to tease out the complicated relations between race, class and gender and environmental concerns.

As in any collection of essays, some of these contributions strike the reader as more pertinent and convincing than others. Taken as a whole, these articles are all calls to action for historians, and illustrate the public roles that historians, with their own methods and training, can play. For that reason this collection of American case studies should also be of great interest to a Canadian audience.

## Chris Wilson and Paul Groth, eds., *Everyday America: Cultural Landscape Studies after J. B. Jackson*

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Wilson, Chris and Paul Groth, eds. *Everyday America: Cultural Landscape Studies after J. B. Jackson*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2003. 395 pp., illus., cloth, US\$55, ISBN 0-520-22960-6; paper, US\$19.95, ISBN 0-520-22961-4.

This volume commemorates the inspiration, work and legacy of J. B. Jackson as a student of the cultural landscape, and provides a recent review of the field in the United States. An interdisciplinary conference to recall the memory and work of Jackson (1910–1996), and to begin a re-evaluation of his work and writings, was held at the University of New Mexico in 1998. Some three hundred persons attended, and about eighty papers were presented. Of these, several were published in *The Geographical Review* 88, no. 4 (October 1998), and reappear as part of the sixteen that are published in this volume.

Jackson was born in France and spent his early years in various parts of Europe. During the Second World War he served in Europe, working in U.S. military intelligence. Thus he was familiar with European languages and landscapes, and at an

early stage wrote about the latter. This meant that, in later years, he had a bank of memories to contrast with his observations in the United States, and he also had access to relevant European literatures. But it is his work on American cultural landscapes for which he is remembered and on which this volume focuses.

As the editors point out, the term “cultural landscape” derives from a variety of sources. Indeed, various “mentions” are made in the book about what the term means. The editors themselves indicate in the early pages that “...cultural landscapes (are) the complex sets of environments that support all human lives and all social groups” (viii). This very broad definition is not the only one that could be adduced, but it serves to point out that the field is considerably wide. They follow this by discussing the historical emergence of the term and Jackson’s role in promoting the concept as a way of seeing the world (founding and editing the journal *Landscape* being not the least of his contributions), and by outlining theoretical and methodological issues. This leads to the introductory chapter, “The Polyphony of Cultural