

**Review: *Landscapes of Promise: The Oregon Story, 1800-1940.***

By William G. Robbins

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Robbins, William G. *Landscapes of Promise: The Oregon Story, 1800-1940*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997. 410 pp. US \$29.95 cloth ISBN: 0-295-97632-2.

All who love Oregon and western landscapes in general will want to read this book, an in-depth environmental history of the Oregon country by a distinguished professor of history at Oregon State University. It provides an important corollary to more conventional pioneer history and its frequent pronouncements of grandeur and heroism, for along with immigrants and explorers and settlers came profound and irreversible environmental change. Robbins begins by exploring environmental impacts wrought by native peoples, especially through their use of fire in the Willamette Valley, and then documents ensuing changes in land use resulting from the fur trade, agricultural development, cattle and sheep grazing, resource extraction, hunting and fishing, elimination of "predators," railroads and timber interests, hydroelectric power, population growth, and 20th-century economic expansion.

Indian tribes were in the way of development with its notions of "progress" and "advancement," and, in Oregon as elsewhere, suffered severe depredations and, eventually, removal from their aboriginal territories. Most development endeavors had enthusiastic support from public officials and the press, as Robbins meticulously documents. These, he argues, were inevitable reflections of prevailing world views based on the belief that "further remodeling of the regional landscape through ever more powerful and intrusive technologies would lead to the good society" (p. 297).

Robbins' discussion of the depletion of the wild salmon fisheries is particularly salient, for this has become one of the Northwest's most pressing issues. People of foresight were already sounding the alarm about the dangers to salmon and salmon habitat by the 1870s, citing overfishing, dams building, and destruction of riparian zones as major threats. But their solution to these problems, Robbins writes, was the fish hatchery, now ubiquitous in the Northwest, for even the

conservation-minded assumed that "scientific and technological applications could resolve problems associated with human disruptions to the natural world" (p. 136).

Throughout the book, the author demonstrates repeatedly how environment and economics are intertwined, and reminds us that the best of environmental intentions are forever tenuous in a capitalist economy, where environmental pressures are intrinsic and inevitable. In an important epilogue, Robbins writes, "Capitalism has been, in brief, the most powerful determinant of environmental change in the last two centuries" (p. 302). He warns against being "nostalgic about . . . a mythical age where our forebears enjoyed a strong sense of self-identity and place" (p. 302), for the same environmental pressures that obtain today were at work in that mythical age. This beautifully written and well-referenced book promotes a greater understanding of Oregon's environmental history, and the abiding connections between the past and the present.

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