

**Review: Land in the American West: Private Claims and the Common Good**

By William G. Robbins and James C. Foster

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William G. Robbins & James C. Foster (Eds). *Land in the American West: Private Claims and the Common Good*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000. 224 pp. ISBN 0-295-98020-6 (paper). US\$20.00. Recycled, acid-free paper.

Alexis de Tocqueville wrote, "In no other country in the world is the love of property keener or more alert than in the United States" (p. 53). Had he observed the American West in the 20th century, Tocqueville surely could have claimed that region took the love of property even deeper. This insightful and provocative collection of essays explores Westerners' relationship with land and property from various perspectives and makes an important contribution to environmental scholarship.

The authors originally presented these analyses at a symposium designed to consider land use in the western United States that convened in January 1997 at Oregon State University. The symposium gathered "some of the country's leading minds to intervene in continuing dialogue about land and property-related issues" (p. ix). Spatial limitations necessarily restrict a presentation here of a detailed summary or analysis of each essay contained within *Land in the American West*.

William G. Robbins, a historian, contextualizes the battles over public lands from the late 18th century to the 20th in the introduction. Robbins shows the enormous role the federal government played in land distribution and management, and emphasizes market forces that shaped federal land policy. It becomes clear that government policy, property rights, and market economy have long interacted

The first part of the book presents "Three Perspectives on Property Rights." Three articles by economist Daniel W. Bromley, legal and economic scholar Bruce Yandle, and political scientists Sarah Pralle and Michael W. McCann elucidate ideas concerning property and land. These essays demonstrate how dynamic property rights have been throughout American history and law. Recognizing the evolutionary nature of property rights may ameliorate conflicts in American society that have recently remained unresolved because of naming and blaming games. These essays provide provocative,

scholarly scrutiny of key philosophical, legal, and economic concepts.

The second part of the book-"Urban and Rural Vantage Points on Property"-contains two essays by historians Carl Abbott and William D. Rowley. Abbott discusses the ways urban areas consume outlying lands and how urbanites use the environment for amenity values. Rowley's brief survey of public grazing furnishes perhaps the best assessment available on the subject. This section clarifies distinctly urban and rural problems of land, offering historical insights that could enrich future land-use decisions.

The final section of this volume includes "Three Case Studies of Land Use" by historians María E. Montoya, Arthur R. Gómez, and Stephen Haycox. Each essay explores in specific terms how conflicts have transpired regarding land and property in Colorado, and national parks in the Southwest and Alaska. What becomes clear through these case studies is how complex such issues remain within the interaction of politics, law, economics, and culture.

Historian Richard White concludes with an excellent epilogue, exploring the "Contested Terrain" of land in the American West. His incisive commentary argues that land policy has been employed as a means to "a just and desirable social order" (p. 201) rather than only a particular economic policy. To comprehend the questions and to act responsibly, White suggests, the public must engage the assumptions about the market and nature that are presented in this book.

The antidote to specious, even reckless, arguments about land in the West, according to Haycox, "is continuing scholarly and public elucidation and debate" (p. 182). This volume contributes to that ongoing process of education and discussion. Resource managers, politicians, environmentalists, and scholars of all stripes would benefit from careful deliberation of this book. Environmental decision making might then become more informed and, one hopes, more responsible.

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