

Review: Nature's Northwest: The North Pacific Slope in the Twentieth Century

By William G. Robbins and Katrine Barber

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Robbins, William G. and Barber, Katrine. *Nature's Northwest: The North Pacific Slope in the Twentieth Century*. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2011. 312 pp. ISBN 9780816529599, US\$24.95, recycled, acid-free paper.

In *Nature's Northwest*, William G. Robbins and Katrine Barber offer a narrative of the twentieth-century Pacific Northwest that goes beyond typical constraints. They show how the Canadian province of British Columbia and the American states of Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and Montana share similar histories of social inequality and resource development despite geopolitical borders. Robbins and Barber also highlight how international and national processes shaped regional interactions, as cultures collided and local fortunes shifted with the tides of outside markets. In doing so, they paint the Pacific Northwest as a place where natural abundance helps knit together the social landscape of the region and connect it to the rest of the world.

Robbins and Barber start their story of the Pacific Northwest in the late-nineteenth century when optimism pervaded the region. They show how railroads linked local resource economies to the demands of distant cities and served as symbols of the Pacific Northwest's transition to the modern world. Cities, including Spokane, Washington and Vancouver, British Columbia, experienced rapid growth after railroads fostered greater access to timber, mineral, and agricultural wealth. Robbins and Barber further illustrate that these new connections between nature and industrial society created a host of consequences. Native Americans and First Peoples lost lands to speculators, immigrant laborers faced discriminatory local laws, and reformers and unionists clashed with large businesses. In other words, as the Pacific Northwest developed its resources it also developed social inequalities.

Social and cultural developments connected to local resources as well as global processes throughout the twentieth century. The stock market crash in 1929 highlighted the region's dependence on natural resources and outside demands. World War Two contributed to a mid-century population and industrial production boom. Postwar literature reflected concerns of indigenous groups and Japanese-American internees. Paintings depicted clearcut forests and environmental transformation. For Robbins and Barber, regional and international forces and social and environmental influences intersected in the Pacific Northwest.

Environmental transformation in the Pacific Northwest highlighted the evolution of the region's cities and diverse populations. Robbins and Barber detail how water projects displaced indigenous groups from their lands, and timber harvests cleared forests and gave power to just a few corporations. They note how access to irrigation shaped the growth of agricultural towns, and efficient technology facilitated urban migration but put ethnic laborers out of work. National environmental movements sparked further social shifts as Native Americans and First Peoples, in particular, struggled for land and resource rights. Robbins and Barber also point out how environmental concerns and declines in resource production helped transform urban pockets in the Pacific Northwest. Communities like Bend, Oregon and Bozeman, Montana saw their working-class qualities erode as resource economies diminished and environmental amenities attracted wealthy retirees, tourists, and telecommuters near the end of the twentieth century.

Robbins and Barber do not break new ground in Pacific Northwest history, but rather recultivate it for a broad audience. By telling stories of local characters, including labor radical William "Big Bill" Haywood and bootlegger Roy Olmstead, they make *Nature's Northwest* accessible to the public. Yet they weave together the interactions of social groups and changing landscapes to give historians an important lens for viewing the region. Robbins and Barber scatter several illustrations throughout nine chapters organized both chronologically and topically to add clarity to an already straightforward narrative style. They could include additional illustrations or charts highlighting demographic changes to further shed light on regional transformations. But those are minor details and do not detract from their portrayal of the Pacific Northwest as a place rich in natural and social resources.

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