

Review: Wilderburbs: Communities on Nature's Edge

By Lincoln Bramwell

Reviewed by Yves Laberge

Québec, Canada

Bramwell, Lincoln. *Wilderburbs: Communities on Nature's Edge*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2014. xxiv, 309 pp. ISBN: 9780295994123, cloth. US\$ 34.95. Alkaline paper. Series: *Weyerhaeuser Environmental Books Series*.

Who has never wanted to live in a place near a remote lake, or to have a room with an exclusive view on the mountain? As William Cronon formulates in his "Foreword," *Wilderburbs* is about the city dweller's "dream of living close to nature" (p. ix), an idealized wish that was shared by many Americans in the 19th century and onwards, especially by those rich and prosperous from the élites who lived in big urban centers like Boston and New York City. The author, Dr. Lincoln Bramwell, is chief historian for the USDA Forest Service. Because most of the people who want to live "inside" the landscape come from the city, they try to bring along all the pseudo-indispensable urban elements into their "wilderburbs", almost like so many people living in standardized suburbs; as a consequence, roads are paved, cell phone towers have to be built, and nature cannot be integrally preserved (p. 54). But in fact, natural parks and wilderness itself are not compatible with the typical, urban trend that tends to shape and transform balanced ecosystems into suburbs dominated by human activities:

These cultural differences have become so common and pronounced throughout the West over the past two decades that many rural counties have begun to distribute guides to living in 'untamed' locales (p. 57).

In fact, the spirit of many of these practical guides was more or less derived from a novel, *Code of the West*, written in 1934 by U.S. novelist Zane Grey (1872-1939) (p. 57). Incidentally, imaginary representations matter because literary works were a strong influence in some people's construction (and often misconception) of their idealized place in the wilderness.

Topics discussed in *Wilderburbs* are infinite: how animals in the American West (deer, moose, bears), especially in rural New Mexico, have been anthropomorphised (p. 205) and hunted (p. 204) during the 20th century, but most of all, how humans change wilderness into something coined "wilderburbs." Humans are not bad in themselves, but city life can sometimes be incompatible with and hazardous to nature, hence the numerous risks such as fires in forests and numerous occurrences of pollution caused by human presence and activities. This is Bramwell's main idea, convincingly demonstrated here in the U.S. context (mostly New Mexico), although it could probably be transposed to other countries.

Bramwell's *Wilderburbs* is not a book based on theories or new data (and this is not a problem as such); instead, it interestingly retells the history of "how the West was conquered by the people of the city" with solid facts, anecdotes, accurate observations, and countless examples in a balanced combination of social analysis and literary references. Its main interest is to include tangible elements (nature, roads, landsides, citizens, etc.) as opposed to attitudes, imaginaries, resident's dreams, and their desires of an idealised life "in the nature" as they recreated it. The reader feels from the first pages until the last words a sincere love and dedication for nature and a respectful sentiment for urban citizens alike, despite their unrealistic wishes for sometimes-incompatible lifestyles. Scholars in cultural geography, American Studies, rural sociology, Environmental Education, and all domains related to the studying of landscapes and land use will find here an inspired author and an inspiring text.

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