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# Yellowstone: The Creation and Selling of an American Landscape, 1870-1903

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# Yellowstone: The Creation and Selling of an American Landscape, 1870-1903

## **Abstract**

Chris Magoc's *Yellowstone: The Creation and Selling of an American Landscape* offers a compelling examination of the ironies involved in the creation of our first national park. Focusing on the inherent contradictions of nature preservation in an industrializing society, Magoc argues that Yellowstone's popular embrace was "less a progressive step toward modern environmentalism than a profound expression" of dominant trends in middle-class American life (p. 4). Yellowstone National Park and the Northern Pacific Railroad became "monuments on the landscape of American capitalism" during an era when the myth of inexhaustibility enabled Americans to meld nature and the technological sublime (p. 74). Americans' attraction to scenic industrial landscapes, exemplified by glowing descriptions of geysers as a busy city, demonstrate the paradox of nature appreciation within the booming life of a "transformative, mechanistic civilization" (p. 93).

## **Keywords**

National park, middle-class, preservation, wildlife, bison

## **Disciplines**

Natural Resources and Conservation | Natural Resources Management and Policy

## **Comments**

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World geologists by indicating how his own divisions of the Tertiary (as Miocene, Eocene) could be applied to their lands. He also took from New World geologists: his map notes that it was compiled from the “state surveys of the U.S. and other sources.”

Overall, Volume 2 of Wilson’s biography of Lyell is narrative rather than analytic in style and is written largely from primary sources. There is relatively little engagement with secondary literature. A useful companion to Wilson’s new book, also published in 1998, is the provocatively entitled *Lyell: The Past Is the Key to the Present*, edited by D. J. Blundell and A. C. Scott (Geological Society). A wide variety of approaches to Lyell is presented in this volume, including a contribution by Wilson describing Lyell’s challenge to the “craters of elevation” hypothesis.

SANDRA HERBERT

**Chris J. Magoc.** *Yellowstone: The Creation and Selling of an American Landscape, 1870–1903*. xviii + 266 pp., illus., bibl., index. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999. \$49.95 (cloth); \$19.95 (paper).

Chris Magoc’s *Yellowstone: The Creation and Selling of an American Landscape* offers a compelling examination of the ironies involved in the creation of our first national park. Focusing on the inherent contradictions of nature preservation in an industrializing society, Magoc argues that Yellowstone’s popular embrace was “less a progressive step toward modern environmentalism than a profound expression” of dominant trends in middle-class American life (p. 4). Yellowstone National Park and the Northern Pacific Railroad became “monuments on the landscape of American capitalism” during an era when the myth of inexhaustibility enabled Americans to meld nature and the technological sublime (p. 74). Americans’ attraction to scenic-industrial landscapes, exemplified by glowing descriptions of geysers as a busy city, demonstrate the paradox of nature appreciation within the booming life of a “transformative, mechanistic civilization” (p. 93).

Ferdinand Vandiveer Hayden’s 1871 expedition made Yellowstone comprehensible and validated the landscape in the public mind. Geysers were named, ranked, and timed, while curative waters were measured and catalogued. Beyond technical reports, Hayden identified and valued the landscape “by reference to treasures of middle- and upper-class American life” (p. 16). Ma-

goc also utilizes the observations of Amold Hague of the U.S. Geological Survey to demonstrate how science bolstered the Yellowstone mystique. He discusses the “managing paternalism of modern science” (p. 162), enlisted alongside the American frontier myth to preserve the wildlife of Yellowstone as a cultural possession. Wild bison were fenced and idolized so visitors could see what the magnanimity of modernity preserved.

Preservation discourse, Magoc notes, began only after incorporation of the Yellowstone landscape in the market economy of railroad-based tourism. Tension between preservation and development surfaced as early as 1883. Preservationists helped transform scenery, Native Americans, and wildlife into tourist objects—the “idols and effigies of nature” (p. 139). The consumptive language used by park boosters was familiar to Americans and served to render Yellowstone Park consumable and inspirational. While created as a reserve for nature, writes Magoc, Yellowstone was “never disengaged from the prosaic and profane world” (p. 190).

A work of substantial scholarship, this book takes a thorough look at original documents and early publications and is wonderfully illustrated with fifty-four historical photographs and maps. It utilizes themes developed in work by Anne Fairar Hyde, Alfred Runte, and other historians, synthesizes them in admirable fashion, and applies these ideas in fresh and insightful ways to the history of Yellowstone National Park. Magoc counters the idea that national parks were created out of lands considered worthless, noting that influential Montanans envisioned a park, like the railroad, “as a vehicle for economic progress” (p. 35).

Historians interested in these topics will want to look at other recently published works, including Mark Spence’s *Dispossessing the Wilderness* (Oxford, 1999), Marlene Merrill’s *Yellowstone and the Great West* (Nebraska, 1999), Paul Shullery’s *Searching for Yellowstone* (Houghton Mifflin, 1997), and Richard West Sellars’s *Preserving Nature in the National Parks* (Yale, 1997).

Magoc’s work presents a valuable addition to the literature. Ultimately, he suggests, Yellowstone’s present is directly connected to its Wonderland roots. Americans created Yellowstone as a “peaceable kingdom” (p. 186), a place supposedly set apart, and even today we are surprised when the bison do not submit to the imagined park borders. Many current difficulties with management are rooted in capitalist economics and a culture that tried to separate nature from

civilization. Yellowstone remains tied to economic and cultural forces of American life, as well as to the landscape beyond the park border. We need to re-envision Yellowstone National Park “as a place unknown” (p. 190), suggests Magoc, and dissolve the boundaries between sacred and profane landscapes. Readers will agree that this book is a good beginning.

JAMES PRITCHARD

**Ephraim G. Squier; Edwin H. Davis.** *Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley*. Edited with an introduction by **David J. Meltzer**. [vi] + 98 + 316 pp., illus., figs., tables, bibl., index. Reprint of 1848 edition. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998. \$60 (cloth); \$29.95 (paper).

Ephraim Squier and Edwin Davis’s classic archaeological study of the mounds of the Mississippi Valley, which appeared in 1848 as Joseph Henry’s maiden volume of the “Smithsonian Contributions to Knowledge,” has long been out of print; this reissue of a landmark in the history of American archaeology, handsomely reproduced with a sensitive and historically informed introduction by David Meltzer, should therefore be most welcome in every Americanist library. The editors have left out nothing; Meltzer has even gone to the unusual trouble of preparing a valuable “Guide to Squier and Davis’s References” for those who seek a fuller intellectual context for early North American archaeology.

Meltzer’s long (ninety-five-page) introductory essay is foundational and deserves separate publication. Here he both emphasizes the weight of importance that was riding on Joseph Henry’s first publication as secretary of the new Smithsonian Institution and traces in fascinating detail the remarkable, twisting series of events and crises that led to its emergence in 1848. Squier and Davis appear as an unlikely scientific duo—indeed, even before the volume actually found its way into print they had bitterly and permanently parted ways, squabbling over priority, credit, and even free copies of the book. Meltzer draws intelligently on previous scholars such as Tom Tax, Robert Bieder, William Stanton, and Stephen Williams; on the invaluable, decades-long Joseph Henry Papers project at the Smithsonian; and on his own substantial archival digging into the papers of Squier, Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, and others to construct a narrative that verges at times on the tragicomic. The full story of *Ancient Monuments*, its patronage, and its authors becomes a mixture of ambition and deceit, hyper-

bole and hucksterism, serious science and fraud, and, finally (for Squier in his later years), personal betrayal, depression, and madness.

For Henry, the publication of this first “Contribution to Knowledge” was part of a lifelong crusade against amateurism and speculation in American science, a strong step away from “throwing dice for discovery” and toward verifiable, sober scientific observation. As he admonished Squier and Davis, “Your labors should be given to the world as free as possible from everything of a speculative nature . . . and your positive addition to the sum of human knowledge should stand in bold relief unmingled with the labours of others.” Henry, an outstanding figure in nineteenth-century physics and electromagnetism, was particularly pleased to begin his tenure at the Smithsonian by endorsing an unexpected and scientifically suspect field, “because,” as he told Elias Loomis, “it will show that I am not inclined to devote the funds [of the Smithsonian] entirely to the advance of Physical science.”

Authoritatively but kindly, Meltzer assesses the field methods and classificatory principles of these untrained pioneer archaeologists. He reminds us that while their assumptions of a distinctive and separate “Moundbuilder Race” played into dangerous polygenist arguments in defense of slavery in the tumultuous decade before the Civil War, and were in any case overthrown by the Bureau of American Ethnology Mounds Survey even before 1900, the direct field observations, drawings, and plans that Squier and Davis left to posterity have ever since provided an invaluable early resource for our continuing inquiry into the prehistory of North America.

It should be noted, finally, that this edition of *Ancient Monuments* is dedicated to the archaeologist James B. Griffin (1905–1997), a “living link” through two generations to Squier and Davis. North American archaeology has always maintained a strong sense of lineage; this sesquicentennial publication serves to ground us more firmly in our multiple and overlapping pasts.

CURTIS M. HINSLEY

**C. Lee Campbell; Paul D. Peterson; Clay S. Griffith.** *The Formative Years of Plant Pathology in the United States*. xviii + 427 pp., illus., app., bibl., index. St. Paul, Minn.: American Phytopathological Society, 1999. \$49.