



Spring 2002

**Seeing Things Whole: The Essential John Wesley Powell, edited  
by William deBuys**

Pam L. Cox

**Recommended Citation**

Pam L. Cox, *Seeing Things Whole: The Essential John Wesley Powell, edited by William deBuys*, 42 NAT. RES. J. 447 (2002).

Available at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nrj/vol42/iss2/10>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Law Journals at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Natural Resources Journal by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact [disc@unm.edu](mailto:disc@unm.edu).

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Seeing Things Whole: The Essential John Wesley Powell*. Edited by William deBuys. Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2001. Pp. 388. \$27.50 cloth.

Major John Wesley Powell was a soldier, teacher, scientist, explorer, visionary, and true American hero. In *Seeing Things Whole: The Essential John Wesley Powell*, William deBuys compiles Powell's writings to paint a picture of this great man's life, time, and vision. In a single volume, William deBuys weaves together Powell's adult life beginning with journal entries from his history making and daring expedition down the Green and Colorado rivers in 1869 through his laudable political struggles concerning water usage in the arid west.

Subsequent to his filling in the last blank spot on the map of the United States, Powell devoted his life to the management of the West's limited water supply. He used the notoriety he achieved while on this expedition to become an official in Washington, D.C. His mission was to encourage other public servants in Washington to change land and water laws before settlement of the west. Powell knew that only a rational approach to water usage (*i.e.*, careful planning and development of arid lands) would minimize later conflicts over this finite resource. He knew that the west did not have an endless supply of water for irrigation.

*Seeing Things Whole: The Essential John Wesley Powell* begins with an introduction by the editor, William deBuys, a writer, conservationist, and historian. Mr. DeBuys eloquently retells the story of Powell's youth and education and his time as a civil war soldier, including the loss of his right forearm during the battle of Shiloh. His narrative also begins to give us insight into the political struggles Powell would face later in life. Following the introduction is a biographical chronology of Powell's life from his birth in 1834 to his death in 1902. The book also contains a variety of historic maps and photos of Powell, which bring his travels to life.

*Seeing Things Whole* is not a biography, but an overview of the depth and scope of this great man's life. The book is divided into seven parts, each containing several sections. Throughout the entire volume, deBuys skillfully adds introductions and footnotes to Powell's writings, expanding our understanding of his works. The editor cites not only Powell's writing but also the works of dozens of fine authors and writers. This book is not for the casual Powell reader who wants another dose of adventure into the Great Unknown; rather it is for anyone who wants to grasp the immensity of the contributions John Wesley Powell made to our understanding of the West and its limited resource, water.

### **Part 1: Down the Colorado: Letters from the Wilderness Post**

DeBuys begins part one with a depiction of Powell's 1869 history making expedition down the Green and Colorado rivers. He describes each

of the nine adventurous men who accompanied the Major on this dangerous undertaking. In addition, he recaps some of the rumors that had spread concerning the demise of the men of the Powell expedition. Following this introduction by the editor are two letters written by Powell and mailed from the Uinta Indian Agency five weeks after the journey began. The letters put to rest rumors and gave America a real sense of the perils and wonders these men faced.

## **Part II: Voyage into the Great Unknown**

Journal entries from Powell's Colorado River expeditions through the Grand Canyon comprise these selections. Even though these are some of Powell's most recognized writings, they are well-written and always fun to read. The introduction by deBuys and the footnotes in this section add to the understanding of the toil and danger faced by these men. He also begins to give us a brief look at what is ahead in the book: "Where Powell was concerned, stubbornness was a survival trait. It helped carry him through Shiloh and all its grievous aftermath, and it accounted for much of his success and the success of his ideas years later in the halls of government in Washington" (page 59).

## **Part III: Among the Natives of the Colorado Plateau**

Powell devoted much of his time to the study of native people. His ethnological work led to the formation of the Smithsonian Institute's Bureau of American Ethnology, which Powell headed from 1879 to 1902. The Bureau today still studies native customs, beliefs, and practices. "One senses in these pages Powell's genuine delight in probing the differentness of other people and cultures" (page 96).

## **Part IV: Report of the Lands of the Arid Region**

The real focus of *Seeing Things Whole* is Powell's ambitious *Report of the Lands of the Arid Region*, submitted to Congress in 1878. Within this Herculean commentary, Powell "laid out a plan for the settlement of the entire West" (page. 140). It called for an inventory and classification of western lands, the careful planning of how water would be distributed, and the methodical development of arid lands. This report led directly to the establishment of the United States Geological Survey by Congress in 1879. Since much of the *Report* is laden with technical jargon and includes other authors, deBuys included only Powell's preface and the first two chapters. He does, however, mention that the omitted portions of the *Report* are of much interest; they simply were not necessary to appreciate Powell's vision for the management of arid lands.

### Part V: The Nation's Expert

With the writing of the *Report of the Lands of the Arid Region*, Powell firmly established himself as the nation's expert on the issues of land and water usage in the West. The centerpiece of the three selections in part V is *The Lesson at Conemaugh*, in which Powell relates the horrors of the Johnstown Flood of 1889 and the importance of an irrigation survey and proper dam construction.

### Part VI: Advice for the Century

The three articles in part VI were published in *Century Magazine* in 1890. DeBuys writes, "The *Century* articles are a kind of sequel to *The Report on the Lands of the Arid Region*. In them one finds the fullest development of Powell's ideas, now matured another dozen years....In the *Century* articles that vision becomes even sharper and more penetrating" (page 246).

### Part VII: A Philosopher for Humankind

The final two selections, *From Barbarism to Civilization* and *Competition as a Factor in Human Evolution*, both published in *The American Anthropologist*, attest to Powell's philosophical side. "Even as the Geological Survey spawned the Irrigation Survey and the latter blazed across the heavens of controversy, burning out a brief but intense life, Powell reflected and wrote on problems of increasing abstraction: How does culture evolve? Where are the essential denominators of human experience? Are the nature of consciousness and the consciousness of nature the same?" (page 317). Although admirable, deBuys describes these works as "exhausting."

Overall, William deBuys has skillfully managed to pack a lifetime of one man's contributions to history and land management into one well-edited volume. As a ranger-naturalist who presents interpretive programs to visitors from all over the world, I found this book on Powell to be an invaluable resource. *Seeing Things Whole* allowed me to do just that; in one volume I was able to grasp the complexities of this man's life, struggles, and contributions.

How fortunate to be sitting aside the Rio Colorado while reading *Seeing Things Whole*. As the river rolls by, one can't help but wonder what Major Powell would think today, if he could see this river that began his lifelong pursuit of a rational approach to water usage. How would he feel to see, not a "river colored red," but an emerald green, controlled, siphoned, redirected, and much litigated river? In a speech to the National Irrigation Congress in Los Angeles in 1893, Major Powell said, "Gentlemen, it may be unpleasant for me to give you these facts. I hesitated a good deal

but finally concluded to do so. I tell you, gentlemen, you are piling up a heritage of conflict and litigation of water rights, for there is not sufficient water to supply the land." Truer words were never spoken. If only they had listened.

Pam L. Cox  
Park Ranger  
Phantom Ranch  
Grand Canyon National Park, Arizona