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PACIFIC SHIFT

By William Irwin Thompson.
San Francisco: Sierra Club Books. 1986.
Pp. 197 + xii. \$15.95.

Thompson's name may be known to readers in connection with the Lindisfarne Association he founded, or on account of his first book, *At the Edge of History*, which won some acclaim about fifteen years ago, or his own favorite of his works, *The Time Falling Bodies Take to Light*. This effort probably will win him no acclaim outside a tiny circle of futurists. Although Thompson's own notes report about critics and reviewers, I will undertake to explain here both why this book is worth reading for leisurely inspiration, and why it should not be taken very seriously as either scholarship or futurism.

Thompson's book offers a peculiar blend of ecology, economy, philosophy, psychiatry, religion, and politics. These strange bedfellows lie atop a mattress of natural resources and the ecological damage done by their exploitation, while all are covered over by a San Francisco misconception of zen Buddhism as the earth's last best hope. Not only does Thompson presume to summarize world history (to the exclusion of no inconsiderable number or variety of cultures), but he presumes to point the way to a sort of California salvation. Any reader who, like me, has had the good fortune to have lived in California, been educated at its University, and later also have been a visiting professor there, will marvel at Thompson's naive praises for the wonders of silicon valley and west coast consciousness. It is a region of major oil refineries (oil he attributes to the old, decadent, past culture of the Atlantic), the Livermore Labs' research on nuclear weapons (same wrong-headed attribution), and the drive-in everything. Its "consciousness," Thompson has not noticed, includes not alone the Sierra Club, which generously published this book, but Ronald "If-you've-seen-one-Redwood-you've-seen'em-all" Reagan, who was elected there in zen heaven to two terms as governor, and now oddly sits a larger seat. But Thompson believes that Jerry Brown is California, while Reagan merely passed through Hollywood briefly. That kind of ignorance might be excusable, if the author demonstrated any realistic grasp of what the west means. That, however, is his topic, and I will summarize his assessment.

Thompson intends to argue that global consciousness, culture, and power, are making the Pacific Shift. After the Riverine (Tigris-Euphrates) era, came the Mediterranean, and after it, the Atlantic. The future lies in the Pacific Rim, and the cities Los Angeles, Tokyo, and Sydney are

the only ones named in the book as keys to the rim. (The book, though, argues that centrism is a feature of old consciousness, so we should not focus on cities.) Now, the claim to be advanced here *could* be supported in numerous ways using evidence from economics, resource depletion or development, and more (need I add, the California courts' decisions impact elsewhere in our own country). But Thompson marshals none of that evidence, makes not that argument. Thompson argues that individuals' consciousnesses are entering—and must enter, to save the world—a “Gaia” state. His effort is to sketch an ecologically aware self-consciousness.

Thompson's sketch is a fascinating one indeed. He himself seeks to compare it to *Goedel, Escher, Bach*, and mentions all three of those as figures with his own kind of sensitivity and sensibility. *Goedel, Escher, Bach* is an almost unreadable book on account of the brilliance of conception and the detail of evidence; readers will not have those problems with *Pacific Shift*. Although Thompson cites from or alludes to Marx, Levi-Strauss, Bateson, Foucault, McLuhan, Habermas, and more, demonstrating a wide education and knowledge of what he calls Paris cafe posers, his own skimming is unconvincing and, at points, truly offensive. (He will quote Nietzsche, put down the man's mentality as obsolete, and then use aphorisms himself verbatim but unattributed later in the book.) But my hat is off to the breadth of sources Thompson has assembled as if to support his view; the only writer I have encountered capable of greater name and title dropping is Kenneth Burke. And I believe Thompson has chosen with great discretion (i.e., without context) the passages he quotes from these people, whether he is arguing against their work (e.g., Levi-Strauss) or for it (Francisco Varela). If one cares for it, and I do, such argument is interesting indeed.

The strength of Thompson's argument stems from its weaknesses. His summary of human consciousness evolving through stages is fascinating. His discussion of matching equilibria of ecology may prove interesting to *Natural Resources Journal* readers, especially when he turns his attention to our own Atlantic age. Thompson then begins to argue sensibly about pollution, deforestation, and other problems which, he says, stem from the “old” Atlantic consciousness, with its focus on economy, and will/may be resolved by the new Pacific consciousness, which, he claims, emphasizes ecology instead, and a new sense of “polity.”

What makes up this “new” consciousness of the Pacific Shift? Thompson talks about microcomputers, computer graphics, Disney, and zen (actually, about even more, but space is limited). He even speculates about brain hemisphere dominance, and the return to a pre-Gutenberg Galaxy literacy based, not upon this wretched print, but upon computer graphics. His hope is that we all will see ourselves living in an overlaid

fashion in the world of the future. He (correctly, I think) rejects both Outer Space and Tribal Culture as solutions to our problems. His faith in the PC on which this is being written, however, amazes me at times.

Thompson's appeal to us as readers is to consider history as he has considered it, as an evolution through stages of human consciousness (an idea the German idealists popularized in the 18th and 19th centuries, although he seems oddly unaware of Fichte and the others). If we buy his view, then a turn to a Pacific Shift is "logical," and his presentations of politics, religion, literature, and more, become sensible. If we don't, his book contains the seeds for our dismissal as critics with Atlantic outlooks—people the poet Dick Hugo called Europolators, whom Thompson might call Europaphiles. We are blinded to the present and future by the past. Like Marx or Freud, he explains everything and, so, explains nothing. But he does it with a literary elegance which I commend.

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