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Review Essay

WILLIAM DEBUYS, *SALT DREAMS: LAND AND WATER
IN LOW-DOWN CALIFORNIA*

Douglas C. Sackman

We may now revise Mark Twain's famous quip about the nation's arid lands: in the West, whiskey is for drinking and water is for writing about. Studies of western water overflow. But only a few writers, including Mary Austin, Wallace Stegner, and Donald Worster, have written about the subject with as much insight, grace, and power as William deBuys. *Salt Dreams* explores the human and ecological history of the lower Colorado River and the human actions that have connected the river to the Salton Sea, a sub-sea-level place in the Imperial Valley where "consequences collect" (p. 13). For deBuys, the Salton Sea offers a bitter antidote to nationalistic narcissism built on the control of nature. Looking into the sea's troubled waters, deBuys finds the results of dreams unmoored from ecological realities and social responsibilities.

DeBuys constructs an "archeology of place" (p. 3), investigating the various strata of human endeavor and ecological action that have made and remade the region. In other hands, we might take this "archeology" to be a mere figure of speech. DeBuys shows us the region's landforms and waterways as a geologist and hydrologist might, and then unveils the great human

William deBuys, *Salt Dreams: Land and Water in Low-Down California*. Photographs by Joan Myers (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999. xiii + 307 pp. 100 duotones, 30 halftones, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00 cloth, ISBN 0-8263-2126-7.) Douglas C. Sackman is an assistant professor of history at the University of Puget Sound.

dramas that unfolded in this geophysical scene. But the setting is no mere backdrop, for in his compelling stories people are intricately connected to place. He describes the dynamic relationship between nature, economic motivations, and environmental context to show how land and water changed from the sixteenth century to the present. The vast sweep of the book is impressive, although one might wish for more particulars on race and class relations in the Imperial Valley. But that is in part because deBuys's observations are so absorbing that the reader thirsts for more.

Tracing the interrelationship of natural ecosystems, political economy, and representations of nature has been the environmental historian's "greatest challenge." Meeting this challenge remarkably well, deBuys develops a history that pays attention as carefully to ecology as it does to ideas, while he details the economic motivations and consequences of developments along the Colorado. DeBuys's success is perhaps most plainly apparent in his treatment of the environmental and business fiasco on which his narrative centers. In 1905, the California Development Company (CDC), which had been diverting Colorado River water into the Imperial Valley for several years, lost control of its waterworks and sent the whole river careening off course. Rushing through a poorly engineered intake cut, the Colorado began to flow west into the Imperial Valley rather than south to the Gulf of California. While William Smythe envisioned the cultivation of democratic communities of yeoman farmers through irrigation in his *Conquest of Arid America* (1899), Charles Rockwood and Anthony Heber of the CDC "found a way to appropriate for private gain the waters of a great river and to cause that water to metamorphose into title to an inland empire" (p. 81). Yet the hubristic Rockwood, having pushed the more competent engineer George Chaffey out of the picture, failed to understand the power and character of the Colorado. The consequence was that his engineering works, like the financial structure of the company itself, were susceptible to devastating erosion. Ultimately, it would take the industrial muscle of E. H. Harriman and the Southern Pacific Company to plug the breach and rescue the CDC and its agricultural clients in the Imperial Valley. After this deluge, "nothing looked the same, not landscapes, institutions, politics, or ideas" (p. 121). Here, deBuys's main theme finds striking expression: how Anglo-American dreams of turning the desert into a garden ran aground, creating enduring consequences.

Similar to Elliott West's approach in *The Contested Plains*, deBuys delivers a history that is rich in ecological understanding and that takes seriously the dreams of both Indian peoples and newcomers. Leslie Marmon Silko also explores the gulf between perceptions about the ways and means of using

the Colorado's waters at the turn of the century in her most recent novel, *Gardens in the Dunes*. From the perspective of her Mojave and Ria C'ed O'Odham characters, the dam's construction site is a place where "the earth was blasted open, the soil red and moist as flesh. . . . The river had been forced from her bed into deep diversion ditches, where her water ran angry red." Mojaves worry that such damage will lead to an increase in witchcraft activity, one character lamenting that "if the river got moved, there would be no way to keep a garden."² Although outsiders invariably viewed the Southwest as virgin desert land in need of improvement, Natives had considered it a homeland and garden for hundreds of years. DeBuys fully recognizes that the reclamation dreams of the newcomers devastated older established patterns of dreaming about this land. One of his most poignant and telling stories is of the Torres-Martínez Band of the Desert Cahuilla. In 1909, they were awarded ten thousand *submerged* acres of land in the Salton Sink by the Department of the Interior. Government officials expected the sea to dry up in a matter of years, but it stubbornly remained. The Cahuillas dream of using this parcel of potential land sank under some eighty feet of water put there by the agricultural empire that displaced and dispossessed them.

In 1902 Congress passed the Newlands Act, which put the government in the business of damming and retrenching western waterways in order to cultivate garden communities of democracy. Historians who write about water in the West agree that this Jeffersonian dream has evaporated into thin desert air, but they disagree sharply about the cause of its failure. Donald Worster points to the confluence of technological, political, and economic elements involved in controlling water in an arid land. For Worster, the CDC fiasco showed that private interest alone is not equal to the task of managing rivers, thus setting the stage for state intervention. Worster's state does not march to the drumbeat of democracy but instead operates in accord with a capitalist ethos committed to economic growth and the technological control of nature. Setting his investigation within the "larger world experience" of manipulating water and adapting a Frankfurt school critique of knowledge and power, Worster compellingly describes the formation of technological and political systems designed to dominate, rationalize, and commodify the waters of the American West. These water works created a "hydraulic society . . . a social order based on the intensive, large-scale manipulation of water and its products in an arid setting."³ Worster argues that the alchemy of capitalist enterprise and technological control led not to the liberation of humanity from the limits of nature and to the flowering of democracy, but instead to a social system that was as characterized by domination as was the overall

human relationship to nature. In contrast, Norris Hundley Jr. argues that western water development is not “the creature of a despotic and centralized system of control,” but the product of conflict and rivalry among interest groups and federal, state, and local governments.⁴

DeBuys’s treatment of the lower Colorado supports both views. The book is full of stories about the competing visions of individuals, agencies, and interests in the area. Although he approvingly cites Worster, deBuys seems willing to attribute the pattern of water development along the Colorado as much to human foible, simple greed, and misplaced dreams as to an inexorable domination produced by the technologies and mentalities of modern capitalism. DeBuys does not advance an overarching theory to explain the relationship of water control and social power in the arid West. His approach is more like Richard White’s in *The Organic Machine*, where the Columbia is portrayed as a dynamic part of nature whose banks, surface, and depths have been criss-crossed with the nets of various groups who would make the river’s energy their own.⁵ *Salt Dreams* is a marvelously rich case study confirming many of Worster’s conclusions while also confirming Hundley’s belief that water in the West “is a vital, finite resource over which there has been constant struggle . . . [resulting in] profound social, economic, and environmental consequences.”⁶

The final chapters of *Salt Dreams* masterfully bring this triple saga of consequences up to the present. DeBuys tells the story of how developer M. Penn Phillips and others created an alluring mirage called the “Salton Riviera” in the early 1960s. These boosters were colorful figures, but deBuys also shows us why their promotional schemes matter. In order to understand the interconnection between ideas of nature, economics, and ecology in this dreamland, we need to know as much about the views of boosters as we do about the positions of the Bureau of Reclamation or the Sierra Club. Ecologically, the Salton Sea has become both a refuge and a danger zone. The artificial body of water is a vital stomping ground for migrating birds, which have faced the disappearance of wetlands all along the Pacific flyway, but the salty, pollution-laden sea has also become a breeding ground for several ailments that have caused avian die-offs of alarming proportions in recent years. DeBuys employs an analogy to explain the current predicament: “If the Salton Sea could be heaved up on a gurney and wheeled into the most efficient emergency room on the planet, treatment would still be slow” (p. 242). He concludes with a profound and crystalline assessment of competing dreams for the future of the Salton Sea, including a fascinating revelation about how his own dreams became intertwined with those of the late Sonny Bono.

Salt Dreams is as vivid in its imagery as it is penetrating in its analysis. Like several exceptionally revealing recent books, it is the result of collaboration between a historian and photographer.⁷ Joan Myers presents two portfolios of her portraits of the Salton Sea and the peoples who stand beside it. Her pictures are sympathetic, probing, and ask how environmental and social consequences collect in these lives and places. Myers and deBuys include no historical photographs. The focus on the present sets the narrative and the images into an interesting relationship; the photographs refuse to be seen as mere illustrations of the words. What deBuys says of borders can be said about the space between his written text and Myers's visual record: "The border is a barrier across which two very different kinds of social energy arc and flash, and the lightning that results ignites all kinds of things" (p. 176).

Salt Dreams is incandescent, brilliantly illuminating the pasts of this complicated place and shedding considerable light on its possible futures.

Notes

1. William Cronon, "Modes of Prophecy and Production: Placing Nature in History," *Journal of American History* 76 (March 1990): 1123. See also Donald Worster's essay, "Transformations of the Earth: Toward an Agroecological Perspective in History," *Journal of American History* 76 (March 1990): especially 1090–91.
2. Leslie Marmon Silko, *Gardens in the Dunes* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 213–14.
3. Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), 7, 19.
4. Norris Hundley Jr., "Water and the West in Historical Imagination," *Western Historical Quarterly* 27 (Spring 1996): 16. In this article, Hundley responds to the critique of his work by Donald Worster in *An Unsettled Country: Changing Landscapes of the American West* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994). See also Norris Hundley Jr., *The Great Thirst: Californians and Water, 1770s–1990s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).
5. Richard White, *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995).
6. Hundley Jr., "Water and the West," 11.
7. For example, see Patricia Limerick and Drex Brooks, *Sweet Medicine: Sites of Indian Massacres, Battlefields, and Treaties* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995); Gray Brechin and Robert Dawson, *Farewell Promised Land: Waking from the California Dream* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); and Gary Okihiro and Joan Myers, *Whispered Silences: Japanese Americans and World War II* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996).