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The Antiquities Act: A Century of American Archaeology, Historic Preservation, and Nature Conservation, edited by David Harmon, Francis P. McManamon & Dwight T. Pitcaithley

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The Big Oyster is at once too much and too little. Over the top Manhattan, insufficient mollusk. Kurlansky offers glancing treatment of the science, law, and regulatory controls that apply to the bivalve; slights the renowned Chesapeake Bay oyster fishery; dismisses mollusks in the Gulf Coast, especially the blow that Hurricane Katrina dealt the region; and ignores West Coast bivalves. The writer also neglects the period after 1930, although he does explore oyster catchers' deft switch to cultivation when they realized that centuries of Gotham pollution and excess had decimated the region's natural oyster beds. Missing from the account is how New York might have prevented or limited oyster devastation wrought by eons of gluttony, filth, and crushing population expansion. Kurlansky, therefore, laments oystering's demise, but he never squarely confronts ways that Manhattan could have rectified or ameliorated the profound decline, thus exuding an air of inevitability.

Kurlansky seems unclear about precisely what he intends *The Big Oyster* to be. The volume is one part New York excess, one part cultural history, and one part ecological tract. In attempting to realize so many goals, *The Big Oyster* attains none of the objectives particularly well. The book ultimately fails as cultural commentary, an attribute most trenchantly revealed by contrasting the volume to this genre of cult(ure) classics. *The Big Oyster* compares unfavorably with *Beautiful Swimmers*, *The Founding Fish*, and even *Oyster Wars*.

In the end, readers who hope to discover how the venerable oyster prompted the rise and supported the incredible growth of New York may find *The Big Oyster* disappointing. However, neophytes and even individuals who are experts on *Crassostrea Virginica* will find Mark Kurlansky's new monograph a captivating environmental cautionary tale.

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The Antiquities Act: A Century of American Archaeology, Historic Preservation, and Nature Conservation. Edited by David Harmon, Francis P. McManamon & Dwight T. Pitcaithley. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2006. Pp. 264. \$45.00 cloth; \$19.95 paper.

The National Antiquities Act of 1906 was a visionary piece of legislation that created our National Park system and gave legal protection to our historic landmarks and indigenous ruins. This collection of essays gives the reader a glimpse into the Act's origins in the Progressive Era of America history, but a mere glimpse it is. The best essays are grounded in the turn of the century's complex milieu and acknowledge the influence of industrialization and colonialism. Other essays offer a detailed account of

the passage of the Act and the creation of the National Parks: A manly story about iconoclastic men such as Theodore Roosevelt, their love for the outdoors, and how they convinced effete Washington lawmakers that land conservation was worth the offense to the orthodoxy of private development. Some of these writers see the passage of the Act as an American tale of individuals and the largesse of the Executive. More on point are the few essays that acknowledge the European origins of the preservation movement, that note that reform and modern anxiety were at the roots of this movement, although here no one actually dares speak of the continental socialist backdrop.

This volume provides an adequate history of the subject for lay readers. The National Antiquities Act (NAA) granted to the Executive power to "declare by public proclamation historic landmarks, historic and prehistoric structures, and other objects of historic or scientific interest [on Federal lands] the limits of which in all cases shall be confined to the smallest compatible lands...." Legal challenges followed Roosevelt's ambitious granted protections at Grand Canyon and Jackson Hole, after which the Act fell into disuse. The Carter and Clinton administrations revived the NAA in slightly less dramatic fashion, but the Act retains its power to raise controversy. This basic outline is repeated unnecessarily in the volume, although details could have been fleshed out in one or two essays. The repetition results in the unintended effect of making the Act seem rather paltry, as if its cheerleaders were struggling to fill up a whole book with its legends and infamous showdowns.

The editors of this collection faced another problem at the onset that was not successfully overcome. Archeology and urban architecture are very different disciplines, sometimes competing, that themselves only occasionally overlap with the intricate concept of land conservation. It is only by examining the concerns of all parties, movements, and disciplines that a reader would be able to comprehend the complexity of the *idea* of preservation. Although the book presents itself as a basic history for general consumption, identifying a basic philosophy of the underlying subject, if there is one, or many, is left undone.

James Rasband offers a thoughtful critique of the centralized power by which the Act operates – "The Elgin Marbles of Our Public Lands?" – a good argument for land conversation at the local level. A law professor at Brigham Young, Rasband contrasts the clumsy unilateral process of land conservation to the intellectual purity of American naturalist writers like Henry David Thoreau and John Muir and believes something has been lost. The preservation movement should "exhibit more skepticism about its achievement." At the same time, he acknowledges a public that may be happily inclined toward mineral extraction. The author comes out in favor of local feedback and influence, even at the possible cost of a dilution of the great idealism of the Progressive Era.

Char Miller points out in "The Antiquities Act, Big Stick Conservation and the Modern State" the futility in guessing at the motives behind government-granted protections. The author notes that at its origins conservation was both an internal anxiety over a closed frontier and an external pressure in an age of endless colonial wars and squabbles over land grabs and the seizing of resources. Conservation is a "civic religion" in which the protected sites "are woven into the American imagination...a dialogue about what made America exceptional." This is a bigger picture about modern nation building and reveals motivations somewhat less than altruistic. This essay and Rasband's are exceptions in a book that gives greater preference to anecdotes and non-critical narratives. It is not clear if this book has a critical subtext or if the reader is meant to be made concerned or soothed.

At times the book falls completely flat. For example, in the lone essay dedicated to the subject of architectural preservation, Jerry Rogers asserts that "[t]he three basic federal [historic preservation] laws, two generations apart, have launched a national idea of historic preservation." Likewise, in the book's first essay, "The Origins of the Antiquities Act," Ronald Lee asserts that the first generation of preservationists "awakened the American people to a lasting consciousness of the value of antiquities....[a] public understanding achieved only after persistent effort in the face of ignorance and vandalism...." This supposed creation of a national preservation consciousness is dubious and is not supported by any factual basis to be found in this essay or the others. The net result of this book is to hear this sentiment many times over, projecting the idea that the NAA and its brethren were successful not only in preserving land and landmarks, but in educating the American people to finally appreciate the "resources" that make up our "rich heritage." In this aspect, this book rarely penetrates deeper than a civics lesson for children. We don't actually learn what the public felt about preservation before the NAA: Crass looters cannot speak for a nation, then or now.

Many of the essays here repeatedly remark that the noblest purpose of the Act was to preserve landmarks, land, and buildings for the "education" of the public. Few of these chronicles, however, specify the content of this pedagogical event. There is a presumed scientific value, as per the language of the Act, but all other lessons imparted on the public remain inchoate. This book is not unique in presenting conservation as an obvious good, the act of a benevolent state interested in preserving "national resources." It is a self-contained and self-referential concept. In England, on the other hand, early preservationists used old buildings as an indictment against the failures of industrial capitalism, with its endless cycle of production of shoddy goods and housing and exploited workers relegated to mindless toil in factories. These early preservationists stressed too the educational value of preservation, including land conservation, and it was a rich and multidisciplinary lesson in art, labor, economics, and

human dignity. The editors of this book avoid this more nuanced, more troubling reality. The subject as presented is interesting national biography, as if preservation were merely an enthusiasm among a largely united people.

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