

BLAKE GUMPRECHT. *The Los Angeles River: Its Life, Death, and Possible Rebirth.* (Creating the North American Landscape.) Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. 1999. Pp. x, 369. \$39.95 [Get access](#)

Gumprecht Blake. **The Los Angeles River: Its Life, Death, and Possible Rebirth.** (Creating the North American Landscape.) Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. 1999. Pp. x, 369. \$39.95.

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Books.) Seattle: University of Washington Press. 1999. Pp. xv, 323. \$35.00.

This book begins with the observation that the relationship between nature and human society's alteration of nature is reciprocal: people change nature, and, in response, nature affects the way people live and work. This keen insight provides the starting point for Mark Fiege's investigation into the history of irrigated agriculture in Idaho.

While inspecting the Snake River valley, Fiege noticed that the complex system of canals, ditches, and conduits relied as much on the area's natural geography as it did on the imposition of technology and science upon the landscape. For example, what appeared to be a naturally occurring creek near the town of Buhl was in fact a part of the irrigation network. But this creek, though "a component of hydraulic technology," was not completely artificial (p. 5). Its path traced a "crease made in the land by geological forces" and as such was as much a part of the natural environment as the river whose diverted waters were carried by the creek to downstream farmers (p. 6). The convergence of nature and technology leads Fiege to think about the history of irrigation in a way that emphasizes nature's responsiveness to the alterations wrought by human society.

This perspective frames Fiege's inquiries into a series of topics integral to the history of the irrigated landscape in Idaho. He traces the plans for and construction of irrigation works from their origins in the late nineteenth century. By 1928, irrigators recognized that nature continually answered every artificial encroachment on the landscape. As one engineer put it, "Reclamation is something like housekeeping. It is never finished" (p. 41). Fiege extends this observation to the ultimately uncontrollable responses of vegetation, animals, and insects to the physical transformation of the land and water. The more humans sought to impose scientific order on nature, the more challenges—social as well as scientific—they created for themselves. Fiege carries this interpretation through a discussion of water law, focusing particularly on the Western innovation of the doctrine of prior appropriation. He concludes, not surprisingly, that the new legal doctrines did not eliminate conflict, in part because competing claims for water increased while the physical supply decreased.

Fiege then turns his attention to commercial agriculture, specifically to a comparison of the economies of scale of large-scale enterprise and smaller, family-owned and operated farms. Each generated alterations in the landscape and erected institutional structures to support their modes of production, particularly their use of labor. In keeping with recent contributions to the new rural history, Fiege merges these once antithetical categories of analysis, finding substantial points of physical, economic, and social intersection. In selling their crops, farmers encountered not the systematic, ordered process the Progressives promised

but an "inherently chaotic, hazardous" market (p. 145). Repeatedly, Fiege argues, farmers, irrigators, engineers, and reformers found the dream of an ordered, scientifically engineered, technological society dashed by the realities of the irrigated landscape. In his final chapter, Fiege analyzes the metaphors and myths that powered the irrigated landscape. Even in the contemporary imagination, disillusionment replaced the dream.

This book represents a remarkable accomplishment. It tells in great historical, scientific, and literary detail the history of irrigated agriculture in Idaho. Its central idea—that nature trumps the hubris of humanity—is a compelling moral for any story, but particularly for an environmental historian concerned, as is Fiege, with understanding human society's relationship to nature. Anyone interested in Idaho's experience with irrigation will have to begin here, and marvel, as did Fiege, at the complex relationship between people and the landscape.

It is because the book holds such promise for relating that history to the broader history of irrigation in the western United States that one wants to ask for more than the focused, richly detailed story Fiege tells. Readers familiar with the development of western water law, the well-charted history of irrigation and agriculture in California and Arizona, and the political, institutional, and legal problems surrounding those events will find much relevant material here, but Fiege has not made the conceptual or historical links explicit. Even in the abundant endnotes (for which the publisher really ought to have supplied page number call-outs), there is little annotated discussion of the literature to which this book is squarely related. This focused case study exhibits many of the merits of the genre. Yet for the scholar interested in the fundamental issues raised by the topic, the Idaho case study would be even more illuminating had the broader connections been laid out and the existing literature directly and critically engaged.

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In this well-written and beautifully crafted study, Blake Gumprecht provides a close look at the evolution of one of America's most urban rivers, focusing on the impact the river has had on human activities and how, in turn, those activities have altered the stream. Slightly more than fifty miles long, the Los Angeles River is today little more than a concrete-line conduit for sewage water flowing to the sea, something of a joke to most nearby residents. Such was not always the case, Gumprecht shows. The river was essential to the development of the Los Angeles region. As Gumprecht observes, the history of the Los Angeles River is "a

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