

Daegan Miller

*This Radical Land: A Natural History of American Dissent*

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With this remarkable book, Daegan Miller makes an important intervention in the historiography of America's outdoor nature. In 1995 William Cronon famously identified 'The Trouble with Wilderness' – in essence, that the idea of wilderness set up a dichotomy between humans and pristine lands that made it impossible for the two to coexist. Ramachandra Guha had already identified this impasse in his 'Third World Critique' of 'Radical American Environmentalism' in 1989. In the ensuing years, numerous environmental historians, including Matthew Klinger, Jennifer Price, Sarah Jaquette Ray, Joseph E. Taylor III and Louis Warren have further critiqued the concept of wilderness by demonstrating the elitism and exclusionary rhetoric of many of those who pursued its preservation. Perhaps no greater proof of this mindset exists than the expulsion of indigenous people from parks to create 'pristine' nature in landscapes humans had occupied for millennia – a process explored by Karl Jacoby, Mark David Spence and Mark Dowie, among others. Miller acknowledges and upholds this criticism, but he also reminds us that it did not have to be this way – that for a time, especially in the second half of the nineteenth century, there were multiple competing visions of wilderness, one of which involved people living and working in wooded lands in a manner less destructive than that dictated by the market forces of industrial capitalism. Ultimately, the exclusionary vision won out, and in many instances preservationists worked with the state to remove people subsisting in environments labelled with this ascendant understanding of wilderness. Other scholars, such as Warren and Jacoby, have drawn attention to the working people who lived and subsisted in, and sometimes sought in their own way to conserve, America's outdoor nature. But Miller is unique in contending that some of these communities were pursuing a radically different vision of wilderness from the one we hold today – a vision we might consider revisiting.

Miller presents his arguments in a complex, multilayered structure that challenges the reader, but recompenses her or him with fresh insights into our relationship with the natural world. Miller organises his book around a series of 'witness trees', historical trees or forests that beheld 'not the typical tale of American progress, but something more radical: histories of dissent, of freedom, of equality, and of justice' (p. 6). One of these trees stands at the centre of each of the four 'Acts' that constitute the bulk of this study. In the first act, 'At the Boundary with Henry David Thoreau', Miller describes how Thoreau, then working as a surveyor, made marks in willow trees to measure changes in the depth of the Concord River. He did so as part of a study intended to show how downstream mills had disrupted the river's flow, to the detriment of farmers and nature alike. By keenly analysing the extraordinarily detailed map Thoreau produced of the Concord, Miller explores the former's increasing disillusionment with the abstraction of natural processes to facilitate commerce and industry. In the following act, 'The Geography of Grace: Home in the Great Northern Wilderness', Miller turns to the forests of the Adirondacks, where nineteenth-century African-American pioneers established agricultural communities with assistance from prominent black abolitionists, like Henry

Highland Garnet. Miller contends that these settlers had a vision of wilderness that involved people living in and working on the land, in a spirit of mutual aid, to maintain freedom. Miller shifts his attention westward in the third act, 'Revelator's Progress: Sun Pictures of the Thousand-Mile Tree'. He examines the photography of Captain A. J. Russell, who documented the building of the Union Pacific Railroad, and in so doing photographed the 'thousand-mile tree' marking the supposed completion of that length of track. While such subject matter ostensibly highlighted human conquest of nature, Miller demonstrates that Russell's photography often subverted this message through the use of sublime imagery and other techniques. Russell thereby hinted at the fragility of white settlement in the American West and the need to respect natural forces. In the final act, 'Possession in the Land of Sequoyah, General Sherman, and Karl Marx', Miller discusses the Kaweah community of anti-capitalist radicals, who took up residence among groves of sequoias in central California. They hoped to establish a logging community that would never target the sequoias, but instead sustainably harvest other tree species, allowing people to live and work in these mighty forests in perpetuity. When the United States established Sequoia National Park in 1890, state officials deemed the Kaweah Colony's land claims invalid, forcing them to abandon their communitarian dream.

Miller's writing in *This Radical Land* is gorgeous, but he does not always adhere to the conventions of academic prose. Readers hoping for a collection of straightforward essays with introductions laying out clear-cut arguments and bodies mechanically supporting these contentions might come away disappointed. Miller crafts exquisite, lyrical sentences, and each act takes the reader on a journey that results in a deeper understanding of what wilderness has become, what it could have been, and what it might still be. Miller also inserts himself into the narrative at points, a controversial practice in our profession, but one that he uses to great effect. This is especially so in his conclusion, 'Enduring Obligations' (a clever play on Rachel Carson's second chapter of *Silent Spring*: 'The Obligation to Endure'). All told, Miller has produced a wonderful work, not just of environmental history, but also of nature writing in its highest form. This is a book worth reading.

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