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Book Reviews

American Environmentalism: Values, Tactics, Priorities.

By JOSEPH M. PETULLA. College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1980. Pp. 239. Maps, notes, index. \$18.50.

The heightened environmental consciousness of the 1970s has led some historians to call for the creation of a "new" history concerned with mankind's relationship to the environment. Citing the inadequacies of conservation history with its emphasis on federal resource policies during the Progressive and New Deal eras, these historians have pointed to the need to examine not only the political and institutional aspects of resource use but also the more fundamental economic and ideological questions about mankind's attitude toward the natural world. Unfortunately the promise of environmental history has yet to be fulfilled. Unlike other "new" histories that were stimulated by the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, environmental history has not been successful in exorcising its presentism and establishing its credibility as a field of study with a distinct perspective on past behavior. All too often environmental historians have been content merely to catalog the dismal record of environmental destruction or to applaud the achievements of the enlightened few. Environmental history, in other words, remains advocacy and not historical method. A good case in point is Joseph M. Petulla's *American Environmentalism*, the first in Texas A & M University Press's series on environmental history. For all of its perceptive insights into environmental issues this book does not succeed as history.

In his preface Petulla announces that his goal is to write a summary interpretive history of the modern environmental movement, but the result is less a history than an impassioned critique of the movement. Petulla approaches his study with little sense of historical process and thus such basic questions as when modern environmentalism began remain unanswered. Eschewing the need to define the chronological boundaries of his study Petulla begins instead with

a lamentation about the current state of environmentalism. He feels that the early unity of the modern environmental movement has yielded to value and behavioral conflicts.

Petulla's explanation for this disunity is the central theme of *American Environmentalism*. The reason, according to Petulla, is that environmental ideology is really composed of three ethical traditions that have led to different values, tactics, and priorities within the movement. The first tradition, the biocentric, is based on a belief in the inherent value of nature and can be traced from the transcendentalists to Aldo Leopold. The ecological tradition evolved from Greco-Roman theories of natural law and Christian teleology. The leading advocates of this tradition include George Perkins Marsh, Rachel Carson, and Barry Commoner. The final tradition is the economic one derived from Protestant values of economic efficiency. Petulla associates this tradition with the conservationists of the Progressive era and with today's government bureaucrats, natural resource economists, and the middle class in general.

Having delineated these three traditions, Petulla next tries to link them to important events in the evolution of the environmental movement, and it is at this point that his conceptual framework falters. It fails primarily because Petulla constantly succumbs to the desire to lobby the environmentalists' cause. The chapter on risk and conservation, for example, promises to discuss how the concept of risk taking has been used by environmentalists to attract support from non-environmental groups. But Petulla launches into a lengthy discourse on the risks of nuclear energy. While his summary of the nuclear safety question is a good one it does not address the question at hand which is how the risk taking concept has been incorporated into environmental ethics.

Perhaps the best example of Petulla's inability to distinguish between the task of a historian and that of an advocate is his treatment of the economic tradition. He quickly dismisses the utilitarian conservationists as untrustworthy because he believes they were tools of corporate interests and then digresses into a criticism of environmental economists and the applicability of economic concepts like social costs and discount rates to environmental problems. Again, while Petulla has provided a good discussion of the inability of a capitalist system to do anything but exploit resources, he has done so at the expense of historical analysis. No matter how much one might disagree with them, the utilitarian conservationists are worthy of more than a page and a half in what purports to be a history of environmentalism.

Petulla confesses to his reader that he was not able to lay out a "simple, neat model" to explain wide divergences of environmental thought. He justifies this shortcoming by saying "if the job sometimes seems to be a bit untidy, I would plead that historical events make it so" (p. xiii). History is rarely "tidy" and while no one expects that the product of historical inquiry be a "simple" model, it is not unreasonable to demand that the results be less equivocal. Petulla is hiding behind Clio's skirts. His inability to make sense out of the modern environmental movement results not from the inherent complexities of history but from his failure to separate his roles as historian, critic, and advocate.

All of those concerned with the environmental problems that continue to confront our society will find Petulla's book a provocative discussion of the difficulties of establishing a coherent ideological base for environmental sanity. But the historian whose academic concern is with the past and not with the future will find *American Environmentalism* less than satisfying.

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Frontierswomen: The Iowa Experience. By GLENDA RILEY.
Ames, Iowa: State University Press, 1981. Pp. xv + 211. Illustrations, tables, notes, index. \$18.95.

In a lecture at Stetson University in 1959, historian David Potter questioned whether Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis was applicable to American women and raised a challenge for future scholars. "Attention to the historic character of American women," he said, "is important not only as a speciality for female scholars or for men who happen to take an interest in feminism, but as a coordinate major part of the overall, comprehensive study of the American character as a whole." Within the last five years a spate of articles and books on frontier women have appeared, marking a renewed interest in the issues raised by Potter. Were there economic opportunities for women on the frontier, and did this encourage a movement toward political equality? What special qualities did the frontier experience produce in women?

Focusing on the frontierswomen in Iowa between 1830 and 1870, Glenda Riley's new book makes a Turnerian argument. The women on the Iowa frontier adjusted their lifestyles, standards, and expectations to meet new circumstances, and with "patience, persistence, . . . optimism," and "resourcefulness" (pp. 38, 41), carved out a better life for themselves and their families in the West. Women's economic partnership with men in this task rendered them men's equals, and this led to improved educational opportunities for women, "revised concepts of economic importance," diversified occupational choices, and increased demands for political equality (pp. 74, 136-137, 152).

Though there is a clear Turnerian bent to her book, Riley's explicit goal was not to refute or support Turner, but to challenge the stereotyped image of frontierswomen. In the context of her writing, it becomes clear that the stereotype which she is most anxious to dispel is that of the overworked and discontented frontierswoman featured in Hamlin Garland's novels and given credence in recent studies by Julie Jeffreys and John Faragher. This scholarship stresses the conservatism of western women, that is, their reluctance to depart from the mandates of the "cult of domesticity." Tension and discontent resulted from the conflict between their ideals of womanhood imported from the East and the demands of the pioneer experience, which required women to do tasks outside their proper sphere.