

## The Young John Muir: An Environmental Biography

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teenth century. As their community increased, they drew new members from diverse ethnic groups and divergent economic and educational backgrounds.

Although these sisters called Carondelet "home," their religious commitment mandated a mobile lifestyle. Sisters traveled to the urban centers of the Midwest and East not to fuel the industrial growth of cities but to alleviate the sufferings wrought by rapid urbanization. As the nation moved westward, so did the sisters. They journeyed not in search of gold, silver, or land but to establish schools, hospitals, and orphanages to serve the miners, homesteaders, and indigenous peoples who suffered from that westward expansion.

In *Spirited Lives* Coburn and Smith skillfully examine the question: How did these sisters create and sustain "a network of support and services that insured the transmission of Catholic values, culture and education" well into the mid-twentieth century (2)? Coburn and Smith acknowledge that this inquiry necessitates an analysis of how the Sisters of St. Joseph, in their convent and ministerial lives, charted and navigated the turbulent seas of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century understandings of gender, religion, and power. The authors render cogent evidence that illustrates the strategies the sisters employed to use the religious and gender ideologies of the era in order to define and expedite their various ministries. Despite successful endeavors, patriarchal forces in the Catholic church and society at times thwarted the women's labors. In some instances, the sisters succumbed to the dominant powers; in most situations, their determination, commitment, and wit circumvented clerical control. Although their ministries afforded them more opportunities than most nineteenth-century women, sisters, unlike white Protestant women, failed to establish a "public voice on social issues involving women and children" (221-22). Nonetheless, *Spirited Lives* elucidates Catholic sisters' pivotal role in the history of American Catholicism and the nation.

*The Young John Muir: An Environmental Biography*, by Steven J. Holmes. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999. xv, 309 pp. Illustrations, notes, index, appendixes. \$55.00 cloth, \$22.95 paper.

Reviewer Thomas K. Dean is special assistant to the president of the University of Iowa. He is the author of "The Pedagogy of Place: Valuing Environment and Community in Education" in *JAEP: Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning*, 1997.

Steven J. Holmes is trying something new and valuable in this biography of John Muir. He defines "environmental biography" as moving

beyond only political and cultural dimensions to provide "a richly textured account of the development of his [Muir's] patterns of relationship with the specific environments—natural, domestic, and built—in which he lived and moved and had his being over the course of his lifetime" (9). The book is valuable on other counts as well. Muir is associated mostly with the West, and often his early career, with formative years in the Midwest, gets short shrift. Holmes also portrays Muir as a man and thinker of inner and outer contradictions rather than a simplistic nature worshiper.

Holmes views Muir's early life through contradictory categorical relationships to environment: wildness, religion, and domesticity. For Holmes, the early naturalist's relationship with nature involved competing desires to partake of nature's wildness, connect with its spiritual dimensions, and relate to it as a domestic home. Holmes attributes such environmental interactions to interior and family struggles: Muir's father's ardent evangelicalism and strict discipline, Muir's love for and detachment from his mother, and thus the Oedipal struggles of childhood and young adulthood projected onto his relationships with the domestic gardens and wild landscapes of his youth.

Holmes's work helpfully bridges the personal and the environmental, but psychologizing someone long dead through the traces of their written remains is more problematic. Holmes claims an "object relations" approach, a holistic exploration of one's relations with the world beyond the interpersonal, but it is still grounded in intimate explorations of Muir's psychology all the way back to childhood. It is difficult to accept a claim, for example, that a nature walk with Muir's maternal grandfather reveals "that the gardens, apples, and field mice were actors in a dual process of maintaining a relationship with his mother and of negotiating his increased separation from her—as well as being the subjects of new, open-ended relationships in their own right" (22).

From the perspective of midwestern history, the book offers detail on the place of Wisconsin, in particular, in Muir's development as one of America's greatest naturalists and nature writers. Ironically, much of that development resulted from Muir's alienation from his Wisconsin environment as he was dislodged from his native Scotland. Holmes examines Muir's drawing inward and upward as a child on the family farm in Wisconsin, developing religious proclivities that would strongly inform his relationship with the grandeur of the West. As a botany student at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, Muir came out of his inner shell and began the process of becoming attached to the natural landscapes of "the West" (of which Wisconsin was a part in his early lifetime). Holmes also simply provides much interesting detail about life and academics at Madison in this period.

In all, with my reservations about the theoretical approach noted, Holmes's biography of Muir is valuable as a pioneering work in the emerging genre of "environmental biography," as a study of Muir's rather neglected early life, and as a substantive look at his midwestern influences.

*Goldbugs and Greenbacks: The Antimonopoly Tradition and the Politics of Finance in America, 1865-1896*, by Gretchen Ritter. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997. vii, 303 pp. Notes, glossary, chronology, appendix, index. \$59.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

Reviewer Jeff Kolnick is associate professor of history at Southwest State University in Marshall, Minnesota. His dissertation was "A Producer's Commonwealth: Populism and the Knights of Labor in Blue Earth County, Minnesota, 1880-1892" (University of California-Davis, 1996).

Students of the American antimonopoly tradition will find little new in *Goldbugs and Greenbacks*, but in our current political climate it will repay a careful reading nonetheless. Perhaps the only public official today who has risen above all criticism in the popular media is Alan Greenspan—the banker's banker. That a banker can be so uncritically seen as a hero of the American economy is a powerful sign that we have moved light years from the days so carefully examined by political scientist Gretchen Ritter. By correctly placing the debate on finance capitalism at the center of national politics in the 30 years after the Civil War, Ritter reminds us of a story told many times about how U.S. citizens debated whether our capitalist economy should be dedicated to a proprietary/cooperative or corporate future. The book contains a useful glossary of terms relating to late nineteenth-century finance, a chronology of important monetary legislation, and an "antimonopolist" reading of L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. There is also an analysis of money and politics in North Carolina, Massachusetts, and Illinois. The book will serve as a nice introduction for graduate students and precocious undergraduates to the debates surrounding finance after the Civil War.

Based largely on secondary sources, the book is divided into two major sections, one devoted to the debate surrounding the return to the gold standard after the Civil War, and the other to the politics of money in the 1890s. Along the way one gets a sound treatment of the National Banking Act of 1863 and a balanced (perhaps too balanced) account of the arguments used by advocates of the gold standard and various plans to create a flexible and democratic currency, from greenbacks to the Subtreasury Plan.

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