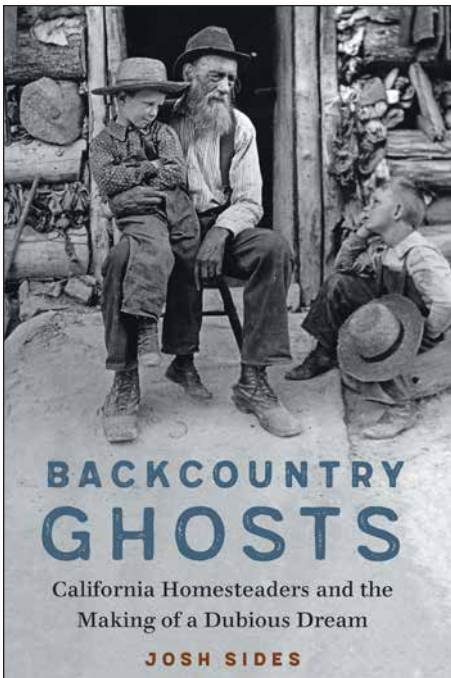


BOOK REVIEWS

BACKCOUNTRY GHOSTS: *California Homesteaders and the Making of a Dubious Dream*. By Josh Sides (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2021, 240 pp., \$17.31 hardcover). Reviewed by Jacob K. Friefeld.



Sitting in a social studies classroom as a fifth grader, the settlement of California seemed a grand adventure. Gold! That's what California meant to me in the fifth grade. So much gold that it inspired the name of a football franchise. I was a bit simplistic in my understanding (and maybe too focused on the football aspect), but Josh Sides would agree that gold along with violent dispossession of American Indians were important themes of California's settler colonial past. In *Backcountry Ghosts: California Homesteaders and the Making of a Dubious Dream*, Sides offers a third theme in California's settlement history: homesteading.

Sides places California homesteaders within a longer settlement history. Before the homesteaders arrived in California, there were the Natives, the Californios who settled when the region was still part of Mexico, and the gold seekers. The cattle ranchers followed, using the

vast public domain to graze their stock. Homesteaders arrived as interlopers in that world of cattle ranching. Homesteaders who claimed and fenced their new farms posed a threat to ranchers who saw their grazing lands increasingly closed off. These relationships, as in other parts of the West, often turned violent.

Along with placing homesteading in California's settlement history, *Backcountry Ghosts* offers important insights that make contributions to the increasing historiography on homesteading and particularly homesteading fraud. For generations historians assumed that the homesteading process was rife with corruption and

fraud. This assumption has recently been called into question, but Sides seems to align with this traditional scholarly view. He details the way in which large lumber companies, namely the California Redwood Company, used the Homestead Act to acquire forestland. An agent from the company based in a saloon bribed would-be-claimants to acquire land and transfer the claims to the company. The lumber companies hastily constructed lodgings, usually not fit for a person to live, to meet the “residency” requirement of the Homestead Act (146–147).

Sides also investigates the ways in which oil companies tried to make homesteaders fail so the company could gain access to the valuable minerals beneath the surface. George W. Ozmun of Kern County returned home one day to find that oilmen had “stolen his house” (43). The intersection of fraud and homesteading in California calls attention to the need for more research, as historians are still far from understanding the extent of fraud via the homesteading laws. It seems that California might have seen a greater amount of fraud than the Great Plains, as other studies have suggested, possibly due to valuable mineral rights in the state. Historians should take local, state, and comparative approaches to homesteading to help tease out the ways in which individuals and corporations attempted to defraud the government in and between spatial contexts.

Sides’s analysis of Hispanic homesteaders is a major contribution. Mexicans who dominated California found themselves displaced after the U.S.-Mexico War and the arrival of white Americans in droves in ensuing decades. Their descendants survived largely by working for white landowners. The Homestead Act offered opportunity for those who wanted to escape this wage labor and own land. Sides argues that Hispanics who homesteaded bucked against the social trend of the state by “effectively bringing former Mexican lands back into Mexican hands” (70). Hispanic Californians dogged homesteading efforts also pushed against the cultural myths of the “lethargic” Hispanic or mythic Spanish past. To Sides, the ability to reclaim ancestral lands gave homesteading a different and perhaps more important meaning to Hispanic homesteaders.

His discussion of Hispanic claimants opens a vein of research that other scholars ought to follow. The history of homesteading has been a very white story focused largely on Euro-Americans moving westward and European immigrants. Recent scholarship has tried to correct this, but a comprehensive study of Hispanic claimants is needed to help understand how they homesteaded and thought about their efforts. Sides’s approach to California’s Hispanic homesteaders is an important step in this understanding.

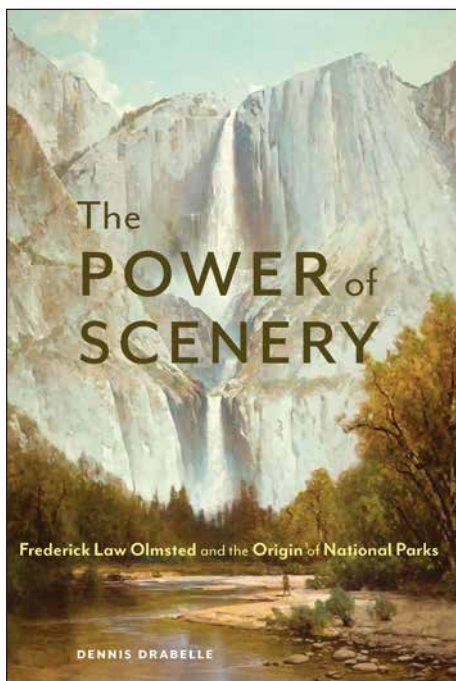
Homesteaders were not the first to arrive in California, and Sides reminds us that they too were displaced by interlopers. These new interlopers were of a very Californian variety—wealthy city-dwellers looking to use rural land as a leisurely getaway from urban life. This gets to the heart of *Backcountry Ghosts*. Sides wants readers to reflect on the nature of home and that California has been caught in a problematic cycle of gentrification in which people are removed, displaced, or priced off the land. He wants Californians to think of the homesteaders’ experience in the context of current inflated housing prices and the state’s struggles with urban homelessness. He even asks his readers to interrogate the United States’ obsession with land ownership.

There is little to complain about in *Backcountry Ghosts*, though Sides should temper his overall evaluation of the Homestead Act as the “most ambitious and sweeping social policy in the history of the United States until the passage of the Social Security Act in 1935” (xi). Surely the Homestead Act was an extremely important social policy. However, during 1862 the United States was engaged in the beginnings of a revolution that would see the end of chattel slavery and extension of voting rights to Black men—arguably a more ambitious and sweeping social policy.

I recommend *Backcountry Ghosts* without hesitation. It is a major contribution to the history of homesteading and the West, and I look forward to seeing how future scholars build on Josh Sides’s work.

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THE POWER OF SCENERY: *Frederick Law Olmsted and the Origin of National Parks*. By Dennis Drabelle (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press/Bison Books, 2021, 272 pp., \$20.74 hardcover). Reviewed by Kathryn B. Carpenter.



In the pantheon of mythic Americans credited for all or part of “America’s best idea,” as Wallace Stegner dubbed the U.S. national parks system, Frederick Law Olmsted is seldom included. Dennis Drabelle’s *The Power of Scenery* seeks to put the landscape architect on that pedestal, using Olmsted’s shelved plan for Yosemite’s management and his advocacy for the preservation of Niagara Falls to argue for his overlooked significance. Better known for his work on projects like New York’s Central Park and the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, Olmsted also served on the Yosemite Commission in 1865, charged with making recommendations for how the park should be managed. Olmsted’s preliminary report, advising that the land be available to all and altered as little as possible, was buried by commissioners serving other interests. Nevertheless, Drabelle posits, Olmsted’s ideas

were championed by others and played an essential role in the later establishment of Yellowstone National Park. This argument is intriguing, and Drabelle makes a convincing case for Olmsted's intellectual influence. The assertion of a direct link between Olmsted's thinking and Yellowstone's establishment, however, is more than the evidence seems to support.

The Power of Scenery is written for an audience of national parks enthusiasts rather than historians, for whom much of this book will be review. In the early chapters, Drabelle pulls together threads explored by other scholars about the intellectual context of the national parks movement in the United States. He touches on America's insecurity as a young nation, leading some Americans to see the country's natural wonders as a way of "making up for the dearth of traditional high culture" (10). He describes the overdevelopment of Niagara Falls, which serves as a foil to the hands-off approach to national parks management championed by Olmsted and others. Readers also meet George Catlin, whom Drabelle credits with introducing a "rough draft of the national parks idea," and Henry David Thoreau, a major influence on the thinking of John Muir, and other influential thinkers (20). After establishing this intellectual context, Drabelle returns to Olmsted, surveying his early career, his work on Central Park, and his brief stint in California, including his time on the Yosemite commission. Here, in contrast to Olmsted's more active landscape work, Drabelle shows us that Yosemite was a "landscape for which Olmsted prescribed inaction" (88). However, when he leaves California for the East, Olmsted largely exits the book's stage for the next few chapters.

Drabelle turns instead to the legislative battles to remove squatters from Yosemite, the surveys of Yellowstone and its preservation as public land, the influence of railroads in the park's establishment, and the legend of the 1870 campfire conversation that is central to the founding myth of the national parks (Drabelle follows other park historians in judging this to be more legend than fact). These central chapters are especially concerned with early parks administration and management, perhaps not surprising given the author's background as a former adviser to the Department of the Interior. But they give limited treatment to other essential stories of Yellowstone's creation, especially the violent removal of Indigenous peoples. Drabelle breezily reports that one tribe that called Yellowstone home, the Tukudika, "moved to an existing reservation in Wyoming because the removal of so many other Shoshonean bands had left the Tukudika feeling isolated" (115) and treats the expulsion of Nez Perce tribes from the region in just a couple of pages before returning to legislative and policy debates.

The book's organization is sometimes challenging to follow, with overlapping narratives in loose thematic and chronological arrangement. The author's repeated need to parenthetically refer readers to other chapters is a symptom of this muddy timeline. The final chapters return to Olmsted, catching up with the landscape architect as he helps to mount a campaign to save Niagara Falls from being sold into private hands and overrun by tourist clutter. This is meant to illustrate, again, Olmsted's belief that some landscapes should remain largely "untouched" by development and reflect the growing acceptance of this idea. Drabelle's case for Olmsted's significance in national parks history emerges most strongly in these final chapters.

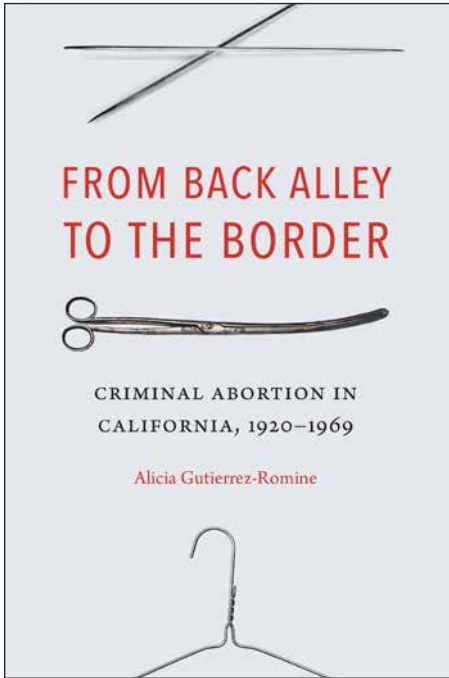
He argues that Olmsted's Yosemite report "had seeped into contemporary articles and books, and from there into the minds of men who worked to establish Yellowstone National Park" (197). This seems feasible, but Drabelle gives little direct evidence to support this assertion. None of Yellowstone's champions seem to reference Olmsted's report. Even in the strongest connection between Olmsted and the establishment of the national parks—his son, Rick Olmsted, helped to draft the 1916 Organic Act establishing the National Park Service—Drabelle admits that we cannot know whether the younger Olmsted "even knew of his father's Yosemite report" but that it does not matter, because "he was steeped in his father's way of thinking about nature" (202). By extension, Drabelle suggests, the country was likewise steeped in Olmsted's influence.

At its best, *The Power of Scenery* works not as an account of one man's influence but as a network of the ideas and personal connections behind the founding of the national parks. He shows how figures including newspaper editor Samuel Bowles, geologist Ferdinand Hayden, explorer Nathaniel P. Langford, Olmsted, and more called on one another to write essays of support, relied on and adapted existing ideas to changing political and cultural contexts, and used speeches, publications, and personal communications to create political momentum. This makes the focus on Olmsted in the book's title and framing particularly puzzling: elevating Olmsted's role undermines Drabelle's own assertion that the idea of national parks was "floating around and gathering support for decades" (133) rather than the product of a single man or moment.

Additionally, the book's focus on powerful and influential men disappointingly downplays the more complicated legacy of the establishment of national parks. Although hard to determine from the book's limited footnotes, Drabelle does not seem to have engaged with works like Mark David Spence's *Dispossessing the Wilderness* or Karl Jacoby's *Crimes Against Nature*, which demonstrate that removing Indigenous residents or settler squatters from national parks was neither as inevitable nor as quickly resolved as Drabelle implies. Nor, to return to Olmsted, is the removal of the African American community of Seneca Village from the land selected for Central Park even mentioned. As a result, this book may frustrate some historians. But for more general readers who are fans of Olmsted and Yellowstone, the book is a fitting way to celebrate the milestone birthdays of both (Olmsted's 200th and Yellowstone's 150th) this year.

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FROM BACK ALLEY TO THE BORDER: *Criminal Abortion in California, 1920–1969*. By Alicia Gutierrez-Romine. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2020, 270 pp., \$55.00 hardcover). Reviewed by Sarah B. Rowley.



In the mid-twentieth-century history of reproductive rights, both the underground abortionist—sensationalized as the “back-alley butcher” in press and reform accounts alike—and the cross-border Mexican procedure loom large in the sources. At the time of the legal reform movement in the 1960s, the “Tijuana abortion” provided a foil against which to argue for expanded U.S. access. The reform movement aimed to liberalize state laws to expand the scenarios in which a licensed doctor might legally perform an abortion, beyond cases in which it was deemed medically necessary to save a pregnant person’s life. Arguments for reform, which were ultimately successful in several states before serving as the foundation for the 1973 landmark *Roe v. Wade* and *Doe v. Bolton* Supreme Court decisions, pitted upstanding, skillful, and compassionate professional physicians against shadowy, illicit, untrained, unsan-

itary, and/or morally suspect black-market abortionists. However, in *From Back Alley to the Border*, the historian Alicia Gutierrez-Romine problematizes such stereotypes and illuminates the ways that those lines were not always so distinct.

In her book, Gutierrez-Romine highlights several individual cases to explore the provision of illegal abortion in California in the decades leading up to legalization. Writing from a feminist perspective, she poses the following questions: why, if abortion was illegal in both California and Mexico, did so many U.S. women travel across the border to obtain the procedure in the years immediately preceding legalization? And, what role did illegal abortion providers play in the shifting landscape of abortion law? Ultimately, she argues, providers were “instrumental” to legalization, beyond their symbolism as shadowy cautionary tales (193). Their creativity and persistence in providing abortions to meet the never-ending demands of pregnant women—despite the legal and physical risks—ultimately forced lawmakers, journalists, doctors, and members of the wider public to reckon with the ways that restrictive laws endangered women’s health and hamstrung physicians in caring for patients.

In framing the topic, Gutierrez-Romine builds on feminist work of the past forty years, especially the sociologist Kristin Luker’s 1985 book *Abortion and the*

Politics of Motherhood and the historian Leslie J. Reagan's definitive 1998 monograph *When Abortion Was a Crime: Women, Medicine, and Law, 1867–1973*. This addition to the scholarship applies Reagan's insights to a regional California context. Building off of Luker and Reagan's work around the silences and voices surrounding illegal abortions, Gutierrez-Romine makes clear that women spoke publicly about their abortions long before the "speak-outs" held during the women's liberation movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Ironically, the very developments that rendered abortion more medically safe also accelerated its restriction. As fewer women died from illegal abortions, more were available to testify in cases brought to prosecute providers. This expanded the public discourse on abortion, which had previously been limited to fatality stories. The resultant publicity led to crackdowns, but they also facilitated women's sharing of their experiences in a public forum. Gutierrez-Romine works hard to uncover the agency of these women despite the limitations of her sources. After the 1950s, those who did not want to face public scrutiny through testimony sought cross-border "Tijuana abortions" (so called regardless of specific location within Mexico) in order to remain invisible and anonymous. Thus, Gutierrez-Romine argues that even before legalization, California women "claimed ownership of their bodies and exercised the conscious choice" to obtain an illegal abortion (11).

Gutierrez-Romine's approach foregrounds women's agency despite relying on court and other legal primary sources. She balances seeing them as both victims of an unjustly restrictive reproductive landscape and as historical actors who made (constrained) choices in the interest of bodily control. *From Back Alley to the Border* adds to the ample historical evidence we have of the lengths to which women were willing to go in order to end unwanted pregnancies, as well as the ways that increased abortion restrictions endangered those seeking the procedures. Illegality did not suppress demand, but state enforcement of restrictive laws made the process more dangerous.

Gutierrez-Romine's commitment to telling individual stories makes for an engaging narrative that sheds new light on this realm of reproductive history. Chapters 5 and 6 are the strongest of the book. Here, Gutierrez-Romine relates the stories of the providers at the heart of the Pacific Coast Abortion Ring (PCAR), which was active from 1934 to 1936 and was brought down by a legal operation that sent several of its operatives to jail. Reginald Rankin, the mastermind behind the ring, recruited Dr. George E. Watts, the inventor of a suction device to perform a vacuum aspiration technique that improved safety outcomes. Watts, in turn, trained other providers—mostly physicians—who met a growing demand during the Great Depression. The sliding-scale fee was accessible to most women, even those who had to put fur coats or engagement rings down as collateral to borrow the necessary funds. With business booming, Rankin paid off law enforcement officials and a medical regulator to ensure a steady operation. It was his greed and hubris that proved his downfall, though, as a full-scale investigation resulted from a tip-off Rankin made against a business competitor. Rankin and many other members of the criminal organization were found guilty and sentenced to jail, even in the absence of fatalities and murder charges, which had traditionally enabled prosecution for abortion-related charges.

None of PCAR's patients died, so they were available to testify when they could be tracked down, therefore increasing the visibility of women beyond the voiceless and often dead victims that press coverage had previously featured.

After the trial, law enforcement officials increased their surveillance and punishment of abortion providers. However, many of the former PCAR providers resumed their services after serving their sentences by taking advantage of various loopholes in the law, especially its deference to physicians' professional autonomy. In turn, the advent of the hospital committee system, which required multiple doctors to sign off on "therapeutic" (medically necessary) abortions, reduced the ability of private doctors and their patients to navigate around the law. A continually evolving "cat-and-mouse game between law enforcement and providers of illegal abortions" (103) created the legal situation that the California Supreme Court eventually found untenable in the 1969 landmark case *People v. Belous*. There, the specter of "Tijuana abortions" helped push the justices to decriminalize. The Court accepted the premise that cross-border abortions were uniquely dangerous and that U.S. physicians should have more legal flexibility to provide safer options in California. Ironically, Gutierrez-Romine argues, the justices failed to grasp that the biggest threat to American women was the California law, not the Mexican abortions: "while Mexico offered real relief for countless women, the problem with Mexican abortions was the American law that drove women to them and made them so profitable" (189).

From Back Alley to the Border emphasizes the continuities in abortion provision across the seemingly great divide of legalization. By organizing the book around the 1930s Pacific Coast Abortion Ring (PCAR), Gutierrez-Romine establishes a turning point that is disconnected from the usual periodization of abortion history, which tends to revolve around the late 1960s and early 1970s. This historiographical contribution is one of the strongest elements of the book. The other major contribution consists of the individual stories she tells, which center the experiences of pregnant women and often maligned illegal providers and which weave extremely compelling narratives. With its drama and colorful characters, the PCAR tale would not be out of place as a prestige television miniseries.

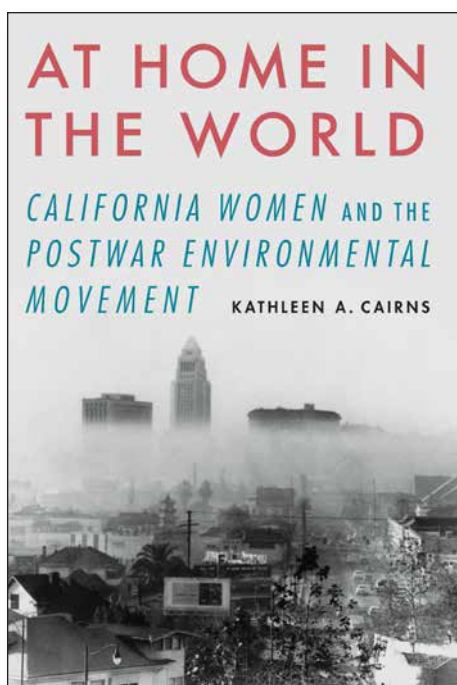
Despite the strengths of the book, the first few chapters are fairly repetitive and thinly sourced. In some cases, expected works of scholarship are missing from the bibliography. For example, despite a substantive discussion of the ways that abortion criminalization developed alongside the medical profession's attempts to regulate its boundaries, particularly in exclusion of Black doctors and female midwives, it is surprising not to see reference to Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's pathbreaking 1985 article "The Abortion Movement and the AMA, 1850-1880." Elsewhere, in a laudable attempt to recover the agency of women seeking abortions, Gutierrez-Romine sometimes oversteps and attributes feelings and/or motivations to historical subjects in a way that cannot be supported by available evidence. This is, of course, a perennial challenge for women's and other social historians.

Overall, however, this is a clear and concise overview of abortion as it related to the history of medicine, law, gender, and sexuality. For those wanting to introduce students to the topic of criminal abortion through a local/regional study rather than Reagan's broader overview, *From Back Alley to the Border* contains the necessary

context and is written accessibly enough to do so, even for introductory-level undergraduates. The stories at the heart of Gutierrez-Romine's work are extremely engaging and help personalize the consequences of illegal abortion. As we contemplate the potential end of the *Roe* era in our own political moment, it is instructive to study the practical effects of restrictive abortion laws as well as to rethink the ways we periodize the history of abortion.

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AT HOME IN THE WORLD: *California Women and the Postwar Environmental Movement*. By Kathleen A. Cairns. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2022, 199 pp., \$21.95 hardcover). Reviewed by Molly McClain.



Kathleen Cairns has produced an inspirational book documenting what she calls “the midwives of modern environmentalism,” women who pioneered grassroots activism in the post–World War II period. The narrative connects the trio of women who helped save the San Francisco Bay from pollution in the 1950s with the Mothers of East L.A. and other environmental justice activists in more recent times. It introduces the reader to women who might have made the newspapers but rarely end up in history books.

At Home in the World contributes to a growing body of scholarship that considers gender and the environment. In 1990, Carolyn Merchant called for environmental historians to include gender analysis in the discipline’s critical toolbox. Since then, scholars such as Glenda Riley and Nancy C. Unger have laid the groundwork for the investigation of women’s

roles in the formation of the modern environmental movement. *At Home in the World* complements their efforts by focusing on a series of known but little documented case studies. The author does not engage with gender theory; instead, she makes the story of California women and the environment accessible to a wide range of readers by blending history, biography, and journalism. This is a beautifully written and well-researched book.

The book consists of five chapters organized chronologically. The first, “Feminine Warriors: California Women and the Environment,” provides the context in which white, middle-class women began environmental campaigns such as Los Angeles’ Stamp Out Smog (SOS) in the 1950s. A frenzy of homebuilding transformed bean fields and citrus groves into suburban housing tracts, freeways expanded, and waste from construction and manufacturing had to be dumped somewhere. The Sierra Club, meanwhile, remained focused on the preservation of wilderness, not on mitigating environmental damage in places people lived. “Women moved into the void,” writes the author, developing new strategies and facilitating “a new kind of citizen activism.” In doing so, they “played a pivotal—and underappreciated—role in fueling modern environmentalism” (20).

Chapter 2 focuses on the efforts of three “East Bay housewives” to save the polluted San Francisco Bay which had become a dumping place for everything from bedsprings and mattresses to raw sewage (45). Concerned by news that the city of Berkeley planned to fill in two thousand acres of bayfront, Sylvia McLaughlin, Catherine “Kay” Kerr, and Esther Gulick banded together to form Save the San Francisco Bay Association in 1961. Chapter 3, meanwhile, tells the story of Kathleen Goddard Jones, “the dune lady,” who prevented the construction of a nuclear power plant on the Central Coast’s Nipomo Dunes. Her campaign unleashed a “civil war” in the Sierra Club when Diablo Canyon was identified as the alternative site for nuclear power. Readers of the *SoCal Quarterly* may be most interested in Chapter 4, “Saving the Santa Monica Mountains,” which documents the creation of a sprawling network of parks spanning more than 155,000 acres. Susan B. Nelson is known as the “mother” of the Santa Monica Mountains, but many other women took part in the effort to protect chaparral-covered hillsides and canyons from development in the 1970s. Chapter 5, meanwhile, describes working-class female activism in the 1980s and 1990s, a topic rich enough for a book of its own.

One of the strengths of this book is its biographical approach. Cairns shows that many postwar female activists did not conform to stereotypes about middle-class white women of the 1950s and 1960s. They were not alienated, anxious, or isolated. Instead, they were often highly educated, well-traveled, and deeply engaged in clubs and community organizations. Most were married to successful men, giving them the time and money to pursue environmental causes. Their social status led them to organizations like the Sierra Club which “had long skewed white and middle to upper class” (9).

Cairns is straightforward about the privilege that allowed middle-class white women to challenge city hall, developers, and powerful public utilities. She acknowledges that most were interested in their own communities, not in poor or minority neighborhoods. Many of these women “came to adulthood at a time when few people, particularly in their circles, questioned the status quo with regard to class, gender, and ethnicity.” She writes, “It would be left to future generations comprised of many different individuals and groups to create a broader and more inclusive movement that came to be called ‘environmental justice’” (9).

A consistent theme in the book is the lack of interest by national environmental organizations in local issues faced by urban and suburban communities. Leaders

of the Sierra Club, Save the Redwoods, and the Audubon Society declined to get involved in Save the Bay, for example. “Everybody sort of patted them on the head and said, ‘well, good luck,’” recalled one observer (52). According to Cairns, “established organizations like the Sierra Club had their own agendas and were not inclined to pivot to issues outside their areas of expertise or interest” (160).

Another strength of the book is its detailed exploration of how women mobilized grassroots campaigns. In Los Angeles, women led the hillside and canyon associations that descended on city hall when bulldozers started carving into the Santa Monica Mountains. They founded the Friends of the Santa Monica Mountains and raised money for television and radio ads. Members attended every Planning Commission and City Council meeting where development was on the agenda. They conducted house-by-house surveys and worked with geologists and engineers. They also turned their sights on politicians, pressing for a Los Angeles County Grand Jury investigation into the “cozy relationship between public officials and developers” (119). When the state proposed to expand Mulholland Drive into a freeway, women organized weekly hikes in the surrounding canyons to make people aware of what traffic was already doing to the natural environment. They lobbied the government and ultimately sold the idea of a massive mountain park to public officials in the greater Los Angeles area.

It is unfortunate that Cairns could not find a compelling example of women’s activism from San Diego, California’s second most populous county. She mentions Progressive Era activists like Ellen Browning Scripps, but there are more recent examples. A future historian might explore the role of Abbe Wolfsheimer-Stutz in the creation of the San Dieguito River Park, or the advocacy of indigenous women in the region’s eighteen Tribal Nation Reservations.

Since its founding, California has attracted exceptional women “who passionately embraced nature” and ensured its preservation into the twenty-first century (23). One hopes that Cairns’s tribute to pathbreaking female activists will inspire many more.

Molly McClain is a professor of history at University of San Diego whose published works include Ellen Browning Scripps: New Money and American Philanthropy, 1836–1932.