Gunther on Cairns, 'At Home in the World: California Women and the Postwar Environmental Movement'

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US environmental historians have never confined their inquiries to the rise of environmental organizations and their influence on politics. Such topics as disease, warfare, work and corporate enterprise, scientific ideas and methods, and specific natural environments—from the Everglades to Puget Sound—have all drawn significant scholarly attention as the field of environmental history has matured. And yet “grassroots organizing” remains a wonderfully evocative metaphor for the politicization of ordinary people in defense of landscapes, ecosystems, and bodies of water that become envisioned as extensions of home. Questions of how to define the environmental movement—by time, place, and constituency, and in contrast to ideas and organizations that preceded it—remain important and to an extent still unsettled a half century on. The fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *Silent Spring* (1962) in 2012 brought new and deserved attention to Rachel Carson’s life and career. Her descriptions of ocean and shore life, and of the impact of pesticides on wildlife and human health, were not bound to a specific place. This helps account for the popularity of her books. However, Carson’s work and networks were based on the East Coast, in such states as Maine, Maryland, and New York. In *At Home in the World: California Women and the Postwar Environmental Movement*, Kathleen A. Cairns takes us to the West Coast. Around the time *Silent Spring* hit bookshelves in 1962, California became the nation’s most populous state. One can easily trace its increasing relevance to the broader currents of twentieth-century US history through migration, defense appropriations, highway construction, suburban development, the film industry, popular music, and presidential politics. Cairns holds that we have not yet fully appreciated the extent to which Californians—specifically, California women—contributed to the environmental movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

In one other significant way, the choice of California as a case study for tracing the origins of the environmental movement makes sense. John Muir’s captivating personality, lyrical writing, and early leadership of the Sierra Club made him one of the most iconic figures in US environmental history. Muir’s fight for Yosemite National Park and the subsequent Hetch Hetchy controversy cast a long shadow, highlighting competing visions of unrestricted capitalist development, utilitarian conservation of such resources as water, and preservation of certain specific landscapes for recreation and aesthetic appreciation. In her introduction and first chapter, Cairns differentiates Muir from Catherine “Kay” Kerr and some of the other women whose post-World War II advocacy and organization building are featured in the book. It is instructive to note that the Hetch Hetchy
controversy had been framed as a choice between providing a more dependable water supply for the
city of San Francisco and preserving a small and somewhat distant mountain valley from
development. A half century after Hetch Hetchy was dammed, Kerr and her colleagues were fighting
to curb pollution in the San Francisco Bay itself, where hundreds of thousands of people lived and
worked. Cairns argues that women in postwar California succeeded in confronting new problems by
“moving beyond established organizations to forge a new kind of grassroots community activism. It is
not too far-fetched to view them as midwives of modern environmentalism ... aimed at communities
where people actually lived” (p. 3). In terms of strategy, “the women often framed their work as
domestic in nature” because “it dealt with issues that affected communities, families, and children”
(p. 7). This helps explain the tactics of dressing in conventional women’s attire when engaging with
the public and using contacts with male experts when possible.

In chapter 1, Cairns further contextualizes her thesis by interweaving descriptions of a host of early
twentieth-century California women, such as Mary Austin and Kate Sessions, who, in a general sense,
“passionately embraced nature and its offerings” through literature, mountaineering, science, and
reform (p. 23). It is noteworthy, for example, that Aurelia Harwood briefly served as the first female
president of the Sierra Club before her untimely death in 1928. However, it better fits Cairns’s
argument to focus on the limitations of preservation advocacy, which was not ideally positioned to
respond to later concerns emerging from World War II mobilization and the mid-century population
boom in California. Circling back and following the scholarship of Carolyn Merchant, Cairns holds
that women in Progressive-Era reform organizations, such as the California Federation of Women’s
Clubs, shared concerns that transcended wilderness preservation. Their activities helped forge both
an expanded conception of “home” and places for women to speak and act outside their literal homes.
Her opening vignette about the genesis of Stamp Out Smog (SOS) in the late 1950s makes a key point
establishing the relevance of her detour into the early twentieth century: “Many if not most SOS
members belonged to other women’s groups—garden clubs, the American Association of University
Women, the PTA, and the League of Women Voters—so they knew how to organize” (p. 15).

In chapter 2, Cairns outlines the genesis and early struggles of the Save the San Francisco Bay
Association (Save the Bay). Methodologically, she primarily relies on newspapers and oral histories of
leaders Esther Gulick, Sylvia McLaughlin, and the aforementioned Kay Kerr, enabling Cairns to
provide sufficient background on their initiations into activism and their relationships with male
journalists, politicians, and their own husbands. Water pollution, wildlife depletion, and rampant
commercial development (which by the early 1960s showed no sign of abatement) sparked the
women’s advocacy for what became the Bay Conservation Development Commission. Their tireless
preparation for hearings and their creative use of media and direct mail to put pressure on local and
state politicians enabled them to achieve victory by the end of the decade. Convincing the Sierra Club
to become involved in their struggle—a debate about the destiny of a major urban area—was
important in shaping the outcome and also underscores Cairns’s broader argument about the broader
national transition from preservation to environmentalism.

Cairns moves on in chapter 3 to explore Kathleen Goddard Jones’s struggle to save the Nipomo Dunes
from Pacific Gas & Electric’s (PG&E) plans to construct a nuclear power plant. This chapter is
fascinating, mainly due to Cairns’s narration of how “the Dune Lady” came to love this area and how
the Sierra Club devolved into a brief civil war over whether to oppose all nuclear power or to
negotiate with PG&E on an alternative location. Nuclear energy was clearly a new and relevant issue
in postwar California (and throughout the United States), but one is struck by the unspoken parallels between Jones (and Nipomo Dunes) and Muir (and Yosemite and Hetch Hetchy). It may detract from Cairns’s argument to dedicate a chapter to the story of a preservation fight, no matter how interesting that conflict was. If I were asked for an alternate feature story to underscore Cairns’s thesis, it would be the activism of Dolores Huerta and the United Farm Workers against indiscriminate agricultural pesticide use.

The fourth chapter, “Saving the Santa Monica Mountains,” moves the reader back into a densely populated and growing urban area: Los Angeles. The involvement of such women as Harriet Weaver and Susan Barr Nelson in contesting further commercial development in the Santa Monica Mountains underscores the point made elsewhere in the book that women did not have to be born in a specific place to feel connection and kinship to it. As with Save the Bay, the women who formed Friends of the Santa Monica Mountains, Parks and Seashore experienced gender-based condescension and opposition from male developers and politicians. Margot Feuer’s involvement underscores the importance of connections between organizations, as she had been a leader in SOS. Their successful advocacy for what became the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area did raise issues of race, class, and elitism in the environmental movement. By seeking to curb overdevelopment, were they merely protecting their own neighborhoods and lessening the general housing supply in the metropolitan area? The response of Friends of the Santa Monica Mountains, Parks and Seashore was to point out pollution concerns that affected everyone in the area, to highlight the general benefits of free access to nearby open space, and to argue that wildfires in sensitive areas like the Santa Monica Mountains would be worse if overdevelopment took place. All of this makes this chapter both poignant and relevant to current affairs.

Given that scholarship on women and the environment is still somewhat cordoned off from scholarship on environmental justice, Cairns’s fifth chapter, “Environmental Justice: The Politics of Survival,” is both welcome and excellent. Again, her methodology is to use key oral history archives, such as that of Asian American activist Pamela Tau Lee. This chapter traces connections between the anti-nuclear movement (first broached in chapter 3); the activism of the United Farm Workers; and inner-city grassroots organizations, such as Mothers of East L.A. and Greenaction (in San Francisco), which worked to stop large-scale economic activities that were harmful to people living in their neighborhoods. Though preservation of wild lands is still a significant national goal—and organizations like the Sierra Club remain relevant—events like the 1991 National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit represent in many ways the most important legacy of women’s environmental activism in California and beyond. Cairns’s documentation of protests at the Los Angeles City Council meeting in 1994 (with residents opposed to the “La Montana” waste site for earthquake rubble wearing surgical masks with “Let Us Breathe” written on them) is strikingly pertinent.

At Home in the World is a lean and accessible book that would work well in the undergraduate classroom in courses on California history and American environmental history. Scholars of modern US environmentalism, especially those focusing on gender and race, should read this book because of its focus on California and the author’s ability to synthesize prior scholarship while using new primary sources (the aforementioned oral history interviews). Overall, Cairns asserts and defends a provocative argument about the significance of women’s activism in a large bellwether state in shifting popular and political attention from preserving wild places to improving the health and
quality of life of people in urban and suburban areas. Given the scholarship of Michelle Nickerson (Mothers of Conservatism: Women and the Postwar Right [2012]) and others on grassroots conservative resurgence in California and elsewhere, one does wonder if Cairns will have the final word on the question of the significance of women’s political activism. In chapter 2, Cairns explains the headwinds faced by Gulick, Kerr, and McLaughlin amid the rise of the free speech movement, on the one hand, and Ronald Reagan’s victory in the gubernatorial election of 1966, on the other. “Engaged citizens like Gulick, Kerr, McLaughlin, and others were quickly becoming the future of political activism,” Cairns argues (p. 62). In the years since 1966, the language and symbolism of motherhood has not been employed in service of environmentalist goals alone. Paradoxically, is the reality of political stalemate on current environmental issues like combatting climate change in part a function of engaged grassroots activist women on the other side?


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