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Review

Reviewed Work(s): God's Wilds: John Muir's Vision of Nature. by Dennis C. Williams

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lief, expressing a new disjuncture between an assumed geographical privilege and exceptionalism on the one hand and the peculiarly antigeographical ideology of post-nineteenth-century Americanism on the other" (p. xiii). Instead, what ultimately emerges—in spite of these vague assertions—is a satisfying sense of the participation of one particular geographer in some of the vital institutions and policies of the first half of the twentieth century. This achievement by itself makes *American Empire* a singular contribution to the history of geography.

ALEX CHECKOVICH

Dennis C. Williams. *God's Wilds: John Muir's Vision of Nature.* (Environmental History Series, 18.) xiv + 246 pp., illus., bibl., index. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2002. $39.95 (cloth).

Best known today as a nature writer and pioneering conservationist, John Muir (1838–1914) also was respected in his own day as an amateur geologist and botanist. Beneath these varied activities, many interpreters (both scholarly and popular) have discerned a strong religious foundation—usually, however, without fully understanding the intellectual context or content of that religiousness. In this intellectual biography, Dennis Williams explores the ways in which Muir's cultural, scientific, and political orientations were shaped and supported by his lifelong grounding in religious belief and theological reflection.

In contrast to the many scholars who reduce Muir's religious context to an ahistorical, one-sided caricature of conservative Calvinism, Williams carefully sketches the rich intellectual world of nineteenth-century evangelical Christianity, composed of diverse and sometimes opposing tendencies inherited both from the long history of Christian thought (Hellenistic versus Semitic roots, Augustinian versus Pelagic theology, varied emphases on mysticism versus rationality, and immanence versus transcendence) and from more recent developments within Protestantism (traditional Presbyterianism versus newer movements for ever-more-"primitive" faith, represented by Muir's mother and father, respectively; and in Muir's adult lifetime the range of responses to Darwinism). In negotiating this welter of living intellectual currents, Muir took his stand in the strong liberal tradition that flowed to him from a variety of sources, including the Presbyterians' 1619 Belgic Confession, the Scottish common-sense school, and popular American preachers like Walter Brooks—religious influences that Muir would rely on, not break from, in his later life.

Interestingly, Muir's major conceptual challenge was not the one that we today usually associate with evangelical Christians—namely, finding a place for the worth and value of the natural world within a religious framework; eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Protestant thinkers had already prepared that groundwork quite well, insisting that the "Book of Nature" reveals God's mind, will, and love as clearly as do the books of Scripture. (Unfortunately, much of this religious valuation of nature would be rejected by the fundamentalist and neo-orthodox conservative movements of the early twentieth century.) Rather, Muir's theological conundrums arose when he observed the human realm: why and how could people be so insensitive to nature's worth and beauty as to ignore it in favor of the baubles of culture—or, worse, destroy it for mere economic gain? On Williams's analysis, Muir's answer came in his reinterpretation of the evangelical concept of sin or, more precisely, depravity—that is, the condition or choice of turning away from God's word, whether found in Scripture or in nature. Muir's lifelong goal was thus to turn to God by turning to nature, in mind, body, and soul—and to help others do the same.

Initially, Muir's fascination with discerning the divine order in nature led him to science—through formal education, informal study, and his own amateur scientific researches. His most public—and controversial—scientific work involved the glacial origins of Yosemite Valley, and Williams gives the deepest and most balanced account yet of the intellectual strengths and weaknesses both of Muir and of his competitors, a treatment that constitutes a nice case study of the workings of nineteenth-century geological science. Less dramatic, but of more long-term importance, were Muir's later investigations into the distributions of plants, animals, and insects over the entire Sierra range, which immersed him in an ecological worldview that would open outward into crucial philosophical and practical questions regarding the human place in nature (including the possibilities for humans to act with nature in maintaining or restoring the divine/ecological order). Together, Muir's religious and ecological insights led him to an optimistic conservationism. On the one hand, guided by the understanding of sin mentioned above, Muir's literary and recreational activities were aimed at restoring the healthy functioning of both the external and the internal eyes, the better to see the divine order in nature. On the other hand, on a practical level, Muir knew he had to work with

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worldly laws and powers as well as spiritual ones, and Williams insightfully sketches his place in the rough-and-tumble of turn-of-the-century politics in California and the nation.

In all, *God's Wilds* offers the most thorough and nuanced account yet of Muir's intellectual context, affording both a deeper understanding of Muir and a detailed case study of the intersections of science, culture, and religion in nineteenth-century America. In so doing, Williams successfully takes on perhaps the major challenge of the intellectual biographer—he shows Muir both as deeply embedded in his own historical era and as possessing the capacity to speak to issues of contemporary interest and relevance.

STEVEN PAVLOS HOLMES

■ Recent (1950–)

Jon Agar. *The Government Machine: A Revolutionary History of the Computer*. viii + 554 pp., notes, index. Cambridge, Mass./London: MIT Press, 2003. $50 (cloth).

The notion of an information society has become so commonplace as to become meaningless. But Jon Agar's groundbreaking *The Government Machine: A Revolutionary History of the Computer* reintroduces the questions of what constitutes an information society and how information technology and the state mutually shaped each other and the notion of information in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain. Agar masterfully brings together two historical fields, the history of technology and the history of government, arguing that to study the modern state is to study technology.

Agar begins by considering the discursive tools used to shape a mechanical vision of government in the early nineteenth century. A wide variety of actors thought of the government itself as a machine—most notably Charles Babbage and Charles Trevelyan, both of whom played key roles in conceptually reorganizing the British bureaucracy into gentlemen generalists and lower-class, and sometimes female, mechanicals. As the bureaucracy grew, this notion of mechanical, clerical work shaped the introduction of office technology, from typewriters to tabulators to computers. Information technology, in turn, changed the nature of the British Civil Service by altering work practices and also—more important—by forcing civil servants to rethink what government could and should do.

Agar also considers the roles played by various expert movements and their location in a variety of agencies in either perpetuating or resisting the use of information technology (and sometimes, in complicated ways, doing both simultaneously). For example, while there was a strong expert movement in statistics in Britain, activities to generate statistics were not centralized prior to World War II. Decentralization had a number of consequences. The interagency nature of statistics challenged the generalist/mechanical split that elsewhere facilitated mechanization. At the same time, statistics formed the keystone of the overall orientation of government toward mechanically produced information. The expert movement behind statistics, which evolved over time, was in some ways empowered by diverse demands from many agencies; but in other ways decentralization also removed a base from which to rally. This kind of richness of interpretation is the hallmark of Agar's study—mechanization is never reduced to a simply linear story.

A second crucial episode details the development of the Organization and Methods (O&M) division within the Treasury after World War II. Agar rightly emphasizes the transformative role of both world wars in creating new demands for information, new technologies, and new functions for the state. However, wartime changes were again transfigured by peacetime socioeconomic demands. Treasury O&M is a terrific case study in this kind of mutation, as well as a base from which to introduce the computer into clerical work in the 1950s. It is here that Agar really drives home his thesis that "only through a history of the material practices of government can an understanding of the capacities and actions of government be gained" (p. 414). However, his account is also beautifully nuanced in showing that just as O&M's power peaked in the early 1960s, it was ironically undermined by the technocratic rhetoric of the Wilson Labour government, which sought to limit centralized, top–down expertise. In fact, the Thatcher-era epilogue of *The Government Machine* is that the British government eventually began contracting out its expert systems to private-sector players like EDS, thus removing top–down expertise through a peculiarly Conservative route. If one were to find fault with Agar's book, it is that these public–private interactions appear too rarely—clearly the development of the machinery of information as well as the reconfiguration of clerical work takes place in firms as well as in the Civil Service. However, given the already vast scope of Agar's work, this criticism is to ask for more of his brand of complex interactions

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