H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John Wills. *US Environmental History: Inviting Doomsday.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013. 233 pp. $95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7486-2263-4; $30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7486-2264-1.

Reviewed by David Stradling (University of Cincinnati)
Published on H-Environment (August, 2013)
Commissioned by David T. Benac

All Roads Lead to Doom (or Disney)

John Wills opens his new book with a discussion of the 2009 disaster film *2012*, in which director Roland Emmerich "tapped as many American concerns as possible" (p. 3). In Emmerich's apocalypse, theoretically prophesied by the Mayans, the earth's core overheats, leading to earthquakes and tsunamis. For good measure, Emmerich throws in stereotypical Russian and Chinese villains. While it may seem odd to frame a sweeping history of the United States with a comically bad movie, Wills's choice is apt, if only because he has written the scholarly equivalent of *2012*. Flawed Americans have repeatedly invited environmental doomsday, and in a quick 225 pages Wills throws in as many environmental concerns as possible. To explain the destruction, Wills marches all the familiar bad guys across the stage. Conveniently, he lists them on page 4: "the early colonial mindset, the capitalist system, white-coat scientists and technology, the everyday consumer, myths of abundance, religious domination, and manifest destiny." Thereafter, Wills delivers what he promises: "an exploration of a range of catastrophe-based case studies that chart an American trajectory towards environmental ruin" (p. 4).

This teleological story begins on seventeenth-century colonists' ships, which carried both pilgrims and "the seeds of environmental doomsday" (p. 7). Given the "colonial doomsday gaze," perhaps inevitably the Virginia Charter "represented a legal charter for environmental domination," but most historians will be surprised to learn that "nature actually ended on the eastern seaboard in the early 1600s" (pp. 9, 10). I will confess that I nearly set the book aside when nature "ended" ten pages in, but I had to know what could carry this environmental history over another four hundred years. I was rewarded with a breathless charge through American history. After the initial settlement with the seeds of doomsday, the book leaps to the Civil War, specifically the Battle of the Wilderness, which Wills calls "a sign of a downward spiral in American culture" (p. 15). To affirm the connection between the war's destruction of human life and the natural world, Wills tells us that after the battle, "dead soldiers and dead leaves decayed on the forest floor" (p. 25). Twenty years later the bison fall on the plains, in a chapter that also includes a description of the Ghost Dance movement and the long and eventually complete destruction of the passenger pigeon, with poor, stuffed Martha, the last of her breed, becoming a "genuine doomsday article" on her perch at the Cincinnati Zoo (p. 47).

Wills slows down after World War II, and he gains surer footing as the narrative turns to the more genuine doomsday topics of the Cold War nuclear arms race and the development and widespread use of deadly agricultural chemicals. In perhaps the book's most successful section, Wills discusses Doom Towns 1 and 2 at the Nevada Test Site, where the Federal Civil Defense Administration set up fake communities, complete with manikins, in order to film the consequences of nuclear explosions on unprepared families. The chapter on Rachel Carson covers well-trod territory, although the theme of doomsday works especially well in Wills's discussion of "A Fable for Tomorrow," the remarkably effective opening to *Silent Spring* (1962).

Another chapter concerns the Santa Barbara oil spill, which Wills narrates well and as thoroughly as I have seen, although his treatment of the disaster, described mostly through the eyes and actions of Get Oil Out! (GOO), does not support his theme of "inviting doomsday." Indeed, GOO, and Carson in the previous chapter, worked diligently to ward off disaster. Wills connects the Santa Barbara spill with the Deepwater Horizon disaster, and the connections are obvious, but the California coast recovered from the 1969 spill and one might argue that the activism of GOO, like that of Carson, has had a more lasting impact on the environment than the spill itself.

Wills explores the Katrina disaster in New Orleans in the next chapter, managing, in a stretch, to connect it to Jacob Riis and New York's turn-of-the-twentieth-century tenements, and then, in a greater stretch, he concludes that the hurricane was "the death knell of the American metropolis" (p. 213).

The final full chapter concerns Disney's conception and purveyance of nature, both in film and in its amusement parks. Wills provides the now standard critique of Disney, but it never becomes clear how this chapter fits in a study of doomsday, or why the movie *Bambi* (1942) deserves four pages of analysis. And while the Tree of Life at the center of Orlando's Animal Kingdom may be "fake," or even "dishonest" (p. 195), the threat it poses pales in comparison to, say, climate change, which gets less attention. Wills studied Disney for an earlier book, which undoubtedly explains its appearance in this rumination on doomsday, but this chapter also affirms Wills's predilection for conflating fictional tales and actual events. Indeed, with *Inviting Doomsday* Wills has created his own Hollywood version of environmental history: a disaster movie script where overstuffed Capitalism sits in a saloon smoking a cigar next to steely-eyed, heartless Technology, who is itching to do his bidding. Outnumbered and outgunned, Nature does not stand a chance. But this is America, and Wills surely knows that here the good guys always win in the end.

Citation: David Stradling. Review of Wills, John, *US Environmental History: Inviting Doomsday*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. August, 2013.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=39024