From Promise to Conflict: Bill Robbins’s Oregon

For those of us who did our graduate training in and on the Pacific Northwest, William G. Robbins is among the most important of an earlier generation of scholars who have left a crucial scholarly legacy for the next generation. He is required reading for anyone who wants to understand and write about this part of the world or about the American West more broadly. In particular, Robbins’s examinations of the role of capitalism as a central force in shaping lands and lives remain insightful and provocative.[1] A longtime faculty member at Oregon State University in the timber town of Corvallis, Robbins has now turned his critical eye on his home state, in a two-part history of Oregon that is part of the University of Washington Press’s Weyerhaeuser environmental series.

The first book, *Landscapes of Promise: The Oregon Story, 1800-1940*, examined the encounters of Oregonians with global capitalism and the connections between Oregon and faraway places: where the timber and wheat went, where the microbes and money came from. Robbins divided his story into three roughly equal sections: the early historic period from 1800 to 1850, when the fur trade and epidemics began their transformations of power and landscape; the period of settler occupation and industrial foundings from 1850 to 1890; and the expansion and extension of industrial infrastructure, including most notably railroads and dams, from 1890 to 1940. Robbins ended this installment of the Oregon story with the establishment of what he called “modern Oregon,” a land transformed by and inextricably enmeshed in global economic, technological, and social networks. His title was ironic: Robbins argued that despite the promises of abundance, freedom, and prosperity offered by boosters and industry officials, the realities of life in Oregon often failed to deliver on those promises. As numerous other scholars of the American West—and of environmental history more generally—have noted, those in search of the frontier brought their old problems with them, and created new ones once they arrived.[2]

Published in 1997, *Landscapes of Promise* was well received. Reviews of the first book routinely called it “impressive,” “thoughtful,” and “important,” and many reviewers appreciated Robbins’s typically graceful prose. There were also some critiques. Some reviewers noted that different strands in the book’s story—e.g., the rhetoric of boosters and the activism of laborers—were not always connected, and that Robbins’s well-known emphasis on the “culture of capitalism” tended toward the monolithic, leaving little room for alternative voices. (One reviewer also noted several “biological and geographical gaffes.”) Overall, however, *Landscapes of Promise* was praised as a welcome contribution to the canon of Pacific Northwest historiography, bringing regional history into conversation with broader national and global dynamics.[3]

*Landscapes of Conflict* continues that conversation, following Oregon’s story from the opening of the Second World War to the beginning of the twenty-first century. Its organization is different from *Landscapes of Promise*; instead of emphasizing chronological periods, this second book is more thematic in its treatment. Part
As Robbins notes in his preface, attempts to come to terms with the environmental, economic, and social consequences of Oregon’s mythic promise “have divided rural and urban Oregon, citizen from citizen, and worsened class schisms” (p. xx). In this respect, *Landscapes of Conflict* reads much like its predecessor, and indeed, like much of Robbins’s work: the juggernaut of industrial capitalism, in the form of sawmills and dams and pesticides and shipyards, has had a bewildering array of unforeseen (but in retrospect, entirely logical) outcomes. Oregonians, Robbins seems to argue, are trapped within the false promises of their collective past.

The praise offered for *Landscapes of Promise* still stands here. Robbins brings a critical and moral clarity to his research and analysis that turns the specifics of one state’s environmental conflicts into a synecdoche for broader struggles with modernity, capitalism, and ecological sustainability. He also adds significantly to a growing body of broad-minded, theoretically informed scholarship about the Pacific Northwest, a region whose historiography has in the past tended toward either the provincially myopic or the gushingly exceptionalist. Robbins makes the case, in other words, that Oregon matters.

That said, *Landscapes of Conflict* is not without its problems. The first stems from Robbins’s continued allegiance to an overarching Marxist analysis, which, as several reviewers of *Landscapes of Promise* noted, has a tendency to obliterate resistance. This second book, which profiles citizen activism of several stripes, is an improvement on the monolithic leanings of the previous one, but the story’s ending—Oregon’s current political and environmental predicament—still comes across as somewhat inevitable.

A second concern centers on scale and scope. Simply put, does it still make sense to write state histories? If environmental history has taught us anything about lines on maps, it is that they often mean very little in terms of actual ecological systems and effects. Dams on the lower Columbia River, for example, are also a Washingtonian problem—and for that matter, a British Columbian, Idahoan, and Montanan one as well. (If we want to be exhaustive about it, we should add bits of Wyoming, Utah, and Nevada, too.) The suburbs of Portland sprawl not just across three Oregon counties, but into one in Washington. Indigenous communities have important kinship and resource ties that cross state lines (although it should be mentioned here that there are very, very few Indians in this second book). Meanwhile, taxation and land-use revolts in suburban Oregon look an awful lot like movements elsewhere in the country, and threaten to diminish Oregon’s exceptionality, both as a present day regulator of growth and as a historical example. Staying within the state lines does not necessarily help us understand these things more clearly. Other geographies, either smaller or larger than a single state—Robert Bunting’s Raincoast, Katherine Morrissey’s Inland Empire, Nancy Langston’s Klamath Basin,
Carl Abbott’s metropolitan Portland, or Richard White’s Columbia River—can often tell us much more. In particular, they can help us understand the historical and ecological origins of exactly the kinds of intra-state conflicts with which Robbins ends his book.[6]

Of course, Robbins was not tasked with writing local or bioregional history—he was tasked with writing a history of a state, its people, and its environmental problems. To that end, he has succeeded marvelously. Most states still require teachers in training to take a state and regional history course; one hopes that Promise and Conflict might become standard texts for such courses, a kind of “owner’s manual” for Oregon.

In the last section of Landscapes of Conflict, an epilogue entitled “This Special Place,” Robbins reaffirms the ethical vision that is at the heart of so much of his scholarship, in a voice that is both chastising and compassionate. His final sentence: “There is no better test of our collective will, I believe, than the stewardship we exercise toward each other and toward the world around us.” Linking the social and the environmental, his writing is also a call to action. And for those of us committed to doing smart scholarship in this understudied region, Robbins—as he has been doing for a long time now—sets the bar very high indeed. In a place where the provincialism of historical scholarship is mirrored by the masking of environmental and economic connections to global capitalism, Bill Robbins’s work suggests that the supposed conflict between the local and the global may—like the promises of an endlessly abundant Oregon—just be in our heads.

Notes


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