

John Wills. *Conservation Fallout: Nuclear Protest at Diablo Canyon*. Reno and Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press, 2006. xiv + 244 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87417-680-3.

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Published on H-Energy (August, 2007)



Nuclear History as Environmental History

As we witness a drive to re-start the nuclear power industry in the United States, John Wills's study of controversies around the Diablo Canyon nuclear reactors comes at a timely moment. Wills strives for more than an account of the skirmishes between Pacific Gas & Electric (PG&E) and anti-nuclear activists. He situates the disputes over nuclear power in the 1970s and 1980s in a broader environmental history of the Diablo Canyon's Central California coastal region, the Pecho Coast. He sees a succession of "energy landscapes" in the long history of human occupation and use of the territory. *Conservation Fallout* places the contest over PG&E's nuclear plants in this expanded context.

Appropriately, *Conservation Fallout* begins with attention to the Native Americans who inhabited the area. By about 1000 A.D. a distinctive Chumash Indian culture had emerged, altering the environment in largely benign fashion. Spanish colonization intensified the process of ecological change, introducing invasive flora and fauna, firearms, and microbes. However, only about ten miles from the mission at San Luis Obispo, the Diablo Canyon area remained largely a "pariah landscape"—untamed, threatening, and inhospitable to human habitation (p. 25). Whaling and cattle ranching in the nineteenth century were to usher in another energy landscape; Wills briefly tells the story of the commercialization and commodification of the area, processes that went on with scant attention to ecological consequences.

PG&E, foreseeing rapid demand growth and falling costs for nuclear power, acquired land at Diablo Canyon

for nuclear construction in 1963. In chapter 2, Wills traces the controversies that shook the Sierra Club in response. Most Club leaders favored the project. Nuclear power looked cleaner than fossil fuel generation; granting Diablo Canyon to the utility would preserve other more scenic areas nearby. However, opponents of the reactor plans, led by the redoubtable David Brower, presaged a more militant version of environmental protest that was to thrive in the 1970s.

By 1973, as plant construction neared completion and PG&E sought an operating license, a local group, Mothers for Peace, had picked up the banner of opposition. As American troops pulled out of Vietnam, this anti-war group focused on the nuclear danger they perceived growing in their midst. For Mothers for Peace, nuclear weaponry and nuclear energy could not be separated. They demanded "No More Hiroshimas" (p. 79) and feared radiation from the plant would harm their children. In keeping with his broader argument that nature and landscape were perpetual topics of contestation around Diablo Canyon, Wills finds an affinity between Mothers for Peace and later ecofeminist ideas and imagery. This seems valid and important, but it may understate the ways in which Mothers for Peace adopted a maternalist rhetoric about women and peace that (as Amy Swerdlow points out in *Women Strike for Peace: Traditional Motherhood and Radical Politics in the 1960s* [1993]) groups like Women Strike for Peace had deployed earlier.

With the mass civil disobedience at the Seabrook, New Hampshire nuclear construction site in 1977, anti-

nuclear protest emerged as one of the era's most significant social movements. Seabrook's Clamshell Alliance inspired the formation of California's Abalone Alliance. A coalition that grew to involve over sixty member groups by 1981, the Abalone Alliance staged blockades and occupations of the Diablo Canyon site between 1977 and 1982. Nearly two thousand were arrested during a two-week-long blockade in 1981, outpacing Seabrook as the largest number arrested at an anti-nuclear protest in America. Despite its size, its creative tactics, and the passion of many of its participants, and despite revelations that a branch of the San Andreas Fault extended near the nuclear projects, PG&E eventually started full-scale generation by 1985.

By the time of Chernobyl in 1986, the American anti-nuclear movement had fragmented and its energies had flowed in other directions. As Wills points out, the movement had difficulty growing beyond its original class and cultural dimensions. Opposition to the Reagan administration's policies in Central America and movements to combat racism, sexism, and homophobia became higher priorities for many activists. Local opponents of the plant kept an eye out for signs of danger and strived to raise anti-nuclear consciousness, but the main woes that PG&E faced at Diablo Canyon were financial. With California electric energy deregulation in the late nineties, the utility had to contemplate closing its expensive nuclear facility.

With the waning of anti-nuclear protest, Diablo Canyon's place in the regional ecosystem regained attention. The area north of the plants had become a heavily used state park. PG&E's lands, meanwhile, received relatively few human visitors. Flora and fauna thrived in the Diablo Canyon environment. The reactors came to host a landscape of scenic beauty and biological diversity—ironically, values prized by those who had protested the

nuclear incursion. Considering nuclear energy's stagnation in the last thirty years, as Wills nicely puts it, "It was the atom itself that decayed, rather than nature" (p. 167).

In his concluding chapter, John Wills reiterates the importance of seeing Diablo Canyon as an episode in environmental history. In building the plants, Pacific Gas & Electricity sought to transcend the environmental limits that fossil fuels imposed and provide a green alternative to conventional energy sources. In opposition, protesters generated their own ideology that saw nuclear energy as entirely at odds with an idealized conception of nature. He regrets that both sides lacked a clear understanding of the actual environment of Diablo Canyon, an understanding that might have diminished conflict. What compromise might have resulted is, however, somewhat unclear. Ultimately, it is hard to disagree with his judgment that the reactors at Diablo Canyon "did not provide an appropriate solution to California's energy issues" (p. 184).

In vigorous prose and with a firm grounding in sources ranging from oral histories to Sierra Club records and Nuclear Regulatory Commission documents, John Wills has added an important dimension to our understanding of the struggles between nuclear energy proponents and their foes by focusing on their environmental perceptions and ideals. He properly reminds us that the conflicts of the 1970s and 1980s were often about a landscape and our roles in it, not just about the dangers of nuclear power. Sometimes, his perspective may give short shrift to the contexts of business, the economy, and the Cold War. These probably had a more direct bearing on the outcome of nuclear controversies at Diablo Canyon and elsewhere. Yet he is undoubtedly right that the history of nuclear energy needs to pay attention to environmental history. He has done this for Diablo Canyon with outstanding results.

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Citation: Daniel Pope. Review of Wills, John, *Conservation Fallout: Nuclear Protest at Diablo Canyon*. H-Energy, H-Net Reviews. August, 2007.

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