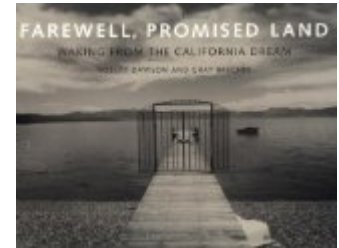


Robert Dawson, Gray Brechin. *Farewell, Promised Land: Waking from the California Dream.* Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1999. xix + 233 pp. \$60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-520-21124-7.



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"I'd be safe and warm if I was in L.A. California dreamin' on such a winter's day" [1]

The California dream for me was defined and expressed early on through the music of the Beach Boys and the Mamas and Papas. Life in their world was one long endless summer romp on a Pacific beach, a redemption from the vicissitudes of climate, economics and parental control. My father came to California in the 1950's for a job and I, at age 13, to turn adolescence into a life style. But along came the hole in the ozone layer and the scourge of skin cancer, not to mention the accumulation of years, and today the dream of life on a California beach is no longer so appealing.

In one form or another, the California dream has enticed and seduced and, all too often disappointed. What is it that has encouraged countless immigrants to imagine California as a promised land? Kevin Starr, who has constructed his multi-volume history of the state around the dream theme, sees California as "the cutting edge of the American dream" and believes that throughout its history "Americans glimpsed a California of beauty and justice, where on the land or in well-ordered cities they might enter into prosperity and

peace." Of course, he adds, "the dream outran the reality," in part due to the unrestrained greediness of its development.[2] The state's first visitors were quick to notice that the dream had a shadow side. "Nature here reminds one," wrote Bayard Taylor in 1862 about the mining regions, "of a princess, fallen into the hands of robbers, who cut off her fingers for the sake of the jewels she wears." [3]

Photographer Robert Dawson and writer Gray Brechin, in an eloquent and disturbing look at the mangled California environment, do not mourn the loss of the California dream so much as challenge us to awaken from what has become a nightmare and confront the social and ecological consequences of the Euro-American presence. Unlike a 1993 call to repair the damage that covered similar terrain, *California's Threatened Environment: Restoring the Dream*, Dawson and Brechin do not want to restore or revive the dream but rather to indict those who have manipulated it for power and profit.[4] They blame neither expanding population nor impersonal technologies for the state's environmental crisis, but focus instead on the unruly behavior of often powerful individuals. Brechin describes Califor-

nia as "the world's greatest stag party" which has been trashed "as thoroughly as a saloon in a drunken brawl" (p. 36). In imagery which often goes over the top but achieves its objective to evoke and provoke, the author depicts California allegorically on its 150th birthday as "a badly used whore - chemically dependent and disfigured by abuse - who has seen and tried everything" (p. 175).

Farewell, Promised Land begins with a lament for all that has been lost in California since the Gold Rush opened the floodgates of immigration, from flourishing native American cultures to the grizzly bear. Then, in five chapters which counterpoise text and photographs, it catalogs a litany of woes affecting people and the land under the categories of mining, agriculture, energy, cities and pollution. Finally, it raises the flag of hope by telling the stories of ordinary citizens who, through their collective actions, have mitigated some of the disasters and healed a few wounds. This concluding chapter changes the sad tenor of the work and gives it a unique power to rally readers in defense of *civitas* and home, two of the symbols the authors invoke for a communal response to the destructiveness of Progress in which individuals monopolize natural bounty for personal profit.

In 1991 Dawson and Brechin received the Dorothea Lange-Paul Taylor Prize from the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, given to honor the writer and photographer who produced an acclaimed blend of text and image, *American Exodus*, in 1941. They embarked on a five-year project to document environmental transformations in California, using Ray Dasmann's 1965 classic, *The Destruction of California* as a model. Brechin was a co-founder of the Mono Lake Committee which won a ruling from the state Supreme Court in 1983 preventing the city of Los Angeles from continuing to destroy the lake. As a TV journalist he uncovered the story of the poisoning of the Kesterson National Wildlife

Refuge from farm irrigation runoff containing selenium. Brechin recently received a doctorate in geography at Berkeley and published *Imperial San Francisco: Urban Power, Earthly Ruin*, a powerful exposé of how urban elites have controlled and devastated the countryside through financial manipulation, land speculation and "remote control" technologies.[5] Dawson, who teaches photography at San Jose State University and Stanford University, has long been involved in documenting environmental issues in California. His photographs have been published in numerous books, including studies of water in the west, the Central Valley, and the Truckee River.[6]

In Chapter One, "The Absence of Things," Brechin writes that he, like most Californians, had come to take "the emptiness" for granted, the skies empty of birds, the missing native Americans, the lakes gone from the Central Valley. Dawson's photographs graphically illustrate Brechin's description of the emptiness that remains at Naomi Lackee, the site of a former Indian reservation "Some places have drunk so much pain that they never give it up. We call them haunted. Nomi Lackee is one such place," he writes, comparing it to another -- Dachau. "It was the Indians' misfortune to play the Canaanites in the Promised Land" (p. 12). He also writes about, and Dawson depicts, the end of commercial fishing in the Sacramento Delta, the last artesian well in Tulare County and the stuffed, and now extinct, grizzly bear at the California Academy of Sciences, a fitting symbol for the state's flag. These losses, Brechin makes clear, are not accidental. "You have to crack eggs to make an omelet, or to make real estate, and as one of the world's most golden omelets, California is littered with the eggshells of massacres, lynchings, forced marches, and exterminations necessary to grid and market its land" (p. 17)

Chapter Two, "The Price of Gold," provides the guiding metaphor for progress in California. All subsequent environmental destruction can be seen in terms of extraction for profit. "The miners'

ethos," Brechin writes, was "extended to every other aspect of the environment: sequoias, wildlife, whales, fish, people, oil, and water all became lucrative ore on the city's markets" (pp. 51-2). The authors make use of historic photos, including much reprinted classics by Carleton Watkins, to illustrate the toxic legacy of mining, including the continuing contamination of streams with mercury in Santa Clara County from the long-abandoned New Almaden mines. Perhaps because it is a familiar story, this is the shortest chapter in the book. The quest for gold and silver, however, is the addiction that made Western civilization possible. The Indians conquered by Cortez believed the Spaniards ate the gold they sought so passionately.

In Chapter Three, "Coerced Cornucopia," Brechin tells how capital and water transfers made the California deserts bloom by turning the state into "the greatest food and fiber factory the world has every known." From the beginning, however, the Jeffersonian ideal of a land full of small farmers was perverted by swindlers and speculators who created giant agribusiness on huge landholdings. Today the state's largest farmlands are owned by several oil companies and the Southern Pacific Railroad. Using chemicals that transform soil "from an organic matrix into a hydroponic medium with the nutritive qualities of cardboard," agribusiness today is more "a means for transforming petroleum into food" rather than the fruit or almond orchards that turn-of-the-century boosters portrayed in glossy magazines as the California ideal.

Chapter Four portrays "Energy's Luminous Net" as a stream of automobile tail-lights on one of California's many freeways, or the "river of gasoline" necessary to carry commuters from the suburbs to their work, or as the "sea of fossil fuel" that propels the Los Angeles economy and pushes its borders outwards. Whether electrical, oil or nuclear, the energy needs of California were not a natural outcome of growth but were instead stim-

ulated for profit. "To a degree that few were aware of at the time," Brechin writes, "the growing demand for energy - which was virtually synonymous with the word 'progress' - was planned; commuters had little choice but to consume fossil fuel. The freedom of the road had become its tyranny" (p. 105) But here, as elsewhere in the book, the writer sees real estate as the true El Dorado of California. Land was the ultimate commodity, as Mike Davis has describes so incisively in his analysis of Los Angeles.[7] The automobile enabled the development of previously inaccessible land and became "the most perfect tool ever devised for increasing the value of real estate while simultaneously keeping the price of oil up" (p. 99).

Urbanization is the topic of Chapter Five, "Alabaster Cities." In California, cities, like the land, were coerced. They seldom grew naturally with the purpose of providing citizens with housing and work. Brechin argues that with the "unwitting aid of taxpayers, a few determined individuals have irrigated, seeded, and grown them like cash crops in the desert" (p. 113). Here, having invoked Aldo Leopold's principle of land as a community rather than commodity, Brechin laments the lack of civitas, or civility, in California's urban environments, and quotes approvingly Frederick Law Olmsted's observation that Californians show little interest "in the fixed qualities of the place." The "spiritual pollution" of California's cities "reflects the murder of nature required to build them" (p. 149).

In Chapter Six, Brechin contrasts "The Image of Health" as a component of the California dream with the reality of toxic pollution and cancer clusters that plague the state. Despite the persistent image of California as "one immense spa," Brechin finds that "the denial of mortality and of the ills to which flesh is heir forms a continuum of malarkey from the heroic Gold Rush miners to the blond and buffed surfers of today's Malibu" (p. 161). Here he tells stories of the poisoning of the

Kesterson National Wildlife Refuge, the dumping of chemicals into Santa Monica Bay and disposal of nuclear waste by the federal government at the Farallones Islands. While Rachel Carson is cited as the founding mother of environmentalism, Brechin disagrees with her assessment that chemical pollution was something the people had done to themselves. No, he writes, the workers in California had it done *to* them. Unusually high cancer rates and an abundance of chemical spills make California a particularly hazardous place to live.

Despite the fact that "materialism has permeated California culture since the Gold Rush," and today little remains "sacred except the right to accumulate wealth," Brechin finds hope in the presence of Californians throughout history who have "questioned popular notions of progress and who attempted to light the way down different paths." In the book's concluding chapter, "Alternative Courses," Brechin, with Dawson's pictorial assistance, tells the history of resistance to "the barbarism masquerading as civilization" in California. Here he speaks of the early work of Olmsted, John Muir, Helen Hunt Jackson on behalf of Indians, the many women who campaigned for conservation, and the utopian experiments to live in harmony with the land. He speaks of the cable car preservation campaign and the "freeway revolt" in San Francisco along with successful efforts to save the bay. In this chapter Brechin shows concretely that movements for social and environmental justice cannot be separated, and shows the work of the West County Toxics Coalition in Richmond, various community gardens, and the Mothers of East Los Angeles who blocked a toxic waste incinerator, a hazardous waste storage facility and a prison.

The story Brechin tells, of loss, destruction, and redemption through community revival and citizen activism, could not have been as effective in provoking a sympathetic response from readers without the photographs of California past and present. Dawson's contribution is essential, as

are the photographs collected from various historical museums. As Dawson points out in his preface, it is very difficult to photograph the past. And so in several cases he captures unwritten and forgotten history through murals, monuments and inscriptions on plaques. Rather than simply report present realities, Brechin has explored the archives and provides first-hand observations from early residents and visitors. Thomas Magee, for example, wonders in a 1868 issue of *Overland Monthly*: "Of what use will be good government to a country which has been desolated by the cultivators of the soil who have raised matricidal hands against our common mother earth?" (p. 25). And turn-of-the-century novelist Frank Norris writes that Californians "had no love for their land. They were not attached to the soil. To get all there was out of the land, to squeeze it dry, to exhaust it, seemed their policy" (pp. 25-6). Dawson and Brechin's counsel to wake up from the California dream is an old story that bears retelling.

Where *Farewell, Promise Land* differs from its predecessors in the wakeup California genre is in its emphasis on materialism, individual greed, land speculation and inability to love the land as the primary culprits. Dasmann, for example, saw overpopulation as the critical problem leading to environmental destruction. Deep Ecologist George Sessions argued at a 1998 conference in Santa Cruz that since population had tripled since Dasmann's 1965 book, immigration controls, resisted by the Sierra Club, were the only solution to the problem. But Dawson and Brechin have little to say about overpopulation and even automobiles do not seem the threat others make of them. The authors resolutely refuse to blame the victims and put the responsibility for the fate of California on the shoulders of numerous individuals and businesses who "had no love for the land," who trashed California in the "world's greatest stag party," who spread "the gospel of easy living" while finding ways to increase the value of their real estate, and who, in the end, treated both humans and nature as means for their financial ad-

vancement. Whether you call it materialism, greed or capitalism, the despoilers of California are the true homeless persons, people with no appreciation for the land. Dawson and Brechin's *Farewell, Promised Land* bids adieu to myths and dreams and calls Californians to their true home.

Notes

[1]. "California Dreamin," written by John and Michelle Phillips and recorded by the Mamas and Papas.

[2]. Kevin Starr, *Americans and the California Dream, 1850-191* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 46, xiii.

[3]. Starr, 174.

[4]. Tim Palmer, ed., *California's Threatened Environment: Restoring the Dream* (Washington, D.C., and Covelo, CA: Island Press, 1993).

[5]. Gray Brechin, *Imperial San Francisco: Urban Power, Earthly Ruin* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1999).

[6]. Robert Dawson, *Photographs* (Tokyo and Santa Monica: Gallery Min, (1988); Peter Goin, ed., and Ellen Manchester, *Arid Waters: Photographs from the Water in the West Project* (Reno, NV: University of Nevada Press, 1992); Stephen Johnson, Robert Dawson and Gerald Haslam, *The Great Central Valley: California's Heartland* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Robert Dawson, Peter Goin and Mary Webb, *A Doubtful River* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, forthcoming).

[7]. Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London: Verso, 1990).

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