



Mary P. Ryan. *Taking the Land to Make the City: A Bicoastal History of North America.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 2019. Illustrations. 448 pp. \$40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4773-1783-9.

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In this conceptually ambitious history of pre-Civil War Baltimore and San Francisco, Mary P. Ryan seeks to understand what the history of these two cities can reveal about the history of the American nation of which they were both, eventually, a part. I say “ambitious” because in the broadest sense Ryan advances several broad historiographical arguments on the importance of urban history to North American history: that large municipalities nurtured democracy no less than did the supposed rugged individuals of the agricultural frontier; that it was in cosmopolitan centers where capitalism was propelled and, in occasionally surprising ways, altered; and that metropolises like Baltimore and San Francisco provide an entirely different vantage point to understand the political geography of the Civil War era. But above all, this is a book about the simultaneous making of cities and the formation of the United States, and about how the two were often one and the same. For in Ryan’s hands, cities were more than mere sites where the US nation formed. They were, perhaps, the essential sites.

Ryan organizes *Taking the Land to Make the City* into four sections. Part 1 looks at the geographic practices of the indigenous people who inhabited the Chesapeake and San Francisco Bays for several thousand years before European contact—the ancestors of the Powhatans and the

Ohlone, respectively—and then narrates how the English and Spanish (again, respectively) took the land and began converting it into individual parcels of private property. The brutal European expropriation of Indian land did not produce the cities of Baltimore and San Francisco immediately, but it did establish the social, economic, and political foundations upon which such city making could proceed. Part 2 then moves into the heart of Ryan’s story, describing how settlers during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries began to produce their urban spaces. Along the Chesapeake, a mixture of public and private actors worked together, sometimes tensely and other times harmoniously, to build the row houses, impressive monuments, and orthogonal streets that characterize Baltimore to this day. Meanwhile, around the bay of San Francisco, *pobladores* (settlers) like Francisco de Haro created what Ryan calls “a new and distinctive landscape, one that extended out into ranchland, came together around a plaza, and acquired the legitimacy of a pueblo” (p. 173). Although they took different paths, and although they drew from different geographic traditions, the local inhabitants of these blossoming cities practiced a popular form of self-government that had “lasting consequences” for both the Mexican and US republics (p. 127).

The second half of the book examines the rise of Baltimore and San Francisco as modern, capitalist metropolises. Part 3, which consists of two of the book's most fascinating chapters, narrates how by the 1850s each city came to resemble the other in terms of power and size. The paths they took, however, diverged. Baltimore's tale involved an energetic municipality allied with an ever-growing private sector: "as private corporations claimed their private rights and privileges, the mayor, city council, and taxpayers were left with a growing burden of public responsibilities" (p. 256). San Francisco's tale, meanwhile, grew out of the US annexation of Alta California, the Gold Rush, and the frantic land grab that followed. The end result of all this rushing and all this grabbing was a distinctly Californian urban landscape, one that did not replicate Baltimore's grid so much as it wrote "a pattern of blocks, lots, and an occasional public square" down the peninsula and toward the Pacific shore (p. 306). The makers of Baltimore and San Francisco made use of land according to their own local logics, and they would continue to do so even as the US fractured along sectional lines. Part 4 concludes this story of two cities with an east-west perspective, and with urban residents taking still-more territory and building still-more houses and streets during the tumultuous 1860s. As Ryan notes, the sale of city lots did not stop for the Civil War; indeed, it did not stop for anything. She concludes that the US nation's triumph over sectionalism, slavery, and slaughter was "due in no small part to the history made in cities," where a polyglot of peoples and interests formed an intersecting network around which the postwar world would be built (p. 321).

The power of Ryan's arguments about popular democracy, urban capitalism, and national formation rests in the granular nature of her analysis. By reconstructing the processes by which Baltimore and San Francisco were charted, mapped, and built, she intervenes in and occasionally reshapes a number of ongoing debates. Her discussion of the marriage of public and private actors in Balti-

more, and of the ways that democratic politics and private capital reinforced each other, provides welcome nuance, for instance, to the narrative of urban development specifically and nineteenth-century American political development more generally. "There was something more complicated at work than an abrupt transition from a private to a public city (or vice versa)," writes Ryan. "As private corporations claimed their private rights and privileges, the mayor, city council, and taxpayers were left with a growing burden of responsibilities" (pp. 255-56). Meanwhile, Ryan's detailed discussion of the speculative frenzy that erupted over San Francisco real estate in the aftermath of the Mexican Cession and Gold Rush continues the important work of scholars like Maria Montoya by showing precisely what happened when two legal systems and political economies converged in the most cherished bay of the Mexican Cession. Perhaps most importantly, Ryan's careful attention to the messy mechanics of land speculation sheds much-needed light on the map-makers, financiers, property assessors, lawyers, and politicians usually hidden by passive sentence constructions in other historians' work. And these are just a few examples out of many. With remarkable attention to detail, Ryan weaves deftly between the fields of political geography, vernacular architecture, and urban history to make the persuasive case that cities were incubators of American democracy, American capitalism, and the American nation itself.

In the broadest sense, *Taking the Land to Make the City* is an ode to the nineteenth-century metropolis and a tribute, in particular, to early Baltimore and San Francisco. Ryan thus adopts an almost elegiac tone, but this occasionally leads to some analytical trouble. It is jarring to read celebratory accounts of settlers and their descendants in a book that is also a story of settler colonialism. It is likewise curious that her thorough examination of geographic commoditization leads Ryan to conclude that "our cities serve as an admonition not to take but to tend the waters and the land" (p.

15). Perhaps most perplexing is the place of race. Although clear-eyed about the ways that white Baltimoreans and San Franciscans delimited the democratic potential of their “streets, squares, plazas, neighborhoods, and vigorous municipal institutions,” Ryan often partitions her considerations of racism to the end of chapters or sections, an organizational choice that implies “the political energy, relative economic equality, and urban pleasure that once thrived” in nineteenth-century cities was either incomplete or not yet complete (p. 365). Many historians have shown that the supposed energy, equality, and pleasure of American cities was *constitutive* of the racism that flourished on their streets and in their neighborhoods, and to separate any discussion of urban racism from that of urban democracy can be misleading.

Ryan is less interested ultimately in the implications of urban exclusionary practices than she is invested in reconstructing the redemption and hope of urban spaces. There are advantages to this choice. *Taking the Land to Make the City* is an elegant portrait of early Baltimore and San Francisco that is as enjoyable as it is insightful. It offers a convincing case for the centrality of urban history to the metanarratives of early US history and deserves to be widely read.

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