Review


Few topics receive more intellectual attention than water, irrigation, and politics in the American West. From Wallace Stegner’s *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian* to Marc Reisner’s *Cadillac Desert*, it is no secret that aridity plays a powerful role in defining the region. In the memoir *The Man Who Thought He Owned Water: On the Brink with American Farms, Cities, and Food*, author Tershia d’Elgin contributes to the vast literature through a deeply personal account of the conflict between cities and farmers over H2O in Colorado’s South Platte River Basin, one of the West’s most productive agricultural regions and a historic stronghold for small-scale irrigation. She argues that the river and its underlying aquifer are increasingly unable to meet the twenty-first century demands of burgeoning metropolitan growth and commodity-based farming. Using her parents’ agricultural operation — Big Bend Station — on the banks of the South Platte as a place-based surrogate for the entire farming community, d’Elgin gracefully unravels a new iteration of a very old story — small farms are no match for real estate interests, and water in the American West flows towards the deepest pockets as inexorably as it flows downhill.

Tershia d’Elgin divides her story into twenty ‘spectacles’ or chapters that chronologically follow the evolution of her family’s relationship with an 800-acre spread acquired during the 1960s. As a hardworking couple living in Denver during the postwar economic boom, Tershia’s parents — Bill and Gogo Phelps — accumulated enough capital to leave the big city behind. Unlike many of their peers who retired or bought second homes in booming Front Range resort communities such as Vail and Aspen, her parents traded in their urban residence to follow Bill’s idyllic dream of small-scale agricultural production. As an employee of a large cattle corporation during the 1960s, he gained experience in food production by running 20,000 cattle in the rangelands of Wyoming, Nebraska, and Colorado. Transitioning from managing cattle to growing wheat and corn proved challenging, especially as global political and economic forces restructured American farming and as environmental instability reshaped the land.

After establishing the story and setting, d’Elgin shifts attention to the importance of controlling water rights in the arid West. As the central drama of the narrative unfolds, she perceptively reminds the reader of the material realities of H2O: ‘Everything about water is dynamic. Put a little water in your hand. Think about owning it and preserving it. Water isn’t easily contained. It moves around; it evaporates; it freezes. Its force moves other things around. In concert with sunlight, water makes weather, another untrammeled force. And, every living entity on the planet needs water critically’ (p. 49). Because growing commodity crops requires a great deal of water and the South Platte discharges a mere 1.4 million acre-feet annually, competition for water — especially among junior water users — remains incredibly fierce. According to d’Elgin, approximately 100,000 acres in the river’s drainage relied on groundwater from the South Platte Aquifer during the summer months. When surface water rights were curtailed at Big Bend Station, ‘Bill had only to lean toward one of his five pump houses and flip a switch... All the water the fields needed, whenever he wanted, gushed from that enormous bladder beneath the soil’ (p. 65).

Unfortunately for South Platte farmers dependent on groundwater pumping, the hand of the state can also turn off the machines. As increasing affluence and population growth fueled Denver’s suburban sprawl, the desire to keep lawns green and showers flowing threatened the livelihood of many of the Basin’s farmers. Because Colorado’s 1969 Water Right Determination and Administration Act linked surface and groundwater flows into a single priority system, farmers reliant on well irrigation legally became junior in right to most surface users. In order to pump during the critical summer months, these farmers needed to augment their out-of-priority water use through the acquisition of replacement water. For over thirty years, sympathetic state engineers allowed farmers to pay a minimal fee to the Groundwater Apprriors of the South Platte to annually augment their water use. However, in 2003, on the heels of a meager snowpack, the Colorado State Legislature and Supreme Court effectively shut down irrigators’ access to groundwater. According to d’Elgin, the deep pockets of burgeoning Front Range municipalities and the triumph of globalized industrial agriculture had finally shifted political power away from small-scale farmers towards white-collar suburbanites and large corporations.

*The Man Who Thought He Owned Water* is a well-written defense of rural life and a plea for readers to take seriously the interconnectedness between cities and farms. Although the author’s claim that her story is one ‘no other water book, no other farm book, no other climate book is telling’ feels hyperbolic, it does give voice and perspective to a group often marginalized in the historiography of water in the American West (p. ix). Despite Tershia d’Elgin’s activist writing style that makes the book feel similar to an extended *High Country News* piece, historical geographers interested in western water politics will find this book valuable. Her emphasis on place will resonate with cultural geographers, and her brief engagement with Guy Debord’s concept of psychogeography offers additional appeal. Furthermore, her explorations of the important connections between agriculture and wildlife — especially migratory birds — and the threat suburban growth poses to wetland habitat offer a worthwhile parallel to Robert Wilson’s *Seeking Refuge*. In terms of visualizations, the book has several useful maps and graphics as well.

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as innovative embedded notes, which include extended descriptions of terminology in separate boxes throughout the text. Unfortunately, the monograph does not feature any photographs of Big Bend Station or the South Platte River Basin and contains too many of these note boxes. Ultimately, *The Man Who Thought He Owned Water* provides a useful case study and text for those teaching an undergraduate class dealing with water or food issues in the American West.

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