

Darren F. Speece

*Defending Giants: The Redwood Wars and the Transformation of American Environmental Politics*

Seattle, Washington State: 2016, University of Washington Press.

ISBN: 978-0-295-99951-7 (HB) \$29.95. 384pp.

Far from California's centres of political and financial power, the residents of the state's isolated North Coast are often described as living behind a 'Redwood Curtain'. By the 1980s, the redwood trees that made up that curtain were under increasing logging pressure, and in reaction a ferocious strain of local environmental activism took hold. Darren F. Speece's *Defending Giants: The Redwood Wars and the Transformation of American Environmental Politics* tracks the rise and fall of the so-called Redwood Wars that resulted when North Coast environmentalists engaged in a pitched battle against lumber companies, politicians and public apathy.

The cool, foggy range of low mountains edging the Pacific Ocean are the northernmost place where the majestic coast redwood are able to thrive. The rugged and remote nature of this locale meant these forests were largely spared the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century logging pressure which decimated much of the redwood forest closer to California's cities. Since logging the redwood required a different approach than logging elsewhere in the country, major national firms were reluctant to move in, meaning large areas of redwood in Humboldt and Del Norte counties, such as the Headwaters Forest, near the town of Eureka, were still largely intact by the 1970s. The heart of this book is in the small towns and forestlands of the region from the 1970s through the 1990s, as changes in economic and political realities create a new push towards logging these redwoods. While keeping his focus firmly rooted in the North Coast region, Speece traces how both logging companies and activist groups emerged and evolved in response to the new interest in redwood logging while they battled each other in media and courtrooms.

Oversized personalities dominate Speece's telling of twentieth century California Redwoods activism. Radical activists, treesitters, local politicians, logging company CEOs, and even the looming figures of iconic Californians from John Muir to Ronald Reagan, all have had personal styles that pushed to the forefront of their speech and actions. Whether flamboyant activist or 'charismatic villain' (p. 120), the eccentricities and style of these Californians became intrinsic to their historical importance. Even the organisations associated with these historical actors deviated from expectations, from the localism of the Pacific Lumber Company to the creativity of Earth First! and EPIC (Environmental Protection Information Center). The players in these environmental battles reflected the fierce individuality of the North Coast itself, and were anything but standard in approach and message. Indeed, as is so often the case, personality sometimes became as important to success as content.

The methodological approach used in this book emphasises the personalities of those involved, rather than depicting them as merely representatives of political stances. By taking this approach Speece emphasises how the personal and political melded in these particular environmental struggles. The author conducted extensive oral history interviews with many of the main actors, as well as using published and archival textual sources. This keeps the historical actors' experiences central, with frequent direct quotes from interviews by both the author and others. The effect is to create a real sense of the attitudes and energy of those involved in these events.

This book and others like it are a welcome counterweight to the data-driven, statistics-heavy projects that increasingly lure environmental historians and other humanities scholars. GIS, text mining and other digital approaches may lend gravitas and certainty to conclusions about broad trends and long-term patterns. However, the promises of digital methods in the humanities are often found to be illusive or dependent on data sets leveraged out beyond any measure of certainty. Speece, much to his credit, instead focused much of his attention on that most ancient form of historical evidence, the eyewitness account. The resulting book is a reminder of the power of the traditional approaches to historical research, even in a spatially-focused subdiscipline like environmental history. While environmental history is often faulted for neglecting individual people in favour of depicting change on larger scales, books like *Defending Giants* remind the reader of the insight to be gained by focusing on specific historical actors. Indeed, environmental history is, at its heart, the interactions among people and nature, as this dramatic account of environmental politics reminds us.

EMILY K. BROCK

Max Planck Institute for the History of Science,  
Berlin