

**John Lauritz Larson**

***Laid Waste! The Culture of Exploitation in Early America***

Philadelphia: 2020, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020

ISBN 978-0-812-25184-5 (HB) \$39.95. 312pp.

There are few nations who can rival the United States of America for environmental destruction, and explaining that destructiveness has absorbed the energies of environmentalists, philosophers and historians for decades. The alleged culprits have varied from population growth and technology run amok to religious impulses, economic inequality, and the expression of a universalist assumption that nature, in Rachel Carson's famous words, 'exists for the convenience of man'. In many ways, John Lauritz Larson's own answers will not come as a big surprise. The Purdue University historian lays much of the blame, as so many others have done, at the feet of a rapacious capitalist worldview. But how did Americans come to hold that view in the first place? Where did America's culture of exploitation get its start? *Laid Waste!* is an intellectual history of that culture: Larson argues that it emerged from the intersection of Europeans' ideas and experiences with the extravagant nature they encountered in North America, and then blossomed as those ideas evolved in response to historical and environmental changes. And Larson has no intention of letting his fellow citizens off the hook for the consequences. The nation's self-satisfied origin story of progress via environmental conquest is a product of its unique intellectual and environmental context, he argues. In other words, ecological despoliation is not a bug of the nation's history but a feature, as American as apple pie.

Europe at the time of early North American colonisation was, Larson writes, defined by environmental scarcity and sociopolitical hierarchy. The latter emerged partly because of the former, fostering a community-oriented if hardly democratic social system tasked with resource management and distribution, one in which the rights and responsibilities of royals, serfs and everyone in between were clearly understood if not always appreciated. If it wasn't fair, at least it had the virtue of being stable – but not for much longer. By the early modern period, growing population, religious conflict and the burgeoning market economy steadily eroded it. Then the philosophical ferment of the Enlightenment, with its challenges to authority and its faith (professed if not always practised) in individual rights, competition and capitalist economies fairly blew it up. It was in the midst of these changes that British colonists descended on North America. Here they encountered a material abundance beyond their wildest imaginings. That rich American nature would in turn fertilise those Enlightenment ideas until they grew, after much labour by Europeans and the peoples they enslaved, into an ideology capable of inspiring, creating and sustaining a new nation.

## REVIEWS

But Americans also ‘cultivated seeds of greed and competition’ (p. 50) in their new home, for the Revolution inspired a new vision of land use as well as politics. White Americans had come to see the extraction of wealth from nature not only as an individual opportunity but as a fundamental right and even a secular quest. Restraints on individualism fell away and community obligations weakened. Native peoples were pushed aside and black people enslaved as white Americans rushed to take inventory of the wealth they could extract through ambition, industriousness and technology, a combination they confidently termed ‘improvement’. No opposition to the project went unchallenged. Indeed, ‘improvement’s’ very success appeared to justify it, and it soon became axiomatic for most Americans, a law of nature as obvious as gravity and unstoppable as time.

Most of nineteenth-century American history, Larson argues, was the story of perfecting and expanding this improvement project. Ending slavery by mid-century did little to change it. On the contrary, emancipation only justified the northern version of exploitation *via* industry, farming and free labour, as settlers and businessmen surged across the Plains and intermountain West to usurp Native lands in the name of freedom and equality and opportunity. But by the end of the century, it was time to begin counting the ecological costs, as blackened tree stumps blighted the landscape, erosion fouled its rivers, and smoke hung in the air. Enter the conservation movement and its prophets like George Perkins Marsh, Gifford Pinchot and John Muir, calling for a reassessment of ‘improvement’.

Larson finishes, as one expects, with a plea for a change of heart. The culture of exploitation is alive and well today, he argues, embodied in extreme form by the unapologetic greed of President Donald J. Trump and the Republican Party. But there was never anything axiomatic or inevitable about that culture, he says, and what can be made can be unmade. The time has come to deliberately shift the paradigm, as it were, a sentiment well known to the more radical environmentalists of the twentieth century.

The breadth of Larson’s reading and the sweep of his narrative is impressive; this is an epic tale with a range of sources to match. Readers might criticise his focus on the beliefs and actions of white Americans at the expense of alternative ones from African-Americans and Natives, or on the British colonial experience as opposed to the Atlantic world. But Larson anticipates this by noting that the culture of exploitation ‘was not built on an accurate platform of historical developments’ but on the ‘willful distortions and selective memorialization’ of a ‘constructed history’ (p. 5) he intends to critique.

Another criticism might be levelled at Larson’s treatment of conservation. Even if conservation was, as he suggests, the first great example of backlash against the culture of exploitation, he doesn’t always reckon with the ways in which it was still a very American creature. After all, half of ‘wise use’ is ‘use’, and most conservationists drew the line at questioning deeper assumptions

## REVIEWS

about individual acquisitiveness and economic growth itself. In practice, conservation could also be used, like the culture of exploitation it criticised, to ruthlessly exclude the poor and nonwhite from access to natural areas and resources. The final chapter of *Laid Waste!* would benefit, then, from a slightly more nuanced reading of conservation. It might also be worth noting that of the conservationists, the wild-loving John Muir was the most critical of the culture of exploitation. But he was originally a Scotsman and not an American, a fact that, if Larson is correct, may not have been entirely a coincidence.

In the end, Larson's book is a convincing one, perhaps too convincing. His success in showing the depth and persistence of culture of exploitation is such that it becomes difficult to believe that America can, in fact, ever shift the paradigm. One hundred years of environmentalism have made some headway, but when the problem lurks in your historical DNA, the solutions seem buried in the wilderness.

BRIAN ALLEN DRAKE  
University of Georgia, USA