

Irrigated Eden: The Making of an Agricultural Landscape in the American West. By Mark Fiege. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998. xv + 323 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$40.00; paper, \$19.95. ISBN: cloth 0-295-97757-4; paper 0-295-98013-3.

Reviewed by Donald C. Jackson

Historians familiar with the history of water resources in the American West only through reading Donald Worster's *Rivers of Empire* (1986) or Marc Reisner's *Cadillac Desert* (1985) will find Marc Fiege's *Irrigated Eden* to be an eye-opener. Not because Fiege's book is necessarily incompatible with grand visions of "hydraulic empires" as portrayed by Worster or with the myriad government-fostered conspiracies that lie at the heart of Reisner's musings, but because *Irrigated Eden* develops an argument based upon a close consideration of how one important region in the West (the Upper Snake River Valley in southern Idaho) was environmentally transformed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by hydraulic technologies intended to spur the growth of irrigated agriculture.

Fiege approaches his subject from the perspective of an environmental historian. The focus is not so much on political or economic or social history per se (although Fiege makes use of all three), but rather on how the physical environment has guided, influenced, impeded, and interacted with the practice of irrigated farming. Paying close attention to the geology and topography of the region (which was dramatically transformed seventeen million years ago when a large meteor crashed through the earth's crust and initiated volcanic activity, still evident in the geysers and hot springs of Yellowstone National Park), he relates the nature of rivers, creeks, coulees, draws, lowlands, and upland benches to the systems of water control and conveyance that were devised to spread water upon hundreds of thousands of acres of (relatively) desert land and make it fit for the production of marketable crops. Although farmers prided themselves on their ability to "tame" nature through science and technology, an essential component of the story Fiege seeks to tell is that nature was never so malleable and controllable as the farmers wished to believe. Reservoirs leaked, groundwater seepage

brought salts to the surface and destroyed the productive capacity of land, muskrats and gophers burrowed into canals, birds attracted to artificial reservoirs feasted upon crops, jackrabbits multiplied like—well, rabbits, exotic plant and animal species flourished, and on and on.

The great strength of the book is that the author is not content simply to critique the seeming foolishness of humans in the face of a resourceful nature. Rather, Fiege explains how nature in the Snake River Valley has not been destroyed by the practice of irrigation so much as it has evolved into something different. Nature cannot be constrained and conquered by legal principles and abstractions (e.g., natural flow versus flood flow) designed to commodify water resources in the interests of economic development. Yes, the water can be captured in storage reservoirs, conveyed in canals, and dispersed through laterals. Nonetheless, these manipulations never proceeded exactly as the farmers and engineers envisaged. The end result is not a “conquered” nature. It is only nature transformed.

In his conclusion, Fiege acknowledges that what most intrigues him about irrigation in the Snake River Valley is the role of myth in firing human desire to make something useful out of a seemingly barren wasteland. Perhaps not surprisingly, given the predominance of Mormon settlers in the valley, many of these myths were grounded in a sense of divine guidance and fulfillment. Noting how one proponent had proclaimed in 1920 that irrigation engineers were “understudies of The Creator,” Fiege observes how irrigators were often perceived as “not merely men who had completed the land but the agents of God’s great plan for the earth” (p. 23). There also existed a concurrent—and hardly contradictory—myth based upon the notion that science and technology could create a world where “much needed moisture [would be] under perfect control” and farmers could “laugh at the cloudless sky” (p. 11). The pursuit of these myths, which Fiege documents as being so difficult to fulfill in real life, continued—and continues—to energize human enterprise in the region. With this observation, Fiege brings to the foreground an understanding that any effort to account for why and how irrigation in Southern Idaho developed cannot be broken down into a technoeconomic assessment of cost and benefit or profit and loss. Irrigation in the American West constitutes a business, but the enterprise of environmental transformation that irrigation encompasses

involves complex social and personal motivations that cannot be easily or simply explained.

Irrigated Eden is a carefully researched and well-written book; it can be read and appreciated by a wide audience interested in both history and issues involving the environmental consequences of economic development. The writing is refreshingly free of pedantic jargon, and readers will not need guidance from a graduate student of environmental-history to guide them through a thicket of postmodern phraseology and posturing. There is also a good selection of about fifty historic photographs and drawings that explicate the text and enhance understanding of the author's arguments and analysis. In sum, this is a book worth reading.

Donald C. Jackson is associate professor of history at Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania. He is the author of Building the Ultimate Dam: John S. Eastwood and the Control of Water in the American West (1995). His next book on the visual imagery of dams and their place within the American cultural landscape is scheduled for publication in the fall of 2003.