

Industrial Cowboys: Miller & Lux and the Transformation of the Far West, 1850–1920. *By David Igler*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001. xiv + 268 pp. Photographs, maps. Cloth, \$37.50. ISBN 0-520-22658-5.

Reviewed by Don Mitchell

California's social, political, and environmental—in short, its landscape—history has come under serious reconsideration over the past decade. Supplementing, and sometimes critiquing, the early foundational literature on the state's development associated with Carey McWilliams, Paul Taylor, Donald Pisani, and Cletus Daniel, and often calling into question the heroic accounts by California's "official historian," Kevin Starr, recent work reevaluates the complex and often fraught mix of land, labor, and capital that has come to be California. Much, but not all, of this work explicitly or implicitly navigates the narrative of California's capitalist rapaciousness that McWilliams was so influential in establishing (but that long preceded him, as the work of Henry George makes plain). In this narrative, labor looms large as a progressive, if oppressed, force; the land serves either as a moldable putty waiting the shaping hand of labor and capital or as an unpredictable, even malevolent, force that resists its own domestication; and capital (often undifferentiated) is the force that binds these elements together in a dystopian nightmare of exploitation and repression that gives the lie to California's claim to be the promised land.

This story is correct, but it is also incomplete. George Henderson (*California and the Fictions of Capital*, 1999) has argued that the logic of capitalist accumulation sets for any particular firm a series of problems or challenges. The way these challenges are met determines the geography of production, and hence the structure of the economic (and social) landscape. This is particularly so in agricultural industries, because the long maturation time of crops (whether strawberries or cows) exposes production to even greater risks than those faced by firms engaged in more continuous systems of production. Among other things, labor demands are highly seasonal and uneven; market-fluctuation predictions must extend over a longer period of time; and environmental risks, like flooding and drought, are endemic. Following from Henderson's argument, detailed studies are clearly needed of how specific companies have negotiated the landscape of agricultural California and its attendant risks, sometimes to their great advantage, and at other times have failed to respond to changing economic and environmental dictates.

David Igler's *Industrial Cowboys* provides one such study. Drawing on a wealth of materials from numerous archives in California, and situating his argument within the historiography of both environmental history and California landscape studies, Igler traces the

rise and fall of Miller & Lux, one of the largest landowners and most important companies in late-nineteenth-century California. Miller & Lux is these days most remembered for its victory in the landmark water-rights case, *Lux v. Haggin*, which, in upholding Miller & Lux's riparian rights over Haggin's prior appropriation, had an enormous impact on both the irrigation and the property-rights regimes of California (even if Miller & Lux was just as often willing to claim prior appropriation when it suited its needs). *Lux v. Haggin* is indeed important, but it is not the whole story of Miller & Lux.

Igler tells that fuller story, tracing the company's founding by two German immigrant butchers who had come to California during the Gold Rush, through its often underhanded accumulation of land for the construction of a vast network of ranches, hay-farms, irrigation ditches, and meat-packing plants, to the peak of its success in 1900 as the only agricultural corporation among the country's 200 largest industrial enterprises, and then on to its decline and virtual liquidation by 1920. Through a careful study of archival records left by ranch foremen, the principal partners of the firm, their descendents, and others, oral histories, and a range of accounts by journalists, travelers, muckrakers, state agents, and in court records (most of the company records were destroyed in the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire), Igler reconstructs the myriad means by which Miller & Lux amassed what can only be described as an empire. The firm owned some 1.25 million acres outright, and one of its founders claimed to control ten times that amount. The brothers married into elite society, bribed officials, and ruthlessly played the public lands alienation game, even mortgaging the company to the hilt in order to buy land from struggling ranchers during the nineteenth century's frequent depressions. Miller & Lux rarely paused (before 1900) in its struggle to knit together a landscape appropriate for the production of meat—from the growing of alfalfa to the rendering of fat.

Igler argues, rightly, that understanding Miller & Lux allows us to understand the West's industrial transformation. In Igler's words, Miller & Lux "created a vast machine to engineer the natural landscape and regulate the geography of western meat production" (p. 5). It also established a vast migratory labor stream to work the lands and provide labor for the engineering projects, a stream that was paralleled by what came to be known as the "dirty-plate circuit" (pp. 140–2). Miller & Lux ordered its ranch cooks to provide free meals to any "vagrant" who asked. Meals were served on the still-dirty plates of the employed workers (Igler shows, interestingly, that this policy was in part a result of Chinese cooks resisting the increased workload the free-meal policy created). The dirty-plate circuit, Igler argues, developed as a means of keeping wages down (by always assuring that there was a surplus of labor on hand), and it laid a foundation for the system of surplus migratory labor and low wages that persists in California to

this day. But it also developed as a means of protecting the firm's assets: "tramps" had a habit of setting fire to haystacks when denied a meal. Exploitation of labor, that is, was the solution to a dual problem: the need to maintain low wages and the need to prevent sabotage.

Labor supply and control in Miller & Lux's far-flung empire was a consistent problem, but so were problems associated with the environment. Alternating droughts and flooding made cattle production exceptionally risky: hence, Miller & Lux's overweening desire to "engineer" the landscape. The firm became the largest developer and owner of private irrigation systems in the state. It did everything it could to gain complete control over water resources (thereby engendering the wrath of both rural settlers and those reformers who hoped to transform rural California into a paradise of small farmers). Iglar compellingly traces the "reclamation" of California and Miller & Lux's (considerable) role in it, organizing his discussion around *Lux v. Haggin*. What results is a story of power: the power of a single corporation; the power to radically transform and engineer the land; and the power to create an empire.

It is, however, a story of power derived from exigency, from myriad attempts to solve problems generated within the logic of expanding capitalist accumulation and by the vagaries of land and labor (the environment and the people who must work in it). And, since power is derived from exigency, it is necessarily limited. Iglar traces the limits of Miller & Lux's power in his concluding chapter: following the death of Lux, the firm overreached its grasp as it sought to control lands in Nevada and Oregon and then failed to respond to both changing market conditions (and a very real impetus toward agricultural intensification in California, from which Miller & Lux could have clearly benefited, given its control over land and water) and competition from the Chicago-based "American Cattle Trust." By 1920, Miller & Lux had been eclipsed. Indeed, it lives on mostly as memory (an argument Iglar makes in the first chapter but fails to return to at the end) and as a long-standing object of reformist derision. Miller & Lux, with its often-illegal land-engrossment schemes, its frequent duplicity in the courts, and its dirty-plate circuit, was a primary target of McWilliams's *Factories in the Field* (1939) and has remained a touchstone in contemporary environmental histories of California (see, for example, Donald Worster's classic *Rivers of Empire*, 1985). *Industrial Cowboys* fills in the picture of how the firm developed, how it operated, and how it understood its own actions, and in the process provides important insights on the specific means by which California's landscape of massive productivity (and thus massive natural and human exploitation) came into being. Not without its flaws (the discussion of the firm's decline, for example, is not entirely convincing), *Industrial Cowboys* is an important contribution to the growing literature on the California landscape. Iglar's book does not deny McWilliams's dystopian narrative; it helps to complete the story.

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