Visions of the Land: Science, Literature, and the American Environment from the Era of Exploration to the Age of Ecology


Visions of the Land, part of an “Explorations in Ecocriticism” series, is an interesting look at the relationship between science, the natural environment and human beings, as expressed in literature published in the United States from, as the subtitle suggests, the period of exploration in the 19th century to roughly the 1960s. Some aspects of that relationship would also apply to Canada.

The authors examined in the book cover quite the range – from explorers John Charles Frémont (American West) and Richard Byrd (polar regions), to author and feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman, naturalist Susan Fenimore Cooper, and scientists John Wesley Powell, Rachel Carson and Loren Eiseley. The types of writing also vary widely – from exploration narratives and technical reports, to fictional utopias, natural histories, popular scientific literature, and more.

The book is divided into three parts: 1. Narratives of Exploration and the Scientist-Hero (Frémont and Byrd); 2. Imagined Communities and the Scientific Management of Nature (Powell and Perkins Gilman); and 3. Nature’s Identity and the Critique of Science (Fenimore Cooper, Carson and Eiseley). The book’s sub-title suggests a certain chronological order in the material, but that turned out not to be the case, which made reading and comprehension a little confusing. It was also a little difficult to follow the author’s arguments through the themes covered in the three parts. I would have found it more effective had Bryson simply written a chapter on each of the authors.

Nevertheless, there is lots of good content in the book regarding science and connections with human perspectives on the natural environment. Frémont, for example, was the “glamour boy of American westward expansion”, the archetypal macho scientist-explorer, who worked and wrote both scientific reports and popular literature at a time when the country was expanding ever faster westward, and when surveying technology and cartographic techniques were continually improving. Frémont’s writing combines descriptive and poetic elements with analytical, quantitative and technical precision such that the species of this globe will either make it clear that the species of this globe will either have to survive in zoos, or in smaller fragments. For instance, the range of many Australian mammals declined already by over 90% and is now confined to off-shore islands; and in New Zealand the native forest cover has already been reduced from 78% in pre-human times to 23% today. Obviously, for many plants and animals in the world, preservation with relatively intact habitats is no longer an option.

Genetics, Demography and Viability of Fragmented Populations


This is another Australian CSIRO (Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization) flag-ship publication of international importance to research and conservation. “The continuing global trend towards non-sustainable exploitation of natural resources means that more, rather than fewer, species are going to be affected by habitat loss, degradation and fragmenta-