

Bron Taylor's review of 'The Ghost Forest: Racists, Radicals, and Real Estate in the California Redwoods'

The Ghost Forest: Racists, Radicals, and Real Estate in the California Redwoods
By Greg King. New York: Public Affairs, 2023; 480 pages. \$32.00 (hardcover), ISBN
978- 1541768673.

Reviewed By Bron Taylor

The Ghost Forest is a horror story ... and a revelation.

The storyteller is Greg King, whose timbermen ancestors began arriving in California in 1873 to join in the logging of the redwood biome that had commenced only a decade earlier. They became so prominent during the early years of European incursions in the region that place names there still bear the family name.

King was born in 1961 and reported that when he was growing up in Guerneville, there were still large tracks of intact redwoods left, including a protected reserve near his home that he regularly explored. When it was time for college, he chose the University of California at Santa Cruz because redwoods were “so much a part of my spirit” (20) that he wanted them nearby.

After graduating with a degree in journalism in 1985, King returned to Guerneville and took a job at a small, weekly newspaper. Witnessing the ongoing destruction of the forests he loved, he soon quit his job, which forbade him from activist endeavors, and trespassed onto timber company lands. There he discovered a wondrous old-growth redwood grove, which he named “Headwaters Forest,” and learned it was slated to be clear-cut. He soon joined in common cause with the Earth First! activists who, since the early 1980s, had been campaigning against deforestation in the region. In their efforts to thwart destruction, Earth First!ers were known for campaigns including lobbying, dramatic civil disobedience, in some cases tree spiking (putting metal or ceramic spikes in trees to increase the costs of cutting them), and other forms of sabotage. Along with Earth First! activists Judi Bari and Darryl Cherney, with whom he worked closely during the second half of the 1980s, King became one of the most tenacious and famous of the activists battling for the redwoods.

Much of his book provides a riveting account of this resistance, especially up to and including the horror when in 1990, someone planted a bomb under the seat of Judi Bari’s car. It went off on 24 May when Bari, accompanied by Darryl Cherney, had just left a house in Oakland for another meeting to organize “Redwood Summer,” their envisioned campaign of mass protest and civil disobedience to protect the redwood forests. The bomb injured Cherney, but Bari’s injuries were severe and permanently disabling. Afterward, Bari and Cherney were arrested and accused of being bomb-carrying ecoterrorists who were injured by a bomb they were carrying and intended to use in their campaign.

In *The Ghost Forest*, King describes well the lawsuit Bari and Cherney filed against the FBI and Oakland Police Department, which in 2002 led to a jury finding that these agencies violated Bari’s and Cherney’s constitutional rights to free speech, and against unlawful searches and confinement (false arrest). The authorities had also defamed

these activists by falsely insinuating that they were bomb-carrying terrorists. Among several lies made by the law enforcement authorities, an FBI agent claimed that the bomb had been placed behind, not under, Bari's car seat. As Bari herself noted, no sane person would knowingly place a bomb in such a place. Noting that the northern California Earth First! groups had, in 1987, renounced tree spiking, King surmised that "one of the reasons for the attack against Judi Bari [was] to make us look violent when in fact we were leading the movement into a more powerful and tenable movement that embraced radical non-violent resistance."¹

Although in northern California the Earth First! movement was overwhelmingly nonviolent in practice and despite its 1987 pledge, the timber industry and its public relations firms effectively used the incident to defeat a 1990 California referendum known as "Forests Forever," claiming it originated with violent, extremist environmentalists.² The referendum would have saved tens of thousands of acres of redwood ecosystems. In his telling of this part of the story, King conveyed and expressed his agreement with Bari and her lead attorney, that the timber industry and FBI were "undoubtedly" responsible for the bombing (382, cf. 396–99). A high-quality 2012 documentary produced by Cherney titled "Who Bombed Judi Bari?" analyzed the extant evidence and advanced similar charges.³

Despite the severe and sometimes violent contention over the logging of the redwoods during the 1980s and 1990s, in 1999, the federal government and state of California passed legislation that provided public funds to acquire and manage what was by then the fragmented, remaining, old growth Headwaters groves (of 3088 acres) surrounded by a previously logged area as a buffer (of 4384 acres). That there was anything left to save, as King documented, was due to strong and passionate citizen resistance since the early 1980s, which slowed the logging, and a precedent-setting lawsuit filed by the Environmental Protection Information Center (EPIC), a small group of attorneys and activists located in northern California. Founded in 1977, EPIC has been the most important regional, community-based law- and science-focused organization fighting deforestation in northern California.⁴ As King put it, for the first time,

¹ Personal communication, 24 July 2023.

² For my analyses of radical environmentalism's complicated history and debates surrounding strategies and tactics that intend or risk hurting people, see Bron Taylor, "Religion, Violence, and Radical Environmentalism: From Earth First! to the Unabomber to the Earth Liberation Front," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 10, no. 4 (1998): 10–42; Bron Taylor, "Diggers, Wolves, Ents, Elves and Expanding Universes: Bricolage, Religion, and Violence from Earth First! and the Earth Liberation Front to the Antiglobalization Resistance," in *The Cultic Milieu: Oppositional Subcultures in an Age of Globalization*, ed. Jeffrey Kaplan and Heléne Löw (Lanham, MD: Altamira/Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 26–74; Bron Taylor, "Threat Assessments and Radical Environmentalism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 15, no. 4 (2003): 172–83; Bron Taylor, "Revisiting Ecoterrorism," in *Religionen im Konflikt*, ed. Vasilios N. Makrides and Jörg Rüpke (Münster, Germany: Aschendorff, 2004), 237–48.

³ The documentary is available at Cherney's YouTube channel; see youtube.com/watch?v=HWApvxSjMKY.

⁴ When I first visited the EPIC office in the early 1990s it was in Garberville, a small town adjacent to the famous Avenue of the Giants. The office was a mess, with boxes of clippings and magazines

this lawsuit “successfully enforced the Endangered Species Act on private timberlands,” which made it impossible to harvest the remaining old growth trees in the Headwaters Forest (363).⁵ It is inconceivable that the 1999 legislation that led to the purchase of Headwaters— as late, partial, and excessively expensive as it was— would have taken place were it not for the synergies between this lawsuit and the decades of citizen resistance to deforestation in the region.

I began studying radical environmental movements in 1990, including time spent in this biome doing extended interviews, including with Bari and Cherney, and I have had occasional contacts with King himself since 1995. I also read whatever I could find about these campaigns and the EPIC lawsuit. I knew, therefore, the main outline of the story of the resistance, although many of the details King provided were new to me. Having interviewed many activists and observed them in action, I understood why people were so passionate about defending these forests. Like them, I understood that only about 5% of the original redwood biome is still standing. But King’s scrupulously documented history of the liquidation of the redwoods was, for me, highly revealing.

He began this part of the book by describing how criminal syndicates arose to fraudulently acquire huge forest holdings during a time when the federal government would award settlers 160-acre land grants. The syndicates recruited ordinary settlers to acquire these land grants and then, for a pittance, orchestrated their transfer to the few plutocrats who would become the timber barons. These tycoons destroyed much of the redwood biome by the turn of the twentieth century. The clearly visible devastation led to public concern and resistance.

King then turned his attention to the Save the Redwoods League, which was founded in 1918 and is widely understood to be the foremost citizen-based champion of these forests. According to King’s scrupulously researched account, however, since its founding and through the rest of the century, the League was deeply complicit in the near-total liquidation of what remained of the redwood biome.

King’s history of the League took up fully a third of *The Ghost Forest*. He began by revealing that those most responsible for founding the League were racist enthusiasts of the pseudo-science of eugenics. Foremost among these was Madison Grant, a highly influential author of eugenics-advocating publications. He was also one of the only founders of the League who was sincerely concerned about wildlife populations and who wanted to save large proportions of the redwood forests. He alone among

scattered around, and I wondered how these folks, who looked like hippies, could get anything done. But they were highly effective. EPIC’s headquarters later relocated to Arcata; see www.wildcalifornia.org/about. EPIC also hosts an excellent timeline and photographs by Greg King that further demonstrate the synergies between grassroots activism and EPIC’s lawsuits in the Headwaters campaign; see www.wildcalifornia.org/headwaters-timeline-and-photo-gallery. National law-based environmental groups also got involved, but EPIC was the most important such group in northern California.

⁵ For another excellent source that complements King’s account, and goes into more details on the complicated machinations at the local, federal, and state levels, see Darren Frederick Speece, *Defending Giants: The Redwood Wars and the Transformation of American Environmental Politics* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017).

the founders, according to King, deserved the conservationist label, but consequently, the League's most powerful and well-placed leaders marginalized him because conserving the biological diversity of these forests was not their priority. They were elite industrialists who were cozy with timber-industry titans and shared commercial interests in the rapid development of the West, as well as a corresponding, rapacious capitalist ideology. Indeed, the attorney and timber titan Wiggington Creed created the League's power structure and priorities. As King documented, "few people in the world had more to lose" from redwood conservation and "more to gain by controlling such an organization" than did Creed (182). Creed and his industrialist comrades, not the conservationist Grant, shaped the League's priorities.

For his exposé, King scoured a dozen archives (including those of the League itself, which are held in a special collection at the University of California in Berkeley), read scores of public documents, lawsuits, published sources (newspapers, articles, and books), reviewed many recorded oral histories, and conducted nearly a dozen interviews. This research led him to conclude that, from its founding until at least the end of the 20th century, the League functioned as a timber industry front group, directing public love of these forests toward these objectives: (1) preserving redwood beauty strips along highways to disguise the destruction and thwart the public outrage and citizen activism that visible clear-cut logging precipitates, and (2) protecting small redwood reserves for camping (typically as state parks), thus securing the League's reputation as the champion of redwood forests.

Like most journalists, King did not provide detailed notes showing from where he learned everything or pulled every quoted statement. This will frustrate future historical researchers who wish to efficiently follow up on specific facts and assertions. Nevertheless, the care and scope of King's research is impressive and I found his narrative compelling.

After reading the book, I contacted the League to see whether anyone would comment on it. I received a one-page statement that ignored King's main arguments. It subtly suggested that any legitimate criticisms advanced by King were the result not of a conspiracy between industrial elites but limited to the first half of the twentieth century and due to priorities shaped during a pre-ecological time. The statement struck me as a response polished by a public relations (PR) firm. Indeed, it was sent to me by the League's PR firm, Landis Communications, which adorns its website with a photo of redwoods and a link to the work it has done for the League for more than ten years. Landis Communications thus used its work for the League to market its public relations successes to other California businesses.

In my view, what the League owes the public in the light of King's book, however, is not public relations spin but a forthright examination of its own history, and greater transparency about what it is advocating and prioritizing today with the millions of dollars that redwood lovers continue to shower on it. It is difficult to believe that the League has turned the corner to taking an ecosystem- and biodiversity-focused

approach to redwood forest conservation when it continues to celebrate its history as though it has always prioritized “saving the redwoods.”

No book can do everything. Too often, reviewers criticize authors for not doing what they would have had they written the work. When someone like King knows a terrain so intimately, there are always wrenching choices about what one must leave out. I will, however, comment about some of the things that I know King could have spent more time discussing and analyzing, the purpose of which is to alert the reader to some complications and nuances that remain out of view, or not fully explored, in King’s book.

King does not, for example, say much directly about *why* people fight so passionately for these trees. Perhaps he thinks it is obvious. There were, however, several places where he mentioned people’s experiences in these forests. Usually, however, he spoke obliquely for himself, referring to redwood forests as “sublime” (89, 178) and “numinous” (81), acknowledging that they evoke “reverence” (31). In his most personally-telling passages, King expressed animistic and pantheistic perceptions, as, for example, when he described his first entry into the activist-named (and later, logger-destroyed) “All Species Grove,” with these words:

Here stood a world unto itself, a seemingly forgotten Eden ... a living tableau of primordial life so ancient, so inherently divine that, whereas I could feel the life of the forest coursing through me, never have I found the words to adequately describe it. (64, 65)

Elsewhere, King described the experience he and others have had while spending extended time aloft in trees as a strategy to keep them from being logged, writing that such activism is transformative— it “awakens the senses ... Do it enough and the trees start talking to you” (86).

These passages reveal both a pantheistic sensibility (including the mystic’s truism that the experience of the divine is beyond words), and an animistic perception that the world is full of non-human persons to whom we owe respect and with whom we can sometimes even communicate. These are the types of experiences and perceptions that I have found animate the passions of many of the most ardent defenders of wild nature, politically radical and not.⁶

Not incidentally, the other two main characters in King’s book, Bari and Cherney, had their own mystical connections to nature. Bari embraced deep ecology, which for many is entangled with pantheistic and animistic perceptions. Even more telling, in my view, is an amusing song she regularly sang, a kind of self-parody about her

⁶ See especially Bron Taylor, “Earth and Nature-Based Spirituality (Part Two): From Deep Ecology and Bioregionalism to Scientific Paganism and the New Age,” *Religion* 31, no. 3 (2001): 225– 45; Bron Taylor, “Earth and Nature-based Spirituality (Part One): From Deep Ecology to Radical Environmentalism,” *Religion* 31, no. 2 (2001): 175– 93; Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

“holy trinity,” namely, “marijuana, magic mushrooms, and big old trees.” For his part, Cherney was involved with the avowedly pagan Church of All Worlds, as was Annwnfn, one of the intentional communities King mentioned that was deeply involved in forest activism.⁷ I wonder whether King did not explore in more depth the spiritualities that often animate radical environmental activists for fear that saying more about this might be counterproductive to his conservationist aims.

There was only one area in King’s interpretations about which I have serious reservations: his strongly-asserted conclusion, summarized previously, that actors within the FBI and timber industry were responsible for the bombing of Judi Bari. It is true that a jury found that the FBI and Oakland Police had violated Bari’s and Cherney’s rights. There is, moreover, circumstantial evidence, which King reviews in detail, that has led many activists to believe that the FBI and timber industry elites conspired to place the bomb. Although I am no expert on the case, I have paid enough attention to it to think that this explanation, which has become widely accepted within radical environmental subcultures, is far from established. Moreover, I think there are competing, and I think more plausible, explanations for the proven misdeeds by law enforcement, namely and especially, a combination of confirmation and selection bias (likely traceable to deeply-rooted, authoritarian, anti-activist law enforcement cultures).⁸ Such bias was fueled, as well, by the occasional sabotage (and pro-sabotage rhetoric more commonly voiced by radical environmentalists), which led law enforcement to surveil and infiltrate these groups, and arguably, after the bombing, led at least some of them to assume that Bari and Cherney were carrying the bomb that nearly killed them.

Such predispositions and assumptions could also explain law enforcement’s failure to search for other suspects, the chain of events that led to the false arrest lawsuit findings, and what may have been embarrassment-covering and career-protecting lies. King also elected to leave unmentioned that there have been other suspects, including Bari’s then ex-husband. Two other journalists seriously considered this possibility, as did some of Bari’s closest associates (one of whom I interviewed), who reported that Bari told them that she feared her ex-husband. There are, however, good reasons to doubt this possibility, which is why King did not mention it.⁹ And publicly, Bari consistently and categorically denied that her ex-husband had anything to do with the

⁷ I am aware of these things through my fieldwork and conversations with both Bari and Cherney during the 1990s. For a scholarly study of the Church of All Worlds see Carol Cusack, “Science Fiction as Scripture: Robert A. Heinlein’s *Stranger in a Strange Land* and the Church of All Worlds,” *Literature & Aesthetics* 19, no. 2 (2009): 72–91. For an overview by its founder see Oberon Zell, “The Church of All Worlds,” in *Fiction, Invention, and Hyper-reality: From Popular Culture to Religion*, ed. Pavol Kosnác (New York: Routledge, 2017), 261–75.

⁸ Activists, including King (340), typically in this regard refer to the FBI’s Counterintelligence Program known as COINTELPRO, which after its inception in 1956, regularly and sometimes murderously violated the rights of activists.

⁹ Personal communication, 24 July 2023. Another reason King did not mention it, he told me, was because attention to Bari’s ex-husband may have contributed to the failure of law enforcement authorities to conduct a serious search for the perpetrator or perpetrators.

bombing. Nevertheless, given the state of the evidence as I understand it, I think a less categorical conclusion than King articulated about who bombed Judi Bari would have been more judicious. It made me wonder whether there were other places in King's analysis in which he chose not to discuss, or did not notice, evidence at variance to his main arguments. To me, unfortunately, the identity of whoever was responsible for the bombing remains shrouded in mystery.

What is clear is this: *The Ghost Forest* is essential reading for anyone who wants to understand the near-total liquidation of one of North America's greatest ecological treasures, and how, against great odds, making many personal and professional sacrifices, and even risking injury and death, relatively small groups of activists conspired, and succeeded, in saving small but ecologically significant remnants of California's once-great redwood forests. These efforts also suggest that a love of these forests and the passions they arouse may lead future generations to rewild large proportions of these exceptionally special and globally important ecosystems.

The Ted K Archive

Bron Taylor's review of 'The Ghost Forest: Racists, Radicals, and Real Estate in the
California Redwoods'
2023

Journal for the Study of Radicalism 17(2) 199–207, 2023;
doi.org/10.14321/jstudradi.17.2.0199. <brontaylor.com>

www.thetedkarchive.com