

Book Review: Horizontal Yellow

Stephen C. Sturgeon

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HORIZONTAL YELLOW

Nature and History in the Near Southwest

Dan Flores

University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 1999. Illustrations, map, index, xiii + 312 pp. \$45.00 cloth, \$18.95 paper.

THE NATURAL WEST

Environmental History in the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains

Dan Flores

University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 2001. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, appendix, index, x + 285 pp. \$29.95.

The first question that comes to mind when examining Dan Flores's *Horizontal Yellow* (1999) and *The Natural West* (2001) is, Why would he publish two seemingly identical books within two years of each other? Both are collections of essays focusing on the environmental history of the interior West that draw heavily upon the author's personal experiences as a framework for discussing changes within the region. A closer examination, however, reveals that while these books do overlap to a degree, the central focus for each book is different.

Horizontal Yellow examines environmental history in the Near Southwest, a region that Flores defines as the drainage basin between the Arkansas River and the Rio Grande (basically New Mexico, Texas, and Oklahoma). The author argues that in addition to sharing a watershed this region has a shared history and landscape. Flores also states that this book is not intended to be a definitive history of the region but rather a meditation upon it.

The topics of the various essays in this book deal with diverse issues and locations: wolves, wild horses, desert, the Red River, and the Llano Estacado. The first chapter examines the history of wilderness in the region. Flores can readily see the change that humans have imposed upon the region, not just since the arrival of Europeans but also earlier, by Native Americans. (A theme throughout both books is Flores's repeated assertion that Indians do not fit the "never-changing nature" stereotype.) Another chapter examines the strange layering of different, and often clashing, cultures that has evolved in and around Santa Fe and Taos, New Mexico. While the chief focus of the chapter is Georgia O'Keeffe, Flores also talks about the history and culture of the Hispano villages, where the locals are not always thrilled when wealthy Anglos show up in order to drop out.

Horizontal Yellow is an interesting, if occasionally odd book (another chapter is a fictional account of an expedition on the Red River) that immerses the reader in a particular place. Perhaps the one weakness of the book is that the region claims to write about and the actual region he discusses are not the same. The real focus of this book is western Texas with brief forays into the northern part of the state and the eastern half of New Mexico. This does not necessarily represent a failure on the part

of Flores, rather that the framework he created is too large for the picture he is trying to paint.

The canvas for *The Natural West* is, by comparison, even bigger. Here Flores seeks to view the entire Great Plains and Rocky Mountains as part of a larger unit, one offering interesting contrasts between the private land ownership and economic decline of the Plains and the public land ownership and apparent growth of the Rockies. Again, as with *Horizontal Yellow*, Flores is quick to state that this book is not intended to be a full-scale environmental history of the region but rather a rumination on it.

The book is a collection of essays, most of which have been published before in different versions. Again, the topics are quite diverse: bison, grizzlies, Utah, restoration efforts, among others. Perhaps the best-known piece in the book is a revised essay discussing bioregionalism as a way of defining a place, which first appeared in *Environmental History* in 1994.

Certain themes repeat themselves throughout this book: Flores's admiration for Walter Prescott Webb (to whom the book is dedicated) and the author's rejection of the notion that there was a lost "golden age" for the environment (although he definitely is critical of the current era). Ultimately, though, Flores's goal to establish a link between the histories of the plains and mountains remains an elusive one. However, this outcome appears to have more to do with the limitations of essay collections than with the merit of the idea itself.

Both of these books are an interesting mixture of history, biology, anthropology, autobiography, and ecstasy. Of the two, *The Natural West* has a more academic feel, the tone a historian would use when she or he is on the clock. *Horizontal Yellow* is more like the type of discussion that takes place when settling into the bar for a long evening of conversation. *Horizontal Yellow* also gives the reader more of a sense of place and even has an autobiographical narrative arc: the essays begin when Flores first ventured into West Texas and end poignantly when he leaves the region twenty years later. Both books, however, provide ample reflections on the past, present, and future of the interior West.

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