

Turner, James Morton. *The Promise of Wilderness: American Environmental Politics since 1964*. Seattle: U of Washington P, 2012. Print.

Today in America, political debates that center on the environment (or lack thereof, as the “climate change silence” during the Presidential debates illustrates) are trending toward a number of complex issues: individual and corporate carbon footprints, melting polar icecaps and rising ocean levels, energy and fuel sources, and genetically-modified and pesticide-laced foods. Disputes over the preservation of wilderness areas are fewer now, with the possible exception of the controversy over the Keystone Pipeline. Set to extend from Canada all the way through the middle of the Western United States, the Pipeline has stirred controversy over wilderness and undeveloped spaces and its impact on resources, particularly water. Into this atmosphere, James Morton Turner published *The Promise of Wilderness: American Environmental Politics since 1964*, his comprehensive and detailed history of the Wilderness Society and its branch organizations (The Sierra Club, Earth First!, and the Pew Charitable Trust, amongst others), taking readers back to a time when one of the most important debates centered on the preservation of “wilderness” areas.

One of Turner’s main contentions, then, is how the definition of wilderness has changed and evolved over the past few decades. According to a YouTube video put out by the University of Washington’s press, Turner took his inspiration for this history when he was on a visit to West Virginia’s Dolly Sods Wilderness Area. Turner states he went there “looking for wilderness” but found instead the influence of human use all over the area. Consequently, the way wilderness gets defined in 20th-century America is bound up in human interference. Similar to Roderick Nash’s 1967 study *Wilderness and the American Mind*, Turner’s work establishes the meaning of wilderness in the latter half of 20th-century America: it is first a “place,” Turner explains, that the 1964 Wilderness Act set up as in need of protection from destructive human forces; next, it is a fraught concept within the American imagination that is “essential to the creation and renewal of America’s democratic institutions”; and it is a “political process” that unites and divides various groups of people—politicians, citizens, and activists—who have united with and differed from each other in an effort to establish the parameters of land use and the protection for their respective interests (4, 5). Through the course of the book, Turner effectively merges these three features to present a comprehensive and balanced narrative of the people and politics that fostered the evolution of the concept of the American wilderness.

Because this is a book about wilderness and politics, a large portion of Turner’s work is dedicated to the evolution of thought that first enabled the Wilderness Act’s passage. The choice to begin his study in 1964 is a significant and appropriate one for a number of reasons: many environmentalists claim 1964 as the watershed year that the contemporary environmental movement began not just because of the passage of the Wilderness Act but also because of the publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*; Turner argues that the Wilderness Act and the debate surrounding it captured the political and social protests of the 60s; and the protection and iteration of wilderness areas was at this point turned over to federal land agencies and Congress, which highlights the relevance and prescience of future environmental legislation.

The narrative Turner tells is a balanced, multilateral story of citizens and politicians approaching the issue of environmental preservation from multiple sides. Turner is most effective when he presents the tangible stories of places and the people tied to them, illustrating how policy and organizations are truly made by the people who support and animate them. A good illustration of this narrative is found in Chapter Three, “The Popular Politics of Wilderness.” Opening with Ted Kaczynski’s (the future Unabomber) letter complaining about the Wilderness Society’s scope and ending with the introduction of Earth First! and the first Earth Day, the chapter covers the multiple manners in which the idea of nature was adopted and utilized by organizations. Turner denotes the “tensions between the ideological and

pragmatic approaches to wilderness” in this chapter through the Sierra Club’s vision during the late-60s and early-70s. From the Wilderness Classification Committee, which challenged the Wilderness Society’s discursive domain over “wilderness,” to Brock Evans’s personal crusade to get the Alpine Lakes Region designated a wilderness area to Evans’s alliance with Stewart Brandborg of the Wilderness Society to protect areas in the Eastern United States, Turner outlines the tangible results of these organization’s goals. With the “new recreation ethic” of the sport of backpacking and the opening up of the science of ecology first proposed by Barry Commoner, Turner locates the solid embodiment of the “promise of the wilderness” both at the personal and political level. This book is for those seeking a thorough history of the various wilderness and resources advocacy groups in America and the people who championed and challenged them. Turner provides a useful guide to understanding that the way we think about land and its uses is still a relevant and contentious concern.

—*Jill E. Anderson, Tennessee State University*