Reclaiming the Native Home of Hope: Community, Ecology, and the American West ed. by Robert Keiter (review)

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Reclaiming the Native Home of Hope: Community, Ecology, and the American West.
Edited by Robert Keiter.
Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1998. 178 pages, $17.95.

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Wallace Stegner saw the American West as a touchstone for thinking about the kind of society we should desire. Now, Stegner himself has become the touchstone for these thoughts. The University of Utah has offered up a book based on the first two symposia held at the College of Law's Wallace Stegner Center for Land, Resources and the Environment. Edited by Utah law professor Robert Keiter and titled after one of Stegner's best-known phrases, *Reclaiming the Native Home of Hope* offers a number of different perspectives: law, federal land management, personal experience, history, and economics, to name a few. As in any book of essays, some are stronger than others, but collectively they offer a somewhat diverse perspective on the American West and how we might want to think about it.

As a professor of political science, I approach this book with my own set of biases. As someone working, writing, and "professing" in the area of federal land policy, I often struggle with what might be termed the "politics of how to get there." That is, there are many wonderful essays both here and elsewhere on the West and its people and places, but oftentimes the hard work of creating the politics and then the solutions which realize Stegner's "native home of hope" is not discussed. Or if it is, clichés and arrogance trivialize the issue.

Consider two essays in this book, both about Utah's Colorado Plateau. Brad Barber and Aaron Clark's "Reconciling Environmental Preservation and Economic Sustainability on Utah's Colorado Plateau: The State's Perspective" reminds us of one of the truths of land policy: "On the other side of the wilderness debate are those who seem to have limited empathy of the concerns of rural Utahans" (99–100). But the essay does not turn into a "woe is us in the rural West" complaint. Rather, it discusses legislation like the rural resettlement law passed in Utah whose intent is "to create designations, modeled after existing enterprise zones, which target incentives toward Utah businesses. . . . These zones will offer incentives to Utah businesses that expand or relocate . . . to qualifying rural locations" (102–3). The authors later suggest that such new industries not as affected by land preservation policies will perhaps grow into the conviction that preservation might be in their best interest.

Contrast this approach to that of Charles Wilkinson's "Filling up the Eye and Overflowing the Soul: Sustainability on Utah's Colorado Plateau." Wilkinson writes with the eye of a visitor who doesn't see much on the ground. With the voice of a comfortable Boulder law professor, he urges that

"we should not even repair rickety old bridges, not even the one over the San Juan River at Mexican Hat" (96). This tradition of contempt for towns like Mexican Hat is a growing one. I recall similar arguments made during the creation of Glen Canyon National Recreation Area. Certain environmentalist proponents of the area argued that a road to the Maze Overlook was a virtue of the area and should be there for people who could not hike into the Maze. Once the area was under the National Park Service management, these same people urged that the road be closed because the area had suddenly become "sacred." Of course, roads to wilderness trailheads should remain open. Wilkinson is usually worth reading, but he disappoints us here.

There are other essays that help triangulate the West. Doug Honnold, in "Wolves, Bears, and the Spirit of the Wild: Asking the Right Questions," tells the wonderful story of the grizzly bear and the plant sweet cicely. For many years biologists had found that bears did not eat this plant. Then, in the eleventh year of their study, bears all over the Yellowstone region were eating sweet cicely. Why? They don't know. There is much we don't know about these great animals. Honnold's mystery tantalizes.

Other essays provoke and teach. Holly Doramus offers a thoughtful essay on private property and public purposes titled "Private Property Interests, Wildlife Restoration, and Competing Visions of a Western Eden." As she says,

> There is a great deal of sympathy in the political community for each of the competing visions of paradise: for the rugged individualist triumphing over nature on the one hand, and for nature as an increasingly essential wild counterpoint to civilization on the other. The result is a series of compromises through which neither vision of paradise will be fully achieved, but perhaps the two can coexist. (84)

Can we celebrate a diversity of value as we celebrate a diversity of life? Have we learned to think this way? Doramus suggests we can, but Duncan Patten suggests no. In "Restoration as the Order of the Twenty-First Century: An Ecologist's Perspective," he moves in the other direction. First, he trumpets that ecologists are ideal to "advocate on issues concerning the loss of degradation of ecosystems, animal or plant populations, or even whole watersheds" (73). It is not much of a leap from this to "thus, human attitudes and actions must be altered in order to create sustainable systems and restore ecosystems to near-pristine conditions" (76). Altered by whom? Probably the very ecologists who are out doing advocacy science.

There is such danger here. More and more, the American public has grown suspicious of expertise, of advocacy masking as science: know where you want to go in policy and find the science to get you there. Everything causes cancer. Fire is bad. Trust us; we know best. We must educate the

ignorant. Doesn't it seem more likely that science is a necessary but insufficient condition for the making of our public policies?

As an antidote to the partisan and tired harangues in some of these essays, read the pieces by Terry Tempest Williams, Stephen Trimble, William Kittredge, and Teresa Jordan. They are softer and do not seek your conversion or your solemn agreement. Instead they offer landscapes based on individual perspectives and experiences had out west, or—in Kittredge's case—the caves and battlefields of France.

In sum, I enjoyed this book of essays. I think it would work well in the type of course that holds as its premise Stegner's belief: "A place is nothing in itself. It has no meaning, it can hardly be said to exist except in terms of human perception, use, and response." There are many visions of the greater West, and this book helps us go there.

A John Graves Reader. By John Graves.
Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996. 338 pages, $34.95/$15.95.

Reviewed by **Bob Frye**
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Sir Francis Bacon long ago wrote that some books are to be tasted, some to be swallowed, and a very few to be savored. *A John Graves Reader* is a book to be savored. The genuinely modest but unerringly honest author, John Graves, is a gifted storyteller, an excellent nature writer, a rigorously careful historian of rivers and humankind who, nevertheless, realizes the insights which thoughtful, well-crafted fiction may provide.

"The hard thing is to get *slowed down*," John Graves writes in *Goodbye to a River* (1960)—the "finest piece of Texas writing ever done," as A. C. Greene calls it. With Loren Eiseley–like quiet humility, Annie Dillard–like particularity, and occasional Faulknerian power, Graves ponders, puzzles out, observes, describes, narrates, and vividly, powerfully dramatizes.

Graves' anthology has six sections. The first one, "Looking Back," is an autobiographical overview. The second, "Land," includes a chapter on the Old Fart from *Hard Scrabble*; "Cowboy . . . ," which is an uncommonly thoughtful piece on how the "cowboy way of being" (74) actually had "cultural durability" (77) through World War II; "A Loser," from *Limestone Ledge*, which is about a farm auction, "a melancholy event . . . aromatic with defeat" (99); and another excerpt from *Hard Scrabble* lauding an older way of life on demanding soil, with "natural and rural basics" which may provide "at least a start toward comprehending adult social and professional life" (107). The third section is "Texas Past," with two powerfully poignant, award-winning short stories, followed by section four, "Side Roads," which includes chapter ten from Graves' best-known work, *Goodbye to a River*. In section five, "Some Friends," Graves sketches four human friends and a canine, Blue, before ending his anthology in section six, entitled