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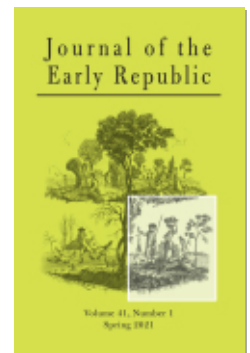
Laid Waste!: The Culture of Exploitation in Early America by
John Lauritz Larson (review)

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structure. Indeed, U.S. leaders understood Negro Fort and its residents to be so threatening to the institution of slavery that they risked international conflict by sending troops to Spanish territory to wage pre-emptive warfare. The point of the fort, from its founding, was to be an antislavery outpost. Grappling with the radical implications of Negro Fort and its place in the Gulf South would have made this good book that much better.

ADAM PRATT is an associate professor of history at the University of Scranton. His book, *Toward Cherokee Removal: Land, Violence, and the White Man's Chance*, will be published with University of Georgia Press.

Laid Waste!: The Culture of Exploitation in Early America. By John Lauritz Larson. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020. Pp. 312. Cloth, \$39.95.)

Reviewed by Camden Burd

The search for the origins of America's particularly destructive relationship with the natural world has been the underlying motive for numerous environmental historians. After several decades of scholarship, there is still no singular consensus. Some historians have pointed to the industrial revolution as the origin of environmental decline.¹ Others have argued that innovations in transportation served a catalyst in the larger commodification of nature.² One historian argued that early American settlers exhibited a destructive mastery over the natural world in order to overcome fear and hardship of an overly abundant natural world.³ More recently, scholars have turned their attention to the political and cultural aspects of the American capitalist system in order to explain the nation's toxic track record with nature.⁴ Despite the countless studies, the central

1. Theodore Steinberg, *Nature Incorporated: Industrialization and the Waters of New England* (Amherst, MA, 1994).

2. William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York, 1992); Carol Sheriff, *The Artificial River: The Erie Canal and the Paradox of Progress, 1817-1862* (New York, 1996).

3. Alan Taylor, "Wasty Ways": Stories of American Settlement," *Environmental History* 3, no. 3 (1998), 291-310.

4. Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York, 2015); Emily Pawley, *The Nature of the Future: Agriculture, Science, and Capitalism in the Antebellum North* (Chicago, 2020).

question of American environmental history still remains a motivating force of historical investigation.

Adding to the bedrock of historical research, John Lauritz Larson offers *Laid Waste!: The Culture of Exploitation in Early America*. This sweeping work does not refute the nuances of earlier contributions. Rather, Larson finds a common thread among the economic, political, and technological developments of the nineteenth century. He concludes that Americans by the late nineteenth century fully embraced a culture of exploitation. “In this culture of exploitation, the resources of nature, first seen as gifts from God, became mere commodities for industry, while greed, once prescribed as sin, was naturalized and elevated to a virtue” (1). For Larson, the culture of exploitation was both immersive and multifaceted.

America’s penchant for exploitation did not develop from a single person or event. Rather, it sprouted from concurrent developments in ideas of commerce, religion, society, science, and race from the colonial period through the nineteenth century. Each chapter reveals one element of the transformation. “Abundance” and “Achievement” follow colonists’ reactions to nature. First considered a threat by the colonists, the natural world was soon seen as an opportunity. Their survival—at the expense of Native Americans—transformed ideas of nature, colonists’ place in it, and their agency to manipulate it to their ends. “Liberation” points to the rhetoric of American independence as a powerful force in creating a new language of libertarianism. This language tended to favor “freedom *from* government” rather than “freedom to govern well” (99). The following chapters—“Inventory,” “Improvement,” and “Destiny”—historicize a host of developments from pro-capitalist government polices to debates regarding the expansion of slavery; from the base desires of westward expansion to the romantic fictions of Manifest Destiny; and from the glorification of the American entrepreneur to the American obsession with natural “improvements.” As Larson sees it, by the time industrialization had taken hold in the decades after the Civil War, “the culture of exploitation had come of age” (178). Throughout *Laid Waste!* Larson tracks an American populace enabled by the language of liberty, obsessed with the market, and encouraged by the promises of progress and improvement.

The catastrophic environmental exploitation that Americans faced at the dawn of the twentieth century could have been avoided had Americans only listened to the skeptics and romantics who grew increasingly

uncomfortable with the rampant materialism, commercialism, and techno-optimism of the era. In the final chapter “Prophecy,” Larson examines Emerson, Thoreau, Muir, Marsh, and Roosevelt to remind readers there were Americans who had hoped to steer society off its wasteful track. Whereas Emerson, Thoreau, and Muir challenged individuals to rethink their relationship to the natural world, Marsh and Roosevelt sought to harness the power of government to enact change. All of them met their critics. The romantics were labeled kooks, elitists, or effeminate—“a stinging rebuke in the masculine, aggressive world of ruthless enterprise and cutthroat competition” (207). With the creation of the United State Forest Service and the passage of the Antiquities Act, the government reformers momentarily bucked their devotion to economic liberalism. Regardless of their motivations or successes, Larson groups these reformers together to remind the reader that along the way some Americans tried to shake the culture of exploitation.

Though the monograph’s topic is historical, the author’s lesson is unquestionably modern. Larson notes that colleagues of his read an early draft of *Laid Waste!* and labeled it “a classic jeremiad” (248). I am inclined to agree. Larson is decidedly damning towards those individuals both historical and modern who epitomize the culture of exploitation. Americans who valued native land over Indigenous people, those who would enslave Blacks and exploit industrial workers, and those who would still argue to “trust the market” when facing unprecedented ecological crises do not receive an ounce of sympathy or objective treatment from Larson. They were, and are, exploiters. This note should not be seen as a critique. Rather, the powerful prose and clear terms in which Larson addresses the readers is a refreshing reminder that historians do, and should, explore the past with one foot in the present. There may be few better books to read or assign for 2020—a year that has forced Americans to reckon with the nation’s long-held culture of exploitation.

CAMDEN BURD is an assistant professor in the Department of History at Eastern Illinois University. His work on American environmental history has appeared in *The Michigan Historical Review* and edited collections including *The Conservative Heartland: A Political History of the Postwar American Midwest*, ed. Jon K. Lauck and Catherine McNicol Stock (Lawrence, KS, 2020). He is currently researching the environmental influence of plant nurseries in nineteenth-century America.