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Arthur Carhart: Wilderness Prophet (review)

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Yet Fife also produces Pentecostal Christians, those who belong to the Pilgrim Holiness Lighthouse church, above all the aptly named “Maggy’s” who drive Elise, in search of family, to the edge of anorexic starvation and mental illness. Those familiar with Barnes’s own painful brush with backwoods Christian fundamentalism in *In the Wilderness* (1996) will recognize the accurate portraiture. Fife also contains the Clearwater Hospital Foundation, the mental hospital where Lucas Jainchill, an abused boy, ends up meeting Elise. Jainchill’s story of chronic and severe bodily punishment at the hands of a truly sadistic father proves much darker than Manny’s earlier tale of abandonment. This chilling perversion of fatherhood suggests that for every Dr. K, there are several like Lucas’s father living on the edges of other Fifes. In such a spot, as Lucas advises three younger teenage boys, “it sometimes seemed to Lucas that every man’s life was defined by violence done and received” (248).

A Country Called Home closes, though, with the young couple (Elise and Lucas) having a chance at love and a normal life. That chance derives in large part from their being insiders, at home in their river canyon. Both emerge from wrecked marriages, however, and the reader quits Barnes’s epilogue with the sense that the young couple faces uphill battles, that stable, warm fathers are in short supply, and that only father surrogates (Dr. K, Manny) or resilient town clerks facilitate arrival at a home built of love.

Arthur Carhart: Wilderness Prophet.

By Tom Wolf.

Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2008. 294 pages, \$34.95.

Reviewed by David N. Cremean

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Beyond the few best-known earlier American “environmentalists”—Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, John Burroughs, Teddy Roosevelt, Mary Austin, Zane Grey, Aldo Leopold, Mardy and Olaus Murie, Rachel Carson—few receive much attention. Tom Wolf’s *Arthur Carhart: Wilderness Prophet* is an attempt to add another bust to the Wilderness Pantheon or at least sandblast down to where it can be rediscovered and restored, but Wolf’s writing merely goes through the motions. Consequently, he proves unable to do the needed work.

Arthur Carhart wore many hats, including the endearing one he sports as a young man on the front cover. But primarily he was a landscape architect and an author of numerous writings, ranging in genre from articles to novels to topical volumes to guidebooks. However, despite

Wolf's claims to the contrary, excerpts from Carhart's writings unveil little evidence that he was anything more than a capable but mediocre writer. The samples Wolf presents betray few or no signs of distinctive or memorable content, style, or voice.

Wolf's own style proves serviceable if bland, his insights under- if not undeveloped. But he and the University Press of Colorado have done a nice job of packaging the book, including solid, almost perfect copyediting, all too rare at the present. (Though in a note, Donald Worster morphs into "David" Worster [77], and "[sic]" is missing in action after Carhart incorrectly writes "Gallipois" instead of "Gallipolis" [238].) I approached the book eagerly, particularly because Wolf, echoing his subject, claims early on that Carhart was an environmental "heretic" (3, 4). Allowing more space for dissent and heresy within its ranks is essential to environmentalism's survival in any meaningful form.

Ahead of his time overall in at least one matter, Carhart opposed 1964's Wilderness Act because, as Wolf frequently refrains, he believed humans were and should be part of "nature" and "wilderness," not separate from them. He also fought what he frequently termed the "burocracy" [sic] almost every step of the way, but in Wolf's paws, he seems undeserving of the monikers "non-conformist," "maverick," or "prophet": he penned guidebooks, oversaw a company that created country clubs and other developments, and in general earned his keep via developing and commodifying nature, that is, materializing it, despite frequently bemoaning the exponential growth of materialism in the United States. He and Wolf seem unaware of this as well as the way his penchant for "intensive management" of wilderness (possibly the most insidious "burocracy") produces numerous logical conundrums. His claim that "a lot of so-called conservation is bunk" nonetheless remains worthy of mantra-hood today (8).

For the most part, Wolf has written an individual's history rather than a biography worthy of the term. Missing is the real sense of analysis, evaluation, and informed conjecture that makes a biography and its subject breathe. Also lacking, at least in this book, is much evidence that Wolf possesses the instinct to root through the fur to get not only to the flesh and blood but also to the giblets, the interesting tidbits so critical to history sweeping or personal. A Republican like many early environmentalists, Carhart possessed strong democratic sensibilities, and they carried over into his philosophies of conservation, land use, and the availability of land to the common man. But as a personality, Carhart comes across more like John McPhee's dour archdruid, David Brower, than like his titanic Floyd Dominy.

Perhaps most egregiously, Wolf manages to do little or nothing to establish his book's subtitle: with few exceptions, it fails to reveal a Carhart

who called his society to account, a prophet's main responsibility. Wolf's Carhart seems a rugged individualist perhaps, but rarely a very interesting individual. Even intriguing information about Carhart—his mystical experience at Trapper's Lake, Colorado, or his battles with the Forest Service—come across like the rest of the book: frequently vague and only dryly factual, prone to undeveloped claims, valuable mainly as a record all too often "bureaucratic" in style and substance. The result is neither a convincing, let alone definitive, biography, nor a complete waste of a book, though it tracks closer to the latter.

Searching for Tamsen Donner.

By Gabrielle Burton.

Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009. 328 pages, \$26.95.

Reviewed by Diane Bush

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In the cultural cosmology that has grown up around the Donner Party, the universe revolves around Tamsen Donner. The story of the spunky schoolteacher who chose to stay in the mountains with her dying husband, George, rather than walk to safety with her young daughters and who may have been murdered and cannibalized has reached mythological status. Multiple novels and poems attest to her role as legendary heroine and saint. Gabrielle Burton, a Tamsen Donner devotee and writer, whose projects include a film and an award-winning novel, details her own obsession with the woman who suffered the loss of her daughter through miscarriage and the death of her first husband and her son from influenza only to die in the Sierra Nevada Mountains in winter 1847. In *Searching for Tamsen Donner*, Burton invites us on a series of road trips with her husband and five bonneted daughters to discover the soul of the woman who "became entwined, warp and woof, with [her] struggle" to balance being a woman, a mother, and a writer (12).

A cryptic comment by writer William Lederer at the Vermont Bread Loaf Writer's Conference in 1972 sparks Burton's ongoing interest in the woman who, for many, embodied the myth of "womanhood at its finest" (16). As a metaphor for Burton's own fear of "emotional cannibalism," Tamsen Donner "was almost tabula rasa. I could reject all the virtues men had written on her, and search for her. I could write myself on her, make her up, give myself permission to be adventurous. She was a blank page I could write my own story on" (232, 69).

Scholars will appreciate Burton's inclusion of all seventeen extant Tamsen Donner letters, but for general readers, she offers a self-described