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Industrial Cowboys: Miller & Lux and the Transformation of
the Far West, 1850-1920 (review)

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David Igler. *Industrial Cowboys: Miller & Lux and the Transformation of the Far West, 1850–1920*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001. xiv + 267 pp. ISBN 0-520-22658-5, \$37.50.

Made famous by the 1881–1886 battle (*Lux v. Miller*) that ultimately upheld their riparian rights over James Haggin’s prior appropriation of California’s Kern River, Henry Miller and Charles Lux consolidated more than 1.25 million acres into a family-owned corporate monopoly of land and water for resource extraction and market production. By 1900 their cattle, irrigation, land reclamation, and meat-packing empire ranked among the largest U.S. industrial enterprises. In California’s environmental and labor histories, Miller and Lux frequently appear as predatory capitalists from central casting. They have not received the same attention, however, in histories of American industrialization. Indeed, Walter Licht’s synthesis (*Industrializing America*, 1995) renders both agriculture and the trans-Mississippi West largely superfluous to the social and economic processes that transformed the nineteenth-century United States.

Joining a growing effort to include regions and industries neglected by eastern, manufacturing-based research agendas, David Igler makes a convincing argument that Miller and Lux, San Francisco, and the Far West played an integral role in the nation’s industrial transformation. This study also enhances our understanding of the ways in which industrial capitalists acquired wealth and power during the period, including entrepreneurs associated with intricate urban networks, and of government officials anxious to nurture private ownership of the public domain for industrial expansion.

Tracing the ascent of his title characters from German immigrant butchers to the ranks of the industrial elite, Igler demonstrates that Miller and Lux profited because they learned to exploit American cultural assumptions about wealth creation, to adapt to immediate needs, and to transform their holdings into a system of livestock production integrated backward into cattle and grassland purchases for grazing and forward into marketing meat products for urban consumption. Basing his work on extensive research, Igler has probed surviving Miller & Lux business records, state agency reports, oral histories, and descriptions provided by newspaper accounts, boosters, tourists, and the firm’s employees, as well as a wide range of historical debates.

San Francisco plays a central role as the nexus where business-people and politicians “deliberately” planned one of a series of urban-rural networks for American expansion (p. 36). Examining the

networks created there, Igler argues that neither Donald Worster's "hydraulic society" (*Rivers of Empire*, 1985) nor William Cronon's "mercantile system" (*Nature's Metropolis*, 1991) captures the complexity of the processes that shaped the Far West. Building on the works of William Deverell (*Railroad Crossing*, 1994) and other historians who have examined the reciprocal influence of business and politics during the nineteenth century, Igler argues that Miller and Lux understood the consensus on private property rights that prevailed throughout the nation, and learned how to seize their "rights" where wealth and power circulated: in the social networks that would help them navigate San Francisco's land acquisition system and financial syndicates. Both men thus married into an elite San Francisco family, joined the inside circle of business leaders and politicians, and received assistance from surveyors, land assessors, sheriffs, and other government agents, all of whom helped them gobble up land and water rights along San Francisco's main transportation corridors. They also capitalized on individual talents and proclivities. Miller, the man in the field, oversaw the firm's land operations, while Lux brokered deals and hobnobbed with the city's elite.

Always aware of nature's unpredictability, Miller and Lux also responded to immediate environmental crises and labor shortages (rather than having the "grand plan" often attributed to them). Their responses included acquiring the region's largest irrigation enterprise, reclaiming more land, segmenting labor along racial and ethnic lines to create a self-replacing work force, and creating innovations such as the "Dirty Plate Route": feeding scraps to the wandering unemployed to guard against property damage, quell labor strife, and guarantee a "floating army" of laborers (p. 145). These tactics provided the context for the clash with Haggin. At no time, however, did that confrontation involve alternatives to private property rights and nature; it took place within a society of reclaimers anxious to develop the region for American agribusiness.

In the end *Industrial Cowboys* provides a cautionary tale about research methodologies. Rummaging through the evidence, rather than following a theoretical framework, Igler found that Miller and Lux never engaged in felonious maneuvers, at least not in strict legal terms. He seems somewhat uncomfortable with this conclusion, and he provides various scenarios for the firm's decline after 1900 rather than pushing his argument to its logical conclusion: after Lux's death in 1887, perhaps Miller simply lacked the acuity to broker new deals in the industrial Far West. Other firms prospered mightily on Igler's "ideology of accumulation" (p. 36) and resource extraction, despite the "new" rules framed by some Progressives and conservationists.

This deeply textured narrative of power, adaptation, and human agency stands as a welcome, and long overdue, contribution to the history of American industrialism.

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Lee Scamehorn. *High Altitude Energy: A History of Fossil Fuels in Colorado*. Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2002. xvi +232 pp. ISBN 0-87081-661-6, \$27.50.

High Altitude Energy explores the history of natural resource extraction in Colorado from 1860 to the present. The contexts for the book are the energy crises of the 1970s: Lee Scamehorn undertook this well-researched study in order to understand them. The work falls somewhat short, however, in using its narrative to explain why America has been faced with recurring challenges to meet its energy needs. Rather, it delivers a focused and largely descriptive account of the development of Colorado's mineral resources that in many respects will serve as an encyclopedia of one state's modern energy development.

The organization of the book privileges description over analysis. Arranged both topically (by natural resource) and chronologically, the first four chapters treat coal, coke, crude oil, and natural gas production, respectively, from the late nineteenth century to 1930. The next three address coal, petroleum, and natural gas, in turn, during the period from 1930 to the onset of the energy crisis in 1973. A separate chapter explains efforts related to the production of synthetic fuels, from 1917 to 1973. The penultimate chapter considers all forms of natural resource extraction during the period of energy crisis, 1973–1985. The conclusion deals with recent developments. In the last three chapters, which provide much more context in terms of national energy development and policy trends than the earlier ones, Scamehorn focuses on the links between Colorado energy development and the exogenous national and international factors that shape it. Still, *High Altitude Energy* does not effectively use state and local history to shed light on critical socioeconomic and natural environmental impacts and policy issues. Rather, the author simply sets the narrative in the context of national and international developments. Thus the description of developments at the state level provides little additional insight into why America experienced the energy crises of the 1970s.