River Flowing From The Sunrise

Aton, James M

Published by Utah State University Press

Aton, James M.
River Flowing From The Sunrise: An Environmental History of the Lower San Juan.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/9418.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/9418

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=204136
St. John the Divine ended his Book of Revelation with “a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb.” On either side of that river grew the tree of life, bearing all manner of fruits every month of the year and shiny green leaves that could heal all the nations. He would not have liked the San Juan, the river of the American Southwest named by Spanish missionaries in his honor. Only cottonwood and tamarisk trees grow along its banks. Its water is dark with silt and has been polluted by oil. It flows not from a heavenly throne but from the state of Colorado, where gold miners have sought wealth more than spirituality. Native Americans, to be sure, have deeply religious feelings about this river. So do Mormon settlers in river towns like Bluff. But they have not lived together in peace; on the contrary, this river has experienced bitter conflict, fierce competition for its scarce resources, and not a few deaths. In other words, it has been a real river, not some phantasm in a dream, and how much more interesting that fact makes it.

James Aton and Robert McPherson have given us a splendid history of this harshly beautiful place. Heretofore it has been neglected by historians and other scholars, though they have written a surprising number of books and articles on the various peoples, the colorful individuals, who have passed along the river. Aton and McPherson have drawn on that literature extensively, while adding prodigious archival research of their own. But they have done more than sit in a library turning over brittle pages from the past. They have experienced this river firsthand. And they have completely reconceptualized the place and its history so that the whole stands forth, with a new clarity and integrity that it has not had before. They have done this by putting the river at the center of the story and then watching the civilizations come and go. The San Juan becomes the main character; it is no longer merely incidental to human endeavors.

We call this radical new perspective environmental history. It begins with the premise that the natural and human worlds are not totally separate but intertwined and interdependent. What nature does affects human beings in the most profound way; vice versa, what people do can influence the patterns and processes of nature profoundly, especially in the modern period, when technology gives us so much more power than we have ever had before. Often that impact has been felt not only by other species who share the place but also, through the intricacies of ecological feedback, by human communities as well. Because early Clovis hunters, the first people to leave their mark on the place, may have exterminated the local population of Columbian mammoths, both hunters and hunted suffered. Later, when the Navajos acquired sheep from the Spanish, they overgrazed the scanty vegetation and created an environmental disaster. The whites who crowded in with their large cattle herds during the late nineteenth century have followed an age-old pattern of land exploitation that likewise has brought serious economic and social problems. If this phenomenon of interdependence has been hard for people to learn, it has seldom entered the apprehension of historians—until the rise of environmental history, so well exemplified in this book.

Most dramatically, the river has been a powerful force over time. Study the canyon walls
it has carved through ancient limestone, and you cannot miss that power of running water. What the river has done to the hard materiality of rock it has also done to the tangible dreams of human society: flooded, eroded, and washed them away. Although the federal Bureau of Reclamation has constructed Navajo Dam to control flooding, any historian of long view knows that such control is bound to be imperfect and temporary. Even the mighty Glen Canyon Dam downstream, just below the old confluence of the San Juan and Colorado Rivers, must one day become a man-made waterfall and its reservoir a vast plain of alluvial mud drying in the sun.

The history of the San Juan River stretches back millions of years, while the verified history of human beings dates only to between eleven and twelve thousand years ago and that of Euro-Americans only to 1765, when Juan Maria Antonio de Rivera came looking for the source of a silver ingot. From the perspective of the environmental historian, what happened can be divided into periods called Pleistocene, Anasazi, Ute, or American; these periods vary in length, but they all form one history.

Aton and McPherson are too wise to reduce that history to an oversimplified chronicle of progress or decline. Their perspective is more cyclical and multiple. The San Juan and its peoples pass through cycles of development in which expansion is regularly followed by stasis, even depopulation. And what looks like a time of progress to the whites may look like decline to the Utes or Navajos. Even now, as the authors show in the later chapters, change is coming to the river and its watershed. The old extractive economy created by the whites, which included lumbering, mining, and ranching, is failing, and its place is being taken by urban refugees looking for solitude and white-water rafting enthusiasts lining up like customers at an amusement park. In these changes lie many new problems as well as possible solutions to older ones. Neither a shallow optimism nor a shallow pessimism is supported by the always-tangled history of this place.

It is time that we got to know this river a little better. For too long it has been ignored as a mere tributary of the much larger and more celebrated Colorado, with its Grand Canyon and famous artists and explorers. Yet the San Juan has an amazing story to tell, too. Louis L’Amour found inspiration (and a home) here, and so has Tony Hillerman. But neither of them is a historian, working carefully through the records to tell the underlying story of this place. Aton and McPherson have brought together impressive talent, insight, perspective, and wisdom to write the environmental history of one of the most spectacular parts of the American continent. They are river guides in the fullest and best sense: boatmen who inspire the imagination and inform the mind as well as safely navigate the rapids.
Writing an environmental history is much like setting afloat for a trip on the river. Indeed this project began as we sat beside the San Juan under the yellow cottonwood leaves of fall, savoring peanut butter and jam sandwiches. It has taken a long time and many “miles” since that afternoon to bring us to this point in the journey. As we look back at the distance traveled and events along the way, there are a number of people and institutions that deserve thanks and recognition for making the entire tour possible.

Traditionally, the acknowledgments section in a book is the shortest but represents the greatest effort and assistance from others. This one is no different. In this case, length is not an indicator of gratitude, since without help from the following individuals and agencies, this book would not have been possible. The authors also recognize that although an agency has provided financial support or expertise, it is really people who make things happen. On the other hand, we have tried to compile a balanced recounting of the history of the Utah portion of the San Juan River, but if errors have crept in, we accept full responsibility for them.

The outfitters for our journey have been extremely helpful. Among the most prominent in launching and sustaining this work were the Utah Humanities Council, the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies, Southern Utah University’s Faculty Development Fund, and the Manti-La Sal National Forest Service in Monticello, Utah. They provided financial support and/or assisted in the collection of Native American and other materials used throughout the text. In addition, the White Mesa Ute Council and the Navajo Nation Museum clarified traditional perspectives and, in the latter case, contributed photographs. Other agencies that supplied expertise and/or pictures are the San Juan County Historical Commission, the Utah State Historical Society, the Bureau of Land Management (San Juan Resource Area), the LDS Church History Archives, University of Utah Special Collections, the Huntington Library, the Museum of Northern Arizona, Northern Arizona University, Brigham Young University Special Collections, the California Academy of Sciences, and the Denver Federal Records Center. Southern Utah University and the College of Eastern Utah also offered each of us timely sabbaticals.

Many individuals also journeyed with us through parts of the manuscript, and their expertise as guides proved invaluable. Their names are sprinkled throughout the endnotes and encountered along the way. Collectively, thanks are due to members of the Navajo Nation and the White Mesa Utes for sharing their culture and history. Ray Hunt, trader and friend, who passed from this life as this manuscript was in progress, shared his many years of experience along the San Juan. He has left a legacy in his thoughts and words for future generations. Archaeologist Winston Hurst read and commented on parts of the manuscript and shared a knowledge of the land and its people that was extremely helpful. Gary Topping has been an endless source of information, friendship, and laughter over the years. Other readers who helped with all or parts of the manuscript are Charles S. Peterson, Mark W. T. Harvey, Rachel M. Gates, and Jill Wilks.

SUU Interlibrary Loan staff members Lorraine Warren and Loralyn Felix made much of the off-river research possible. Various SUU
colleagues gave assistance: Rodney Decker, David Lee, Michael P. Cohen, S. S. Moorty, and Thomas Cunningham. SUU students Robert Sidford and Leann Walston helped with compiling the bibliography and scanning pictures. Tim Hatfield was a true artist developing black and white photographs. Special thanks go to Donald Worster, who commented on aspects of the work and wrote the book’s excellent foreword. His knowledge of environmental history is well known and has played an important part in shaping our own thinking.

On a more personal level, we appreciate the patience and love extended by our families and friends as we worked on this project. Worthy of special note are Steve, Sue, and Emily Lutz. They opened their beautiful “Avenues” home during numerous research trips to Salt Lake City and also shared many wonderful river trips. All the float trips over the years were fun, and we hope that our children and friends understand now why some of those stops along the shore took longer than they thought necessary. This book is as much a testimony to their patience as it is to our perseverance. And like those trips that ended with sand-filled shoes and sunburned necks, there is a glow that comes with completion. We hope readers feel the same sense of accomplishment upon exiting the river as we do.