

Trout Culture: How Fly Fishing Forever Changed the Rocky Mountain West. [Book Review]

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Abstract:

A review of the book “Trout Culture: How Fly Fishing Forever Changed the Rocky Mountain West” by Jen Corrine Brown.

Keyword: book review | sports history | environmental history | fly fishing

Article:

In Trout Culture: How Fly Fishing Forever Changed the Rocky Mountain West, Jen Corrine Brown offers an environmental history, a sport history, and a political critique. According to Brown, mythology about fly fishing in America’s Rocky Mountains has had dire consequences for native fish. As Brown notes, this mythos has been idealized in popular culture by Norman Maclean’s masterpiece *A River Runs through It* (1976) and Robert Redford’s 1992 film adaptation of the same title. Both novel and film depict the sport of fly fishing in the West as a religious experience—an activity and place where access to pristine nature with pure motives become possible. Though largely embraced by anglers, fishery managers, regional boosters, and conservationists, this thinking, Brown claims, is “a nostalgic and simplified view” (3). Covering over a century, Brown contends that western fly fishing in the United States (specifically Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Utah, and Colorado) has been influenced by complex international processes, a consumer economy, and folklore. As she shows, from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century, ideas about race, gender, and class, disseminated from Europe, especially Great Britain, influenced the type of rods and lures fly fishers used and the kinds of fish they pursued. Moreover, the Industrial Revolution and the growing ethos of capitalism within the United States made the transportation of such technologies and ideas possible. As a result, fishing for certain trout as “sport” (instead of for sustenance) became associated with whiteness, masculinity, and, for a time, an upper-class social status.

Yet Brown’s most blatant challenge to western mythology is to point out that the particular trout Rocky Mountain anglers desired were not native to the West. Billions of rainbow, brown, and brook trout were transported by train, bred in hatcheries, and planted into streams, rivers, and lakes. By the end of the 1920s, trout culturalists were placing over a hundred million nonnative

trout into western waters annually. By the 1950s, helicopters and planes helped bring these nonnative species to previously inaccessible locations. It got to the point where fishery managers would place catchable trout in rivers just to have them caught downstream the very same day.

Furthermore, particularly after World War II, to secure a healthy population of catchable nonnative trout, fishery managers worked to remove native species. To do this, they used dynamite, fish nets, electroshocks, and toxins. They would literally poison rivers, kill off native fish, wait for the poisons to wash away, and then introduce rainbow, brown, and brook. As Brown emphasizes, anglers and fishery managers held diverse thoughts about “coarse fish” (any fish not trout or salmon). Nevertheless, the presence of a dominant ideology that devalued them led to the extinction of the Utah Lake sculpin and the Snake River sucker and the endangerment of many other native species.

Additional human interventions also held unintended consequences for anglers and trout. By the 1950s, engineers had dammed basically every major river in the West. As Brown explains, bottom release dams caused warmer waters and greater nutrient loads, leading to more vegetation and thereby more insects for trout to eat. Although many anglers initially opposed the new dams, canals, and irrigation systems, Brown points out that they soon embraced fishing for abnormally large trout (known as “lunkers”) in dam tailwaters.

In Brown’s final chapter, she explains that, in the 1960s and 1970s, due to the emerging environmental movement, calls for biodiversity, along with a greater awareness of the hatchery system’s ecological harms, finally led some fishery managers to abandon hatcheries. Instead, they began to focus on maintaining suitable habitats through river conservation. By this point, over a century of hatchery work, complemented by a new environmentalist practices, made significant populations of self-sustaining nonnative “wild” trout a reality. As Brown cautions, however, the qualification of “wild” further obscured just how manufactured western trout remained, causing anglers and fishery managers to continue to overlook the well-being of other species.

Brown’s monograph is, in essence, a plea for biodiversity, and it will enlighten conservationists, anglers, fishery managers, and historians. From the perspective of recreational and environmental changes related to fly fishing, Brown convincingly shows that fly fishing had a lasting—and often harmful—impact on Rocky Mountain ecology. For sport historians interested in sport in the American West or in the interaction between sporting cultures and environmental change, *Trout Culture* is a worthy and recommended read.

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