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Review: Smoke Wars: Anaconda Copper, Montana Air Pollution, and the Courts, 1890-1920

By Donald MacMillan

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Donald MacMillan. *Smoke Wars: Anaconda Copper, Montana Air Pollution, and the Courts, 1890-1920*. Helena, MT: Montana Historical Society Press, 2000. 296 pp. ISBN 0-917298-65-9 (paper). US\$18.95

Donald Macmillan's doctoral dissertation *A History of the Struggle to Abate Air Pollution from Copper Smelters of the Far West, 1885-1993*, was edited posthumously and published in 2000 as *Smoke Wars*. The book begins with a lengthy introductory chapter by William L. Lang that reviews the genesis of the dissertation. In addition, Lang writes about the milieu of environmental history and Macmillan's place among other environmental historians and his work among other environmental histories.

According to MacMillan, the struggle to abate copper smelter air pollution consisted of three distinct phases. Phase one, the war between the citizens of Butte and smelter owners, concerned issues of public health and well being. Phase two, the construction of the world's largest smelter in Deer Lodge Valley in 1902, concerned issues of property destruction. Phase three; the confrontation between the federal government and the most powerful of mining and smelting trusts, concerned issues of land conservation.

Chapter 1, "A Struggle for Health, Property, and Conservation," provides a very brief introduction to the book and presents a central thesis and theme—that "the current conflict over air pollution in the smelting industry is not a mutation springing from an unknown parent. It is not a case of society suddenly changing the rules. The present conflict is the legacy of those earlier battles" (p. 21).

Chapter 2, "The Humblest Citizen of Butte is Entitled at Least to Fresh Air," chapter 3, "Bluffs Don't go in Smoke Wars," and chapter 4, "The War of Wealth Against Health," examine the environmental and public health issues related to smelter smoke in Butte and surrounding communities between 1885 and 1900. MacMillan describes the physical setting and the early history of smelting and smelters. He also details the reported ill effects of smelter smoke on the environment, humans, and animals. Of special interest are the attempts by several so-called experts to abate smelter smoke using untested and suspect technologies. Some of these have corollaries in today's many remediation technologies—for the right price or

potential profit there is always someone willing to invent a cleanup technology. In addition, these chapters bring into focus the burgeoning battle between those seeking to provide healthy living conditions versus those seeking to press on with the bountiful smelting economy. The media's increasing role in supporting the smelting industry is examined as well.

Chapter 5, "Progress and Pollution Come to the Valley," chapter 6, "The Farmers Versus the Trust," and chapter 7, "The Struggle Outside the Court," recount the epic struggle between the economic interests of the Trust and the environmental and public health concerns of the public. The opening of smelters in Deer Lodge Valley was the final ill wind for locals fighting for clean air. MacMillan brings into play the many outside interests relied upon by both sides to bolster their positions. It is the classic "my expert versus your expert" scenario. This part of the book is especially interesting as it also serves as a historical vignette of early twentieth century scientific and medical research. MacMillan also recounts the efforts of local farmers, through the Deer Lodge Valley Farmer's Association, to fight the smelting interests, and the legal wrangling exhibited by the plaintiffs (farmers) and defendants (Washoe Copper Company and Anaconda Copper Mining Company).

Chapter 8, "The Roosevelt Men Versus the Smelters," chapter 9, "Compelling a Corporation Do its Duty," chapter 10, "The Taft Men Versus the Smelters," chapter 11, "We Will Have Secured all that We Have a Right to Ask," and chapter 12, "The Struggle Abandoned," tell the story of how presidential interest and legislative efforts were ineffectual in the fight to abate smelter air pollution. All of the smelter opponents' efforts essentially "went up in smoke" due to the overwhelming economic, media wrangling, and political/lobbying brunt of the smelting industry. As MacMillan writes, "What the government envisioned as a solution...was an abatement of poisonous emissions...through creative technology, with some help from the marketplace" (p. 231). However, the smelting industry never recognized any responsibility to local citizens, instead seeking maximum corporate profits.

The Montana Historical Society Press has done students of western and environmental history a real favor. This is an outstanding examination of air pollution, its corresponding impact on human and animal health, politics, and media wrangling that surrounded smelting facilities in Montana from the late nineteenth century into the early twentieth century. What makes this book so compelling is that after more than a century, the issue of smelter smoke damage is still controversial and its impact on human health and the environment as problematic as it was in the 1880s. Indeed, the history of smelter smoke abatement and its ancillary issues has not changed significantly since the 1920s.

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