



Nature's Altars: Mountains, Gender, and American Environmentalism

Susan R. Schrepfer

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From the ancient Appalachians to the high Sierra, mountains have always symbolized wilderness for Americans. Susan Schrepfer unfolds the history of our fascination with high peaks and rugged terrain to tell how mountains have played a dramatic role in shaping American ideas about wilderness and its regulation.

Delving into memoirs and histories, letters and diaries, early photos and old maps, Schrepfer especially compares male and female mountaineering narratives to show the ways in which gender affected what men and women found to value in rocky heights, and how their different perceptions together defined the wilderness preservation movement for the nation. The Sierra Club in particular popularized the mystique of America's mountains, and Schrepfer uses its history to develop a sweeping interpretation of twentieth-century wilderness perceptions and national conservation politics.

Schrepfer follows men like John Muir, Wilderness Society cofounder Robert Marshall, and the Sierra Club's own David Brower into the mountains—and finds them frequently in the company of women. She tells how mountaineering women shaped their lives through high adventure well before the twentieth century, participating in Appalachian mountain clubs and joining men as "Mazamas"—mountain goats—scaling Oregon's Mount Hood.

From these expeditions, Schrepfer examines how women's ideas, language, and activism helped shape American environmentalism just as much as men's, parsing the "Romantic sublime" into its respective masculine and feminine components. Tracing this history to the 1964 Wilderness Act, she also shows how the feminine sublimines continue to flourish in the form of ecofeminism and in exploits like the all-woman climb of Annapurna in 1978.

By explaining why both women and men risked their lives in these landscapes, how they perceived them, and why they wanted to save them, Schrepfer also reveals the ways in which religion, social class, ethnicity, and nationality shaped the experience of the natural world. Full of engaging stories that shed new light on a history many believe they already know, her book adds subtlety and nuance to the oft-told annals of the wild and gives readers a new perspective on the wilderness movement and mountaineering.

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