

Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell & the Second Opening of the West

-- Wallace Stegner

I elected to read this book because of Stegner's style and it has added depth and texture to our studies in this class. It is an object lesson in the importance of relationships and developing mutual respect, which I think is vital to our future and I hope is what this class facilitates – those foundational stones pave the path forward in terms of water solutions in the US West.

Stegner describes the life, times, and efforts of John Wesley Powell, who finally made the land west of the 100th meridian (already oft-traversed by others by the time of Powell's first venture there in 1868), "spread out and walked over and brought within the control of definite lines on paper." It portrays Powell as a lifelong learner in pursuit of knowledge, not riches, who was captivated by our region in an age where the U.S. west either inspired speculators or was a haven for those with no other options. He didn't fit into either of those categories.

In his painterly prose, Stegner follows Powell from his early influences (midwestern Methodist father, homemade education which gave him the benefit of not knowing what was impossible, and mentorship by amateur naturalist George Crookham). Stegner describes Powell's military experiences in the Civil War where his leadership skills were honed and which gave birth to his eventual role as politician and promoter, and his subsequent exploration of the Rocky Mountain region, including the first recorded navigation of the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon with a motley crew. Stegner traces Powell's time as Director of the US Geological Survey & ethnologist for the Smithsonian Institution – disparate areas of expertise that help describe a man of wide-ranging experiences and abilities. The book ends with Powell's later lobbying in Washington D.C. for managing the arid US West differently than the East had taught our legislators to do, his endeavors to include conservation in the conversations of "development" of the territory, and his efforts to establish government departments firmly grounded in science. Powell's efforts to debunk the prevailing beliefs of the day – that "rain follows the plow" and that some vast artesian wells would greenify the great U.S. desert – and to build fact-based policy met with mixed success. Stegner outlines the history that led to intrigue and drama during Powell's most powerful years and lobbying efforts for the West.

Powell had a prophetically clear understanding that the US West's geography and resources would never enable it to be the replica of the eastern and Midwest landscapes many white explorers, settlers, and influential politicians dreamed it would become. (There's a chapter, for example, entitled, "Blueprint for a Dryland Democracy" which highlights Powell's prescience.) Among other things, Powell preached conservation in a time when others felt resources were unlimited. He also proposed irrigation and state lines based on watersheds – how many of us wish he had prevailed over the railroads' and others' lobbying efforts?

Beyond the Hundredth Meridian is a very readable historical portrait of the area of the country we're living in and learning about and some of the people who shaped it in pivotal ways.