

## THE COUNCIL OF FIFTY IN WESTERN HISTORY

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In his *Frontier Thesis*, Frederick Jackson Turner postulated that social life in the West was a Darwinian sequence marked by “civil-savage encounter” and “free land.” Humans who encountered the wilderness were at first at its mercy, until they slowly transformed it. As the wilderness receded and the “lines of civilization” advanced, settlement moved into a more developed stage.<sup>1</sup> Turner’s thesis, written in 1893, drew from widely held nineteenth-century beliefs about the West and offered a compelling synthesis of American history that shaped history writing for generations. It also launched western American history as a distinct field. But Turner left out of his exposition individuals, groups, and ideas that we now consider to be quintessentially western, Mormons included.<sup>2</sup> After Turner, the field offered varying competing theories—each building on Turner’s and past historiographical traditions—yet in each retelling, Mormons, with few exceptions, did not figure prominently. Although Mormons’ own histories were Turnerian in some regards, the building of Zion by the communally oriented Latter-day Saints did not fit standard narratives of the West. Part of the blame may lie at the feet of western historians; Jan Shipps posits that western historians treat the West as a donut, with the conspicuous hole representing

Mormon country. Another metaphor, offered by the environmental and cultural historian Jared Farmer, draws on Great Basin geography: the provincialism of Utah history is like water that pools and never finds an outlet.<sup>3</sup>

Mormon studies has made inroads in the last few decades, garnering greater recognition and attention from academics and publics outside the Intermountain West. The Joseph Smith Papers Project is in part responsible for raising the stature and quality of Mormon history. And, coincidentally, its recently published volume of the Nauvoo minutes of the Council of Fifty can help us rethink not only the Mormon place in the West but the meaning of the Mormon experience to western history. Mormons had a unique but also distinctly American way of perceiving and approaching the Far West. Turner's compelling synthesis of American history, whatever its limitations, provides insight into the nineteenth-century Mormon mindset that viewed the interior West as a region without a history, a blank slate upon which they could imprint their mark.

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The formation of the Council of Fifty in the spring of 1844 came just as Americans were widely awakening to the idea of a westward empire extending to the Pacific. Expanding the nation's borders satisfied America's divine mission, so the idea went. In his run for the US presidency, Joseph Smith blended the ideology of Democrats and Whigs; like ardent Democrats he looked westward and spoke of extending the nation, but in the Whig tradition he saw national influence as what the liberal minister William Ellery Channing called "a sublime moral empire, with a mission to diffuse freedom by manifesting its fruits, not to plunder, crush, and destroy."<sup>4</sup> The Great Emigration of 1842 and in following years gave the Americans a firm presence in Oregon Country, which after 1818 was jointly occupied by the British. Yet, as Richard White has observed, "The American nation that began to expand westward was neither militarily formidable nor a centralized state."<sup>5</sup>

Upon its formation, the Council of Fifty petitioned Congress for Smith to lead a company of one hundred thousand “armed volunteers” for protection along the emigrants’ trails to Oregon and Texas.<sup>6</sup> Congress ignored the memorial, though in 1846 it did authorize establishing military posts along the road to Oregon and a regiment of mounted riflemen (part of a long tradition of federal government oversight and support of emigration and western settlement, which is oftentimes ignored in narratives of the western individualist). The council’s military proposal was part of a larger western strategy that occupied the council through 1845: where to establish Mormon settlement beyond western Illinois. The council’s project to expand outward no doubt drew from a national sense of Manifest Destiny. Smith and his associates, though, sought refuge from their enemies, and they seriously considered Oregon, Alta California, and the Republic of Texas as possibilities.<sup>7</sup>



The Council of Fifty unsuccessfully petitioned Congress to allow Joseph Smith to raise an army to protect American interests in the West. Daguerreotype of US Capitol by John Plumbe. Courtesy of Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

Geographically, Oregon had several advantages and may have appealed to Smith. Orson Hyde, writing from the nation's capital in 1844, apparently mailed Smith a prepublished copy of explorer John C. Frémont's report and identified the most attractive locations in Oregon as the "Umqua and Clamet Valleys."<sup>8</sup> As Frémont wrote, "Th[e] structure of the coast, backed by these two ranges of mountains [Cascades and Sierra Nevadas], with its concentration and unity of waters, gives to the country an immense military strength, and will probably render Oregon the most impregnable country in the world."<sup>9</sup> As appealing as Oregon appeared, however, Mormons clearly recognized that other Americans likewise coveted the region, particularly in Orson Hyde's view settlers from Missouri—"our old enemies, the mobocrats of Mo."<sup>10</sup> And it was not altogether clear that the United States would "win" Oregon or that it would be anything other than British. The council debated and even considered the "influence we can have under the British government," but discussion was brief; Brigham Young, who assumed chairmanship of the council after Smith's death, claimed to want "nothing to do with them."<sup>11</sup>

Mormons considered the government of the United States as intolerable to live under as that of Great Britain, if not more so. The minutes hint at disillusionment toward the US government. When the council drafted its own constitution, it mimicked the structure of the US Constitution and listed off grievances in the vein of the Declaration of Independence. As noted in the committee's constitution, the US government was beset, as were other governments, with "pride, corruption, impurity, intrigue, spiritual wickedness in high places, party spirit, faction, perplexity and distress of nations." The problem was not the principles undergirding the government but the absence of "the disposition and power to grant that protection to the persons and rights of man."<sup>12</sup> Members seemed to look forward to self-rule; George A. Smith said he "has long reflected that we ought to have a new government."<sup>13</sup> Their new home would be governed by their own laws, perhaps with creation of a territory through an act of Congress, as George Miller contemplated in correspondence with William P. Richards in 1845, or perhaps within domain of their own independent country.<sup>14</sup>

All this suggests, and the minutes seem to confirm, that Mormon leaders sought, at least initially, to shed the federal yoke and settle in a location outside of US jurisdiction. Smith spoke of “establish[ing] independent governments” from land carved from the Republic of Texas.<sup>15</sup> After Smith’s death, Young remarked that “in the name of the Lord when we go from here, we will exalt the standard of liberty and make our own laws. When we go from here we dont calculate to go under any government but the government of God.”<sup>16</sup> This intent to institute God’s laws in many ways made Mormons distinct from other Americans who looked westward. William W. Phelps was prescient when he remarked in a council meeting in 1845 that “the greatest fears manifested by our enemies is the union of Church and State.”<sup>17</sup>

Mormons cast their gaze westward to Alta or Upper California, then Mexican territory. From council deliberations, it seems Smith favored the Gulf of California as a location for his people; according to Erastus Snow, Smith always opposed settling away from the coast.<sup>18</sup> Young felt the same as late as mid-1845. In meeting after meeting, a member or the entire council expressed delight in a song composed by John Taylor, “The Upper California,” expressing the intent to reside somewhere “Beside the great Pacific Sea.”<sup>19</sup> Maps depicting Alta California as a large swath of land ranging from the Pacific to Colorado’s Rocky Mountains give the sense that Upper California meant the Great Basin just as well as the Pacific coast. Descriptions in the council minutes clearly point to the virtues of settling close to the coast, however. Young’s description of the ideal place for the Saints—“the advantages of Navigation and commerce,” fortified between mountains, “gold and silver and precious stones,” “raise all kinds of fruit,” building and travel in ships, “where we can live without labor”—hardly fit the description of the Rocky Mountains.<sup>20</sup>

Not until late summer 1845 did leaders identify the Salt Lake Valley or possibly the Bear River Valley to the north as potential places to create a Mormon homeland. Knowledge of the Great Basin region came from trappers reporting to James Emmett, a council member, and from Frémont’s 1845 publication of his Far West travels. The idea initially was that a Wasatch Range settlement would serve as an entrée to Mormon expansion to the Pacific and as a way station for weary travelers on the

emigrants' trail.<sup>21</sup> The interior West did not have a coastline or favorable climate, but the geography and terrain had several advantages coveted by Mormon leadership. Young spoke of locating a place beyond the Rockies that could "easily be fortified against all hostile foes."<sup>22</sup> To another, the desert mountain terrain would mean they would "be free from the jealousies of any government." But the men also saw value in a landscape they did not know, opining for example that the mountains would shield them from cold and that near the West's "barren deserts" were "plains which are always rich and fertile."<sup>23</sup> Clearly, Young thought about desert lands not in the context that Mormons would come to see them—as land suited for a people determined to make it blossom as the rose—but as buffers from their enemies.

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Not until they arrived in the Salt Lake Valley and got their hands dirty in the soil did they come to understand their new homeland. The Nauvoo minutes conclude in early 1846, but what we have from the available Council of Fifty record of the Mormons' first years in the Great Basin provides a dramatic juxtaposition between earlier perception and later realities.<sup>24</sup> This time the Mormons confronted a landscape that confounded and frightened them. What crops they planted were devoured by swarming crickets. Their cattle wallowed in deep snow with insufficient feed during the harsh winter of 1848 and 1849. Wild animals presented a threat to public safety and, in the case of wolves, a noise nuisance.

The story of the Latter-day Saints' first years in the West is one of desperation. It is also one of action: they sought to refashion their homeland as they imagined it. The Council of Fifty organized a public two-month hunt to eradicate wild animals, the result being an overwhelming slaughter.<sup>25</sup> It sent men to establish fisheries on Utah Lake, others to establish a tannery, still others to go east to buy sheep. The council outlawed the making of corn into whiskey, erected an armory, imposed taxes, redistributed money and food to those who had little, surveyed streets and fenced farm lots, constructed canals, located the site of the Salt Lake City cemetery, and reorganized the Nauvoo Legion. A committee superintended

construction of fences in the “Big Field” to farm the land between 900 South and 2700 South. These efforts to build up not only the Great Salt Lake City but numerous other settlements came to characterize the idea, as expressed by the writer Wallace Stegner, that Mormons are more earthly, their communities more deeply rooted in the land than are other groups in the West.<sup>26</sup>

Stegner and other writers have rooted the Mormons to the western landscape; indeed, Mormon communities in a large swath of the American West—Mormon Country—appear as western as anything. Yet prior to their arrival in the Great Basin, Latter-day Saints were largely ignorant of the West and its peoples. When they did set their gaze west of the hundredth meridian, the land was unfamiliar and their perceptions often erroneous. Like other Americans, they looked to the West for opportunity, their aspirations part of a midcentury national project to spread beyond the nation’s borders. The Mormons brought to that project their own style and agenda (in some respects counter to the mainstream) to shape the landscape according to their religious aspirations. Yet Mormon migration and settlement in the Great Basin has meant that the religious group originating in the frontier of western New York has become intricately intertwined with a national narrative that is western in its orientation and that the ambition to find a home that is unpeopled perfectly fits into the larger white western project to settle and reshape the West.

Mormons colonized the Far West with idealized views of the land that originated from their experience in the well-watered East and were refined by the religious assurances of a promised people. They envisioned not only a place where people could live, but a *well-ordered* place.<sup>27</sup> This idealized view—the quintessential pastoral landscape—possessed a redemptive quality that fit squarely with the nineteenth-century biblical view of land ordained by providence for “the use of man.” Mormons brought with them religious beliefs about land and their role on it. They may have looked forward longingly to the millennial day when the high places would be made low and the crooked places straight, but they didn’t have to wait. Their work was to realize that dream. They established the first modern irrigation system in the West and created an inland empire

in the mountains that lasted nearly through the nineteenth century. It was a spiritual and temporal endeavor, and it gave meaning and vitality to the act of settlement and survival in this region.

Central to these ideas was the notion held by council members that Upper California, the Far West, and most particularly the eastern rim of the Great Basin constituted a region without a past, without a history. This was particularly important to a people driven out of several states at the behest of “old” settlers—in the words of George A. Smith in 1845, to “plant ourselves where there will be no one to say [we] are old settlers.”<sup>28</sup> The Salt Lake Valley was for Young a blank canvas on which God could realize his handiwork: to organize a new society, to ensure that its citizens and the land conformed to the divine decree. Young reportedly told the council not to “suffer infernals, thieves, Murders, Whoremongers & every other wicked curse to [exist],” urging its members to blot out evil-doing as prescribed by the body’s very name, “The Kingdom of God and his Laws, with the keys and power thereof, and judgement in the hands of his servants.”<sup>29</sup> Likewise, in council deliberations in early Utah we see this impulse to shape not just human behavior but the land in conformance with divine decree. Part of planting a new society in a new place was the idea of environmental transformation—the attempt to domesticate wild lands by subduing wild animals, for example.<sup>30</sup>

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If the Mormon narrative sounds Turnerian, it is because in large measure it is—at least in the way that nineteenth-century Mormons spoke of their westward march of progress. Once ensconced in the valley of Salt Lake, Mormons represented their history as one of settling, even conquering, the wilderness. Speaking before his people on July 24, 1852, five years since the Mormons’ arrival in the Great Basin, Young helped to create the mystique of the Mormons arriving in the mountain valleys and building a thriving city that “spread out from the east to the west, measurably so, but more extensively to the north and south.”<sup>31</sup> George Q. Cannon, speaking before the Third National Irrigation Congress in 1894, said that when he first entered the Great Basin he “felt that there



was a great future for” the western country. After describing the desolate conditions in the basin, Cannon looked back on what was accomplished with a great deal of pride, holding up the Mormon system of irrigation as a model for the other western territories and states.<sup>32</sup> Cannon’s and other pioneer narratives underscored the God-ordained rightness of their cause, ignored other peoples or events that went counter to their retelling of the history, and emphasized the resulting environmental transformation of their civilizing work on the landscape.<sup>33</sup> The simplicity of the narrative—not unlike that of Turner—gave it staying power, even as it bolstered a rendering of the history that did not support its own weight. Yet however much the Frontier Thesis has since been discredited in the academy, Turnerian ideas live on prominently in the American imagination. His ideas would have reverberated with a late-nineteenth-century audience who could look back on the peopling of a continent with pride and nostalgia.

Whereas Turner spoke of the West as the westward march of human progress, a generation later Walter Webb, in his book *The Great Plains*, defined the West as a place. Webb borrowed from the ideas of John Wesley Powell to argue that the West’s defining characteristic was a scarcity of water. Aridity forced westerners to innovate.<sup>34</sup> Some of this is reflected in the post-Nauvoo council record: the Mormon system of irrigation, the fencing of field to keep cattle from wandering, the extermination of predators. The communal energy of the Mormon project also helped mitigate terrestrial problems; for instance, Church-controlled irrigation differed from the more competitive orientation of prior appropriation practiced elsewhere.<sup>35</sup> The idea of water scarcity might help us reconsider the reasons for the council’s vast State of Deseret: lack of rainfall and distance between water sources forced Young to explore large areas of land for expansion. Could it be that the expansive State of Deseret—the Mormon inland empire—was as much a product of environmental contingencies as geopolitical aspirations?

Taking a page from Webb, though considerably complicating his narrative, are the so-called New West historians, who identify the West as a particular region characterized by conflict and racial and ethnic diversity. The area bounded by the State of Deseret’s original proposal is considered

by historians as “unambiguous West,” the core of what most historians think of as the West.<sup>36</sup> Other themes identified by New Western historians are reflected in the record of the council. Note, for instance, that historians have emphasized the community impulse of western settlement, not only of Mormons but of other groups in the region. Moreover, Mormon central planning, which eventually contributed to the success of dozens of western settlements, in some respects presaged the federal control that came to dominate the political, economic, and social fabric of the West.<sup>37</sup>

When I think about the Council of Fifty and its expansionist ideas for the West that never materialized, I look to another historiographical tradition represented most prominently by Henry Nash Smith’s *Virgin Land* but also by many other western historians and writers since: the West as a state of mind, a myth, an identity.<sup>38</sup> As the Nauvoo minutes reveal, council members envisioned innumerable iterations of their planned western empire. The boundaries and contours remained opaque even as they attempted to bring geographical specificity to their discussions. The problem, of course, was that the territory of which they spoke was still relatively unknown and unpeopled—in some cases literal blank spaces on the map. Until they planted their feet on the soil, they could do little more than to envision and plan. Even after they arrived in the West, their aspirations remained just that. Their proposed State of Deseret never came to be, but it reflected the broader aspirations of Utah’s first permanent Euro-American settlers, who dreamed and worked toward a Great Basin empire. Moreover, the idea of Mormon expansion had not reached a terminus. Settlements would continue to be made, and the imprint of the Mormon settler would continue to stamp itself on the land. The dream of a Mormon kingdom continued.

The American West has always been a place of dreams and aspirations. Few were as grand and idealistic as the Mormons. The Council of Fifty minutes provide a glimpse into the vision of a religious people who played an important role in western history—in the Mormon migration west, the Euro settlement of the Great Basin, and the political maneuverings for a Mormon state. It was a vision unique from the

western experience, but it was also one that can be placed in western American historiography.

## NOTES

1. Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (paper presented at the American Historical Association conference, Chicago, July 12, 1893).
2. For the absence of Mormons in Turner's analysis, see Patricia Nelson Limerick, *Something in the Soil: Legacies and Reckonings in the New West* (New York: Norton, 2000), 239–40.
3. Jan Shippo, *Sojourner in the Promised Land: Forty Years among the Mormons* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 21; Jared Farmer, *On Zion's Mount: Mormons, Indians, and the American Landscape* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 14.
4. Quoted in William Nester, *The Age of Jackson and the Art of American Power, 1815–1848* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2013), 226.
5. Richard White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A New History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 61.
6. Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 26, 1844, May 13, 1844, in Matthew J. Grow, Ronald K. Esplin, Mark Ashurst-McGee, Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, and Jeffrey D. Mahas, eds., *Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 1844–January 1846*, vol. 1 of the Administrative Records series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Ronald K. Esplin, Matthew J. Grow, and Matthew C. Godfrey (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2016), 62–73, 159–65 (hereafter *JSP*, CFM).
7. See, for example, Council of Fifty, Minutes, April 18, 1844, May 3, 1844, March 1, 1845, in *JSP*, CFM:115–16, 127–28, 137–47, 267–68. The council considered but soon abandoned Texas as a place to relocate en masse.
8. Letter from Orson Hyde, April 26, 1844, in *JSP*, CFM:181–84.
9. John C. Frémont, *Report of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1842, and to Oregon and North California in the Years 1843–44* (Washington DC: Gales and Seaton, 1845), 275.
10. Letter from Orson Hyde, April 25, 1844, in *JSP*, CFM:177.
11. Council of Fifty, Minutes, April 11, 1845, in *JSP*, CFM:408.

12. Council of Fifty, Minutes, April 18, 1844, in *JSP*, CFM:111–12, 129.
13. Council of Fifty, Minutes, April 18, 1844, in *JSP*, CFM:116.
14. George Miller to William P. Richards, January 28, 1845, in *JSP*, CFM:240. Richards had suggested the idea of a “Mormon Reserve” to be created by an act of Congress.
15. Council of Fifty, Minutes, April 18, 1844, in *JSP*, CFM:127–28.
16. Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 1, 1845, in *JSP*, CFM:268; see also Young’s remarks on January 11, 1846, in *JSP*, CFM:513.
17. Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 4, 1845, in *JSP*, CFM:285. This is not to say that Young did not calculate the possibility of Mexican territory becoming a US possession, and he almost certainly expected Alta California to come under the protective care of the United States. Seeking to curry favor from federal officials, Young informed President Polk in 1846 of Mormon plans to carve a state out of Upper California. Statehood would create “home-rule” within the American political system, even though it threatened to temper theocratic designs. Brigham Young to James K. Polk, August 9, 1846, Brigham Young Office Files, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, qtd. in Ronald W. Walker, “The Affair of the ‘Runaway’: Utah’s First Encounter with the Federal Officers,” *Journal of Mormon History* 39 (Fall 2013): 2.
18. Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 18 and 22, 1845, in *JSP*, CFM:328, 354.
19. See, for example, Council of Fifty, Minutes, April 11, 1845, in *JSP*, CFM:402–3.
20. Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 18, 1845, in *JSP*, CFM:328–29.
21. Council of Fifty, Minutes, September 9, 1845, in *JSP*, CFM:472.
22. Council of Fifty, Minutes, January 11, 1846, in *JSP*, CFM:513. Prior to Frémont, some mapmakers placed east-west ranges bounding the northern and southern boundaries of the Great Basin, suggesting an even more isolated and protected region.
23. Council of Fifty, Minutes, January 11, 1846, March 22, 1845, in *JSP*, CFM:515, 518, 352.
24. Prior to publication of the Nauvoo minutes of the Council of Fifty, what we knew about the Council of Fifty’s role in the West derived from diaries, letters, and reminiscences of council members revealing either their impressions or their memories of council proceedings. These are compiled in my own edited volume, *The Council of Fifty: A Documentary History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2014). See also Klaus J. Hansen, *Quest for Empire: The Political Kingdom of God and the Council of Fifty in Mormon History* (East

- Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1967); D. Michael Quinn, "The Council of Fifty and Its Members, 1844 to 1945," *BYU Studies* 20 (Winter 1980): 163–97; and Andrew F. Ehat, "'It Seems Like Heaven Began on Earth': Joseph Smith and the Constitution of the Kingdom of God," *BYU Studies* 20 (Spring 1980): 253–80.
25. The council's war against "wasters and destroyers" is but one example of a broader tradition of categorizing and vilifying the animal kingdom. Like the land, animals fell into camps of "good" or "bad" depending on how they served humans. Patty Limerick has shown that in the West, so-called good animals had wildlife bureaus named for them—Fish and Game—while bad animals did not. See Patricia Nelson Limerick, *Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: Norton, 1987), 311–12. Wolves, mountain lions, and coyotes were often attacked by the government, as was the case with Utah's earliest Euro government in 1849. And the Council of Fifty's first laws in Utah, dated 1848, granting a bounty on wolf and other skins began a grand tradition in Utah of targeting animals deemed too wild, troublesome, or dangerous. See entries for the winter of 1848–49 and Historian's Office History, January 26, 1850, in Rogers, *Council of Fifty*.
  26. Wallace Stegner, *Mormon Country*, ed. Erskine Caldwell, American Folkways series (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1942).
  27. Jedediah S. Rogers, *Roads in the Wilderness: Conflict in Canyon Country* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2013), esp. chaps. 1 and 2.
  28. Council of Fifty, Minutes, September 9, 1845, in *JSP*, CFM:476.
  29. John D. Lee, Diary, March 3, 1849, in Rogers, *Council of Fifty*, 161. For the council's name, see Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 14, 1844, in *JSP*, CFM:48; see also William Clayton, Journal, January 1, 1845, in Rogers, *Council of Fifty*, 29.
  30. See Rogers, *Council of Fifty*, esp. entries for 1848 and 1849.
  31. Brigham Young, July 24, 1852, in *Journal of Discourses* (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855), 1:146.
  32. George Q. Cannon, "The Mormon Land System in Utah," *Irrigation Age: A Journal of Western America* 7 (July 1894): 188–89.
  33. The Mormons' narrative that they had transformed the environment is taken up in Farmer, *On Zion's Mount*, 105–38; and Jon T. Coleman, *Vicious: Wolves and Men in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 173–87.
  34. Walter Webb, *The Great Plains* (1931; repr., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981).

35. See John Bennion, "Water Law on the Eve of Statehood: Israel Bennion and a Conflict in Vernon, 1893–1896," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 82 (Fall 2014): 289–305.
36. Walter Nugent, "Where Is the American West: Report on a Survey," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 42 (Spring 1992): 2–23.
37. For works on the federal presence, see Karen R. Merrill, *Public Lands and Political Meaning: Ranchers, the Government, and the Property between Them* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); and Leisl Carr Childers, *The Size of the Risk: Histories of Multiple Use in the Great Basin* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015).
38. Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950).