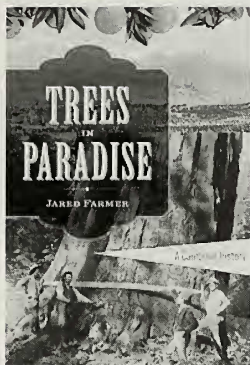


REVIEW



*Trees in Paradise: A California History.* By JARED FARMER. 2013. W.W. Norton & Company, New York, NY Acknowledgments; maps, figures, photographs; appendix of common and scientific names of species; further reading; notes; index, 552 pp. ISBN 978-393-2. \$35.00, hardcover

This sizable book, well-written and nicely researched, stoutly bound and illustrated with four sizable galleries of photographs printed in black-and-white, is an admirably recounted “natural and unnatural history of California trees” (p. xx). Inevitably, the subject species picked will chafe those most knowledgeable about California botany and forest history who will dispute the trees that author Jared Farmer, a prize-winning historian, chooses to write about in *Trees in Paradise: A California History*. As Farmer notes in a concise preface, California includes the oldest, tallest, and biggest trees in the United States. Three of the four varieties he singles out — eucalypts, citrus, and palms — are exotics; only the redwood and giant sequoia are native to California, and even those are sometimes described as refugial species, survivors of a more beneficent climate and habitat of long ago. This engaging read of eight chapters has two for each “tree” — one looking at the nineteenth century, the second concerned with the later twentieth century up through today, an organization that adds background and currency to each study.

The fact is, this book is rather more a cultural history of California than it is a study of specific trees, and Farmer is interested in the reshaping with exotic species of the state’s landscapes in the interest of a triumvirate of causes: aesthetics (eucalypts), economics (citrus, almost solely the navel orange), and semiotics (palms with their Southern California symbology) (p. 432).

Madroño readers may pause, no doubt consumed by the same sorts of doubts that afflicted me in considering Farmer’s choices. What of the bristlecone pine, witness to 10,000 yrs of rigorous climate change? Or of the California bay, or the buckeye? And of the Monterey pine or the same region’s cypress, what? And how, especially, could varied and signature oak species not feature among California’s select trees? No doubt Farmer has faced these challenges and occasional sputters of doubt

in press tours and interviews. Yet as a reviewer, I’m given to repeat an adage that I heard one of my teachers, James E. Vance Jr., chuff in aggravation when the reviewer of a book Jay had recently published went on in excruciating and self-aggrandizing detail about how he, the reviewer, would have taken on the subject: a book review best assesses an author’s success or failure with the topic as written about, rather than teeing off at length about how the reviewer might have chosen to approach the theme. And in bits and pieces throughout *Trees in Paradise*, Farmer does a good job of laying out the reasoning behind his decision to consider trees that brought a different kind of prosperity, and in particular a distinctive look and feel, to California.

To Farmer’s way of thinking, trees connote the California Dream, and the visions of an ideal landscape that colonists coming into California brought with them — though presumably, he is concerned mostly with occupiers of a northern European stripe, perhaps American-British most of all. These settlers were not, he suggests, enamored of a setting relatively bereft of trees. It wouldn’t be hard to argue that Farmer’s predilection for certain trees is bound up in a lot of preconceptions. After all, settlers of Spanish-Mexican origin, who came to Alta California in 1769, were actually very much used to a *dehesa* of oaks so characteristic of southwestern Spain and Portugal, and Mexico has the largest variety of *Quercus* L. species anyplace on earth (Campos et al. 2013). Farmer claims, “[p]ost-Gold Rush settlers did not feel content with the existing landscape subtly modified by Indians, Spaniards, and Mexicans. It looked deforested. It looked unfinished” (p. 117). Grasslands abounded; so did coastal shrub lands and chaparral. As the author suggests:

From roughly 1850 to 1950 — California’s first hundred years as a state — American horticulturists planted innumerable trees in formerly shadeless locales. To use an old-fashioned term, they *emparadised* the land. They imported a profusion of ornamental and commercial species and varieties and created moneymaking orchards and picturesque tree-lined streets. In short, tree planters staged a landscape revolution. By the mid-twentieth century, eucalypts defined the look of lowland California, oranges dominated Southland agriculture, and palms symbolized Los Angeles. (p. xxviii)

Certainly, as the Spanish-Mexican era gave way to the “American,” parts of the California landscape underwent a deliberate and profound

renovation; I would simply note that, Native American forest management aside, eight decades of Hispanic presence, use, and coexistence transpired before Anglo-Americans aggressively began trying to undo a Mediterranean landscape. That is a quarrel, though maybe more of a nit-pick. Certainly Farmer's work deserves a commentary for how he treats each of the four "trees" chosen.

Redwoods and the giant sequoia — coastal and gallery or riparian forests, and those from the edges of the west-central Sierra — were a formidable challenge for axe-wielders and industrial foresters, once an enormous amount of clean, near-perfect, and hugely durable wood was recognized as a resource after 1848. Removing those trees and protecting some remnant of them posed two separate challenges dealt with admirably in this book. In fact, new techniques in logging and timber movement had to be invented, just as novel means of preservation and legal protection would develop across a century, from 1870's to 1970's. Nonetheless, a hunger for wood and for the trophy rounds that could be sawed from the giant sequoia brought down many a tree, including some name-plaques and commemorated by earlier colonizers in the Sierra foothills. As a good history should, *Trees in Paradise* offers up no shortage of facts. For example, from the Sierra east of Fresno 1890–1910, "loggers felled roughly one-quarter of all mature sequoias in California — that is, the world," moving timber by way of a massive flume — 54 mi long and dropping 4200 ft in elevation, that earned Sanger at the terminus of the flume in the San Joaquin Valley the title of "Flumeopolis of the West" (pp. 44, 43). Lauding the size of trees and scale of harvest was not without creepy undertones: the turn of the twentieth century was high season for eugenicists — foresters, fellers, and scientists included — and the language of race improvement and prodigality was much a part of the redwood revelry. That would take a drastically different turn after World War II, when technology made it easier to remove some of the very largest coastal redwoods, and hijinks of the financial services industry took stock resources, including unharvested coastal redwoods held carefully in reserve by select-harvesting companies, and sought to cash out by clear-cutting entire groves of the tallest and oldest trees. The galvanizing effect of the Redwood Summer of 1990 and the Headwaters conflict earns a characteristic Farmer remark: "[i]n the minds of the 'Freedom Riders for the forest' — white people easily identified by countercultural accouterments like African talking drums and crocheted Rasta beanies — the rights of wild trees seemed analogous to the rights of black southerners" (p. 96). But "[o]ld-growth protectors were generally tone-deaf to

Humboldt County's culture of producerism" (p. 97). The MAXXAM era with the looming figure of Charles Hurwitz, the demise of Pacific Lumber and the company town at Scotia, the usurpation of selective logging by clear cutting, the arrival of EarthFirsters and the ascent of tree-sitter Julia "Butterfly" Hill into the redwood named Luna, are each part of the late twentieth-century story. And as Farmer notes, times change, sometimes startlingly: "[o]n the North Coast, America's THC nerve center, cannabis now rivals redwoods as the region's leading export" (pp. 104–105).

Various species of eucalyptus were brought into California, though principally the Tasmanian Blue Gum that accounted for about 90% of California's eucalyptus plantings. While Farmer doesn't emphasize it deeply, the introduction came in no small measure because of active sharing between Australia and California during the Gold Rush years, and the eucalyptus was so prevalent in Tasmania and Australia that adding trees to California, especially in moist areas where eucalypts, with their volatile oils, was considered virtuous and health-giving. That turned out to have more to do with the vast amounts of water taken up and transpired by the thirsty trees, drying out a seasonally soaked landscape, but nonetheless, the eucalyptus was for a time considered a hero in nineteenth-century battles against malaria in the Sacramento and San Joaquin valleys. And the trees did in their own way become nearly universal. Several frames from the famed "Migrant Mother" sequence of photographs taken by Dorothea Lange during the Depression actually show a sizable eucalyptus grove behind the shanty where mother and children are sheltered, leftover from a speculative plantation. Much of the intent behind eucalyptus planting was the creation of woodlots — and so many were planted, in such density, that trees are still prominent on the California scene. Speculative investor Frank Havens from 1910–1913 purchased sections of the Berkeley-Oakland hills and started a plantation there as part of his Mahogany Eucalyptus and Land Company. It went broke and back into public hands not long after, but eucalyptus species and Monterey pines still carpet the East Bay Hills (pp. 143–144), a major management quandary for the East Bay Regional Park District and the University of California, Berkeley, which now control much of the property and are attempting a return to native species. Leland Stanford, a former governor and railroad magnate, decided to plant part of his Palo Alto Stock Farm to eucalyptus species, but the plan hiccupped with delays until 1916, when a couple of groves of *Eucalyptus globulus* Labill. were installed, to be amended by other varieties, and "[i]n the mid-twentieth century, university arborists added many other



types of gums to the sprawling [Stanford University] campus; an arboreal census in 1984 counted ninety-four *Eucalyptus* species" (p. 162). The campus of UC San Diego on Torrey Pines Mesa was established on a former eucalyptus plantation (p. 161), and UC Berkeley's West Gate is marked by enormous trees, planted 100+ years ago when eucalyptus was considered a boon to the eyes and a benison to the sense of smell. The trees brought good and bad. The good was fundamental: "[t]hat most Californian of modern-day activities, driving alone on a highway, windows down, approaches perfection with the help of a blue gum canopy. The light is breathtaking, the smell invigorating. Who wouldn't wish for a convertible?" (p. 217). A downside was the 1991 Berkeley-Oakland Hills fire, which I witnessed: "[f]reezes, droughts, and dry downslope winds occur naturally in the East Bay. Not true of blue gum, which covered some 20 percent of the burned area [1520 acres; 2500 single-family dwellings; 25 lives lost] and contributed an estimated 70 percent of the fuel load" (p. 179). As Farmer notes, fear of fire, and a marked distaste for exotics, blossomed in late twentieth-century California into a kind of "botanical xenophobia" (p. 207), and in a place so militantly pluralistic (and rich) as Marin County, which would never consider an anti-immigrant movement, there are regular efforts to purge eucalypts, brooms, and other exotics from the landscape — surely species-ism, of a sort.

About citrus there is so much in print that Farmer has his hands full, and having written at length about the economics and symbolism of California orange groves 25 yrs ago (Starrs 1988), I found this the least inspiring quarter of the book. I was partly given pause by the author's emphasis on a specific time and place: he's most interested in the Southland from the 1870's into the 1940's, and not nearly so curious about the movement north into the San Joaquin Valley of citrus in the early twentieth century, establishing groves of navel and Valencia oranges in Porterville, Exeter, Orange Cove, Navelencia, Tulare, and all through fertile soils on bench lands in the eastern San Joaquin Valley. His is a porthole perspective, with those other sites largely left aside (except as home to a startling array of agricultural maladies). The star is Southern California, where oranges were the economic and cultural crop of choice, and palms the symbol of Mediterranean success. Orange cultivation has Classical roots, in the Garden of the Hesperides, and orange culture was suggestive as an earlier and more blessed world where, in Farmer's calculation, "[s]ociology mirrored geography. The Citrus Belt — in effect, the wealth — of Southern California occupied the broad, inclined alluvial fans (known locally as 'benches' or 'mesas') beneath the San Gabriel and San

Bernardino mountains" (p. 243). Even today, growers in the San Joaquin Valley speak in near-reverential tones about the California Fruit Growers Exchange, about Sunkist as a marketing and quality-control arm for the citrus industry, and they know all the principals of their local packing houses. Farmer, however, is interested in what was, and what was lost: the formation of irrigation colonies (technically, "mutual water companies," p. 232), the ways that orange culture drew settlers through three or four generations of Southern California land and life, and — in a lovely phrasing, marked "the transition from tree culture to horticulturalism" (p. 269); in the requirements for climate modification in citrus culture in the Southland; workers were crucial to citrus, less for cultivation than for setting up smudge pots that would moderate the effects of frost or even the rare hard freeze on oranges. Links drawn between the lighting of 3.3 million Southern California smudge pots in January 1932 and a rising concern about air pollution, allergies, and maladies afflicting field worker are not original, but Farmer artfully connects agricultural excess to urban quality of life concerns. In the 1950's, high school football teams from Redlands and San Bernardino played for the smudge-pot trophy (p. 317). Equally daunting are horror stories about changes wrought: Riverside was the richest city in per capita income in the United States in 1895; by the early 1970's, as oranges were all but gone from the scene, it was the "smog capital of the world" (p. 309). Pests abounded in the groves, and required extraordinary countermeasures. Farmer recounts a 1916 attempt to extirpate a scale insect using hydrocyanic acid gas (HCN) that consumed 4 months, eleven work gangs, the tenting of 383,500 trees on 4250 acres, and 11 railroad cars of cyanide (p. 286). These are tales not of love, but their tone of excess and peril does leave room for admiration, and *Trees in Paradise* rightly singles out the magnetic pull of orange groves, drawing visitors, then boarders, and eventually, permanent residents to Southern California who would swell town numbers, and reduce the possibilities of tree-crop agriculture until humans had displaced tree crops as a feature on the land. The 1974 film *Chinatown*, directed by Roman Polanski from a script by Robert Towne, charted a fictionalized version of the transition, and whether on film or bound page, the results of land use change and urban water seizure were anything but pretty.

Eighteenth-century Franciscan friars brought date palms with them from Spain and Mexico to the missions of 1700's California, in part to guarantee a supply of Palm Sunday fronds for cashiered soldiers, clerics, and Indian peons tilling and ranching along the chain of coastal missions. Palms were then, and remain now, symbolic features. When Henry Huntington

wanted to embellish his estate in San Marino after the San Francisco earthquake of 1906, he had two Canary Island fan palms moved whole from San Francisco. There has long been, it turns out, a land-office business in freighting entire palms from one site to another, in no small measure because palms are not “trees,” as the term would conventionally have it, but monocots in the order Arecales Bromhead that can be exhumed and relocated with relative ease. Most palms in California are single-stemmed, many of them *Washingtonia* H. Wendl., and part of their story is an aggressive messiness, throwing off fronds, harboring any variety of rats, bats, and insect pests, encouraging vandalism when untrimmed, and requiring no small amount of management and cleanup. Yet to many Californians, palms are beloved, and symbolic of difference. Vocabulary is one of the wonders of this book. There are “scouts” or “spotters” whose job is locating desirable and available palm trees for transplanting; “palmskinners” adept at moving the trees; the “palmification” of a landscape; and botanists (including Berkeley pioneer, Willis Jepson) who in their disdainful view of palms as “skybusters” were staunch “antipalmists” (pp. 410, 396, 405, 423, 362). As Farmer notes, “[a] California palm is not just a plant. It is a signpost” (p. 408). Though here, again, I would note some provincialism in the author’s take on palms. As with citrus (oranges), his focus is on trees in a very specific area, Southern California. Those who have traveled the state more widely recognize a crucial role that palms, many dating from the late nineteenth century, play in rural life in the state — or even along shaded streets in such successful Ag centers as Modesto, Sacramento, Visalia, and Colusa. And through agricultural reaches of the state are thousands of homes, set back from a county road, whose presence is announced by a two-abreast echelon of palms leading from public road to private manse. Sometimes the house (and

barnyard and outbuildings) may not even exist anymore — but the palms, or at least a suggestive number of them — announce what was once a symbol of rural pride and investment in place.

Humor can give life, even to a serious book. There is hardly a better moment in *Trees in Paradise* than Farmer’s discussion of Randy Newman’s “I Love L.A.,” with its allusions to driving, watching, and diversity in the Southern California landscape (pp. 404–405). That album by the multiple Grammy- (nine nominations, five wins) and Oscar-winner (13 nominations, three wins) is titled *Trouble in Paradise* (1983), and a satirical Newmannesque spirit resounds through the best moments of *Trees in Paradise*. Two short selections may help round out Farmer’s story: “[o]f the myriad kinds of trees propagated by the million in nineteenth-century California, eucalypts, citruses, and palms had the most significant, long-lasting effects” (p. 432). Trees, in his reckoning, embody a view that “[t]he pith of the California Dream is the idea that the Golden State is different, special, unique, unprecedented” (p. xxix). While quibbling about the selection of trees is possible, to do so might not be wise. This is a good telling, and readers could learn a lot by spending some quality time with Farmer’s narrative of arboreal landscape change as a handmaid or telltale of cultural history.

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