

**Robbins, William. "Willamette Eden: The Ambiguous Legacy." *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 99 (1998): 189-218.** (Reviewed by Susan Mershon)

This is a survey of attitudes toward the Willamette Valley, from writings of past Oregonians. Robbins' sources include newspaper articles, books, and letters.

Robbins says the white Willamette Valley settlers gave a narrative of progress and civilization advancing. They saw themselves as key players in that narrative. Robbins says the twentieth-century dam builders thought about themselves in that same way. The same perspective was held over several generations.

Robbins states, "Progress was frequently measured by how much the landscape had been transformed from its earlier appearance under Native American habitation." (198) The Willamette Valley Project, the effort to dam the river beginning in the 1930s, fit squarely into the grand picture of progress and alterations.

Robbins clearly believes that the narrative of progress is a falsehood. He may even doubt that humans have the ability to change the world for the better. This article is a tale of settlers' hubris.

## **Critique**

This is a literary survey rather than a scientific work. It does cover a lot of writers, and would be a good starting point for further research about European-American attitudes around the Willamette. Unfortunately, Robbins doesn't continue the survey into the present day. It stops in the 1960s. I wish he also quoted people who, today, see themselves as heroes in the narrative of progress. I wish he included recent narratives more sympathetic to his own, more questioning.

This article is a good place to go when wondering "What were they *thinking* ?"

Robbins mentions Lewis Mumford, a prolific writer on urban and regional planning. In Robbin's narrative, Mumford is one of the bad guys, because he believed in humans rationally and creatively altering the world for the better. Mumford supported the hydroelectric dams going in all over the Northwest. I was surprised to see Mumford in this light. In my other research on cities, I saw Mumford as one of the good guys, for believing in conscious change and planned growth. Beware of assigning labels to people!

There are several pertinent journal articles written by William Robbins, Distinguished Professor of History at OSU. He has a particular interest in the history of Oregon and the Willamette Valley.

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