



The entirety of Gates of the Arctic National Park in Alaska lies north of the Arctic Circle.

NATIONAL PARKS

Meditations on conservation

An environmental activist urges a renewal of the American national park idea

Reviewed by **Jared Farmer**

The centennial of the U.S. National Park Service has thus far been muted, in no small part because the anniversary year has coincided with a noisy presidential election. News about the agency has not helped: budget shortfalls and scandals, too. And yet the idea of the park system remains beloved, and the flagship parks are being “loved to death” more than ever.

It would have been easy for Terry Tempest Williams to fall back on “the best idea we ever had”—an interpretation articulated by Wallace Stegner in 1983 and popularized by Ken Burns in 2009. Instead, Williams asks hard questions about the current relevance and original goodness of America’s parks. She offers a poetic revision to the Organic Act of 1916, which mandated the conservation of scenery and wildlife for the enjoyment of the public in such a manner as to leave them unimpaired. In her 400-page mission statement, Williams updates “enjoyment” to spiritual renewal, specifies that “the public” means more than white people, and insists that “unimpaired” means what it says.

To write the 12 chapters that compose *The Hour of Land*, Williams pilgrimaged to 12 units in the park system. She chose her itinerary with care, mixing the obscure and the famous, ranging from Acadia to Alcatraz, the Gates of the Arctic to the Gulf Is-

lands. The varied locations inspired various genres, including prose poetry, criticism, personal correspondence, and reportage.

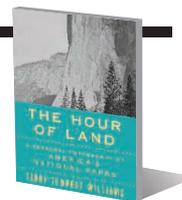
Like Williams’s oeuvre, the entire book is, on some level, a memoir. Having written so affectively about the women in her life, Williams here gives more attention to men: her husband, her estranged brother, her adopted Rwandan son, her climate activist ally Tim DeChristopher, and especially her Mormon father, a retired oil pipe layer. John Henry Tempest loves Grand Teton National Park as much as the Rockefellers—the other family that appears prominently in these pages—but he also shoots prairie dogs for fun and feels “proud of the scars I’ve left in the West” with his family-owned Tempest Company.

“Strange things happen when Terry’s around,” her dad confirms. In *The Hour of Land*, Williams attracts rare woodpeckers, meets an upright grizzly, witnesses a horizontal rainbow, and escapes death by wildfire.

Although she has moved beyond the faith of her father, Williams speaks in religious terms. Enraptured and enraged by our world, she blesses it with holy words like care, ceremony, compassion, humility, inclusion, integrity, restraint, and reverence.

For Williams, the personal is the spiritual is the political. Throughout her centrifugal text, she returns to two controversies. The first is the U.S. oil-and-gas boom of the Bush-Obama years. She visits park beaches in Florida befouled by Deepwater Horizon, park vistas in North Dakota spoiled by fracking rigs, and potential parkland in Utah trampled and fragmented by drill pads. She turns her field observations into

The Hour of Land
A Personal Topography of
America’s National Parks
Terry Tempest Williams
Sarah Crichton Books,
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calls for societal divestment from fossil fuel.

Her second quarrel is with the “land transfer movement” in the mountain West. From renegade rancher Cliven Bundy to Utah representative Rob Bishop (who recently let the Land and Water Conservation Fund expire), many influential figures in the region have demanded that the U.S. government “give back” federal lands. With her chapter on Gettysburg National Military Park, Williams implicitly compares the western “Sagebrush Rebellion” to the southern “Lost Cause”—a pair of states’ rights movements fueled by the resentments of gun-loving white men.

Williams shows more sympathy for Native peoples who were dispossessed from wilderness parks such as Yellowstone. To have an environmentalist of her stature address this violent history is a sign that the 1990s rift between environmental historians and conservation biologists (the “wilderness debate”) has largely healed.

Instead of telling simple stories of innocent preservationists saving pristine places, Williams relates histories of conflict, struggle, money, and power. “We, the people, have made mistakes,” she summarizes.

In *The Hour of Land*, reconciliation follows truth. The author sees hope in the Blackfeet Nation’s demands for comanagement of Glacier National Park. She takes pride in the first black president’s authorization of a national monument in honor of César Chávez. And she beseeches Barack Obama, in his final months in office, to go further.

At a recent federal auction, the author purchased drilling rights to lands near her home in Utah. To avoid violating the law, she founded Tempest Exploration Company, LLC. Writing for the *New York Times*, Williams announced her company’s intent to produce “energy” to “fuel moral imagination” (1). On Facebook, Williams added that her father accepted the call to serve as chairman of the board but only after “serious and soulful conversations.” This episode—environmental activism meets performance art meets family drama—serves as a fitting introduction to a sincerely disobedient book.

REFERENCES

1. T. T. Williams, “Keeping my fossil fuel in the ground,” *The New York Times*, 29 March 2016, p. A25.

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