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America As Second Creation: Technology And Narratives Of New Beginnings (MIT Press)

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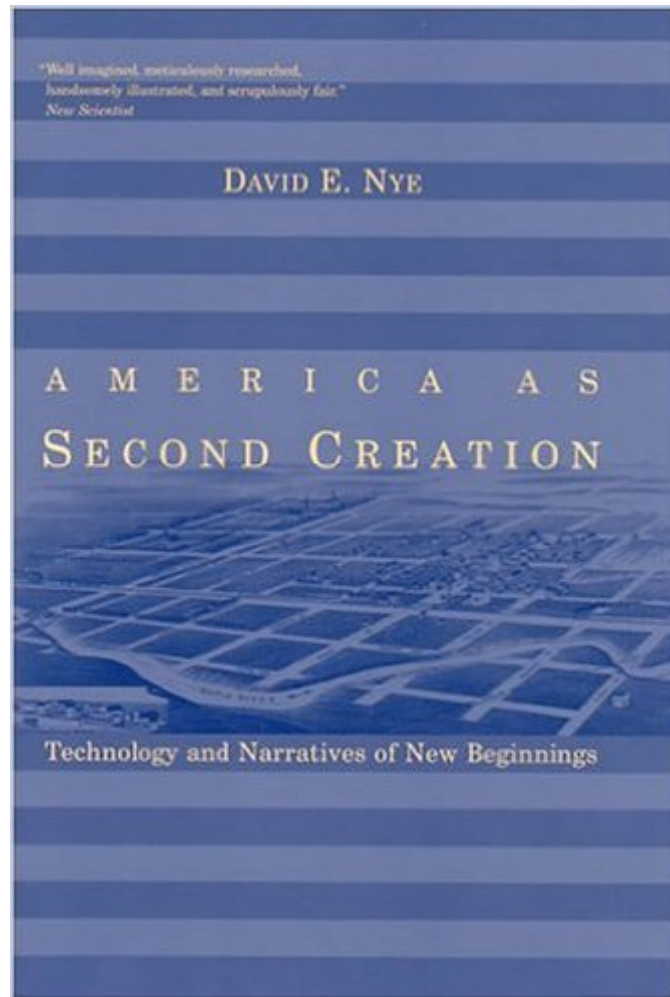
AMERICA AS SECOND CREATION

Technology and Narratives of New Beginnings

Synopsis

After 1776, the former American colonies began to reimagine themselves as a unified, self-created community. Technologies had an important role in the resulting national narratives, and a few technologies assumed particular prominence. Among these were the axe, the mill, the canal, the railroad, and the irrigation dam. In this book David Nye explores the stories that clustered around these technologies. In doing so, he rediscovers an American story of origins, with America conceived as a second creation built in harmony with God's first creation.While mainstream Americans constructed technological foundation stories to explain their place in the New World, however, marginalized groups told other stories of destruction and loss. Native Americans protested the loss of their forests, fishermen resisted the construction of dams, and early environmentalists feared the exhaustionof resources. A water mill could be viewed as the kernel of a new community or as a new way to exploit labor. If passengers comprehended railways as part of a larger narrative about American expansion and progress, many farmers attacked railroad land grants. To explore these contradictions, Nye devotes alternating chapters to narratives of second creation and to narratives of those who rejected it.Nye draws on popular literature, speeches, advertisements, paintings, and many other media to create a history of American foundation stories. He shows how these stories were revised periodically, as social and economic conditions changed, without ever erasing the earlier stories entirely. The image of the isolated frontier family carving a homestead out of the wilderness with an axe persists to this day, alongside later images and narratives. In the book's conclusion, Nye considers the relation between these earlier stories and such later American developments as the conservation movement, narratives of environmental recovery, and the idealization of wilderness.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This short book showed me a great deal about both U.S. history and environmentalism. The extensive notes and huge bibliography mark the book not just as inviting severe academic scrutiny but as a pithy summary of a lifetime of information. If my library was as large as this bibliography, I'd feel obligated to open it to the public.The book is organized around technologies that were used in the white settlement of the U.S.: the different and more efficient American axe (and the log cabin), the water powered mill, the canal and the railroad, and irrigation infrastructure such as dams. With these various technogies over time settlers "improved" the land they found. They felt it took both nature's "first creation" and their efforts at "second creation" to complete the work and make the land truly suitable for life. After years of wondering, here finally is an explanation of what early settlers were thinking when they did things that now seem extremely ecologically destructive.The book calls out four assumptions of second creation: i) grid surveys were a good way to apportion and settle the fairly uniform land ii) free markets allowed individuals to do whatever made most sense without regard to legislative edicts and local monopolies iii) resources --especially land-- were abundant so that population growth didn't have to worry about the downward resource spiral suggested by Malthus and iv) the universe supported changes at no cost rather than levying an entropic tax on every effort at long-term progress. All four were critical to underpinning our foundation story; all four were eventually thrown in the dustbin of history. Those neat squares are a hallmark of flying over the western U.S.

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