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**Review of Di Stefano, Diana L., Encounters in Avalanche Country: A
History of Survival in the Mountain West, 1820-1920**

Hall, Marcus

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Diana L. Di Stefano. *Encounters in Avalanche Country: A History of Survival in the Mountain West, 1820-1920*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013. Illustrations. 192 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-295-99314-0.

Reviewed by Marcus Hall

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Exploring the Edges of Disaster History

Ever since the publication of Ted Steinberg's *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America* in 2000, disasters have been favorite topics for historians plying the contours of nature and culture. Floods, earthquakes, forest fires, volcanic eruptions, and tsunamis have long inflicted harm and destruction on human societies, with such disasters being traced, according to circumstance, from God and the supernatural to humans and their fallibilities.[1] Steinberg reveals with hindsight that there have rarely been such things as *natural* disasters because such tragedies almost always strike hardest those who are most impoverished, most stigmatized, and most ill-equipped to deal with hardship. We finally realize that tornadoes do not have a propensity to steer through trailer parks; rather, those who live in trailer parks are especially vulnerable to random high-speed winds.

Diana L. Di Stefano adds to our understanding of disasters in human history, taking up the topic of tumbling walls of snow in the North American West. In *Encounters in Avalanche Country*, Di Stefano retells the stages of Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier narrative with deep snow on steep slopes impeding progress, first of westward moving explorers, then trappers, then miners and settlers, and finally railroaders. By shaded terrain, the map of her subject spans the Sierras and Rockies north to Alaska, with her main stories drawn from Colorado, Utah, Washington, and British Columbia. This might be considered the first history of avalanches in America and an excellent addition to the bookshelves of avalanche buffs who already cherish Bruce Temper's *Staying Alive in Avalanche Terrain* (2001), the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service's *Avalanche Handbook* (1975), and Bernard Mergen's *Snow in America* (1999). But for historians, Di Stefano's work is of interest primarily for exposing how avalanches may, or may not, alter human lives in ways that are fundamentally differ-

ent than other erratic or marginally predictable dangers in our midst. Do avalanches represent a particularly unusual kind of historical agency, and so do they reveal special insights about human relationships with the natural world? Di Stefano's answer in seven chapters, twenty vintage photographs, and 124 pages of text is possibly yes, but probably no. While avalanches certainly represent a different kind of human hazard—usually smothering victims, say, even before freezing them—they also produce different kinds of historic records, especially records linked to litigation. Thus, more than other kinds of disasters, avalanches seem to provide rich legal trails for allowing historians to track the changing nature of blame, which is the book's most important contribution.

But it is evident after reading the first chapter about trappers and mountain men that these early periods offer scarce archival reference to avalanches, and so most attention turns to the challenges of winter life more generally. Extreme cold, deep snow, and vicious and hungry wildlife required protagonists to adapt, persevere, and reap luck to stay alive. One must infer that while Grizzly Adams occasionally found himself struggling to escape a lurching wind slab, most early travelers in these topographies quickly learned to stay clear of avalanche chutes: "Use a good guide or guidebook, bring enough supplies, and by all means do not get caught in the mountains in winter" (p. 22). The next chapter continues surveying newcomers aiming to adapt to a snow-filled mountain West, where snowshoes and "skees" were (re)invented to help doctors, mail-carriers, and itinerant preachers make their rounds. There are also tall tales in this pre-Jack London era of miners surviving fifty-foot jumps into snow drifts and cottages identifiable only by their chimneys poking through the snow. In these entertaining though mostly predictable chapters, Di Stefano largely misses an opportunity to explore how, for example, Na-

tive Americans confronted or interpreted surging rivers of snow. For Indians living at the base of Takhoma, or “White Mountain” (Mt. Rainier), one source suggests, avalanches were seen to be triggered by unfriendly or capricious supernatural beings who dwelled in the high ridges that disappeared into the foggy mists.[2] The paucity of “avalanche” appearing in the early written record should not prevent future historians from etching even larger circles of avalanche lore, because anthropological or even ecological methods can enrich our historical understanding of these winter dangers.

In subsequent chapters, Di Stefano turns harder into avalanches proper, distancing herself from the subtitle of “A History of Survival in the Mountain West.” Along the way, she reminds us that avalanches can include much more than sliding snow, such as rocks, boulders, tree stumps, or just about any other tumbling mass. In fact a questioning reader may wonder if avalanche histories must be limited to snowy climes since rock avalanches often occur on steep barren slopes, especially seismic or volcanic mountains. Alternative labels for these phenomena, such as “rock slides” or “debris flows,” suggest that “avalanche” may itself be a contested word, or else partial to northerners who consider the proper archetype as snowy. Here, one might be reminded that “avalanche” has its roots in the Old French *aval* (downhill), with English speakers, who lived in a soggy, rolling countryside and rarely witnessing such phenomena, needing to borrow the word from their neighbors across the channel. But such etymologies mattered little for the miners working at Silverton, Colorado, or Alta, Utah, where corporate interests in the late nineteenth century aimed to keep mines humming even during the thickest of snowstorms. Di Stefano skillfully illustrates how miners’ interests collided with mine-owners’ interests when harsh winters demonstrated how many lives avalanches could extinguish. Snowy disasters killed scores of alpine workers laboring in the tentacles of an industrializing America, heightening the call for workers’ rights and solidarity within mountain communities, and between heartland and hinterland. In many cases, miners also engendered their own tragedies by cutting protective forests in the blind rush to build shaft supports, construct towns, and heat houses, thereby paying little heed to George Perkins Marsh’s earlier warnings that “in Switzerland and in other snowy and mountainous countries, forests render a most important service by preventing the formation of destructive avalanches.”[3]

The strongest part of Di Stefano’s research is showcased in the book’s second half where she takes up the issue of blame, especially by dissecting killer avalanches

that led to court cases intent on determining who was responsible for the tragedies. In 1884 in Colorado near Alpine Tunnel, in 1910 in Washington near Wellington, and then in the same 1910 storm on Rogers’s Pass near Revelstoke, dozens of railroad workers or railroad passengers succumbed to walls of snow crashing over the tracks. It dawned on survivors and next of kin that railroads were not always safe to work for or to travel with, and that the Denver and Rio Grande Railway Company, the Great Northern Line, and the Canadian Pacific Railroad were at fault for poor judgment when sending up snow clearers or (in the case of the Wellington debacle) sending a passenger train over passes choked with snow. Di Stefano traces the legal history of these incidents, which in each case involve plaintiffs blaming damage and deaths on irresponsible railroad officials intent on keeping the lines open under all circumstances so as to ensure that “East may meet West” even through wintery mountain passes (p. 61). In short, these drawn-out court cases aimed to reveal whether these avalanche victims had indeed been railroaded (Richard White’s phrase in *Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America* [2012]).

Skillful teams of lawyers representing both sides demonstrated the complexity of locating disaster blame. All agreed that tumbling snow had killed and maimed, but in constructing the long chains of causation that had placed people in the way of such slides, some lawyers ended with “acts of God” while others ended with human fallibility. Were such avalanches predictable? Were such snowstorms unprecedented? Were human responses justified? Were employees or else employers ultimately at fault? In a compelling exploration of environmental legal history, Di Stefano reveals how juries and judges were split between an earlier historic era when people largely accepted their bad luck and fate, and our modern era where we assume that someone, not some circumstance, determines our destinies. By serving as an excellent case study on the development of liability law, *Encounters in Avalanche Country* provides new windows into understanding human encounters with violent natures. Even though judges in higher courts ultimately sided with the railroad companies—agreeing that deadly avalanches could not be foreseen—the drawn out testimony shows the extent to which victims could be viewed as innocents sacrificed on the altar of big business. Today, most of us are convinced that smoke-filling skies, warming climates, and rising oceans are our own darn fault—or the fault of fossil-fuel consuming peoples and their lack of restraint—rather than spontaneous earthly processes, or perhaps humankind’s innocent drive to be fruitful, mul-

tiply, and bring forth abundantly in the earth. We see in Di Stefano's avalanche trials this historic turning point when people, looking to nature, see their own human responsibilities reflecting back. Today, when we read that Italian seismologists were found guilty of manslaughter in the aftermath of L'Aquila's horrific 2009 earthquakes, because they did not adequately predict the moment when the earth would shake, we see early nodes of this growing human blame in last century's Rocky Mountain avalanches.[4]

Encounters in Avalanche Country therefore demonstrates that as historic agents, impromptu slides of snow may be rather similar to other unexpected movements of water and rocks; unstoppable forest fires or windstorms; and marginally predictable heat waves, insect swarms, crop blights, and epidemics. All such disasters inflict harm and suffering, require humans to adapt and recover, lead to explanations (natural or supernatural), and promote blame (emotional, rational, or spiritual). Yet beyond the advantages that an avalanche gives us in laying a legal paper trail, we are still waiting for a book that places disasters on a continuum from fast to slow, because natural disasters can also include soil erosion, desertification, or even glacial melting. Such perturbations to natural systems may span weeks or years, and still produce devastation. Humanity's vulnerability does not necessarily depend on nature's rate of change. And so like Rob Nixon's study about "Slow Violence" (*Slow Violence and*

the Environmentalism of the Poor [2011]), historians need to turn more attention to the causes and consequences of "slow disasters." Insights now reaped about spectacular, cataclysmic natures can help us better understand and appreciate common, ordinary natures.

Notes

[1]. Early disaster histories beyond the United States include Louis Pérez, *Winds of Change: Hurricanes and the Transformation of Nineteenth-Century Cuba* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Christian Pfister, ed., *Am Tag danach. Zur Bewältigung von Naturkatastrophen in der Schweiz 1500-2000* (Bern: Haupt Verlag, 2002); and John Dickie, John Foot, and Frank Snowden, eds., *Disastro! Disasters in Italy since 1860* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

[2]. Ted Catton, "An Administrative History of MRNP," in *Mount Rainier National Park Reader* (Seattle: Alpine Ascents International, 1995), 10, <http://www.alpineascents.com/pdf/brochures/rainier-reader.pdf>.

[3]. George Perkins Marsh, *Man and Nature* (New York: Scribner & Co., 1864), 269.

[4]. Davide Castelvecchi for Nicola Nosengo, "Italian Seismologists Appeal L'Aquila Ruling," *Nature News Blog* (blog), July 3, 2013, <http://blogs.nature.com/news/2013/03/italian-seismologists-appeal-laquila-ruling.html>.

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