

The Autobiography of John C. Van Dyke: A Personal Narrative of American Life, 1861-1931 ed. by Peter Wild.

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***The Autobiography of John C. Van Dyke: A Personal Narrative of American Life, 1861–1931* ed. by Peter Wild (review)**

David Teague

Western American Literature

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

78 Western American Literature reasonable model of an ecosystem, detailing research that classes affiliated with his Meadowcreek Project carried out on campuses in Ohio and Arkansas. By examining the sources of food, energy, water, and materials consumed by the campus community, as well as the human and ecological costs associated with them, Orr's classes sought to understand not just their places in the world, but on it—the distinction is a critical one for Orr. Such knowledge allows the university community to use its economic and political clout to foster ecologically sustainable practices. He has little patience for Allan

Bloom's Academy of Great Books, preferring (and detailing with an extensive bibliography) an interdisciplinary curriculum where students of biology and history, physics and literature will find a common language by articulating a dialectic between their various syllabi and the natural world on which their research is carried out. He seeks a pedagogy to mend the perceived schism between the theoretical and the practical, between the human thinker and the human doer (homo sapiens, homo faber, he points out) promulgated by the University. At a time when many at the front lines of the Canon Wars are demanding an inclusive curriculum that will foster an understanding of cultural difference (in its many guises), Orr's book, it seems to me, goes several steps further. The educational system he details is grounded in the most literal sense of the word, moving beyond an education where "abstraction [is] piled on top of abstraction, disconnected from tangible experience." His book is a challenge—passionate and compelling—to educators with any interest in sustainability, and it provides an indispensable resource for anyone interested in reexamining the relationships between their classrooms and the natural world.

RALPH W. BLACK
New York University
The Autobiography of John C. VanDyke: A Personal Narrative of American Life, 1861-1931. Edited by Peter Wild. (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1993. 320 pages, \$34.95.)

John VanDyke is the man who taught Americans to value their deserts. His most notable desert-pronouncement, still politically correct after ninety years, adorns the wall of West Saguario National Monument Ranger Station. "The deserts should never be reclaimed. They are the breathing-spaces of the west and should be preserved forever," he daily tells park visitors. After the Rangers read his Autobiography, they may break out the Latex-Enamel Wall Satin. VanDyke's Autobiography, completed in 1931 but published only this year, is not the autobiography of a desert rat. Instead it profiles a complex and sometimes deceptive man maintaining a fierce and paradoxical peace with his late Victorian America. VanDyke's connection with Andrew Carnegie, only a part of Reviews 79 his lifelong investment in upper-class society, all but leaps snarling from the book. A close friendship with the man whose U. S. Steel destroyed the Mesabi Range is disorienting to find in one of our four most important nature writers. It is one of several such disorienting things in the Autobiography. Peter Wild, in his thoroughly-researched introduction and notes, delivers the bitterest pill: VanDyke's solo journey across the desert was a wilderness fake; he "likely saw the desert through the windows of trains and hotels." Wild is almost certainly right, for the Autobiography profiles a man acclimated to up-East culture, not to wilderness. The book raises hard questions about the relationship of "wilderness" to "privilege" in our culture. VanDyke was an independently wealthy art critic. He had the time and the money to tour the desert by train, and, invested in "America life" as he was, he had cultivated the aesthetic sensibility necessary to write about it like no Anglo-American before him. But ironically, in cultivating his sensibility, VanDyke had also cultivated a taste for luxury that he could not relinquish even for the wild desert, which he truly loved. In all fairness, there is no need to paint over VanDyke at the Saguario Ranger Station. VanDyke was and should remain a kind of hero, for he taught America to see its beautiful deserts. But he was no ecological saint. His relationship to the desert was a conflicted one involving Pullman cars and first-class hotels. It was conflicted in the way all our desert relationships are these days, when we ride on paved loops through our favorite wildernesses. VanDyke's *The Desert* introduced the wild Southwest to Americans in 1901. His Autobiography presents a Southwest, and a version of the United States to go with it, that Americans in 1994 would do well to consider.

DAVID TEAGUE
University of Houston-Downtown
Assembling California. By John McPhee. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1993. 304 pages, \$21.00.) "People look upon the natural world as if all motions of the past had set...

reasonable model of an ecosystem, detailing research that classes affiliated with his Meadowcreek Project carried out on campuses in Ohio and Arkansas. By examining the sources of food, energy, water, and materials consumed by the campus community, as well as the human and ecological costs associated with them, Orr's classes sought to understand not just their places in the world, but on it—the distinction is a critical one for Orr. Such knowledge allows the university community to use its economic and political clout to foster ecologically sustainable practices.

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