vironmental Historian”; Char Miller’s contribution about environment-related documentary films, “Green Screen: Projections of American Environmental Culture,” undergoes the same unaccountable treatment, appearing in the running header as “Environmental Culture.” Line up several such generic abbreviations (as this volume does) and the potential for using the running header to locate the article you seek is effectively squandered. Also unsettling are the many errors a thorough proofreading should have caught; e.g., “whither” for “wither” in one article, or the five-page separation of the name of the “Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act,” from the first use of its acronym, CERCLA, in an admirable Craig E. Colten article on hazardous wastes remediation.

As its editors note, this volume is the first book of its kind, and its fifteen chapters amply demonstrate the many fruitful intersections between public and environmental history today in the United States. Complementary volumes will surely follow. Some will take up the evident challenge of addressing the public/environmental history interface outside the U.S., including in developing nations, where these topics often play out in strikingly different ways.2

Catherine A. Christen

Smithsonian Institution


Just as at least one middle-aged public historian became captivated with history through repeated readings of _Bugle, A Dog of Old Yorktown_ as a five-year-old in the waning days of the Eisenhower Presidency, Robert M. Utley can trace his own love of history back to viewings of the Warner Brothers epic _They Died With Their Boots On_ as a twelve-year-old in the early days of World War II. That film inspired in Utley a lifelong fascination with the Battle of Little Bighorn and the life of George Armstrong Custer. Utley’s memoirs, _Custer and Me_, show how that youthful fixation evolved into a career as one of the preeminent scholars in public history and one of the leading historians of the American West.

Utley played a key role in shaping the field that became known as public

1. Colten (an urban geographer) is also editor of the volume featured in Gorman’s essay, _Transforming New Orleans and Its Environs: Centuries of Change_, author of _An Unnatural Metropolis: Wresting New Orleans from Nature_, and one of the environmental history practitioners interviewed about Katrina and New Orleans environmental history. He has been writing a blog about New Orleans since Katrina; see http://www.lsu.edu/lsupress/Home/InTheNews/Blog.htm
2. See also _The Public Historian_ 26, no. 1 (Winter 2004), Environmental History as Public History, a special issue guest edited by Lisa Mighetto and Catherine Christen; a follow-up issue focused on developing countries is planned for Spring 2009.
history. He began in one of the earliest types of public history jobs—as a National Park Service (NPS) ranger in the late 1940s and early 1950s, providing historical information to tourists visiting what was then called the Custer National Battlefield. Later, as an Army officer in the mid-1950s, Utley was assigned to another program that helped pioneer public history: the Historical Section of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. That was where he truly learned his craft, producing historical studies that the Joint Chiefs were able to use in military planning. Utley writes that the talented historians in the section both guided and shredded his work, and “taught me more about historical method and clear expository writing than I had ever learned in graduate school” (pp. 54–56).

It was upon returning to the NPS after his discharge from the Army that Utley had his greatest influence on public history. Between 1959 and 1980, Utley advanced the NPS history programs as he advanced through the NPS hierarchy. As the first Regional Historian in the NPS Santa Fe office, he brought a new emphasis to historical studies in a NPS region where historical programs had long been overshadowed by archeological programs. Returning to Washington to become NPS Chief Historian and then Assistant Director, Utley established a strong historical research program and played a central role in developing and implementing the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) of 1966. NHPA had a galvanizing impact for public history at both the federal and state levels, as it created the National Register of Historic Places and paved the way for a network of State Historic Preservation Offices throughout the United States.

_Custer and Me_ surveys the whole of Utley’s career in history, from his graduate training and early focus on Custer, through his busy and sometimes stormy years as a federal historian, to what most public and academic historians alike would regard as the nirvana of being able to research and write history of his own choosing full time. Utley shares both fond recollections and candid assessments of the historians, NPS administrators, Custer loyalists, and Native American activists with whom he worked and sometimes fought. He describes his development as a historian and the evolution of his interpretive approach—particularly with regard to Custer and the Battle of Little Bighorn, where he found himself laboring to defend well-documented and closely-reasoned interpretation against shrill, emotional, and ahistorical assertions emanating from advocates posing as historians on either extreme of an increasingly contentious debate. And while the volume is not an autobiography as such, Utley laces his narrative with considerable detail about his personal life, and how it affected his professional life.

Looking back upon his career, Utley reflects upon two dichotomies that would be familiar to any public historian: first, the tension between being a historian and being a government employee; and, second, the twin (and sometimes conflicting) goals of producing history for mass audiences and producing history for scholarly audiences.

As to the first dichotomy, Utley asserts that he always regarded himself as
“a historian first and a Park Service official second” (p. 62). He never explicitly explains what that means, but from the discussion it seems he meant that he never compromised methods or shaded interpretation in performing Park Service jobs. What he did not mean was that he put his own agenda as a historian above agency policy or chain of command. On the contrary, he adhered scrupulously to regulations and became a master of working within the system. And throughout the book, he is bitingly critical of Park Service officials who thought that they knew better than the Park Service itself. He lashes out at superintendents and regional directors who “did as they pleased without regard for official Service policy” (pp. 132–33, 144–45), at archeologists who were “disdainful of authority” (p. 63), and at least one region that “boasted a tradition of doing things its own way” (p. 63). What concerns Utley in particular was that too many managers in the 1960s and 1970s resisted Park Service policy on historic preservation.

Utley is also caustic about trends in the 1970s to turn historical interpretation into pseudo-historical entertainment, to give seasonal park rangers platforms to editorialize about historical themes they did not comprehend, and to permit publicity-driven wars for “symbolic possession” (pp. 150, 204) to overwhelm serious historiographical debate. Utley struggled fiercely against those developments. He probably won more battles than he lost, but he shows that he did not emerge unscathed by relating the harrowing tale of how his own historical analysis was completely trumped by an NPS graphic designer’s use of inflammatory images in an official publication about the Battle of Little Bighorn.

Nevertheless, it was Utley’s adherence to historic method and refusal to dilute his arguments that helped him to maintain his credibility as a historian and successfully handle the second dichotomy of writing for both mass and scholarly audiences. As Custer and Me demonstrates, Utley is an excellent and very accessible writer, whose style of narrative history appeals to nonspecialists. Yet he is also a careful scholar, whose well-documented publications, prominent involvement in the Western Historical Association, and “conspicuous presence on college campuses” (p. 175) enabled him to overcome academic suspicions of official or public historians. Thus, Utley was able to plant a foot firmly “in each of two worlds rarely bridged by historians” (p. 175).

When Robert Utley first signed on with the National Park Service, government historians concentrated mainly on history of the commemorative or “triumphalist” variety. In the decades since then, government historians moved far beyond that, into such areas as serious historical analysis, research in support of on-going programs, and historical preservation. Utley’s career mirrored the growth and maturity of public history. His memoirs thus trace not only the arc of his life and career, but also the history of his profession.

John W. Roberts

National Park Service