of the essays in this volume offer helpful advice and point to the additional resources necessary to accomplish this important task.

National Museum of American History


During the 1960s and early 1970s, the United States experienced what historians consider to be the birth of the modern environmental movement. Environmental consciousness swept the country as Americans noted with concern the rise of pollution and the disappearance of open space in the face of rapid postwar development. On top of that, more Americans than ever wanted to spend their leisure time outside in the very areas under threat. The timing, Kathy Mengak points out, could not have been better for leading one of the nation’s most important and visible conservation agencies: the National Park Service. In Reshaping Our National Parks and Their Guardians: The Legacy of George B. Hartzog Jr., her immensely readable biography of the agency’s director from 1964 to 1972, Mengak demonstrates how a combination of fortuitous timing and Hartzog’s personality and skill resulted in the largest National Park System expansion in history—in its holdings and its accessibility to minorities, women, and urban Americans. Mengak rightly points out that Hartzog’s tenure deserves notice for his critical role in shaping the agency’s vision and direction, and her rendering of his story provides valuable insights for public historians.

Mengak is an academic advisor at the University of Georgia with a background in recreation and leisure programs. This biography started as a doctoral dissertation at Clemson University, where she received her Ph.D. in parks, recreation, and tourism management. The work reflects her background in both its content and orientation toward a public audience. Although Mengak’s book provides a useful contribution to the academic environmental history literature by highlighting a previously underappreciated subject, she does not explicitly address an academic audience. Instead, her work’s framing and her accessible writing style have the potential to bring Hartzog’s accomplishments—and failures—to the attention of a wide range of people interested in American history, environmental issues, resource management, and public service more broadly. A deeper engagement with academic works would have only expanded the book’s already wide reach by providing a broader context and source base, and sharpening its contribution to a crowded field of works on modern environmentalism, the Great Society, and preservation policy.

Indeed, the work relies heavily on Hartzog himself, an emphasis Mengak recognizes and consciously chose. When she decided to make him the study of her dissertation, she focused on interviewing him because of his ill health
and advanced age. Over the course of twelve years, until his death, Mengak conducted numerous interviews. Relying extensively on these oral histories, which yielded over six hundred pages of transcripts, she captured Hartzog’s voice and passions in ways other sources could not, and provides an example of how to effectively use what can often be a tricky primary source. Although Mengak consulted numerous secondary and primary sources in addition to the oral histories (as evidenced by her selected bibliography), the oral histories clearly constituted the heart of her work. The interviews will provide a valuable resource for future public historians and Mengak has done a great service in conducting them.

Although the oral histories are one of the work’s greatest strengths, they also result in some of the book’s weaknesses, mainly by limiting the text’s source base and perspective. For example, Mengak often turned to Hartzog’s friendly contemporaries, including Interior Secretary Stewart Udall, (1961-1969) to verify claims Hartzog made, relying on their memories and reminiscences instead of turning to other sources. Her main archival resource, the George B. Hartzog Jr. Papers, contains a wide variety of material, including government documents, media accounts, letters and other correspondence, all selected by Hartzog himself. This self-edited archive in and of itself is not a problem, but Mengak recognizes that she did not consult enough of Hartzog’s critics. Having more of those perspectives, she acknowledges, would have provided a better balance (7). On many occasions, she refers to the fierce criticism and opposition Hartzog faced as he pushed through controversial reforms and sought to expand the agency, but does not specify exactly who was criticizing, and in what capacity, relying instead on vague phrases, such as: “others feared,” “critics failed,” and “many worried” (118-119). Providing more evidence and specificity to back up claims of criticism would have strengthened the work.

These observations should not, however, detract from what is a well written and richly rendered work about a complex, dynamic, and influential public servant who has left a lasting legacy. Perhaps one of the most important contributions for public historians is Mengak’s portrayal of Hartzog’s struggles to enact and direct public history policy through the National Park Service’s programs and sites. Hartzog loved politics, and his skill in creating allies on Capitol Hill helped him to advocate for his agency, to find funding, and to shape legislation in favor of the Park Service’s preservation mission, including adding new historical sites and influencing the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. Mengak captures these struggles and successes, from which we can all learn, demonstrating how Hartzog shaped the ways we celebrate and honor history in this country and the difference that public service can make.

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The views expressed above are the author’s and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of State or the U.S. government.