

Lisa M. Benton, *The Presidio: From Army Post to National Park*. Boston, Mass.: Northeastern University Press, 1998. 277 pp.; ISBN: 1-55553-335-3; 28.50 cloth.

Author Lisa Benton describes her new book, *The Presidio: From Army Post to National Park* as a 'biography of place,' a tale of an area infused with meaning and importance for a number of related reasons. Chief amongst those reasons is the connection between humans and the environment in America, between the land as nature in its purest sense, and culture and society as an artificial construct that must exist in harmony with the natural elements. It is a remarkable testament to the author that the story of a strip of land on the western fringe of San Francisco can act as a template for the exhaustive rehearsal of so many ideas about the geographical development of the United States, but this book manages that feat admirably.

For the tale of the Presidio is one of growth, neglect, rebirth and recreation; a rise and fall and rise that mirrors in its own way the passing into maturity of the land, the fortification, and the urban experience that is both Californian and American history. Benton's narrative is a thorough one that builds on the Spanish and Mexican periods in California and displays the strategic growth of the military installation that was the Presidio, particularly in the Civil War era. She proceeds to describe how the Gilded Age reforms of the later nineteenth century brought gold, the railroads and prosperity to San Francisco, but also brought the transcendental solace that had been sought in the words of Thoreau and Emerson. The Presidio emerged as a haven for recreational redress and, as Benton says, 'an antidote to urban life,' whose pressures had begun to crowd in on the population. It was the Presidio and the army that would provide refuge and reassurance in the aftermath of the city's great earthquake of 1906, and World War One saw the army post establish itself as a major training and strategic centre.

World War Two, somewhat surprisingly, did not have the same effect, and when Harry Truman's suggestion that the new United Nations headquarters should be located at the Presidio was passed up (the UN charter having been signed in the city), the future for the installation looked uncertain. It is this story then, of later twentieth century urban renewal, of the transformation from military post to recreational public space, and of the social and political battles for an aesthetic wilderness within the city, that drives Benton's personal observations of the Presidio's metamorphosis in the post-war years. The military bureaucracy, Congressional (specifically Republican) opposition to the publicly quoted sum of \$660 million to transform the installation, and the city's involvement in plans that in time became the Grand Vision for the site, are all well documented and outlined.

What emerges is a philosophical argument between nature and culture, between city and park, as Benton herself says. The social debate within San Francisco encompassing more than twenty five years since the creation and promotion of the GGNRA (Golden Gate National Recreation Area) by California representative Phil Burton, has accomplished nothing short of an appraisal of civilization itself. Benton's thesis is at pains to stress that the Presidio's inclusion in the select band of national parks has challenged the comfortable assumptions about the protection of 'wilderness' and what it is that 'nature' actually represents in modern America. Architecture, military history and environmental pollution controls are only a few of the topics that have also swirled around the debate about the

future of the Presidio. To the author these are critical questions that need asking and rightly need to be contemplated in the next century; by urban geographers, sociologists, historians and politicians to name but a few. With clarity and wisdom this book confronts those issues and charts the way towards an intriguing future for the landscape not just of California but of the whole United States.

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