

Jedediah S. Rogers. *Roads in the Wilderness:
Conflict in Canyon Country.*

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Reviewed by Brian Q. Cannon

In this superb, award-winning study, Jedediah S. Rogers, state historian and co-managing editor of the *Utah Historical Quarterly*, traces the history of conflicts over roads in Utah's backcountry. This book is a must-read for anyone who identifies with and frequents southern Utah's rugged canyonlands.

While roads facilitate travel and commerce, Rogers plumbs their cultural significance as "expressions of ideology" (6). Masterfully he demonstrates that roads are "objects of considerable social and political significance that represent a way of life and livelihood" (134). Adherents to traditional, utilitarian views of the land often celebrate roads because they facilitate economic enterprises. Conversely, some who value wild land primarily as a source of spiritual renewal tend to regard backcountry roads and the traffic they enable as unwelcome intrusions. Many western historians have explored the tension between utilitarian and preservationist worldviews, which are often described as a clash between Old Western attitudes and the New Western sensibilities, but Rogers is one of the few to examine this polarity primarily through the lens of roads. Although he focuses on Utah, his case studies indirectly illuminate controversies over public land usage throughout the West.

Rogers begins with the tale of the road built and traversed by Utah's Hole-in-the-Rock pioneers of 1879–80. It was an incongruous road through a slick-rock wilderness that symbolized Mormon settlers' determination to subdue the physical landscape. He contrasts that road-building saga with the fanciful explorations of the adjacent Kaiparowits Plateau by Clyde Kluckhohn, a Princeton University student, in the 1920s. The budding anthropologist exulted at the magnificence and solitude of the mesa and gushed, "NO ROADS, NO BUILT TRAILS" (26).

Next the author develops a similar contrast between two larger-than-life figures in the cultural memory of southeastern Utah: writer Edward Abbey, who famously derided paved roads in his classic meditation *Desert Solitaire*, and Calvin Black, a San Juan County commissioner and entrepreneur who championed tourist development and road construction. Admitting that these two complex men were not really “Manichaeian opposites” (60), Rogers nevertheless creatively uses them as symbols of the differences between environmentalists and developers.

The heart of the book consists of five admirably researched and documented case studies of road-based conflicts. One case surrounds the controversy over designating Negro Bill Canyon near Moab as a wilderness under the 1964 Wilderness Act. Because the act identified the absence of roads as a fundamental characteristic of wilderness, opponents of the wilderness proposal sought to document public use and improvement of a road crisscrossing the canyon.

In a second fascinating case study, Rogers traces a drawn-out tug-of-war in the 1980s over proposed improvements to the Burr Trail, a steep dirt road linking Boulder, Utah, with Lake Powell. The sixty-six-mile road, an old Indian and ranching trace that had been upgraded during the Cold War by the Atomic Energy Commission, attracted national attention when the state and county proposed paving it in order to facilitate tourism. Plans to pave the trail mobilized local conservationists, including the recently formed Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance and the Utah Wilderness Association. Rogers’s interview with a much-maligned figure in the controversy, Grant Johnson, helps to correct elements of the story that have been misunderstood. The case study also showcases divisions among Utah environmentalists over strategy and objectives. Rogers convincingly argues that the conflict over paving the trail, which devolved into a bitter, demonizing feud, “was more an ideological contest than a debate about the virtues of a paved road” (110).

Another case study involves a battle in the 1980s over a freeway that would have bisected the Book Cliffs, linking Vernal with Interstate 70 at Crescent Junction. Energy companies enthusiastically promoted the plan because it would have facilitated extraction and transportation of oil and natural gas. Through this case study, Rogers illuminates the rising political power of environmentalists in Moab, which was becoming a mecca for mountain bikers, river runners, and hikers. These recreation-conscious voters stymied the proposed road and ousted the

Grand County commissioners who championed it, even though support for the road persisted in Uintah County to the north.

Rogers next explores the contentious question of county rights to old roads on public lands, using the creation of the Grand Staircase–Escalante National Monument as the backdrop for his story. His interesting account reveals a little-known detail regarding the monument’s designation: shortly before President Bill Clinton announced the monument, Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt asked William Smart of the Grand Canyon Trust, one of a handful of Utahns who had been invited to attend the announcement, to suggest ways that the administration could make the designation more acceptable in the Beehive State. As he describes southern Utahns’ opposition to the monument, the author capably highlights divisions among them: some believed it best to compromise with the federal government on access to roads within the monument, while others wanted the county to legally and practically contest every road within the boundaries. Rogers also skillfully highlights the cultural disconnect between wilderness advocates and local opponents of the monument; supporters attributed local opposition to “a naked material self-interest” and failed to realize that the paramount issue for many was the freedom to “move about the landscape as they pleased” (152).

Rogers’s final case study explores access to off-road vehicle trails in Arch Canyon, a section of Comb Wash in San Juan County. In 1989, Jeep-Chrysler designated this region as the site for its Jeep Jamboree USA. Unlike the other case studies, this one involves blazing new trails and roads with new technology. The off-road vehicle, Rogers points out, “is the modern version of the horse” (163).

Roads in the Wilderness is an impressively researched study backed by thirty densely packed pages of endnotes. Rogers incorporates a wide array of sources, including oral histories, minutes of public meetings, records of state and federal agencies, documents from county archives, and the papers of organizations including the Utah Wilderness Association and the Utah Chapter of the Sierra Club. Although the source base is impressive, it might have been further enriched by additional oral history interviews, assuming that participants were willing to talk. For instance, the case study regarding Negro Bill Canyon could have been deepened if activists such as Dave Forman and James Catlin had been interviewed.

The book is a pleasure to read. Rogers is a masterful stylist whose prose reflects careful craftsmanship. Consider his likening of roads that “imprint the land” to “veins [that] mark a leaf” (4). The book sparkles with delightful anecdotes, including quotations from a dedicatory

prayer offered when a major road was completed in southeastern Utah (who knew that roads were blessed like church buildings?) and a heated interchange between Bureau of Land Management staffers and Calvin Black at a wilderness study open house in Blanding.

Rogers declares that his “intent is not to be polemic,” and he largely succeeds. He avoids caricatures and emphasizes the moral complexity of the individuals and issues. “The sides are not clearly or morally drawn,” he cautions (8). But this is not a neutral, dispassionate study. Rogers voices a moderate but unabashedly environmentalist position. After a fairly balanced treatment of the pro- and anti-wilderness positions in the Negro Bill Canyon dispute, Rogers opines that “wilderness has been and ought to be still considered in places . . . that yet bear the human imprint” (86). In other words, old roads should not disqualify a landscape from wilderness designation. Elsewhere in the volume he editorializes, “We need these wilderness areas to keep us rooted” (184). After an evenhanded account of the fight over plans to pave a highway through the Book Cliffs, he tips the scales in favor of the road’s opponents by observing that “nonrenewable resource development is very often shortsighted” (132).

Although some readers may wish for less advocacy, others may feel that Rogers is too restrained. In the final analysis, he champions the moderate environmentalist position that roads are “desired yet lamented” (170). He finds some merit in the paving of the Burr Trail and supports maintaining backcountry roads that serve a higher purpose than entertainment or political grandstanding, such as fire suppression or intercommunity transportation. Most significantly, Rogers chides conservationists who have overlooked or discounted “the deeply held cultural connection that many locals have with the land” (183).

Rogers posits that environmental preservation can promote the health and well-being of rural Utah settlements and can revitalize “local culture and heritage” (183). This type of win-win situation seems highly desirable but difficult to attain; it would require substantial concessions on all sides and the leadership of someone with as much sensitivity to both sides as Rogers possesses.

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