

Displays of Power: Capitalism and Paleontology in the Long Gilded Age

Rieppel, Lukas. *Assembling the Dinosaur: Fossil Hunters, Tycoons, and the Making of a Spectacle*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019. 336 pp. \$29.95 (hardcover), ISBN 978-0-67-473758-7.

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doi:10.1017/S1537781419000902

Lukas Rieppel's *Assembling the Dinosaur* is a beautifully written history of science, culture, and economics in the United States between the 1870s and the 1930s, a period Rieppel calls "the Long Gilded Age." This stylish, meticulously sourced synthesis will serve as a useful resource to scholars and students looking for an introduction to the era's broader themes.

In six chapters, Rieppel guides readers through various settings in which paleontology and capitalism intersected. He begins in the field, describing, in the first chapter, how paleontology developed in concert with the extractive economy of the American West. The once-gentle and genteel practice of fossil hunting, Rieppel suggests, became a ruthless culture of market negotiations in the 1870s and 1880s United States, one that increasingly resembled the sharp-elbowed, double-dealing culture of the West's mining markets.

In the next four chapters, Rieppel takes readers to natural history museums in New York, Pittsburgh, Chicago, and other cities. He chronicles how Gilded Age elites used fossils to inflate their own social status, assert their civic liberality, and demonstrate the size and scale of American wealth. In Chapter Three, he pays special attention to Andrew Carnegie's famous *Diplodocus carnegii*, citing the ways the acquisition, replication, and international distribution of this "unreasonably developed monster," to quote the British press, stood in for the clout of a nation still self-conscious about its power. Later, he uses the Field Museum in Chicago to offer a tidy overview of the way that scientific practitioners and cultural institutions adopted the bureaucratic practices pioneered by the era's corporations, while insisting on their independence from the seamier sides of the marketplace.

Rieppel ends the book by exploring the role dinosaurs played in popular imagination and public culture. In Chapter Five, he seeks to overturn the long-established narrative that public displays of dinosaurs, especially the *Tyrannosaurus rex*, served to embody the ruthless capitalist ideologies embraced by the men who found the fossils and funded their exhibition. Paleontologists and titans of industry, he argues, were actually more interested in the lesson derived from *Tyrannosaurus rex*'s extinction—namely, that it eventually gave way to species distinguished by brainy cooperation rather than brawny ferocity. Rieppel's last chapter follows dinosaurs out of museum halls and onto the silver screen, into the department store and the world's fair, and through the pages of various magazines and newspapers. As merchants and producers traded on the spectacle of

dinosaurs, museums became more invested in safeguarding their scientific reputations, he notes, and placed ever heavier emphasis on having “the real thing” in their halls. The conclusion is one of the high points of the book: Rieppel’s thoughtful discussion of historical and contemporary Chinese paleontology and the relationship between Asian and American science and economics introduces material that will be new even to experts in this field.

Less convincing is Rieppel’s assertion that the science of paleontology and capitalism enjoy a special relationship and that putting the two categories in conversation illuminates the history of each in new ways. Fossils seem to have been governed by precisely the same cultural and economic dynamics as Old Master paintings, Egyptian antiquities, or any number of other collectibles popular in the period he examines. There are smaller overreaches: while the paleontologists at the American Museum of Natural History in New York were certainly preoccupied with evolutionary progress, natural history museums played host to a jostling crowd of evolutionary theories in this era, and museum exhibits trafficked in multiple ideas and ideologies simultaneously. In a book as rich and well-researched as this one, Rieppel would have done well to acknowledge that part of *T. rex*’s great appeal was its ability to serve as a metaphor for many (and sometimes contradictory) narratives of science, paleontological or dismal.

But these are minor points. Chronicling the simultaneous production and reception of representation is always a tricky business, and for the most part, Rieppel handles these challenges deftly. Though historians of science, capitalism, and museums won’t find many new archival discoveries or bold interpretive directions in it, *Assembling the Dinosaur* is a treat to read, and Rieppel’s expertise in the archival material and the relevant historiography of science is plain. This thoroughly enjoyable book is an excellent addition to the reading lists of scholars eager to acquaint themselves with the history of science in the “Long Gilded Age.”

A Very Long Divorce: Dissolving a Marriage in a Progressive Era Courtroom

Elson, Jean. *Gross Misbehavior and Wickedness: A Notorious Divorce in Early Twentieth-Century America*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2018. 325 pp. \$99.50 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1-4399-1390-1; \$34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4399-1391-8.

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doi:10.1017/S1537781419000914

Jean Elson’s *Gross Misbehavior and Wickedness* profiles the tumultuous union between James Wilson Grimes Walker and Nina Chinn Walker, a high-society couple who wed