

to indulge in sentimentality or to mourn the dead. In a brief series of encounters that suggests a meeting of Isaac Bashevis Singer's *Enemies*, *A Love Story* and *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS* (a 1974 exploitation movie Max finds disappointingly tame), he imagines Ilse Koch, "The Bitch of Buchenwald," administering sadomasochistic beatings to a male prisoner's private parts. Horrendous? Yes, but also, oddly, no. Staring into the face of doom, the prisoner is drawn to the pain for the intensity of feeling—that reminder of life—that it provides.

Jacobson will be criticized, like Roth, for his stunted treatment of women. And *Kalooki Nights* does sag

a bit in its failure to differentiate the unsmiling spouses or give as much weight to the females as the males. But his attentiveness to women—the way they look, move, talk—has a way of transcending his reductivism. "With every question," Jacobson writes of one of his mother's kalooki opponents,

her lovely, always somewhat startled face finding more and more fantastical contortions of vitality, her orange eyes seeming to start from their sockets, first one and then the other of her nearly Negroid nostrils flaring, her mouth so full and expressive that sometimes you would have sworn that in her need for volubility she had found an extra lip.

In his 1993 nonfiction saga, *Roots Schmoots: Journeys Among Jews*, Jacobson describes his "progression from thinking I must have been a switched baby, so Jewish didn't I feel, to knowing myself to be so exclusively Jewish that I barely had room to know anything else." *Kalooki Nights* is not only Philip Rothian and Mordecai Richlerian in its virtuosic Jewish-intellectual irreverence, it's Lenny Bruceian and even Sacha Baron Cohenian as well. A major advance from the ribald hijinks of early Jacobson novels such as *Coming from Behind* (1983), it has an adrenaline relevance to the here and now, not to mention the here (as in America) and there (as in Britain). •

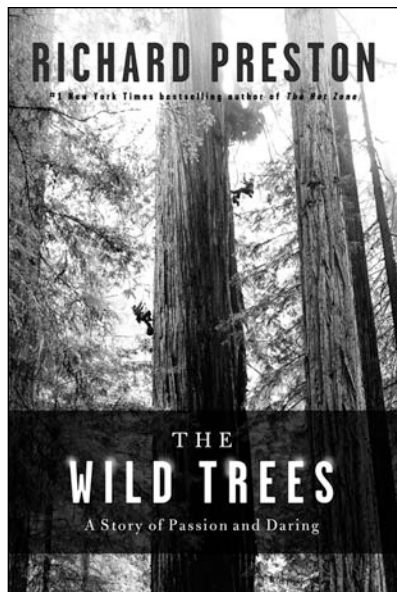
## SLOW AND SLOWER

*The Wild Trees: A Story of Passion and Daring*, by Richard Preston  
Random House, 320 pages, \$25.95

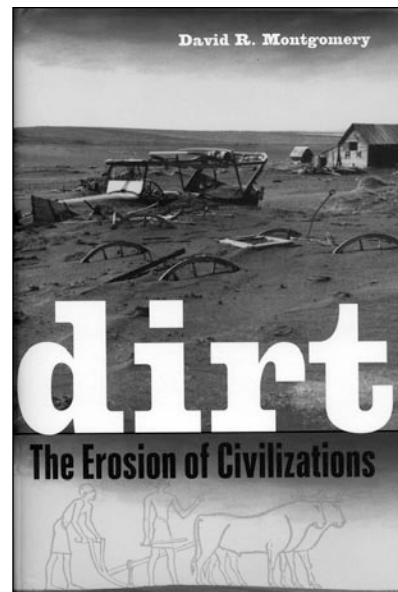
*Dirt: The Erosion of Civilizations*, by David R. Montgomery  
University of California Press, 295 pages, \$24.95

Reviewed by Jonathan Boyd

Some of the Coast Redwood trees growing today in northern California most likely sprouted before the time of Christ. At a height of over 300 feet and with trunks over 20 feet thick, many of them reach a third of the way up the Sears Tower. They're hard to bring down (without a giant saw, that is) because their roots interlock with



their neighbors' into huge mats. When a giant does finally fall in a wildfire, say, or in a violent storm, the tips of its roots send up new sprouts, forming a "fairy ring," which—in just a few thousand



years—can become an entire grove of new giants. Coast Redwoods are so remarkable and distinctive that the people who find these giants give them individual names like Kronos and Adventure and, left

alone, almost all will outlive their discoverers.

But there's a paradoxical fragility in this durability. Not despite its long life but actually because of it, an individual redwood is vulnerable. Its loss is, in one blow, a loss of the two to three thousand years it took to grow. Things happen so slowly in the redwood canopy that some of the unique lichens found there begin to grow only once a tree has reached its thousandth birthday. There are places, hundreds of feet up, where thickets of huckleberry bushes grow in gardens of soil three feet deep. A redwood's longevity is almost unimaginable to humans, and its contribution to the world's ecosystem often goes unnoticed for this very reason.

The same paradoxical fragility and durability holds true of soil found both in the redwood canopy and on the ground below. Soil is formed over literally geologic time spans as bedrock weathers through wind and rain into its component minerals. Plants and animals enrich these minerals with organic material. An inch of soil can take between 200 and 4,000 years to accumulate—and this is not a process anyone has figured out how to accelerate. Amazing, then, when you consider that soil erosion can happen so comparatively rapidly: that same inch of soil can easily be swept away in a single day (as happened repeatedly in the mid-1930s Dust Bowl). Even under normal agricultural practices, an inch of soil loss in 25 years is considered acceptable by the USDA. Too bad that might be 50 times faster than that same inch can form again.

Each of these natural processes—the growth of the world's tallest plant and the weathering of barren rock into rich soil—happen very, very slowly. And two new books shed light not only far back into the

natural histories of both the redwoods and the soil, but also into the complex ways humans interact with these ancients of nature.

Richard Preston, a longtime *New Yorker* contributor and the author of the best-seller *The Hot Zone*, brings his distinctive voice to *The Wild Trees: A Story of Passion and Daring*. And where does this passion and daring lie? It's seen in both the dedication of scientists who study the towering Coast Redwoods found in northern California and Oregon, and also in those who work hard to preserve the remaining redwood forests. But the science and the environmentalism wound through these pages aren't where the real action lies; it's in the tree climbing.

The "wild trees" of the title doesn't indicate their standing in the wilderness; it's climbers' slang for a tree never before climbed. Preston writes, "Humans are the only primates that do not spend time in trees," but in fact, his whole book belies the generalization: some humans do—a lot. Preston's book arose from his budding passion for tree climbing and not the other way around. As a result, he brings to his writing an authentic feeling for the urges and fears in the gut of the tree climber.

Reading his anecdotes of adventures high off the ground, I basked in my own happy memories of hours spent aloft as a boy, whether in Mrs. Mulligan's spruce, in the virgin white pine my brother and I named Crow's Nest, in my grandparents' apple orchard, or even in that backyard maple that hovered inconveniently over a spiked fence. And Preston has thought much about our instincts for and against arboreal exploration:

Humans are the only primates I know of that have an inborn fear of heights. Other primates, when they are frightened, instinctively

run up a tree, where they feel safe and at home. Hominids who felt insecure in trees, more afraid of heights, and more willing . . . to move out across open ground may have had a better chance of surviving and producing offspring. Open ground would have seemed as terrifying to many primates as heights do to many humans.

His point is that we reached a new page in our primal history when Big Mama Evolution stuck her head out the window and hollered, "You kids get down from there! You'll break your necks!"

Preston's own experiments in the New Jersey woods and his growing infatuation for tree climber's gear drew him into the orbit of a legend in technical tree climbing, Steve Sillett. A botanist and pioneer in climbing redwoods, Sillett stands at the center of *The Wild Trees*, along with a cast of supporting characters that includes Michael Taylor, a man with a passion for discovering the world's tallest tree (which he eventually did, just last year), and other assorted friends, colleagues, and lovers. It's the mission of this book to give voice to these people and tell some of their truly amazing adventures, and Preston does that well. His narrative voice is strong (though regrettably repetitive and sometimes stiffly didactic), and he has the good sense and the skill to let his subjects' voices come through, too, by telling stories in the way friends would tell them among themselves. But do we really need the technical play-by-play of how Sillett and Marie Antoine had sex high up in the branches of a tree named Windigo? Probably not, but that's really only the most extreme example of the intimate detail Preston relates.

In the process, naturally, we learn a lot about the ecology of trees, lichens, copepods, even leeches; but if this is an environmentalist's book,

that's chiefly because it conveys the rush of adventure inherent in pushing through the undergrowth in search of what's still unknown in nature and then reveling in its sheer existence, the delight of knowing that "there was something wonderful still to be found on the earth."

Given the intimacy of the book—the way its pages make up a kind of scrapbook of the lives of Sillett, Taylor, Antoine, and others—it's especially disappointing that there are no photographs included. If, as you read, you want pictures of redwoods (and you're going to, I guarantee), I recommend James Balog's innovative book of photographs, *Tree* (2004). There are three useful maps and several fine line drawings in *The Wild Trees*, but they're no substitute for portraits, of people and trees alike.

While Preston's is the kind of history that verges on diary or at least journalism, *Dirt: The Erosion of Civilizations* is a more conventional kind, though it deals with an unconventional subject. The geomorphologist David Montgomery brings us a longitudinal survey of the agricultural impact on soil health around the world. Shall we admit it takes all kinds? Preston is a tree geek; Montgomery is a dirt geek.

After an introduction to the basics of soil formation (including the story of Charles Darwin's late-career obsession with earthworms), Montgomery catalogs the ways that agriculture has consistently stripped the soil from the land. The argument implicit in the subtitle is one he's careful enough to hedge with disclaimers, but it clearly forms his rhetorical thrust: take better care of your soils or your civilization is doomed.

So don't read this book for the kind of exhilaration you'll get from

*The Wild Trees*. Montgomery would like you to add soil degradation to the list of end-of-the-world scenarios you're already supposed to be worrying about, right up there with global warming, oil depletion, overpopulation, avian flu, and death by asteroid.

• • •

Shall we admit it takes  
all kinds? Preston is a  
tree geek; Montgomery  
is a dirt geek.

• • •

(Just as soil is more elemental than either guns, germs, or steel, Montgomery would say its impact for good or ill is felt even more fundamentally than those factors explored in Jared Diamond's 1997 bestseller.) It strikes me as unlikely, however, with apocalypse fatigue widespread already, that this book will achieve anything like a high profile in the popular mind.

And that's too bad, because popular perception is a big part of the (unsexy) problem of soil infertility. Montgomery demonstrates—with a compelling drumbeat of historical parallels from ancient Rome and China to Europe's 18th-century colonies through to today's Amazon and Iowa—how soil exhaustion and erosion happen slowly but relentlessly, unnoticed over generations until it's too late. (Montgomery even points to the squandering of soil fertility as a major cause of the American Civil War.) The cruel irony here is that soil erosion happens so slowly that we humans are ill equipped to perceive it; even an attentive farmer doesn't necessarily notice the catastrophe happening in extreme

slow motion with every spring rain. Montgomery points out that we've been warned before, so how ironic if his own warning in turn were to go unheeded?

The solution isn't simply to buy organic produce or start a compost pile; like most really big problems, it's more complicated than that. At root, Montgomery is calling for "knowledge-intensive agriculture" that will involve producers and consumers alike, so reading his book is a first step in the right direction.

If you read *Dirt* and get into its message, you may start to be taken for something of a crackpot by your friends and neighbors. Most people would much rather talk about, say, tree climbing, than no-till cultivation. But buy your senator a copy, or send your kid to ag school instead of med school, and you might just be part of the solution. Soil degradation is a slow and steady problem, and it will take slow and steady solutions.

Since the time of Teddy Roosevelt, if not before, the American style of environmental conservation has emphasized special places deemed worthy of protection, made sacred by being set aside as national forests and parks, wildlife refuges, and wildernesses. (Ecotourism sends abroad our impulse to visit sacred groves, even if we seem to find it's not easy being green at home.) We often think of nature as somewhere to go, a place picked out with coordinates on a map, but given the long periods over which many ecological processes unfold, time is truly a fourth dimension of the environment. Side by side, these books survey this extra dimension and demonstrate that nature merits much more than static preservation. If we are to understand that the environment isn't just a place, but also *takes place*, these books chart a path. •