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Trouble in the Forest: California’s Redwood Timber Wars

Richard Widick

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Wars over natural resources have been fiercely fought in the Humboldt Bay redwood region of Northern California, a situation made devastatingly urgent in recent decades of timber war that raised questions of economic sustainability and ecological preservation. In *Trouble in the Forest*, Richard Widick narrates the long and bloody history of this hostility and demonstrates how it exemplifies the key contemporary challenge facing the modern societies-the collision of capitalism, ecology, and social justice.

An innovative blend of social history, cultural theory, and ethnography, *Trouble in the Forest* traces the origins of the redwood conflict to the same engines of modernity that drove the region's colonial violence against American Indians and its labor struggles during the industrial revolution. Widick describes in vivid detail the infamous fight that ensued when Maxxam Inc. started clearing ancient forests in Humboldt after acquiring the Pacific Lumber Company in 1985, but he also reaches further back and investigates the local Indian clashes and labor troubles that set the conditions of the timber wars. Seizing on public flash points of each confrontation-including the massacre of Wiyot on Indian Island in 1860, the machine-gunning of redwood strikers by police and company thugs during the great lumber strike of 1935, and the car bombing of forest defenders in 1990-Widick maps how the landscape has registered the impact of this epochal struggle, and how the timber wars embody the forces of market capitalism, free speech, and liberal government.

Showing how events such as an Indian massacre and the death of a protester at the hands of a logger create the social memory and culture of timber production and environmental resistance now emblematic of Northern California's redwood region, *Trouble in the Forest* ultimately argues that the modern social imaginary produced a perpetual conflict over property that fueled the timber wars as it pushed toward the western frontier: first property in land, then in labor, and now in environment.

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