



The Making of Yosemite: James Mason Hutchings and the Origin of America's Most Popular Park

Jen A. Huntley

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Leader of the first tourist expedition into Yosemite in 1855, James Mason Hutchings became a tireless promoter of the valley—and of himself. Seeking to create an alternative to California's Gold Rush social chaos, Hutchings whetted the public enthusiasm for this unspoiled land by mass producing a lithograph of Yosemite Falls, while his Hutchings' California Magazine beat the drum for tourism. But because of his later legal imbroglios over the park, Hutchings was effectively written out of its history, and today he is largely viewed as an opportunist who made a career out of exploiting Yosemite.

Now Jen Huntley removes the tarnish from Hutchings's image. She portrays him instead as a "connector" who brought artists to Yosemite and Yosemite to Americans, and uses his career as a lens through which to view the contests and debates surrounding the creation of Yosemite, and, by extension, America's emerging ethic of land conservation. Blending environmental and cultural history, she tracks Hutchings's professional trajectory amidst significant changes in nineteenth-century America, from technological advances in printing to the growth of tourism, from the birth of modern environmental movements to battles over public lands.

Huntley uses Hutchings's legal battles with the government over ownership of land in the Yosemite Valley to analyze larger battles over public land management and national identity. She also explores the role of urban San Francisco in designating Yosemite a public park, shows how the Civil War transformed Yosemite from a regional icon to a national symbol of post-war redemption, and takes a closer look at Hutchings's relationship with John Muir. Making Yosemite sheds light on the role of power, class dynamics, and the late-century ideal of individualism in the shaping of modern America's sacred landscapes.

Hutchings emerges here as a visionary communicator who cleverly tapped into midcentury Americans' attitudes toward spectacular scenery to create a sense of place-based identity in the American Far West. Huntley's revisionist approach rediscovers Hutchings as a key player in the histories of American media, tourism, and environmentalism, and suggests new terrain for scholars to consider in writing the histories of our national parks, conservation, and land policy.

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