U.S. Geological Surveys staff went into the interior of the country and exposed and educated the urban populous and government officials with their drawings; photographs; botanical, bird and mammal collections; and geological studies. The illustrators and photographers each created an independent style—clear, taut, graphic—in response to social and political forces. Three of these documentarians are discussed in this volume; the engraver and botanist Arthur Schott, photographer Timothy O’Sullivan, and photographer C.C. Jones. One would expect the images created by such individuals to, first and foremost, be scientifically informative and have graphic clarity. But the work of all three goes beyond that in the illustrators’ imaginative and ingenious response to the demands of a required, archive style. Their images have a modernistic aesthetic that is evident in their interpretations and abstractions of the landscape.

Each illustrator is associated, in varying degrees of historical importance and exposure, with specific surveys. C.C. Jones, for example, was sent by the U.S. Geological Survey to Charleston, South Carolina to photograph the effects of the 1886 earthquake. Arthur Schott, a Prussian draughtsman, illustrated landscape scenes of the U.S.-Mexico boundary for the 1856 Emory Survey. Timothy O’Sullivan, the most famous of the three, produced canonical photographs for the King (1867) and Wheeler (1869) Surveys.

The book’s central idea is reflected in the case of Jones. Jones’s photographs do depict the earthquake but the damage, although severe in Charleston, is often hard to pick out in his work. One may see cracks in the foundations but these can be easily viewed as old buildings with a need for some repair. The photographer’s independent style, not the earthquake damage, is most evident. Since this was not what the Survey needed, Jones’s photographs were used sparingly.

The book is an academic and imaginative thesis on nineteenth-century visual culture and the role of the U.S. Survey images. It is well illustrated throughout with extensive endnotes, bibliography, and index. Robin Kelsey, the author, is the John L. Loeb Associate Professor of the Humanities at Harvard University. He has written articles on Timothy O’Sullivan and nineteenth-century visual culture.

This book is highly recommended for academic libraries, and those interested in U.S. history and visual culture.

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