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Rethinking LA's Nature through German Eyes

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Rethinking LA's Nature—Through German Eyes

Los Angeles might be more than 5700 miles from Berlin as a crow (or Luftansa) flies, but German culture—and most notably its varied perceptions of nature—have strongly influenced how those living in the Southland experience their environs.

Oft in the negative, to judge from the enduring legacy of Bertold Brecht's sharp commentary about the City of Angeles in which he sheltered during the ravages of World War II. "They have nature here," he jotted down in his diary in August 1941, and as "everything is so artificial, they even have an exaggerated feeling for nature, which becomes alienated."



Figure 1 Bertolt Brecht with Lion Feuchtwanger in Los Angeles. Photo by Ruth Berlau. Courtesy of the Feuchtwanger Memorial Library, USC Libraries.

That sense of alienation welled up while gazing out of the window of German-born actor and director William Dieterle's home overlooking the San Fernando Valley: below, "an incessant, brilliantly illuminated stream of cars thunders through nature." Yet what constituted the natural was in doubt: friends told the newly arrived Brecht "that all the greenery is wrested from the desert by irrigation systems. Scratch the surface a little and the desert shows through: stop paying the water bills and everything stops blooming."

Brecht's insights are not wrong: by the early 1940s, Los Angeles was siphoning water from eastern Sierra watersheds as far north as Mono Lake and from the Colorado River 200 miles to the city's east. Distant snowmelt kept Los Angeles' lawns and canopies a vibrant green, its pools and spas a sun-lit blue. Although urban boosters praised this "water miracle," Brecht's private musings have long been amplified in an array of public criticism leveled at Los Angeles' artificiality. Carey McWilliams' *Southern California: Island in the Land* (1946) may be more upbeat than Robert Towne's searing script for "Chinatown" (1974), but both focus on the rough politics that surrounded the importation of water, and, at least by implication, the verdant veneer this offered a place that by nature should have been sere brown. That unbalanced chromatic scale inflects that brilliant work of such water historians as Marc Reisner (*Cadillac Desert*, 1993;

Dangerous Place: California's Unsettling Fate, 2004) and Norris Hundley (*The Great Thirst: California and Water*, 1991). And becomes the palette that Mike Davis wielded in his evisceration of Southern California, *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (1999). Brecht's disdain has had a lot of intellectual company.

This Brechtian dystopia might make sense if all one looked at were the local valleys—the San Fernando, San Gabriel, Pomona, and Ontario. These flatlands, however, require upland to exist: as it happens, the powerful, jolting geological forces that have pushed up, and continue to do so, a range of mountains towering above the land below offers an intriguing counter narrative about this region's nature. A counter narrative that also gains some of its impetus—aesthetic and scientific—from Germany.

The San Gabriel Mountains are the spectacular backdrop to Los Angeles. Their chaparral-cloaked slopes offer a recreational refuge for more than four million visitors a year to frolic on the federal lands that cover the foothills and sweep up to the high ground that the 10,050-foot Mount Baldy dominates. They also serve a life-sustaining function, serving as the source of most of the region's surface and groundwater, a reality that was evident to the indigenous people who have lived here for more than 10,000 years; and to the settler colonists, whether Spanish, Mexican, or American. The Santa Clarita, Los Angeles, San Gabriel, and the Santa Ana rivers rise from the stiff folds of the San Gabriels, and in the late 19th Century, local conservationists, community leaders, and farmers advocated for the protection of these vital watersheds; maintaining forest health was essential, they believed, to ample water flow. Their beliefs were shaped by having adopted some of the key principles defining European forestry, principles that had received principal expression in Germany. Figures such as Sir Dietrich Brandis (1824-1907), whom the British had hired to manage their imperial forests in India, and who later was knighted for his manifold contributions to the empire, were deeply influential on receptive Americans.

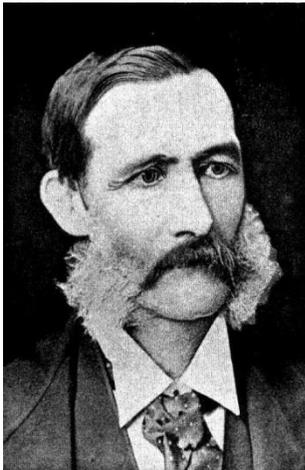


Figure 2 Sir Dietrich Brandis

One of those so persuaded was local real estate developer Abbot Kinney, an early member of the California Forestry Board and staunch proponent of forest protection. It was due to his and others' persistent pleading with Washington that in 1892, shortly after Congress passed the Forest Reserve Act of 1891 granting the president the authority to establish forest reserves on the public domain, that the San Gabriel Timberland Reserve was created, the first in California.

Another, even more profoundly influenced by the German forester, was Gifford Pinchot (1865-1946). He studied with Brandis in 1890-91 and learned the preeminent value of developing a system of well-managed forest reserves, a perspective he helped put into effect when in 1898 he was appointed the fourth head of the Division of Forestry in the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Seven years later, he became the first chief of the U.S. Forest Service overseeing an expanding number of national forests covering millions of acres. Four of these sites today ring greater Los Angeles: the Angeles and San Bernardino, which grew out of the earlier San Gabriel Timberland Reserve, and the Los Padres and Cleveland national forests. Their central purpose, in keeping with Pinchot learned from his German mentors, and consistent with the legislative directive embedded in the Forest Management Act of 1897, was to protect highland watersheds. Although Pinchot and his teachers did not have the language of environmental services, that was what they set out to preserve and provide. Without the 19th century conception that downstream depended on upstream, modern Los Angeles would be a very different place.



Figure 3 Mount San Antonio (Baldy), Ontario Peak, and Cucamonga Peak rise from the valley floor along the Cucamonga Fault. Courtesy of the City of Claremont History Collection, Honnold Mudd Library Special Collection, Claremont Colleges.

So I sense every time I stare out of my office window at the weathered face of Mount Baldy rising in the distance. Because the Forest Service manages this wind-swept peak that serves as the apex of the local watershed, its steep canyons and tumbling creeks are the physical manifestation of the conservation ethos that some Americans imported from Germany to help sustain life in Southern California.

How apt, then, that although playwright Brecht and forester Brandis did know one another they have had a profound impact on how Angelenos imagine and inhabit this semi-arid terrain.