



Mary Colter's design for a "typical stone cottage" at the Grand Canyon's Indian Gardens section

MARY COLTER:
Architect of the Southwest.

By Arnold Berke. Princeton Architectural Press. 320 pp. \$35

After the West was won, somebody had to imaginatively lose it. During the first decades of the 20th century, that task fell to Mary Elizabeth Jane Colter (1869–1958), the Minnesota-bred daughter of Irish immigrants. Working for the nation's chief promoters of western tourism, the Fred Harvey Company and the Santa Fe Railroad, Colter "restored," for American consumption, the indigenous architecture of the dispossessed, creating hotels, train stations, shops, and restaurants modeled on Native American and Hispanic cultures. Colter even built "ancient ruins," such as the Grand Canyon National Park's Watchtower, its weathered, craggy façade covertly supported by steel girders.

The art critic Robert Hughes once called Colter a pioneer of "the American theme-park mentality." That backhanded tribute did at least anticipate a time when Colter's genius for "oldening things up," as the architect herself put it, would look pretty impressive. After years spent riding through the Southwest on horseback, sketching pueblo ruins and Hopi villages, Colter knew all the uses for stone, brick, tile, iron, glass, and textiles. Her careful reinterpretations became the great architectural legacy of America's railroad culture. Colter's work would not be matched during successive waves of automobile-based tourism.

With this gracefully written account, Berke, an architectural historian and preservationist, provides the first serious study of Colter's contribution. Whether from discretion or ignorance, he says almost nothing about her personal life. Though beautiful as a young woman,

Colter never married and apparently didn't form intimate attachments with men; nor did she care for the company of women as a class. She appears to have been a singularly tough-minded character whose work was her passion.

Hopi House (1905), Colter's first project for the Harvey Company, was built of local stone and wood to look like the ancient village of Oraibi in Arizona. An ersatz trading post stocked with Native American arts and crafts, Hopi House symbolized the partnership between commercialism and romanticism embraced by the Harvey Company. If the paternalism of her employers bothered her, Colter never complained. Rather, she made sure that the local Indians hired to perform the traditional dances knew their steps, and that the artisans charged with producing "ancient" murals and traditional sand paintings worked by the book.

Like Frank Lloyd Wright, who once designed a home without closets (his distraught client had too many possessions anyway, Wright coolly insisted), Colter must have been a nightmare to work for. At age 76, she was still making her crew of masons tear up a fireplace repeatedly to achieve just the right degree of "casualness" in the brickwork. Still, she earned respect because she demanded nothing she couldn't deliver. She could lay adobe bricks, mix plaster washes, and fix viga joints better than most tradesmen.

Colter retired to Santa Fe in the 1950s. She had amassed an exceptionally valuable collection of Native American jewelry and pottery, but her favorite possession—some drawings made by Indian prisoners after the 1876 Battle of the Little Bighorn—had no monetary value. The drawings had been given to the family when she was a child, and she had hidden them under her mattress, defying orders to burn them in case of

smallpox contamination. Shortly before she died, Colter donated the drawings to the Little Bighorn National Monument—her way, perhaps, of giving back to a dying culture what she'd stolen in good faith.

—A. J. HEWAT

**THE REBUKE OF HISTORY:
*The Southern Agrarians and American
Conservative Thought.***

By Paul V. Murphy. Univ. of North Carolina Press. 351 pp. \$49.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper

Intellectuals cultivate what Freud termed the “narcissism of small differences,” so it’s no surprise that the intellectual history of American conservatism embodies as much contention as consensus. Even so, for those who like their history simple and linear, the story Murphy tells with such thoroughness and insight will come as a rebuke, as it were. A professor of history at Grand Valley State University in Michigan, he offers a dense but cogent account of how the radical movement known as Southern Agrarianism became one of the main strands of American conservatism.

Agrarianism’s manifesto, *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (1930), was written by “Twelve Southerners,” including poet-critics John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate, and novelist-poet-critic Robert Penn Warren. The Agrarians contended that an agricultural economy was uniquely suited to human flourishing, and that the values and traditions of an agrarian ethos were ideal to support a stable, coherent society that emphasized family and community. Such a traditional social order was hostile both to state power and to the untrammelled market, while inclined toward natural piety and religious

observance. As the prime historical exemplar of such an ideal order, the Agrarians unapologetically touted the antebellum South. Not surprisingly, and not entirely unjustly, they were accused of being economic reactionaries, cultural and social traditionalists, and racists.

In the more affluent but anxious Cold War era, the Agrarians and their followers shed the agricultural emphasis and became identified with a general defense of traditional Western-Christian culture against the acids of modernity and secularism. As such, the movement was seduced by William F. Buckley’s largely successful “fusionist” effort to create a broad church of conservatism, with latter-day Agrarians such as Richard Weaver and M. E. Bradford generally siding with the traditionalist (as opposed to the libertarian) wing. By the 1980s, Agrarianism had transformed itself once again, this time becoming a largely academic exercise caught up in questions about the survival of southern identity.

In a book with many virtues, Murphy skillfully charts Agrarianism’s twists and turns. Along the way, he lucidly explicates—and then criticizes—positions with which he clearly disagrees. He emphasizes the Achilles’ heel of race and slavery that southern conservatives, except for Robert Penn Warren and a few others, never really overcame.

Beyond race, Agrarianism’s problem was that it never had the courage of its convictions against finance and industrial capitalism; nor was it willing to take a stand on the environmental damage inflicted by capitalist as well as socialist economies. Rather, it took the easy way out by embracing American conservatism’s obsessive hostility to the state. In doing so, southern conservatism acquiesced in the late-20th-century version of the Gilded Age.

—RICHARD H. KING

CONTEMPORARY AFFAIRS

**FOOLED BY RANDOMNESS:
*The Hidden Role of Chance in the
Markets and in Life.***

By Nassim Nicholas Taleb. Texere.
203 pp. \$27.95

You are considering an investment adviser with an admirable track record:

For 10 years, through good times and bad, he has consistently made profits for his clients, even as other advisers have crashed and burned. If you are convinced his methods are lawful but know nothing else about how he picks winners, should you hire him?