Book Review:

Phyllis Andersen

A Landscape History of New England
Edited by Blake Harrison and Richard W. Judd.

Coeditors Blake Harrison and Richard W. Judd challenged a group of senior and young scholars to produce essays that capture myriad aspects of the New England landscape: the material landscape of forests, upland farms, stone walls, inland rivers, and rocky coast lines, and the symbolic landscape of picturesque villages, bucolic pastures, and the stock pieties of hard-working farmers with backs to the plow and eyes on the horizon. Methodologies deployed by the authors vary from the new disciplines of environmental and ecological history to literary narrative and to the politics of gender, ethnicity, and environmental change. The twenty essays are bookended by the editors’ introduction and conclusion—dissimilar threads skillfully woven to form comprehensive case studies of landscape and cultural changes over three centuries. The essays engage both the essence of regional character and the theatrical promotion of magnetic scenery created for the seduction of tourists to visit New England and support local economies.

Old England was a refuge for New England’s early settlers, so newly settled places were often named after mother-country places (the Berkshires, Portsmouth, Worcester, New London) and topographic terms (brook, pond, marsh, fens) coincidental to mother country terms. This offered familiarity amidst what some early settlers called the emptiness of the place and others called the howling wilderness. The fact that the “emptiness” contained areas of cultivation by Native Americans was ignored in the jeremiads of early Puritan ministers who needed a transformative narrative to motivate their flocks to both stay and spread out. As waves of settlers came to understand the intrinsic capacities of the landscape, the wilderness became a land of cultivation and harvesting: pastures, orchards, and gardens; forests for fuel and building material; rocky and sandy coastal waters offering access to a rich diversity of fish and crustaceans.

Joseph Conforti opens the roster of essays by setting a theme for the entire volume: regional identity as both historically grounded and culturally invented. Conforti projects New England identity as flowing from Native American
tribes such as the Algonquians, with their seasonal settlements and cultivation of crops, to the formation of isolated towns and villages distributed across farmland and along the seacoast, a land-planning method still visible today.

The New England landscape was physically reconstituted in the nineteenth century with a surge of industry, especially shoe manufacturing, textile mills, and ship building. The current evolutionary stage of development includes a topology of leisure and recreation: heritage sites, boutique-lined waterfronts, ski slopes, athletic fields, and the indigenous clothier of fishers and hunters, L. L. Bean. Conforti quotes Dona Brown, a historian at the University of Vermont, to describe that tourist landscape as “a commodity peddled and consumed like the notions of an itinerant Yankee trader.”

In his essay, Kent Ryden finds the well-worn argument of nature vs. culture a useless bit of rhetoric in understanding the New England landscape. Everything we see is the result of land use, he insists, recorded in the ways that human minds and hands worked in tandem with natural opportunities and constraints. He cites a little-known essay by Thoreau, “The Succession of Forest Trees,” first delivered as a lecture in 1860. From years of observing

“Tourists in Franconia Notch, 1920s. Franconia Notch was one of the most popular sites in New Hampshire’s White Mountains. Here, tourists by the shores of Profile Lake gaze upward at the Old Man of the Mountain.”  
Source: From Automobile Blue Book.
the transformation of abandoned farm fields back to forests, Thoreau became aware that the species mix of the New England forest in the mid-nineteenth century was as much a result of human interventions as natural succession. Ryden adds to Thoreau’s observation that New England’s famous fall foliage is as much determined by human intervention as by natural process. His evidence is that when first-growth forests were cleared for timber and farmland by the middle of the nineteenth century, three-quarters of the region had been deforested and the fields derocked. With the diminishing of agricultural use, the forests returned as old fields were taken over by white pine (*Pinus strobus*), which thrives in sunlight and can survive in poor soils. As the pine forests matured, an understory of deciduous species, mainly oaks and maples, established themselves below the evergreen canopy. At the turn of the twentieth century, pines were cut for wood products and the young deciduous species could then dominate, producing colorful autumn foliage that was of little value to farmers but was essential to establishing the ritual of autumn visitors (leaf-peepers) to New England.

Despite the difficulty of subsistence farming in New England, by the early twentieth century the farm complex of pasture, cultivated fields, orchards, and picturesque barns and outbuildings offered symbolic value to visiting urbanites fatigued by lives over which they had little
control. Attracted to a life of self-sufficiency, writers in particular were drawn to the back country of New England where they documented their survival tactics in numerous publications. Dona Brown describes a little known back-to-the-land movement of the 1930s; she notes that an “imaginative reconfiguration” of New England was underway as the image of a region full of “dour puritans and antiquated blue laws” was refigured.

In a 1932 editorial in *Harper's Monthly*, the noted writer and historian Bernard DeVoto observed that the Great Depression was not as severe in New England because long years of trials and tribulations had given the people great moral strength: “By the granite they have lived for three centuries, tightening their belts and hanging on.” Brown uses as an example the writer Elliott Merrick and his wife who gave up urban life for a back country farm in Vermont where Merrick wrote *From This Hill Look Down* (1934). He stressed self-reliance and hard work in taming nature as a way to revitalize the urbanized mind and body. The couple was followed by another pair of writers, Helen and Scott Nearing, who relocated first to rural Vermont and then Maine. Their book, *Living the Good Life* (1954), became a manual for disaffected youth of the 1960s and 1970s.

Elizabeth Pillsbury investigates Long Island Sound on New England’s southerly shore, valued first for its oysters and later for boating recreation. The Sound became a waste depository and ended up as a dead ecosystem. Moving up the coast line, Robert Gee brings his reader to Maine’s “drowned coast” created by the rising and then receding sea level revealing land features: dramatic inlets of eroded tide pools and island clusters accommodating a rich variety of sea and shorebird life. Gee tracks the development of Maine’s fish canning and blueberry industries in tandem with its growing popularity for tourists and summer homes. Moving back down to Boston, Michael Rawson traces the concern for the environmental health of Boston Harbor today back into the nineteenth century, when extensive filling of brackish tidal flats dramatically altered the shore line.

The topic of alternative ways of writing about the New England landscape is covered by two essays on lesser known individuals, each dealing with the ambiguity between documentary and fantasy writings. Under the pen name Henry Red Eagle, the Native American writer and wilderness guide, Henry Perley, wrote numerous stories about Maine’s north woods. Written for a popular audience, his tales of adventure and romance highlighted his Native culture. Perley also participated in tourist activities, and like many other Natives took roles in national performing troupes such as P. T. Barnum’s, cooperating with displays of stereotypical Indian behavior demanded as entertainment by “white man” audiences. Similarly, the Maine travel writer George H. Haynes, who, in the words of contributing author David L. Richards, spe-

cialized in the two social dimensions of landscape in general: timeless antiquity and rushing modernity; he blended literary romanticism with journalistic realism that he referred to as “a bit of realistic fairy-land” writing. Haynes prodigious output included books, articles, historic treatment of scenic areas, and promotional brochures.

Across New England, tourism filled the gap when the utility of lumber and crop-producing landscapes moved on. The landscape that had made agriculture so difficult on rocky upland pastures changed in people’s minds to a topography of gentle mountains and valleys cut through by rivers and streams—romantic scenery documented by artists, photographers, and souvenir postcards. Tourism also responded to picturesque scenes of villages with white painted houses, church spires, and town greens.

John Cumbler describes how the landscape of Cape Cod, described by Thoreau as the “bared and bended arm of Massachusetts,” evolved from the productive but fragile landscape of fisheries, salt works, and grain fields to pleasure grounds for summer visitors. The sandy and nutrient-poor soil and overgrazing by sheep and cattle led to depopulation of the area by the turn of the century, while tourism grew from early guest houses and cottage communities to golf courses and seaside hotels on manicured lawns.

The editors admit that more work needs to be done on the urban landscape of New England. Two useful articles in this volume take up the urban story in the late nineteenth century. Phil Birge-Liberman reveals that the Boston park system was created as much by the values of the reigning Yankee upper class as it was to satisfy a genuine need for leisure spaces on behalf of the city’s burgeoning population. The annexation of neighboring towns to the city of Boston and the growing number of immigrants compelled the Yankee leaders to do a bit of social engineering by developing a park system that could control behavior and ease social tensions. Birge also treats real estate speculation and its link to park development—an area that needs much more investigation not only in Boston but other American cities. James O’Connell examines the Boston metropolitan landscape in the twentieth century: the linkage of suburbs, highway development, and a regenerative way of life in expanded urban areas.

European academics use the idea of terroir, a French term based on terre (land as place), referring to an area where soil and microclimate conditions produce distinctive qualities in food products, especially wine. An expanded definition of terroir includes the customs and traditions of a people. A closer reading of the New England landscape that integrates the work of earth scientists is in the future of environmental history. It would serve to deepen and enrich the current discourse that continues to take much for granted. This book offers a distinctive base for this dialogue to continue.

Additional Reading

(books by some of the essay authors)


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