

THE NATURE OF NEW YORK: AN ENVIRONMENTAL

History of the Empire State

David Stradling

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Environmental history originated during the environmental movements of the 1960s and 1970s. The American Society for Environmental History was founded in 1977, and the subdiscipline came of age through such journals as *Environmental History Review* (and its successor *Environmental History*), and in major books by scholars including William Cronon (whose work will be familiar to many geographers), Carolyn Merchant, John McNeill, and many others. David Stradling is an environmental historian at the University of Cincinnati, author of books on the Catskills, Cincinnati, and air quality in the Progressive Era. In the present volume he provides a survey of the environmental history of New York State. He defines environmental history as “the study of human interaction with place, the physical and biological world” (p. 3). This definition is likely to disconcert geographers, many of whom would define their own field in precisely these terms but who will find no echo of their concepts here. Stradling cites a few specialized works by geographers such as Michael Williams’ authoritative analysis of American forestry and David Lowenthal on George Perkins Marsh. But it is discouraging to find no reference to the work of scholars such as Meinig, Schein, Huggill, and others who have labored in the historical geography of New York State. Nonetheless, Stradling’s scholarship is broad. His references and bibliographical essay should be indispensable to historical geographers working in our area. The text is eminently readable, with its characteristic historian’s pattern of broad interpretations interwoven with telling examples, personalities, and places. The author is by no means invisible in the text. He reports that his own fondest childhood memories are of upstate vacations, and the beautifully rendered Epilogue begins with him showing Love Canal to his daughters, and ends as he ponders the inseparability of the human and the natural beside part of an abandoned canal system turned wildlife refuge, before finally turning his eyes up to a windfarm, icon of a new round of resource exploitation.

The text is arranged chronologically, moving through the key phases of New Yorkers’ cultural construction and appropriation of nature. The account of Native Americans benefits from recent scholarship on native concepts of land occupancy and the manifold ways in which European trade networks and diseases shaped and disrupted their land practices. Beyond reference to the Hudson Valley Dutch and the influx of New Englanders after the Revolution, we do not get much sense of the diversity of New York’s culture regions or of the environmental habits of other migrants streams (for example those from Pennsylvania), or of the ways their changing

practices created and destroyed places and regions. The colonial and early national perspective on the natural world as a threatening and limitless “wild” to be tamed and exploited is illustrated with an exceptionally penetrating account of the land-clearing and farming practices which brought in train industries (e.g., potash “asheries”), grist mills, very species-specific demands on diminishing woodlands (e.g., hemlock bark for tanning), and a host of invasive species. Stradling resolutely traces causes and effects across the rural-urban boundary as canals and then railroads integrate the state, and he provides excellent outlines of the ecologies of disease, sanitation, water, wetlands, and air in the growing cities. Chapter 4 demonstrates compellingly the relationship between urban environmental degradation and reform from mid-century to the Progressive Era.

The great change in sensibility to nature and wild landscapes wrought by romantics in the early nineteenth century is copiously illustrated from the visual arts (e.g., Hudson Valley painters) and literature (e.g., Cooper’s fictional reworking of his father’s place-making in Cooperstown, and Irving’s fictional mythology of the Catskills). The consequences of this change for environmental thought and action were vast. Stradling traces them through such cultural brokers as Andrew Jackson Downing, William Cullen Bryant, and Olmsted (whose concept of landscape aesthetics as a tool of social discipline is not emphasized enough, I feel), leading to the commodification of landscape, tourism and the early reactions against tourist clutter which it provoked, such as the Niagara Reservation created in 1885.

After the Civil War a new consciousness of nature began to dawn, which Stradling calls (*avant la lettre*) “ecological” and which he associates, I think correctly, with George Perkins Marsh, who mobilized poetic appreciation of natural beauty to protect systems of organisms from human destruction. The connections Marsh asserted between Adirondack deforestation, erosion, and the flow of the Hudson found real political traction in New York City. With this and similar examples we move into what I feel are the most successful sections of the book, which deal with ecological, political, and social aspects of conservationism and its successor environmentalism. This book brings home just how many environmental struggles occurred in New York — with profound national consequences. We are provided with excellent and contrasting accounts of the environmental thought of the two Governors/Presidents Roosevelt, with tangible consequences in Palisades Park, the Adirondack Park, wilderness areas, reforestation of “idle lands” and innumerable Depression era projects executed by the Works Progress Administration, the Civilian Conservation Corps, and many other agencies.

Issues of modern environmentalism ranging from DDT, PCBs and acid rain to nuclear fallout, algal blooms and zebra mussels are explored with an exemplary combination of breadth and penetration. So too are some of the iconic New York sites including Storm King and Love Canal. Politically the Federal intervention in Love Canal (which led to Superfund legislation) represented a decline in the tradition of state leadership on environmental issues. It is not dead, however, as Stradling’s assessment of the accomplishments of Governor Pataki reveals. The conflict of Consolidated Edison with environmentalists over Storm King prompted formation of interest groups such as Scenic Hudson and Riverkeepers which have been widely emulated. It also catalyzed arguably the most successful of all pro-environment organizations, the National Resources Defense Council. Nor does Stradling neglect the many notable individuals who have

shaped New Yorkers' awareness of environmental issues including essayist E.B. White; protest singer Pete Seeger; Elizabeth Robinson, New York City smoke control activist; Robert Marshall, wilderness advocate and associate of Benton MacKaye; and Lois Gibbs, the indefatigable organizer at Love Canal.

Another theme that runs through the final chapters is the environmental impact of urban and regional planning, which Stradling sketches from the time of the City Beautiful Movement to the 1916 New York City zoning law, through the work of Robert Moses and the Levitt family, to modern regional planning and efforts to control sprawl. The account of the emergence of regional planning from the time of the Regional Plan of New York and its Environs is good (although the arguably more influential Regional Planning Association of America is neglected except for its work at Sunnyside). One searches in vain for some more recent ideas in environmentally friendly planning and urbanism: smart growth, green jobs, the local food movement, bioregionalism, the New Urbanism, and indeed for a rounded discussion of the key term "sustainability." The current debate on hydrofracking broke too late for inclusion in this book; it suggests that New York is destined to maintain its place in the vanguard of environmental problems and solutions.

For courses in historical or environmental geography, environmental planning, or the geography of New York State this excellent, wide-ranging, well-written, and informative book will provide very useful reading, though our disciplinary conceptual vocabulary will need to be added. I expect to use its comprehensive account of the emergence of environmental thought in our region in a graduate course in planning history.