

NATURE AND CULTURE IN THE NORTHERN FOREST:

Region, Heritage, and Environment in the Rural Northeast

Pavel Cenkel, Editor

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Nearly twenty years have passed since William Cronon's (1983) *Changes in the Land* was published, helping to establish the still young field of environmental history and pushing for greater attention to the inseparability of nature and culture. Since then the ecological transformations of New England have provided rich material for deepening this understanding, not only in the fields of environmental history and historical geography but for a range of related disciplines often brought together under the interdisciplinary framework of environmental studies. *Nature and Culture in the Northern Forest* is a potent contribution to this legacy of scholarship on the northeastern United States. The volume brings together an able group of scholars to explore themes of region, heritage and environment in the rural northeast, from New York's Adirondack region across northern Vermont and New Hampshire and into Maine. The contributors spin narratives from threads of the region's literary heritage as well as from its alpine meadows, bogs, farms, wildlife and extensive forests.

In the introduction entitled 'Reading Place in the Northern Forest' editor Pavel Cenkel, locates the scholarship in the field of Northern Forest studies, which he characterizes as 'fertile and growing' (p. 7). While acknowledging the fluidity of the ecological and the cultural boundaries of the region, *Nature and Culture in the Northern Forest* succeeds in communicating considerable regional coherence across the area's several million mostly forested acres. This is achieved in great measure because, in spite of some degree of cultural, political and historical heterogeneity in the region, the authors identify with familiar traditions of reading and writing place in the Northeast, engaging common themes including farm abandonment and landscape succession; the complexities of rural, wild and wilderness typologies; tensions between conservationist and preservationist currents in environmentalism; and the intricacies of class and gender in northern livelihoods and environmental knowledge. Much of the source material for exploring these themes is also familiar and the writings of Thoreau and Frost figure prominently in a majority of chapters. Yet, for all its familiarity (and not all of it was familiar to this reader), the authors successfully reframe some of the important themes in northeastern environmental studies while delving deeper into others, providing fresh insights and leading to more nuanced understandings.

The fourteen essays in the book are organized into four sub-sections: 'Encounters', 'Teaching and Learning', 'Rethinking Place' and 'Nature as Commodity'. The three chapters in 'Encoun-

ters' focus on experiences and interactions with wildlife species and habitats — boreal wildflowers; songbirds; beech trees. In 'Teaching and Learning' topics include both contemporary and historical approaches to engaging students in the study of natural history, ecology, rural living and place. 'Rethinking Place' includes some comparative analysis, across space and over time, in order to reappraise the contemporary landscape and the experience of it. The three concluding entries employ textual analysis to explore the commodification of place, heritage and nature.

Literary analysis and criticism dominate much of the volume and this will come as no surprise since the vast majority of the contributors come from backgrounds in English and the humanities. At the foreground of the meditations on texts however, are the themes of place and ecology. Stetter and Mosher for example, in their contributions to 'Encounters', ground meditations on botany and bird song respectively, not only in the writings of natural historians, but also in their own field excursions, writing as keen observers of ecology as well as of prose.

If these encounters suggest a playful and rewarding engagement with the rich legacy of nature writing, the ecocriticism of the chapters in 'Nature as Commodity' serve as a penetrating counterpoint. Here, the three essays challenge readers to reflect on the underpinnings of contemporary environmentalism in ways reminiscent of the work collected in the classic *Uncommon Ground* (Cronon 1995). Thoreau and the transcendentalists come under scrutiny and readers confront some of the enduring and unsettling contradictions inherent to the environmentalist psyche: the paradoxes associated with use and protection of nature, the sometimes bizarre nostalgia that is marketed to us as rural heritage. In a brilliant final essay entitled 'So Much Beauty Locked Up in it: Of Ecocriticism and Axe-Murder' Matthew Bolinder reads such contradictions in the marketing of decorative firewood logs in a Maine magazine. He creatively sounds the now familiar warning that so much environmentalist thought has been tainted by demonizing the use of nature. His use of texts to keep environmentalist critique "from becoming merely a form of hypocritical and largely irrelevant nay-saying or of imaginary consciousness raising" (p. 273) is effective for rethinking strategies and outcomes.

Nature and Culture in the Northern Forest will be a useful text for upper level graduate environmental studies courses, especially for those focusing on the northeast. The book is equally useful for its effective sharing of teaching strategies. The majority of the contributions address questions of pedagogy and classroom engagements in some form and the sub-section on 'Teaching and Learning' is dedicated to these themes. Readers learn about how to use texts to cross disciplinary boundaries, as Williams, Reynolds and Oerlemans do with Russell Banks (1999) novel *Cloudsplitter*, which they use to teach geology, landscape ecology and social history of the Adirondacks. Importantly, readers also encounter a familiar discourse regarding the importance of teaching place to North Country youth, using natural history and emphasizing the rewarding nature of local environmental knowledge. Jill Mudgett's lengthy but engaging chapter on 'Youth, Refinement and Environmental Knowledge in the Nineteenth-Century Rural North' shows that the familiar lament about loss of place-based awareness is anything but new.

Indeed, this is perhaps one of *Nature and Culture in the Northern Forest's* important reminders. So many of our current ideas, debates and disillusionments have lengthy histories and these are available to us in a variety of texts. If read critically these texts can help to create better informed, self-aware and self-critical guiding philosophies of human-environment relationships

into the future. As Priscilla Paton suggests in her chapter entitled 'In Awe of the Body: Physical Contact, Indulgence Shopping and Nature Writing', critique of our inherited, flawed conceptualizations of nature and culture need not wipe the intellectual slate clean. Rather, the intellectual inheritance of the Northern Forest "can be thoughtfully and deliberately revised... shaping broader conceptions... that mutually benefit human and non-human life" (p. 230).

References

- Banks, R. *Cloudsplitter: A Novel*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Cronon, W. 1983. *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists and the Changing Ecology of New England*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Cronon, W. ed. 1995. *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc.