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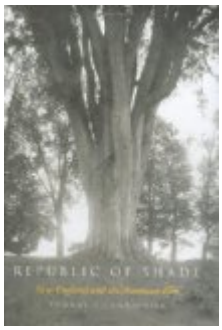
**Thomas J. Campanella.** *Republic of Shade: New England and the American Elm.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003. ix + 228 pp. $38.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-09739-9.



**Reviewed by** Lori Vermaas

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Popular historian and illustrator Benson John Lossing affirmed in 1862 that American trees are historical chroniclers, but very few contemporary historians have followed up on his claim with any lengthy study.[1] Indeed, there are few cultural syntheses that analyze Americans' interactions with and valuation of trees, or their expression in art.[2] With ***Republic of Shade: New England and the American Elm***, Thomas J. Campanella, a specialist in city and regional planning, steps confidently in this direction. It is a personable and well-researched microstudy of the American elm's symbolism in the New England region.

Well aware that "the cultural history of trees is immense and largely unexplored terrain" (p. 185), he focuses on the elm's appeal primarily during the nineteenth century as a historic marker, native son, and "domestic ornament" (p. 5) in the first three chapters. Elms, especially, served as prideful evidence of American antiquity, a regard that reached full flower for some old trees--arboreal patriarchs that, as "monument elms" (p. 54), marked and culturally validated significant American historical events and figures. Campanella details the stories of a large number of these patriarchs (maybe too many), like the Tree of Liberty, the Great Elm of Boston Common, and the Washington Elm, accounts that amply support the idea that New Englanders were fascinated with the elm's symbolic power.

In chapters 4 through 7, Campanella narrows his focus. He investigates the archetypal New England elm-lined street by tracing out the history of its development via the emergence of the village improvement movement in the 1830s (chapter 5). Americans initially relied on exotic species, especially the Lombardy poplar, to adorn streets and other civic spaces during the early-nineteenth century because "exotics ... bore the stamp of cultural refinement, and even an air of sophistication" (p. 78) to the young nation's prominent yet culturally insecure citizens. But soon Americans shifted their "arboreal allegiance" (p. 81) to native species, because their use patriotically celebrated the young nation's riches. Building on a discussion of the influence of European antecedents, Campanella paints a picture of the antebellum New England village as a place inhabited by citizens

who still retained strong historical ties to Europe and thus depended on Old World landscape allusions to justify evaluations of their growing American villages as tastefully designed urban spaces. The movement was initially driven by individual philanthropists, most famously James Hillhouse of New Haven. Because these were independent efforts, the native tree's maintenance suffered throughout most of the century, until its revitalization in the latter nineteenth century when municipal town systems emerged. As Campanella points out, "The antebellum street, with its vague boundary between public and private, its grassy margin and unpaved surface, had become by the 1870s a machine in its own right, a conduit for buried wires, gas lines, sewer pipes, and rail trackage, with telegraph wires, power lines, and street lamps overhead. Elms and oxcarts no longer ruled the scene" (p. 118). However overshadowed by these modern contraptions, the elm's presence helped to transform the New England village into a proto-modern town, one that comfortably synthesized urban and rural spatial associations. The American elm's "architectural qualities" and "gothic thrust" created "a remarkable spatial transformation of the streetscape" by the end of the century, Campanella affirms, creating a sacred space--a "forest edge"--whose religiosity softened the hard edges of the typical Yankee city (pp. 122, 133, 134). The landscaping of towns, like New Haven, satisfied citizen-leaders' desire to transform the nature-artifice dialectic--what Campanella labels a "reconciliation of the urban and rural" (p. 132). His interpretation of the street's revitalization in the late-nineteenth century and the pastoral values it expressed is fascinating, another example of the nature-movement fad whose influence during this period is more fully developed by Peter J. Schmitt in ***Back to Nature: The Arcadian Myth in Urban America***.[3] More inclusion of cultural sources like Schmitt's would have fortified such speculation, proving Campanella's implicit point that the study of nature reveals as much about our attitudes toward the urban environment as it does the natural.

His use of primary sources in these chapters, like agricultural journals, town histories, and individual biographies, is impressive, especially given the relative dearth of extant sources documenting early-nineteenth-century tree-planting efforts. However, his overall argument about the elm's sacred presence in New England would have benefited from the recognition that trees in general captivated Americans during this period of "environmental awakening" (p. 77). When he argues that "no tree has loomed larger in American history than the American elm" (p. 5), Campanella overlooks the fact that others, like oaks and redwoods, equally captivated Americans during this same period, the latter especially becoming an icon of American exceptionalism and identity. Such an oversight is particularly glaring when he details the range of romantic associations that he claims the elm attracted exclusively in the region. A survey of the primary literature regarding trees in America easily shows that all trees elicited similar sentimental associations. The same patriotic symbolism that Americans attached to elms, like the Tree of Liberty and Washington Elm, were also attached to many other tree species--the most famous instance being the Charter Oak, arguably ***the*** most famous nineteenth-century American tree, whose story he glaringly neglects to mention at all. Such a larger vision would have more fairly contextualized his analysis of the fascination for "the ethos of the individual tree" in America--what a wonderful phrase--much more thoroughly (p. 21).

The nineteenth century was the heyday of the elm's celebrity in America, and Campanella's study shines most strongly when focused on this period. His accounts of the tree's symbolism in the twentieth century, however, unfortunately pale in comparison. The approach used in previous chapters drops out, the victim of a lengthy summarization, in the last two chapters, of the story of Dutch

Elm disease and DDT poisoning, their devastating effect on the American elm, and the rage for the scientific breeding of disease-resistant strains. Even his use of sources lacks punch, for he relies mostly on nonlocal ones, such as the magazine *American Forests*. These accounts and sources are relevant to an understanding of the elm during this period, but given the richer approach that bolstered his analyses in the previous chapters, the switch to a more reportorial style leaves Campanella's analysis of the elm's meaning in twentieth-century New England incomplete.

Regardless of these shortcomings, Campanella's work flourishes as a study of the way New Englanders' sense of place developed via an individual tree species in the nineteenth century. It is a welcome addition to a fascinating and largely unexplored subject. Trees teach us about perception or, rather, self-perception. As some environmental historians, like Michael P. Cohen, have intuited, "most people ... choose a tree that speaks to their condition," and the same can be said for a town, region, or nation.[4] New Englanders "drifted toward" (p. 65) the elm as a regional icon, a tree narrative that explicates a very unconventional but highly imaginative and revealing self-portrait of nineteenth-century American regional attitudes. This is the allure of studying the cultural history of trees--the pleasant surprise that its analysis reveals less about botany than human culture. If, as Campanella cogently suggests, "in trees we see ourselves" (p. 4), the American elm shows us to be a nation of city dwellers, left to understand ourselves in these places in ways that should include our relationship to trees.

Notes

[1]. Benson John Lossing, "American Historical Trees," ***Harper's New Monthly Magazine*** 24 (May 1862): pp. 721-740.

[2]. Exceptions include Lori Vermaas, ***Sequoia: The Heralded Tree in American Art and Culture*** (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2003); Michael P. Cohen, ***A Garden of Bristlecones: Tales of Change in the Great Basin*** (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1998); and Gayle Brandow Samuels, ***Enduring Roots: Encounters with Trees, History, and the American Landscape*** (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999), although Cohen's and Samuels's projects are more episodic in their analysis. Howard Mansfield's chapter on New Hampshire's nineteenth-century neighborhood trees (what he calls "tall trees") is an important contribution. Mansfield, "The Passing of Tall Tree America," pp. 165-192 in his wonderful ***In the Memory House*** (Golden: Fulcrum, 1993). More generalized studies include Roderick Nash's seminal ***The Wilderness in the American Mind*** (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967); Thomas R. Cox's, ed., ***This Well-Wooded Land: Americans and Their Forests from Colonial Times to the Present*** (Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 1985); Michael Williams's ***Americans and Their Forests: A Historical Geography*** (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989); and Simon Schama's ***Landscape and Memory*** (New York: Vintage Books, 1995). These works are highly recommended and essential to any study of the subject; however, they primarily focus on the meaning of the American wilderness or forest. In essence, they consider the forest instead of the trees.

[3]. Peter J. Schmitt, ***Back to Nature: The Arcadian Myth in Urban America*** (1969; reprint, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

[4]. Cohen, p. 217.

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