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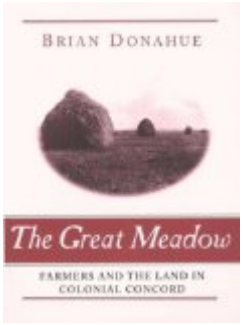
Brian Donahue. *The Great Meadow: Farmers and the Land in Colonial Concord.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004. xix + 311 pp. $35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-09751-1.



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A widely held trope of environmental history presents the arrival of Europeans to an area in the Americas as almost inevitably leading towards mismanagement and the decline of resources. Historians of all specialties have generally agreed that such declension occurred in New England. But Brian Donahue asserts that--at least in one place and time--a sustainable way of life was developed by colonial Americans. Settlers found Concord, Massachusetts similar enough to their homelands that they could apply many of the practices they brought with them from England. Those settlers were also flexible and creative enough to utilize crops native to North America, and to alter their practices, in order to develop a new system of agriculture. This was a way of life that relied on "husbandry" to find a way of life from the land; they did not exploit the land, or use it up and move on. He argues that "throughout the colonial period," farmers in Concord "remained bound one and all by family and community obligations and expectations and by the limitations of their environment and their markets into a system that was oriented primarily toward yielding a comfortable way of life directly from the diverse elements of Concord's landscape" (p. 127).

Donahue achieves much through his in-depth research of the materials available in his town. Tax valuations and records of probated estates provided useful glimpses into what food was produced, what tools were used, what choices were made in acquiring land, how productive the land was, and what farming techniques were practiced on different plots of land. He looked at modern assessors maps, ran deeds back, and made his own maps based on that research and Geographical Information Systems methods. His argument is satisfyingly developed in maps which make it easy to follow how different land uses were distributed in Concord. By displaying the types of land use on such maps, he helps the reader trace, from one generation to the next, how farmers were selecting plots of land to serve the variety of functions they felt farmland should provide.

Along with this archival work, Donahue builds on what he learned from farming. This is an unusual and impressive version of "interdisciplinary" work, very valuable for a project like his.

I imagine it is unlikely many historians will take up farming, so this is probably more useful as an achievement than as example, but I found it exciting. He makes clear what can be learned from knowledge developed in relationship to a place; from experiencing, and working, a variety of fields in a given vicinity. The knowledge that, in his preface, he suggests he gained from farming is analogous to (and helps prepare the reader for) the kind of intimate knowledge he continually suggests Concord farmers had of their varieties of small fields.

With a nod to Henry David Thoreau (whom he makes frequent references to throughout), Donahue uses chapter 1 to give readers a "walking tour" of Concord. Chapter 2 provides a useful explanation of how Concord's soils developed over the course of thousands of years. This geographical information provides the underpinnings for his discussion of the possibilities and limitations of particular farm fields, and how farmers based their acquisitions and uses of land on the qualities of different areas.

Donahue devotes chapter 3 to discussing the agricultural techniques Concord's settlers knew in England, techniques they originally tried to recreate in New England. Based on his analysis of secondary literature, he provides thoughtful descriptions of English practices, a system that made use of three key interlocking components: the use of woods, the use of water, and the practice of mixed husbandry. Their practices, and their common field system in particular, "operated not so much to extract the highest productivity from the land through specialization as to maximize security through diversification," a principle he explains was also at the heart of strategies in Concord (p. 64).

English immigrants learned which elements of their system to keep (rye, for instance) and which to let go of (most English grains); what to modify (their system for providing winter feed) and what to acquire (corn as a crop). He suggests that the most of the elements of this adaptation were in force by the late-seventeenth century, though it then took almost a century to fine-tune the system into one fully appropriate to the place. (Even then, that system only lasted effectively for a generation, and then began to decline.) As a town of freeholders, Concord residents achieved something perhaps not unique, but certainly unusual in world history--a town of sustainable small farms, operated by their owners. Donahue reminds us that innovations such as the use of clover in convertible husbandry, which were developed in England after the colonists left, were not applied in Concord. Rather, colonists stuck with the techniques they brought with them, and that they developed while in America. Chapter 6 focuses on three case studies, demonstrating the inheritance histories of three families, giving us a sense of common trends as well as the typical range of occurrences.

Donahue returns to those family case studies in chapter 8, using them to examine how Concord dealt with having utilized all the land within its boundaries to the maximum its system allowed. That chapter, "A Town of Limits," explains that by the fifth generation, most children had to leave--the crop production system may have been sustainable within its bounds, but once the system ran up against ecological limiting factors, there was no room for all the children of a growing population. Donahue argues that the land use methods could have been sustainable if the population had been kept balanced. He frequently looks ahead to the nineteenth century, and the decline of the system; but its decline is not his interest here.[1] His work suggests that sustainable agriculture could be developed using American ideas about property and science, and within the political structure of Massachusetts towns. He argues that even though Concord residents participated in the market economy, that did little to diminish the land (or their methods of using it) during the period he discusses. What really posed a challenge to the townspeople (by the fifth genera-

tion) were population growth, and dams which left the meadows flooded too often, leaving farmers unable to effectively obtain hay from the meadows.

The book's title reflects the key role he assigns to "meadows" in Concord. He finds that the hay meadows "lay at the heart of the system and were in many ways its most stable, intensively managed component" (p. xv). The meadows also were the system's key limiting factor, for no more land could be farmed than could be adequately fertilized by the compost which the livestock produced from the meadow grasses. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Concord residents avoided what we might see as the temptation to use more land for crop production, because farmers were aware that they needed to use their land for a variety of purposes. For example, they needed to keep a certain amount of land in forest (often divided into plots containing different kinds of trees) to provide their needs for firewood and other products, and a certain amount of land in meadows to provide winter feed for their livestock. Maintaining that diversity often required them to preserve small fields (even down to an acre), sometimes miles apart. The winter feed provided by the meadows was transformed by the stock into the compost (a subject Donahue discusses at great length) that enabled fields to maintain their fertility. The meadows were, as managed by the Concord farmers, capable of exporting through the feed a small amount of nutrients each year indefinitely and sustainably, supplying other elements in the system with the imported fertility which those fields required to produce crops.

As someone who has worked, and still works, land in Concord, Donahue can pay honest tribute to the "wonderfully variable, convoluted landscape.... If this is all marginal land, it is certainly marginal in an entertaining variety of ways" (p. 18). For instance, rocky, hilly land was and is "marginal" for growing most crops. But farmers learned through experience that such land was excellent for apple-growing (and cider production) in a way efficient in the use of human and natural resources. His useful discussions of the requirements of different crops reflect his knowledge gained through the trial and error of growing different plants on different fields. Attention to soil qualities and changes in physical aspects of the land are vital to Donahue's historical narrative, and he provides enough effective maps to allow the reader to follow his points across the landscape.

How broadly applicable are his conclusions? Were sustainable ways ever developed, for instance, in Kansas, where Donahue lived for several years? Donahue does not claim that such ways of life developed in other places and times. But a key significance of this book might be in sending historians out to look for such possibilities, or for evidence of traditions of careful use even amidst exploitation of resources. Historians, as well as environmental and agricultural studies scholars in other fields, may look to this book as a means for helping them appreciate the knowledge developed by American farmers.

This book thoroughly explores its topic, but such future studies could prove useful in addressing some of the areas Donahue did not focus on. He uses his data to suggest how different households used land. But he has less to say about how work was divided within households, including divisions due to gender roles. It is appropriate that his work concentrates on plants and animals which were managed by farmers in Concord. However, that does not leave the reader with a clear sense of how the populations of other plants and animals were affected by these techniques--did they find ways to adapt, did they find refuges, or did their populations simply diminish?

This is an impressively balanced agricultural history, admiring what the farmers achieved, sensitive to the possibilities of different methods for utilizing land. It also demonstrates what a thor-

ough application of the insights of environmental history (and farming) can contribute to agricultural history. And this is an environmental history that heeds Donald Worster's call to give proper attention to how humans fed (and will feed) themselves.[2] Contemporary agrarians like Wendell Berry will find much to appreciate in this book, including Donahue's argument that a tradition that sought to "cultivate nature with more understanding, skill, and restraint and to care for the places where we live as though we meant for our children to live here, too" has existed at points throughout American history (p. xix).

Notes

[1]. On decline, see Brian Donahue, "Dammed at Both Ends and Cursed in the Middle: The 'Flowage' of the Concord River Meadows, 1798-1862," in *Out of the Woods: Essays in Environmental History*, ed. Char Miller and Hal Rothman (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997), pp. 227-242.

[2]. "Whatever terrain the environmental historian chooses to investigate, he has to address the age-old predicament of how humankind can feed itself without degrading the primal source of life. Today as ever, that problem is the fundamental challenge in human ecology, and meeting it will require knowing the earth well--knowing its history and knowing its limits." Donald Worster, "Transformations of the Earth: Toward an Agroecological Perspective in History," *Journal of American History* 76, no. 4 (March 1990): p. 1106.