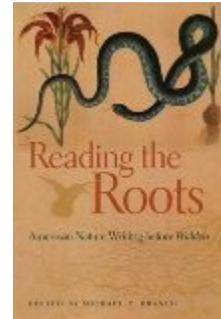


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Michael P. Branch, ed. *Reading the Roots: American Nature Writing before Walden*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004. xxxi + 408 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8203-2548-4.

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## Beasts and Landscapes, Water and Sky

Michael P. Branch's impressive collection of nature writing is a worthy addition to the environmental historian's shelf. Although intended for scholars of American nature literature, this collection offers numerous windows on encounters with American ecosystems that are of value to historians as well.

*Reading the Roots* brings together sources as varied as observations by Spanish soldiers and missionaries, sermons of colonial New Englanders, accounts of American riches from Atlantic entrepreneurs, letters from farmers and widows, descriptions by ornithologists, government reports by explorers and cartographers, and travel narratives by people from all walks of life—Indian captives, independent women, young men with an itch for adventure, jaded Europeans. In these sources, curious eyes peer into places as wide-spread as Southwestern deserts, Southern swamps, Midwestern prairies, and the inside of an opossum's pouch. Whether one is simply reading for the pleasure of the familiar made strange, or looking with a more disciplined intention of charting our national sensibilities regarding the nonhuman world, this collection offers a splendid array of trailheads from which to commence further exploration.

In its primary field, ecocriticism, the book's interest lies in its attention to works and authors that pre-date Henry David Thoreau's watershed work, *Walden* (1854). Traditionally, the canon of nature writing has posited *Walden* as the seminal work from which all subsequent pieces of literature draw inspiration. Branch's collection challenges this in two ways: first, he argues that scholars

of environmental literature need to look beyond the classic form of non-fiction novel or essay, making the case that forms such as diaries, letters, sermons, travelogues, and government reports ought to be considered under the auspices of ecocriticism; second, his collection provides ample evidence that literary works of more familiar form not only pre-dated *Walden*, but in some cases, such as Susan Fenimore Cooper's *Rural Hours* (1850), quite possibly inspired it.

For historians, the value of this collection is also two-fold. Sources such as diaries and government reports are not unfamiliar ground to historians; the specific sources Branch excerpts may be. His scope is wide-ranging across both continent and time, and his evenhandedness in choosing sources that are both interesting and representative means that this collection provides an excellent introduction to the wealth of possible avenues for further scholarly investigation. The experienced historian will be inspired by the range and type of sources, and perhaps intrigued enough by the details in the excerpts and introductory biographies to track down the originals. Young historians-in-training will benefit both from the contextual information about each piece, and from engaging directly with these often entertaining primary sources. It is a rare book that is of value to both students and the professors who teach them, and this is one such book.

On the whole, the weaknesses of this collection are few, and the strengths many. Most of the less-satisfying areas can be traced back to the gap between what is ex-

pected in the field of literary criticism, and the specific demands of historians.

Of these, the most notable concerns citation. Branch has, out of a desire to keep the focus on the source texts, not devoted much of the book to a discussion of sources, and citations tend to be general rather than specific. For example, he notes in the introduction to the Further Reading section that “because most of these materials are available on microfilm, in special collections, or as scholar’s reprints ... I have omitted specific edition publication information” (p. 381). The secondary sources Branch references he admittedly describes as “rather general” (p. 381). While this would not pose a difficulty for an experienced scholar, a less-experienced reader might find it challenging to track down the complete sources from which the collection takes its excerpts. A related issue concerns the contextual mini-essays that introduce each piece. These small essays provide overviews of the author, his or her works, and the context in which he or she lived and produced the source under consideration. As such, they are quite valuable additions to the collection; yet, sources for essays are unclear, though presumably they are among the “rather general” works in the bibliography.

A lesser concern—and it is not so much a concern as a mild advisory—is that a historian who uses this book should be cognizant that the standards of literary criticism are different in two significant ways from those of history. First, there is a greater emphasis on close readings of the text, and less emphasis on the context in which that text was produced and consumed; for historians the reverse is more traditional. Second, if Branch’s introduction is anything to go by, environmental literary criticism as a field is wary of sources that are unfamiliar in form or which belong to eras before the nineteenth century. Branch himself makes the case that this reluctance to engage with such texts is limiting, but a historian unfamiliar

with this disciplinary context might wonder why all the cautionary language in the introduction is necessary.

Compared to these minor weaknesses, the strengths of this collection are considerable. The range of sources Branch has compiled is impressive; he has included not only the well-known—writers and observers such as Cabeza de Vaca, Cotton Mather, Thomas Jefferson, Lewis and Clark, Audubon and Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and the Frémonts—but also lesser-known treasures such as Pedro de Castañeda de Nájera, the chronicler of Coronado’s expedition; the Swedish born naturalist Peter Kalm; the journalist and travel writer Anne Newport Royall; and Nicolas Point, a Jesuit who wrote about the Rocky Mountains. The result is an intriguing *mélange* of perspectives, one which transforms our common perception of nature writing from the purview of a handful of important figures to an activity engaged in by a wide spectrum of individuals. Branch makes a good effort to draw from as diverse a range of sources as possible; he has included the voices of women, African Americans, and Native Americans where possible (although his emphasis on first-hand written accounts constrains their numbers).

The collection is further enhanced by one of the better indexes this reviewer has encountered; not only is it arranged by topic, but it allows the reader to investigate the sources by type: travel writing, sermons, diaries, captivity narratives, government reports, and so on. The result is a collection that is engaging to simply read through, and yet easy to navigate according to the needs and desires of the reader. As best this reviewer can tell (not being formally trained in literary criticism) this collection meets the editor’s stated purposes admirably; that it is a success for historians is an additional benefit. Either way, I can whole-heartedly recommend this collection, not only for the professional scholar, but for the student and the interested amateur as well.

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