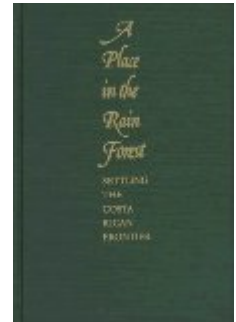


**Darryl Cole-Christensen.** *A Place in the Rain Forest: Settling the Costa Rican Frontier.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997. viii + 243 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-292-71190-7.



**Reviewed by** Stuart McCook

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Historians often have difficulty reconstructing the mental worlds of the people they study. The world of deeds and actions is more accessible than the world of beliefs and emotions. Environmental historians can, for example, trace patterns and rates of deforestation, while the world views of the people who wielded the axes remain hidden. Forests were often cleared by the poor and the illiterate, who had neither the time nor the inclination to pick up a pen and reflect upon what they had done. *A Place in the Rain Forest* is a rare exception to this general rule.

Darryl Cole-Christensen moved from the United States to Costa Rica in the 1950s to participate in the settlement of Costa Rica's South Frontier, a region now known as the Coto Brus. Over several decades, settlers from Italy, Costa Rica, and elsewhere laboured to clear the forest and plant crops. Cole-Christensen has written a memoir that tells three interconnected stories. The first is a detailed account of how the frontier was settled, told from the perspective of a typical settler. Second, he explains what motivated the settlers and how they understood the frontier. Finally, the present-

day Cole-Christensen, now involved in conservation efforts, seeks to draw lessons from his experiences as a settler.

*A Place in the Rain Forest* is particularly valuable because of its detailed reconstruction of the process of the settlement of the Costa Rican frontier. The colonists were "architects in reverse" who would "disassemble and dismantle before [they] would build" (p. 13). Dismantling the forest was a long and painstaking task. The settlers began by clearing a small area of the forest for the *ranchos* where they lived while clearing the rest of their land. They cleared the underforest and felled large trees, using only the simplest of tools: machetes, axes, and small hooked sticks known as *garabatos*. The land "cleared" this way was still littered with stumps and trunks, and so was not yet ready for cultivation. The settlers had to wait until the dry season and then burn off this forest debris.

Only after the long and difficult process of clearing could settlers prepare the soil for cultivation. Here too, they used only hand tools: *amachete de suelo* for digging and planting, a short

shovel known as a *pala*, and the ubiquitous axes, machetes, and *garabatos*. Cole-Christensen describes the slow, painstaking work of clearing in photographic detail: "at every other stroke of the *pala* we bang into a root. This collision, like a fumbled axe stroke, takes away a reserve of balance and drains far more energy than it should. In some roots the *pala* gets hung up and we have to pull it free. The rhythmic stroke-and-turn in hilling, so important in this work, is continually being blunted. Multiply this by hours and the inevitable result is fatigue, and some frustration" (p. 80).

There was still much work to do once the forest cleared and the soil prepared. Settlers planted food crops for subsistence and to sell to the United Fruit Company towns in the coastal settlement of Golfito. With the *pala*, they planted coffee seeds, learning along the way when the best time for planting was. After a year of careful watering, pruning, and fertilization, the young coffee trees would be transplanted in the fields. The trees then needed several more seasons to come into full production. In Coto Brus, coffee was harvested in the middle of the rainy season and taken to the *beneficio*, the coffee processing factory, where it was sorted, fermented, washed, and dried, and ultimately sent abroad for export.

Cole-Christensen's account of the thoughts and motivations of the settlers, including himself, adds a new dimension to the traditional narratives of settlement. Recently, a sociologist described the recollections of the settlers of the Coto Brus as "highly romanticized." Cole-Christensen counters that this romanticized encounter with the frontier is essential to understand what the settlers did. "People are affected by the experiences they live with; sometimes the 'romance' of struggle, of being at times close to danger, great risk, great loss, has a lot to do with what they do with their lives and the land and environment which these mold" (p. 51). Reflecting this experi-

ence, *A Place in the Rain Forest* is unapologetically romantic.

The settlers of the 1950s saw the frontier either as land or as forest. The land was the place where they could build, produce, settle, and earn a living. The forest, on the other hand, was an obstacle. For the settlers, argues Cole-Christensen, the forest had no aesthetic value. The settlers evaluated the frontier according to how it could meet their own immediate needs. Official policy supported this view. The settlers were granted title to the land only if they "improved" it, which meant felling the trees, regardless of whether or not the cleared land was then used (pp. 6-7). The forest also meant isolation and therefore insecurity. In the early years, the South Frontier was connected to the coast only by a precarious road, and to the Central Valley by occasional flights. These flights were often hampered by bad weather, poor visibility, and other problems. A reliable road through the forest meant security, connection with the outside world. These attitudes, which Cole-Christensen shared, go a long way to explaining why the settlers felled the forest with such vigour. Recently, Cole-Christensen has come to question some of these values and attitudes. He has become passionately concerned about the seemingly irreversible destruction of the rain forest.

*A Place in the Rain Forest* is thus also an environmental history of the settlement of the South Frontier. Cole-Christensen uses insights from his own experience and from modern ecology to explain what he and his fellow settlers did. Settling the frontier was "a process of interaction between people and this world of existent relationships. It is a fluid, ever-changing, never inert combination of things in which the perceptions, reactions, and attitudes of people will change from moment to moment the circumstances over which they exert some control" (p. 41). Clearing the forest changed the dynamics of light, moisture, relative temperature, and air circulation, which in turn influenced

the way that the crops grew. For the settlers, this constant environmental change meant that they constantly had to learn and to innovate. If the settlers "separated themselves from a concern with the life-systems principles surrounding them ... they would drive a wedge between themselves and what they needed to know" (p. 75). For example, seemingly minor differences in light, water, climate, and location had significant effects on the patterns of growth in the coffee plantations.

Yet Cole-Christensen has written more than just a lament for lost opportunities. Although the rain forest is gone, he argues that we are still on the frontier. "[T]he elements of natural systems, their forces, are no less with us now than before; our lives are not less affected by the forces, these systems; their impact is with us as it was with others; when we are talking about a continuance of life, we are dealing with ourselves, regardless of time" (p. 122). The problem of how to live constructively and productively within nature continues. Coffee planters both past and present have attempted to keep their plantations homogeneous, to keep out weeds, pests, and diseases, to "hold diversity at bay" (p. 180). They have done so with mixed success. Nature, as Cole-Christensen points out, does not simply wait for people to influence it. The problems of the frontier were, and remain, complex. Cole-Christensen has turned his farm, the Finca Loma Linda, into a center for scientific study of the rain forest and agriculture, so that scientists and farmers alike can learn from both the original rain forest and from the successional forests.

The romantic language that makes *A Place in the Rain Forest* a delight to read can sometimes obscure Cole-Christensen's meaning. There are also some problems with organization and pacing. The book follows a broad thematic sequence, but within each chapter the narrative meanders from one topic to the next. It can be difficult to follow these shifts and to understand clearly the connections that Cole-Christensen seeks to make.

But these are minor objections to what is otherwise an insightful and important work. *A Place in the Rain Forest* is an invaluable document for historians studying the environmental history of tropical forests and tropical agriculture

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