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David Stradling. *The Nature of New York: An Environmental History of the Empire State.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010. Illustrations. xi + 277 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-4510-1.

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"Culturally Scripted Places": People and Nature in New York

As the title of David Stradling's book suggests, nature has been a shaping force in the history of New York State. In his broad survey of the state's environmental history since the colonial era, nature plays a role that is at once real and mythic. New York's abundant natural resources–furs, forests, fisheries, fertile soils, fresh water, diverse landscapes–were from the outset the basis of the state's wealth. How this wealth was exploited, managed, squandered, polluted, and preserved reflects shifting ideas about nature that were dominant in a given era, from the capitalist's commodification of natural resources, to the engineer's taming and harnessing of nature's forces, to the romantic's idealization and recreation of the wild. The idea of nature is at the heart of this book, which tells the story of New York as an ongoing narrative of the interaction of people and places.

Given Stradling's previous book, *Making Mountains: New York City and the Catskills* (2007), the choice of New York State as his subject is a logical one, but it may be problematic to some environmental historians who believe a regional or local focus serves as a more effective unit of study for an in-depth environmental history. In his introduction, Stradling addresses these concerns head-on. He recognizes that state boundaries are political constructs that set arbitrary limits to an environmental history. No state, he asserts, can "fully contain its own environmental history narratives," and by inference "any boundary placed on an environmental history must exclude some aspects of the story." At the same time, "the state's boundaries have created a cultural bond, a New York identity" (p. 8). On the face of it, Stradling seems to be stating the obvious, but his methodology is more complex and deliberate.

The last decade or so of American environmental history has proliferated with studies of cities, regions, and ecosystems, with few devoted to a single state. A book of particular relevance to Stradling's, because it lays out an argument for state environmental histories, is William G. Robbins's *Landscapes of Promise: The Oregon Story, 1800-1940* (1997). In his foreword to Robbins's book, William Cronon describes Robbins as a pioneering environmental historian who "invariably tries to embed people and communities whose lives he studies in the context of the much larger system of which they are part." Note that Cronon does not say *ecosystem*, but specifically refers to the system of "modern corporate capitalism," which significantly shaped the relations of "people to each other and to the ecosystems they inhabit" (p. xiii). While Robbins acknowledges that bounded places, by definition, are "primarily culturally constructed," he argues in his prologue "that there are viable and useful strategies beyond those associated with natural geography for exploring the environmental history of politically contrived places.... Under the influence of that progressively expanding global system [of industrial capitalism], political units, no matter how diverse their internal geographical and ecological features, increasingly become culturally scripted places, reflecting the common purposes and designs of capitalism, an economic culture that views the natural world in terms of its commodity potential" (pp. 9, 12).

The Empire State certainly fits the definition of a culturally scripted place where nature itself is a fluid concept. As amply documented in Stradling's history, New York in particular has been a seedbed of cultural ideas about nature that emerged in the nineteenth century, culminating in state environmental policies that influenced national policies and shaped the course of American environmental history. If there is a signature metaphor in this book, it is the idea of boundaries. The natural features that demarcate state lines, he notes, are "ecosystems that join" rather than separate regions, permeable boundaries through which plants and animals, people,

products, and cultural ideas flow (pp. 6-7). Similarly, "the boundaries between nature and culture are porous" (p. 4). Stradling resists the bifurcation of natural and built environments. However altered the environment, "never did nature, as a unity, retreat. It changed," he argues. Given this premise, his book embraces "the full diversity of environments in New York–wild, rural, suburban, and urban–as it must, since environmental history happens in all types of places" (p. 3). Whether a typhus outbreak in a Lower East Side tenement or the experience of wilderness in the Adirondacks, each story illuminates the relationship between New Yorkers and nature in a particular place.

New York State is home to a number of iconic places in American environmental history: Niagara Falls and Love Canal, the Adirondacks and Catskills, Central Park and Levittown, the Hudson River and New York harbor–all of which are treated in this book. The state is also home to a number of significant players in the national environmental story, including James Fenimore Cooper, Thomas Cole and the Hudson River School painters, Frederick Law Olmsted, Theodore and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and Robert Moses, among many others. All to some extent shaped our ideas about nature, and a few enacted those ideas by preserving and transforming landscapes in the state and beyond. "The stories of these people and places … touch upon all the significant themes in American environmental history: the changes to the land wrought by European settlement, the growth of commerce and an urban network, the power of romantic notions of nature, and the development of industry with its benefits and detriments" (p. 2).

Stradling does not make any claims to writing a comprehensive history of New York. He takes a topical approach, with chapters covering economic, cultural, political, and technological stories spanning four hundred years of the state's history since European contact. The seven chapters are organized roughly chronologically, although individual chapters may jump backward and forward in time in treating a specific topic. As a result of its topical approach, the book is somewhat encyclopedic in structure, with chapters subdivided into topical sections. Such organization results in a somewhat disjointed narrative and at times superficial treatment, unlike the more coherent narrative of *Making Mountains*. Nonetheless, the diversity of topics covered, some more in-depth than others, suggest areas of further research that scholars may pursue, consulting Stradling's immensely helpful biographical essay at the end.

The colonial period is treated rather cursorily in chapter 1. The account of how European market hunting affected the relationship between Native Americans and game animals owes much to Calvin Martin's *Keepers of the Game: Indian-Animal Relationships and the Fur Trade* (1978), whom Stradling acknowledges. The description of how Native Americans had already altered the landscape prior to European contact recalls Cronon's seminal regional history, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (1983). There is nothing much new here. A surprising omission in a history of New York is the imprint of the Dutch on the landscape. Stradling's declared emphasis in this chapter is "the importance of the market and the development of the profit motive in shaping New York's landscape after 1609. The shift in economic thinking toward 'improvement' and the accumulation of wealth was fundamental to the many environmental changes that came thereafter" (p. 12). Yet this remains an abstraction without telling the story of different European groups who carried with them cultural narratives about improving the land, and who imported specific settlement patterns that determined how they laid out their farms and towns. The Dutch, in particular, exemplified the capitalist market mentality in their single-minded pursuit of wealth through the exploitation of resources in colonized lands. This seems to be a missed opportunity. Stradling's main focus in this chapter is post-Revolutionary New York, when European settlers spread upstate, gradually displacing Native American groups and radically transforming the landscape as forests gave way to farm fields, roads were mapped in the wilderness, and rivers were dammed. This last section of the chapter is the richest in detail and offers much fresh material.

Chapter 2 treats the engineering of the landscape, from the building of the Erie Canal to the creation of a "waterscape" to improve transportation and agricultural production. It documents the growth of cities that accompanied the network of canals and railroads, which in turn created growing demand for agricultural products. The story of the Erie Canal serves as an appropriate emblem of a number of Stradling's themes: the state's endowment of natural resources; the geographical advantages that allowed the east-west routing of a canal connecting New York port to the Midwest; cultural ideas about improving nature through technology and science; and the market mentality that drove the state's development, creating the Empire State. It also illustrates another theme of Stradling's, that beginning in the nineteenth century, the state was a model in engineering the environment and developing rational environmental policies. As he writes in a piece for History News Net-

work (HNN), the "golden age of state environmental policy" begins with the Erie Canal in 1820 and "stretches at least through the creation of the New York State Forest Preserve" of 1885, which culminated in the "wild forever" clause of 1894.[1]

The focus of chapter 3 is the emergence of romantic ideas of nature that idealized wilderness, giving rise to a nature tourism industry and fostering the creation of urban and state parks, from Central Park to the Adirondacks and Niagara Falls. Despite the fact that Stradling covers this material in more detail, appropriately, in *Making Mountains*, the chapter serves to amplify the importance of romantic ideas in literature and art that shaped the ways people envisioned and experienced nature. James Fenimore Cooper, Thomas Cole, William Cullen Bryant, and Frederick Law Olmsted receive the fullest treatment. Color plates of Hudson River School paintings further enrich the chapter. This chapter is one of the most satisfying as a coherent narrative, serving to illustrate the porousness of nature and culture that is one of Stradling's strong themes.

Chapter 4 tells the story of the Progressive Era in New York, when romantic ideas had fallen out of favor and more rational approaches to city planning shaped urban environmental reform. Again, as in the previous chapter, Stradling is at his best when treating topics he has written about in more depth before. Here he builds on two previous books, *Smokestacks and Progressives: Environmentalists, Engineers, and Air Quality in America* (1999) and *Conservation in the Progressive Era: Classic Texts* (2004). In particular, the chapter covers urban transportation infrastructures, tenement house reform, sanitary reform, efforts to remediate air and water pollution, the City Beautiful movement, utopian suburbs and cities, and zoning. The emphasis in this chapter is the state government's increasing authority to regulate the environment, a necessary authority in Stradling's view given the complexities of environmental problems and solutions. Not until the environmental crises of the twentieth century would that authority prove inadequate, as he notes in the aforementioned HNN piece. This inadequacy of response is considered in the last two chapters.

The conservation movement is the focus of chapter 5, devoting much space to two major players, Theodore and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who spanned the period from the 1880s to the 1930s. Bob Marshall and Robert Moses are also discussed, though in less detail. In Stradling's telling, the stories of these men illustrate the essential roles that individuals can play in achieving environmental preservation–visionary individuals who exercise their power through the political system. Indeed, notes Stradling, the elevation of public good over private right was a cornerstone of Teddy Roosevelt's conservation program. He concludes the chapter with the arguable assertion that "conservation was not primarily concerned with protecting wild nature. It was a utilitarian and market-oriented movement, focused on natural resources rather than natural systems" (p. 148). One wishes for more analysis of how and why this was so, particularly as the conflict between two views of nature–resource conservation and wilderness preservation–were played out in New York State.

Chapters 6 and 7 primarily treat the environmental battles of postwar New York, when the air, lands, and waters were being poisoned by toxic chemicals and nuclear fallout. These chapters document the emergence of environmental activism as citizens reacted to these threats to human health, showcasing the increasing clout of the average citizen to bring about environmental reforms. Stradling does not fail to neglect the critical roles that housewives played in agitating for environmental reforms in their neighborhoods–from antismoke campaigns to protests against nuclear testing, pesticide spraying, and chemical dumping. Lois Gibbs of Love Canal is a prime example. Stradling also covers the battle over Storm King, a scenic mountain overlooking the Hudson, in some depth, treating it as a watershed event in the history of citizen action to save the environment from corporate polluters and developers–in this case, to block Con Edison's plan to turn Storm King into a power plant. Stradling cites organizer Carl Carmer's statement at hearings convened by the Federal Power Commission in 1964 to review the Storm King project. Carmer, when queried about his stance regarding progress, responded: "Progress is made when the people preserve their inheritance of scenic, historic and recreational values." To Stradling, Carmer's words encapsulate a "growing environmental sentiment, one that linked historic and natural preservation in an effort to control growth and limit the damaging effects of development" (p. 187). His statement underscores another of Stradling's themes, that the preservation of natural landmarks is inextricably tied to the preservation of cultural landmarks; indeed, landscapes themselves become cultural icons. The Storm King battle also set in motion ensuing actions by citizens to save America's rivers, beginning with the Hudson.

The last chapter covers the urban crisis of the 1960s that erupted into the riots of Brownsville, the South Bronx, and Harlem. Stradling offers a fresh environmental perspective on these riots, arguing for the interconnection between urban and environmental prob-

lems. The inner cities were places of decay–abandoned buildings, peeling lead paint, uncollected trash, rats and other vermin–threatening the lives of their residents, who like the places they lived in were marginalized and abandoned. The emergence of the environmental justice movement grew as a response to such environmental racism. The chapter ends with short segments on disparate topics: acid rain, global warming, invasive species, open space, and reforestation–all topics that beg for more in-depth coverage.

The book's "broad scope" and "diversity of topics," as described by Stradling, illustrate both its shortcomings and strengths. Its shortcomings have been noted. Its strengths lie in its synthesis of a wide range of primary and secondary sources and its interdisciplinary approach. The topical approach and concise treatment make this highly readable book useful in an upper-level undergraduate course. And scholars will want to consult Stradling's bibliographical essay for its detailed list of sources organized according to the topics covered in each chapter.

Beyond its academic contribution, the book will appeal to a wide audience. The book's originality lies in Stradling's unique perspective on the interplay of nature and culture, particularly his rich discussions of the literature and art that shaped our cultural ideas about nature and indeed made New York a "culturally scripted place."

Note

[1]. David Stradling, "The 'State' of Environmental History," History News Network, George Mason University, November 22, 2010, http://www.hnn.us/articles/133739.html.

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