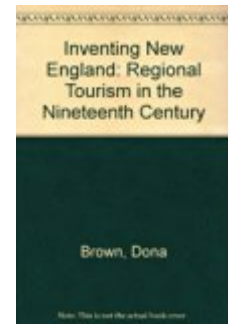


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Dona Brown. *Inventing New England: Regional Tourism in the Nineteenth Century*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995. ix + 253 pp. \$23.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56098-473-3.

Reviewed by Philip J. Landon (University of Maryland–Baltimore County)  
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## Tourism and the Idea of New England

This impressive study of tourism in nineteenth-century New England is far more ambitious than its modest title suggests. Dona Brown not only charts the growth of tourism and its impact on regional economies, but she also explores the ways in which an expanding tourist industry helped create the idea of New England and the cultural values which have long been associated with that idea. *Inventing New England* focuses on middle-class tourists who flocked to New England in increasing numbers throughout the century, revealing the ways in which their experiences at seaside resorts and in rural towns tended both to reflect and to shape middle-class tastes and values. In six chapters, each devoted to a detailed analysis of a representative tourist haven, Brown covers commercial tourism from its beginnings in the 1820s with fashionable tours to Saratoga Springs and Niagara Falls to the 1890s when well-to-do tourists found refuge from the hectic pace of urban life in carefully reconstructed colonial villages of southern Maine.

In her chapter on the fashionable tour that carried passengers up the Hudson River and through the newly opened Erie Canal to Niagara Falls, Brown describes the important differences between the patterns of tourism evolving in the nineteenth century and those of the previous century. Before the 1820s, travelers had depended on social connections to provide them with information about the places they visited. Furthermore, these visitors were primarily interested in observing democracy in action or visiting places that exhibited the economic progress of the new nation. Thus their travels

led them to urban areas where they could observe the seats of government, famous colleges, and modern factories. The Hudson tours, however, began to emphasize scenic attractions that included the picturesque vistas of the Adirondacks, the awe-inspiring Niagara Falls, and the prison at “Sing Sing.” Because this new generation of travelers had no social connections in what was, until very recently, a frontier wilderness, they needed places to stay and guides to lead them to the points of interest. To meet these needs real estate speculators built hotels for the fashionable traveler, a variety of writers turned out guidebooks for them, and the American tourism business was born.

As Brown points out, the shift in touring from the population centers to rural scenes was part of the romantic attraction to Nature, and guidebooks took care not only to lead tourists to scenic waterfalls, mountain landscapes, and forest glens, but also to advise their readers how to react to these scenes. It became a mark of middle-class status to have the correct responses to features deemed sublime, picturesque, or pastoral. Moreover, the guidebooks encouraged seeing nature as separate from and superior to the vulgarities of commerce and industry. As a result, most tourists knew how they were supposed to respond to a particular scene before laying eyes on it. Drawing upon diaries, journals, and published accounts of touring the Northeast, Brown concludes that tourists tended to be as much—if not more—concerned with the quality of their responses to scenic places than with the places themselves.

A chapter on scenic touring in the White Mountains between 1830 and 1860 shows all of these forces at work transforming a frontier wilderness into what guidebooks would identify as the American alps. During the 1820s the Crawford family built three inns to accommodate the loggers and wagon drivers who traveled through the Notch from the northern hinterlands to Portland, Maine. Within a decade, however, these inns were attracting a new sort of customer, travelers drawn to the wild mountain scenery. With an eye on expanding their business, the Crawfords advertised the wild romantic scenery they knew would impress potential guests. Humble local names—the Flume and the Pool—were replaced by those with more romantic associations—Silver Cascade, Diana’s Baths, and Giant’s Stairs.

Throughout the 1830s and 1840s, tourists flocked there in increasing numbers; among these visitors were the artists, writers, and political leaders whose work helped shape the country’s deep cultural myths. Tour books described the White Mountains as embodiments of the national virtues formed by frontier life: sturdy individualism, independence, freedom. The Great Stone Face became the subject of one of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s tales; the scenery was painted by Thomas Cole and praised by Daniel Webster. In “Nature” (1836), published four years after a visit to the Notch, Ralph Waldo Emerson described the poetic power of the landscape in terms similar to those found in the many books describing the White Mountains. He erred, however, when he proclaimed the landscape beyond the reach of commerce and property. Within a quarter of a century, when over 5,000 tourists climbed Mt. Washington every summer, the countryside had begun to lose its majesty. A booming tourist business changed it from “a scenic wonderland...to a fashionable summer place” (p. 74).

In the chapters on Martha’s Vineyard and Nantucket, Brown explores the ways in which the developing tourist industry contributed to the growth of consumerism and exploited the nostalgic longing for a more tranquil, harmonious past. By the 1860s, travel became possible for the growing number of Americans of limited means who could not afford the accommodations of the fashionable tourists who visited Saratoga Springs and Mt. Washington. The Wesleyan Grove on Martha’s Vineyard had long been the site of week-long summer religious retreats held by the Methodist Church. They were attended by tourists of modest means who lived in communal tents and devoted their time to spiritual renewal. The 1860s saw Wesleyan Grove undergo some crucial changes. The tents were giving way to villages of private cottages, and fam-

ilies began to arrive before the scheduled revival services in order to enjoy a brief escape from the cities where most of them lived and worked. At the same time, religious leaders discovered the spiritual values of an annual vacation. Henry Ward Beecher advised parishioners that a period of time away from the workaday world served to renew their religious faith. The right sort of vacation was no longer regarded as a form of self-indulgence to be avoided. Tourism, of the proper sort, helped overcome a long tradition of viewing all forms of pleasure as decadently self-indulgent.

While Martha’s Vineyard attracted tourists interested in preserving traditional religious values, Nantucket attracted visitors who sought a vacation retreat that corresponded to their real and imagined memories of the good old days, when America seemed more stable and tranquil, when society appeared to be free from class and ethnic divisions. As southern New England mill towns were flooded with immigrants during the 1870s and 1880s, places like Nantucket were “imagined as the repositories of a common New England heritage.” They were presented to tourists as the last remaining homes of essential New England values: stability, virtue—and Yankee bloodlines (p. 108). Nantucket, in reality, did not fit this pattern. It was a commercial town in economic decline since the collapse of the whaling industry in the 1850s. But the abandoned houses and the rotting piers had a nostalgic appeal to tourists, and, with an eye to economic revival, the islanders were willing to nurture that appeal by restoring those old buildings and adopting the quaintness of manner expected by summer visitors. By the turn of the century the transformation was complete. Nantucket had manufactured a culture for the tourist trade.

Northern New Hampshire and Vermont did not experience the rapid economic decline of Nantucket, but, by 1890, it became clear that the region was also in trouble. The young left for the cities; farming left for the West; and small factories were losing out to the bigger mills of southern New England. Under the leadership of Governor Frank Rollins, New Hampshire gave birth to a new tradition in 1899: Old Home Week. The aim was to encourage former residents to return home for a vacation that would renew their ties to family, fortify the values associated by then with “old New England,” and, above all, bring dollars into the state. The idea was so successful that within a few years all the New England states had followed New Hampshire’s example. Old Home Week represented a new aspect of tourism that placed emphasis not on scenery but on a pastoral vision of farm life. The

Vermont board of agriculture launched programs to increase tourism by advertising abandoned farms suitable for vacation homes and encouraging farmers to take in paying guests. Farm vacations were less expensive than a stay at a fashionable hotel or a shore cottage, and they attracted clerks, school teachers, and other white-collar workers with limited incomes.

Dona Brown's last chapter is devoted to the far more upscale resort communities in the vicinity of York and Kittery, Maine. Here the colonial past, a period when the area was engaged in the very profitable (and infamous) West Indian Trade, attracted tourists wealthy enough to renovate the old mansions or stay at the elegant new hotels. Real estate developers and hotel owners stressed the region's colonial past; summer people saw it as another refuge from modern urban life. Both Thomas Bailey Aldrich and Thomas Nelson Page summered there and published idealized accounts of life along the Piscataqua River. They extolled the virtues of the natives and their moral superiority to the inferior races populating America's large cities. Brown points out that not all the summer people shared such reactionary views. For example, William Dean Howells, another summer resident, managed to reconcile his progressive views with admiration for the values associated with the old colonial order. His political sympathies for the working classes who sweltered all summer in the cities did not interfere with an annual trip to Kittery.

The book concludes with an epilogue that sketches the twentieth-century development of the tourist business on Cape Cod and takes a brief look at future prospects for using tourism to combat economic decline in the once-prosperous cities of New England.

The strengths of *Inventing New England* seem to be equally distributed among the quality of the writing, the clarity of the argument, and the strength of the historical sources. At a time when cultural studies are often exercises in unreadable prose and tendentious theorizing, Dona Brown has produced a first-rate account of the degree to which the idea of New England was constructed by the evolution of the tourist industry. Although it can be read as an example of judicious social analysis, it should also be read for its striking insights into the reason why generations of tourists and summer people have been so attached to the New England countryside. Let me conclude with what I intend as a compliment, not a criticism. After finishing *Inventing New England* on the porch of a summer cottage in central Maine, I noticed that the landscape praised by Emerson in "Nature" did not look quite the same.

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