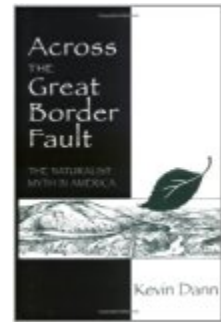


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kevin Dann. *Across the Great Border Fault: The Naturalist Myth in America*. New Brunswick, N.J. and London: Rutgers University Press, 2000. xiv + 328 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8135-2790-1.

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Unmasking the Naturalists

Unmasking the Naturalists

In this ambitious and deftly written study, author Kevin Dann reveals the naturalist myth that underlies contemporary American discourse on the environment and the place of man in nature. Dann selects as the locale for his study Harriman State Park in southeastern New York State (named after Union Pacific railroad president E. W. Harriman, who donated the land), and the environs of the Ramapo mountains. In the first half of the twentieth century, this region was home both to a group of natural scientists who saw the park as a living museum, and to a collection of artists and intellectuals who saw the park as a place of philosophic and spiritual insight. The author's purpose is to describe how the study of nature in and around Harriman State Park was part of the larger political and social agenda of the Progressive era. Enamored with what some scholars have called the "Arcadian" myth, the idea that nature is both a source of strength and regeneration for the urban masses, each group saw the Ramapo district as the perfect setting to launch intellectual experiments that ultimately led down separate epistemological paths. The now forgotten debate between these scientists and philosophers is at the center of the "Great Border Fault of twentieth-century-epistemology" (p. 15).

The scientists, drawn from the American Museum of Natural History and the Eugenics Record Office, created a reductionist and empiricist science of life that described humanity as a by-product of "natural" forces. Using the

tools of the empirical sciences these self-proclaimed naturalists centered their work on natural environments unspoiled by humankind. Their work reinforced the belief that humanity is only understood in light of the study of nature. This became the core of the naturalist myth. Dann argues that the naturalist myth creates an iron cage of determinism that finds expression in the efforts of sociobiologists like E. O. Wilson to reduce human behavior to a set of predetermined genetic patterns. Indeed, Dann suggests that Wilson and others are in the process of creating a new religion of nature in which pristine wilderness becomes the sacred space where ultimate questions of the role of humanity will be raised and answered. Thus, Dann's book falls squarely within the growing literature in science and the environment that understands knowledge as a negotiated construction between society and the world around us.

Dann places the development of the naturalist myth in the context of a broader epistemological contest between philosophers and scientists in the early twentieth century. Opposing those who wove the naturalist myth into the fabric of American culture were a collection of neo-platonic theosophists and anthroposophists who sought a spiritualist scientific naturalism that envisioned the natural world as the manifestation of a greater realm of existence. Influenced by Rudolf Steiner, the anthroposophists created a haven outside of Harriman State Park called Threefold Farm, located in Ramapo, New York. There, for much of the twentieth century, they sought to marry natural science and religion by discov-

ering spiritual insights into nature that would eventually reveal the spiritual and natural destiny of humanity. The anthroposophists placed the study of man at the core of their research into nature. Their failure, and the triumph of the scientists, created a “pervasive natural philosophy” (p. 15) that spawned a “civic religion whose rites centered on camping, hiking, and nature study” (p. ix). More importantly, the triumph of the naturalist myth, like all successful myths, created a system of thought that eradicated earlier discourses and the possibility of alternate views of the place of man in nature.

The strength of Dann’s work is his understanding of the objects of his study. Dann’s background in natural history and his intimate familiarity with the Ramapo district allows for a vivid recreation of the setting of his work. At the same time, Dann has a talent for selecting telling exchanges and quotes that bring his subjects to life. He convincingly develops his thesis by noting the influence of the prevailing culture on the scientific naturalists. Alas, the text has its own great border fault in its awkward division into two sections. The first and better section deals with the natural scientists; the less successful second section develops the discussion of the spiri-

tual scientists. The overall effect marginalizes the anthroposophists, whom Dann admits had a minimal impact on American thought. Thus the reader is treated to lengthy descriptions of the workings at Threefold Farm knowing all the while that this endeavor was not replicated on a national scale. Dann’s desire to situate the text within a specific environment becomes both the book’s strength and weakness.

Overall, this is a stimulating book and a critical text. It should find a place alongside the work of environmental historians such as William Cronon and historians of science such as Greg Mitman, who are similarly interested in unearthing the cultural origins of scientific beliefs about nature and the environment. It would make a fine addition to graduate seminars in the history of science where it is hoped that it will encourage further research into the naturalist myth and its implications for American culture. Scholars interested in science studies and American intellectual history will be well rewarded by reading Dann’s impressive discussion of the development and implications of the naturalism in the late twentieth century.

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