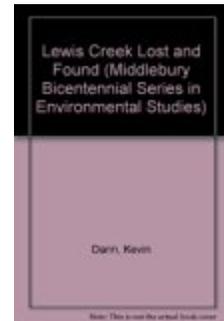


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Kevin Dann. *Lewis Creek Lost and Found*. Hanover, N.H., and London: University Press of New England, 2001. 240 pp. \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-58465-072-0; \$45.00 (library), ISBN 978-1-58465-071-3.

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Rediscovering a Place and Reinhabiting Bioregion

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Kevin Dann has created a remarkable “dig,” here, retrieving from old maps, fiction, local lore, botanical surveys, and local history the stuff of human lives lived in a particular place—a watershed in Vermont. His text, as Stephen C. Trombulak notes in his foreword, “creates a narrative that is neither romantic nor idealized but is as rough and diverse as the land and the people themselves” (p. xii). In ten chapters based on what Dann has found, we encounter wild apples, weeds along a railroad corridor, liminal places and people, an odd “meteoric rock,” and a “jack pine” (*Pinus banksiana*), seemingly out of place in Vermont.

Dann’s is the fourth in the Middlebury College Bicentennial Series in Environmental Studies, following *The Story of Vermont: A Natural and Cultural History*, *Wetland*, *Woodland*, *Wildland: A Guide to the Natural Communities of Vermont*, and *The Return of the Wolf: Reflections on the Future of Wolves in the Northeast*. As the three previous titles make clear, Dann’s focus on a relatively insignificant watershed in a corner of Vermont sacrifices breadth to depth. But his focus down deep and centripetal is principled: “If we are to cultivate bioregionalism as a means of attaching ourselves to place, to ‘reinhabiting’ the landscape, then we need to recover the stories of ‘local heroes,’ the lesser known individuals who have both physically stewarded a place, and ‘metaphysically’ stewarded a place through their cultivation of thought and memory” (p. 5).

In this pursuit of place in particular, Dann falls into good company: Gary Snyder, Wendell Berry, Aldo Leopold, Linda Hasselstrom, Terry Tempest Williams, and many younger ASLE scholars (Association for the Study of Literature & Environment; see <http://www.asle.umn.edu>). Two issues piggyback on works of this sort, one epistemological, one literary. As to the first: at some metaphorical level, a watershed is a watershed is a watershed, whether huge (Missouri/Mississippi) or middling (Hudson River) or small (Lewis Creek). The same sorts of things count: geologic underpinning, floral webs and disturbances, clashes and cooperation of people, and what weather and industry, agriculture and war have done to the web of life there.

The literary problem is tougher: how to incorporate an abundance of local, particular, concrete detail to make the portrait persuasive but not to so load it with names and maps, history and biography as to overwhelm an “out of state” reader. Here is where Dann loses me sometimes. I think particularly of passages such as this one on weeds:

“One hundred years ago, some of the plants still seen along the railroad were first making their appearance in the watershed, and in the state. From the beaches around Boston came orach or spearscale, *Atriplex patula* var. *patula*. From Europe, via Boston, came a relative of *Atriplex*, the oak-leaved goosefoot, *Chenopodium glaucum*, and two mustards, *Lepidium campestre* (field peppergrass), and *Sisymbrium altissimum* (tumble mustard). From the Midwest came the symbol of peregrina-

tion, the tumble-weed (*Amarathus graecizans*). Adventives rode the rails south from Montreal also, such as biennial wormwood, *Artemisia biennis*.” (p. 92)

Were I living in Vermont instead of California, I would cherish and learn from these botanical specifications. They serve well the Vermonter devoted to understanding a place in depth. We readers from away can skim.

Elsewhere Dann addresses broadly human responses to place, the nearly universal inclination of inhabitants of any place to treat some other people or places as liminal and to treat them or mistreat them accordingly:

“If any single habitat could be said to have suffered most from human nature-hating, it would be the swamp.... The average citizen of mid-nineteenth-century America would have made an even more vituperative evaluation [than that of Zadock Thompson in the epigraph to chapter 2]; that citizens held the local swamp in about as high esteem as rattlesnakes, wolves, and chicken hawks. The prejudice against swamps drew its strength from two sources: the inconvenience they presented to a nation of farmers bent on tilling every available inch of soil; and a deeper, almost archetypal fear of such places. Swamps were often impenetrable and always inscrutable. They were the part of Eden where humans were not welcome, though a host of other creatures were welcome there.” (p. 28)

Here Dann deftly weaves together in one tight paragraph the “wisdom” of local prejudice (“chicken hawks”), the perspective of present-day environmental historians (“a nation of farmers bent on tilling every available inch of soil”), and mythopoeic fancy that Joseph Campbell would enjoy (“the part of Eden where humans were not welcome”) to create a persuasive presence of swampiness that would meet the test of Marianne Moore’s demand for poetry, that it “present/ for inspection imaginary gardens with real toads in them” (“Poetry,” 1921, ll. 31-32).

And Dann nicely exploits the nature of watersheds in general to open to his reader the stretch of time and layers of geologic and human sedimentation:

“A river is a great expositor of things hidden, digging up the past as it makes a new present. It sweeps slowly across the landscape, cutting through soil and rock as inevitably as the wind and rain. At its most persistent, it cleaves the continent, opening up epochal memories engraved in stone.... Lewis Creek ... cuts open a land of both abundant rain and past glaciation, where green

plants and an assortment of glacial till, marine, and fluvial deposits shroud the rocks and the earth history encapsulated in them.” (p. 135)

While land forms and nature’s plenitude and variety underlie the phenomenon of place that Dann explicates in his chapters, it is the lives and work of three Vermonters from the Lewis Creek watershed that bring the story of the place to life and link its people and passions to the wider world. Cyrus Guernsey Pringle (1838-1911), a “retiring Quaker,” like John Bartram before him thoroughly explored his home ground and “sought the full complement of his natal watershed’s floral diversity, as part of a wider quest for botanical knowledge” (p. 26). Also like Bartram, he traveled far in his calling: “His twenty-six years of botanical wanderlust radically altered scientific knowledge of the North American flora—10 percent of the more than 12,000 species of Mexican plants he collected were new to science” (p. 91).

Rowland Evans Robinson (1833-1900), a bit of a mystic, “poked about Lewis Creek’s past in search of the sites and stories that best made his fellow moderns rediscover their common humanity through the experience of place” (p. 26). If his practice of rendering dialect in odd spelling now seems strained and difficult to read, it does witness his intent to capture the flavor of his fictional characters’ vernacular wisdom.

John Bulkley Perry (1825-72) “dug deep into the region’s geologic past to anchor the land in the nineteenth century’s unfolding narrative of earth history” (p. 26). His ties to place begin with his study of “The Oven” near Monkton, “the crest of a huge fold” of Red Sandrock which creates “a perfectly arched cavern that resembles an old-fashioned brick oven” (pp. 142-43). It was the sort of oddity that challenged geologists. In mid-century, geology took one to the center of disputes between religion and science, between special creation of species and a more additive, evolutionary model. Perry, an ordained Congregational minister as well as a geologist, sought all his life to embrace both the works and the words of God; in those days “Christian commitment was not the exception, but the rule” among such men of science (p. 150). For that reason alone it is fitting that Dann has included the faith of his exemplars as well as their works, especially when the aim is to discover the full power and authority of reinhabited bioregion (p. 5).

Lewis Creek Lost and Found could well serve as a model of how one may capture other “lost” landscapes, unpack their complexity, and weave them into patterns of contemporary social and cultural dramas. And Dann’s

appreciation for the history of science and biographies of scientists may lead others who have not thought to look at science that way to begin to make connections between ethos and science. Finally, Dann has found in his “lost creek” a humanity-in-place that reminds us of what we honor when we narrate such stories.

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