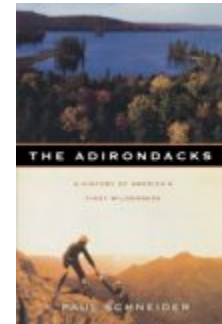


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Paul Schneider. *The Adirondacks: A History of America's First Wilderness*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997. xiii + 368 pp. \$12.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8050-5990-8.

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## Forever Wild

The Adirondacks, a semi-protected forest area in upstate New York, has a rich and powerful history. Harvey H. Kaiser, Samuel Edelberg, Barbara McMartin, Carl Owens, Craig Gilborn, and many others have written on the subject. Each of these, however, only considered a small aspect of the park's past. Paul Schneider provides one of the first comprehensive narrative histories about the Adirondacks.

*The Adirondacks* is multi-faceted. Schneider takes already explored material, binds it together with his own fresh information, and creates a multi-level history of this great location. One history is of the human existence in the park. Within this framework, the author explores the changing meaning of the area to its human inhabitants.

Beginning in the seventeenth century with the Adirondacks' earliest inhabitants, the Iroquois, Schneider illustrates the park's importance to the natives. It is not only a living space, but also the spiritual birthplace of their people. The Native-Americans found all they needed for daily living within the surrounding forest and meadows.

As Europeans explored and settled the area, they began viewing the land as an untouched resource. Hopeful farmers, miners, trappers, and loggers came to make their living and to exploit the region for man's benefit. As time passed, rich sportsmen and hunters touted the land as a wildlife paradise, rich in nature's fruit and plentiful enough to last forever. Soon, naturalists and artists heard of the Adirondacks' beauty and flocked to the region to

be inspired.

As the tourists came, land developers and hotel barons crowded in to serve the clientele, building lavish structures to accommodate the hordes thirsting for a taste of "the wild." The parks clear lakes and streams coupled with crisp mountain air soon caused prominent physicians to prescribe trips to the region for their patients.

Schneider ends his human history of the Adirondacks with a look at the present state of the area. Housing development and resort communities intermingled with the semi-protected forest provides the background for the environmentalist/conservationist battle that has engulfed the region for some time. The 1894 New York State Constitution states that land contained within the Forest Preserve in Adirondack Park "shall be forever kept as wild forest lands." From this point on, the fight has raged over how the park's land and resources would be used.

The second level of history that Schneider provides is the environmental history of the Adirondacks. He illustrates how, through human influences and natural occurrences, the land, wildlife, and resources changed over time. He is especially enlightening on the timber industry and how its practices and influences have effected the region. This relates to the third level of history: how humans and the environment effect one another.

Schneider takes the human side and blends it with the environments', and provides the reader with several different points to ponder and levels to understand the

past. He writes in a way that his readers not only understand what he is describing, but they “feel” the Adirondacks through his words. In addition, Schneider allows the reader to understand the park today by illuminating its past.

Schneider peppers his narrative with colorful characters. Sigmund Freud, Herbert Hoover, Benjamin Harrison, Calvin Coolidge, Teddy Roosevelt, Robert Louis Stevenson, and many other notables that trod the mountains trails, hotel lobbies, or cabin porches. He does not forget the layman either, describing guides, fishermen, trappers, thieves, and loggers. This allows the reader to live through these characters, if only for a moment. They can stalk a deer or sit on the porch of their great camp in the woods. Imaginative folk can take tea on the veranda of the Saratoga Hotel or swim in Lake George. The main point is that no matter if the reader is a historian, environmentalist, booklover, or just likes a great story, they will enjoy *The Adirondacks* because of its great narrative, vivid descriptions, and interesting information.

Despite the great prose, however, the book does contain some problems. The endnotes are confusing to follow. The chronology is difficult to understand. Certain chapters appear out of place. For example, chapter thir-

teen describes the mining business in the park, listing amounts and locations of ore pockets in the 1800-1900s. The following chapter forwards to the present and covers ice climbing and the changing role of the Adirondack guide. In chapter fifteen, Schneider moves into the past again, and lists the authors and artists that frequented the area in the nineteenth century, ending with Dr. Edward L. Trudeau’s Adirondack Cottage Sanitarium.

Although the chapter on ice climbing and the “new” Adirondack guide is important, its location in the text is questionable. Lastly, several chapters are less than three or four pages long. The reader may have been better served if this information was integrated into the other chapters. Perhaps a stronger editing hand could have solved some of the problems.

Although *The Adirondacks* contains a few minor problems, they do not take away from this great history or the author’s ability to tell a worthwhile and interesting story.

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