Australian John Dargavel and Austrian Elisabeth Johann, both widely experienced in forest practice, research, and historiography, present an impressive and valuable ride through 250 years of global scientific forestry. They focus on the science of forestry and chose a classical science history approach concentrating on the internal developments and the intrinsic trajectories of forest science.

The book is divided into five chapters, largely in chronological order. The first chapter recounts the evolution of classical scientific forestry in England (particularly John Evelyn’s contribution), France, and German-speaking countries. Dargavel and Johann follow the classical master narrative of forestry, namely, that wars in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries produced large-scale depletion of wood and timber resources, and that scientific forestry was a reaction to this resource crisis. Readers benefit from the authors’ intimate knowledge of the evolution and improvement of forest management and the problems foresters encountered in measuring and cultivating forests, in making them economically profitable, and in regulating large forests. They explain early scientific concepts precisely, yet in accessible language, and they follow this path up to current forestry practice. The reader will be able to grasp the meaning and the impact of Hundeshagen’s Normalwald concept of 1826 just as easily as twentieth-century digital simulation of industrial forest plantations. The authors keep references to the minimum and add short case studies, biographical sketches, explanatory graphs, and images in each section.

Lamentably, the whole body of social and political history of forestry in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is ignored. The social consequences of reserving forest for conservation purposes; the role of resource control for the evolution of modern statehood; and the question of whose economies were to benefit from the modern even-aged, high-stand, coniferous forests that scientific forestry created, and to whose detriment they worked, receive no mention. Accordingly, we get the impression of a smooth transition to scientific forestry in Europe, invented and implemented by an ingenious group of foresters always on the lookout to improve concepts and practices, always ready to learn by trial and error, and always succeeding if only in the next generation.

In their second chapter, Dargavel and Johann follow scientific forestry to the new world, to new problems being solved by professional, academic foresters. Again the evolution of empire forestry is presented as a problem internal to forestry. Forestry’s role as a tool of empire, brilliantly accounted for by a score of imperial historians, is not a factor in the narrative. Also the new postcolonial science studies school that criticizes simple diffusion models and emphasizes the entanglements of modern sciences with local practices and knowledge has not left its imprint on the book.

In the next three chapters, the authors follow three groundbreaking shifts in twentieth-century forestry. The first constituted a logical extension to the path forestry had taken in the nineteenth century: simplification of the forests’ composition, intensification of cultivation, and growth of managerial control. Key elements of this next stage were finding and breeding new, ever-better adapted species; developing artificial fertilizers; and initiating digital large-scale planning—all everything under the
condition of accelerating industrial demand and population growth. The second shift occurred with the industry’s reaction to the challenges of the ecological age. The reactions included establishing codes of conduct (in production and logging), internalizing hitherto external costs (such as water consumption), and comprehensive planning (including ecosystem services in management plans), or new silvicultural concepts such as nature-based forestry. The ecological approach is complemented by preservation, a century-old idea, to halt exploitation in areas where natural or cultural values should prevail. It has gained momentum since the end of the twentieth century in connection with the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992 and the Convention on Biodiversity. As a third shift the authors consider social forestry, which denotes the increasing demand to integrate the local population in the management of forests and in decision making, to consider local demand for the resources of forests (including pastoral or agricultural ones) and to consider the costs and benefits of forestry to the local economies (for example, labor, infrastructure, pollution). In the last chapter, the authors discuss the current state of the art in forestry and the ecological as well as social challenges to forest science posed by climate change, by the increasing confidence of postcolonial governments and environmental grassroots organizations, and by ever-larger industrial estate forestry.

At the beginning of the new millennium—under the conditions of climate change—forestry’s object of study remains as unruly as it has ever been. Furthermore, epistemological challenges have been posed to staunchly positivist forest scientists. Social scientists criticize the lack of sensitivity toward social entanglements and ecologists decry a simplification of the forest structure and a disentanglement of forests from ecosystems. Dargavel and Johann concede that forest science has been slow, even reluctant, to adapt its scientific system to the challenges, in particular the social ones. It is certainly a bit of a loss that their narrative of scientific forestry presents itself also as largely intransigent to social, political, and environmental perspectives. They chose to remain within the confines of forestry as a scientific discipline and to refrain from viewing it as a social and a political phenomenon. A larger framework might explain to some extent why often only foresters themselves take the emphatic and hopeful outlook on resource management that forestry has offered throughout its history. Still, there is much insight to be gained from this resourceful, comprehensive, and very accessible book. Regarding the long temporal frame—the clear-sighted, convincing grip on the major turning points of scientific forestry, and the patient and accessible explication of forestry’s concepts—it certainly fills a gap in the international literature on forest history.

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