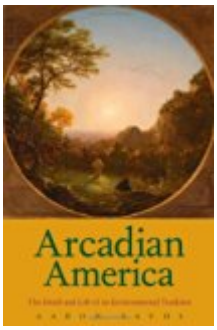
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Aaron Sachs. *Arcadian America: The Death and Life of an Environmental Tradition.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013. xi + 484 pp. $35.00, hardcover, ISBN 978-0-300-17640-7.



Reviewed by Chris Wilhelm

Published on H-Florida (December, 2015)

Commissioned by Jeanine A. Clark Bremer (Northern Illinois University)

Aaron Sachs's *Arcadian America: The Life and Death of an Environmental Tradition* is a 2013 entry in Yale University Press's series New Directions in Narrative History. According to the series' website, the goal of this series is to "offer significant scholarly contributions while also embracing stylistic innovation."[1] In that vein, this work attempts to combine a historical examination of what Sachs calls an Arcadian view of the natural world with a series of personal narratives concerning Sachs's own experiences with death. Unfortunately, Sachs never adequately defines this Arcadian tradition, and many of his personal musings seem to have only a superficial connection to this tradition.

Sachs defines Arcadia as "that ancient society of solid rural values, of pastoralists who wandered free over a broad countryside of mountain meadows and forest glens, yet who also, somehow, established the kinds of stable civic institutions that ennobled Aristotle's Athens" (p. 5). To Sachs, the idea of Arcadia was also infused with death. Death's ability to give "Aracadian life new meaning" is central to Sachs' book (p. 8). Death is also the central theme of Sachs's personal narrative, and he admits that he is obsessed with it (p. 324). This definition though is never precise enough to act as a satisfying and unifying concept for his historical and personal narratives, or explicit enough to be adequately compared and contrasted to other ideas about nature in America. Furthermore, the evidence Sachs marshals does not adequately show that death really was central to Arcadia, nor does it show that the historical actors he examines, like William Cullent Bryant, Ignatius Donnely, Henry George, Hamlin Garland, and others, actually fit into this Arcadian tradition.

The book opens with an introduction that outlines the book's argument and places it in its broader historiographical context. This powerful introduction is probably the strongest section of the entire book. It boldly outlines an alternative historical American view of the natural world: a pastoral and rural view that Sachs finds still alive in the gorges and cemeteries in Ithaca, New York.

The introduction promises much, but largely fails to deliver. Each of the following seven chapters alternates between conventional historical narrative and Sachs's own personal musings. Chapter 6 is fairly typical of the book's organization and content. This chapter opens with Sachs's own account of his acceptance to a PhD program at Yale, then examines the Arcadian thinking of American landscape architect H. W. S. Cleveland. Next we learn of the death of another of Sachs's friends, then Sachs examines Henry George's *Progress and Poverty* (1879), and then the reader is plunged back into another of Sachs's musings on death. The chapter ends as Sachs places Hamlin Garland into the Arcadian tradition. As is typical throughout the book, Sachs's personal reflections often have little to do with his historical writing, other than the fact that they all focus on death. Additionally, many of the explicit connections Sachs makes are based on coincidences that lack meaning or relevance.

There is much potential here though, and there are sections of the book that offer valuable historical insights. Sachs's examination of graveyards as landscapes is certainly well done and has value to environmental historians. His insistence that American environmentalism has been too obsessed with wilderness and has ignored rural areas is certainly a valid insight as well. Yet this is a well-worn observation and Sachs falls short in contributing to our understanding of how rural landscapes and experiences have shaped alternate views of nature in America. Certainly, southern environmental historians would agree that examining the rural tradition in America is important, and Sachs's book would have been greatly enhanced by examining southern figures, or for that matter, any historical actors other than elite northern white males.

Some of Sachs's personal musings are poignant and emotionally powerful, especially those that focus on the death of his infant brother or on the slow deaths of his parents. Yet, Sachs's examination of death is repeated too many times throughout the book and loses its emotional impact. *Arcadian America* contains 368 pages of text, and frankly it seems that a much stronger editorial hand was needed here. Sachs himself is the series editor, and his co-editor is John Demos, who was Sachs's advisor at Yale before he retired in 2008. One has to wonder about the process of editing the book; the lack of strong editing seems to have hurt it immensely. To be sure, there is a 150-page book here full of valuable historical and personal analysis.

There are some methodological issues here as well. Although Sachs comes from an American studies background, many of his graduate advisors (whom he discusses in the book) were historians, and this book is very much an attempt to write history. One major issue is that Sachs seems to be projecting his own ideas about the present back into the past. Certainly his obsession with death is projected back onto these elite cultural figures. His definition of Arcadia also seems tinted by his own concerns about nature and politics in America today and seems to be infused with a romantic view of a mythic past. Sachs even admits this to some extent in his examination of Walt Whitman's Arcadian thinking. Sachs writes that he is "fully aware that I could be projecting my own attachments" onto Whitman (p. 170).

Sachs also lacks the ability to empathize with many historical actors, and ignores figures who were not culturally important white elite men from the North. For example, while examining the Civil War, Sachs admits that he "has never been able to empathize with Civil War soldiers," and even states that despite the perhaps hundreds of books written on the everyday experience of soldiers in the war (some of which he cites) understanding these men's motives is futile (p. 145). Later in the book while examining the Battle of Wilderness historical site Sachs returns to this theme. He writes: "Empathy? I'm still not sure it's a real possibility." He writes that as a historian he

needs to "explore as many sources as possible," to understand this history, yet the only sources he utilizes throughout the book are those written by elite white northern male writers, artists, and political commentators (p. 203). Before Sachs can answer his own question about empathy and the ability of the historian to empathize with historical figures, the narrative abruptly shifts to an account of Sachs's family vacations and the sighting of a pileated woodpecker. This abrupt shift is not in and of itself a weakness, but the lack of connection between the author's treatment of history and his own narratives makes these shifts more jarring and puzzling.

Perhaps the book's greatest value is as a primary document of elite academia in America. Sachs comes from a family of academics, attended Yale, and now teaches at Cornell. His personal narratives very much, at times consciously and explicitly, focus on his own experiences as an elite academic. Sachs's narrative overwhelmingly focuses on his relationship with death, yet none of these deaths impact Sachs's own professional or economic success. Sachs never has to accept welfare checks because family members have died, and his own lifestyle and standard of living is never impacted by these deaths. These deaths immensely affect Sachs's emotional life, but his musings on death seem deeply removed not only from those of most Americans, but even those of most academics in America.

My intent here is not to attack Sachs personally, but because so much of this book is personal, it is essential to grapple with Sachs's personal narrative. If this book review is to be honest, it needs to address Sachs's personal life, which is the focus of half of this book. Although Sachs seems like a very talented writer and a very thoughtful individual, I found much of his narrative deeply problematic and reflective of a great deal of privilege. Sachs does not seem to worry about tenure or to have much of a teaching load, and he never seems to worry about money or student loan debt. The people I have known in my own academic life greatly struggled financially and professionally when family members died, they struggled to pay rent throughout grad school, and they entered the job market burdened with debt. Sachs never discusses adjuncting to make ends meet, or paying for one's own expenses for conference travel. The problem with writing a book that is so personal, is that that person's experiences need to resonate with readers. Unfortunately, other than the universal experience of death, there is little of Sachs's experiences that will resonate with modern diverse readers. Both as a history and as a memoir, this book intensely reflects the concerns of a handful of northern male cultural elites.

Note

[1]. http://yalepress.yale.edu/yupbooks/SeriesPage.asp?Series=161.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-florida

Citation: Chris Wilhelm. Review of Sachs, Aaron. *Arcadian America: The Death and Life of an Environmental Tradition.* H-Florida, H-Net Reviews. December, 2015.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=44966