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Keith Pluymers’s *No Wood, No Kingdom: Political Ecology in the English Atlantic* is a triumph of Atlantic environmental history. It is Atlantic in the truest sense; Pluymers begins in England’s Royal Forests before taking readers on a tour of Ireland’s woods, Virginia’s sylvan landscape, Bermuda’s profitable nursery, and Barbados’s deforesting land. Pluymers’s chapters stand on their own as detailed studies of the political ecologies of wood in specific colonies away from the metropole. But he also has a gift for nesting these stories within one another and drawing out how varying locales were similar to or differed from one another. For example, when writing about how Bermuda’s experience was quite different than those of other Atlantic colonies, he still notes how, “as in Ireland and Virginia, there were frictions between transatlantic commerce and local demands on the landscape” (p. 133). Rather than depict a generic environment, his analysis is thus sensitive to how various environs shaped history.

As the subtitle suggests, *No Wood, No Kingdom* is deeply engaged in the literature of political ecology. As Pluymers describes it, “investigating wood in the early modern period is a question of political ecology—ideas and practices governing the definition and use of natural resources—not just a matter of counting trees” (p. 4). Those ideas and practices hinge on conceptions of scarcity and abundance. Wood—not trees, specifically, but the products they offer—were crucial to early modern states and people because “the early modern world was a wooden one” (p. 5). The rhetoric of scarcity and abundance that pervades writing by metropolitan thinkers and colonial boosters alike, was more indicative of political and social beliefs than of simply having enough wood. The book, then, is mostly concerned with intellectual conceptions of trees and their varied roles as commodities. Pluymers’s work on scarcity and abundance is masterful. But in these pages, rhetoric is abundant while actual trees are scarce. Put another way, his work—like much of political ecology—is brilliant when it treats the political but light on ecological knowledge. While he situates the palmettoes and cedars of Bermuda in the natural world, his dis-
cussion hinges on their “different economic niches” (p. 135). The trees with which Pluymers concerns himself are by and large paper; not because they are made into it, but because that is where they exist. Like the Irish concerns about wood scarcity, which he describes as “the result of paper deforestations,” No Wood, No Kingdom is more about trees on paper and less about those made into paper (p. 60).

The book begins with an introduction and is followed by five chapters (each one tackling the wooden history of a different Atlantic locale) before ending in a final, synthetic chapter. “Scarcity, Conflict, and Regulation in England’s Royal forests” shows how struggles over changing exploitation of English woodlands—both royal forests and wooded lands on estates—were really conflicts over differing political ecologies as locals in need of firewood struggled with ship carpenters and others who used forests very differently. This chapter also surveys the development of England’s early modern forestry apparatus, which oversaw England’s vast domestic wood holdings. From England, Pluymers takes us to Ireland in “Creating Scarcity in Ireland’s Woods.” While early in the English colonial settlement of Ireland “the state, when it perceived Irish woods at all, had treated them mainly as wastes that reduced the taxable value of granted lands,” planters who were granted Irish lands “sought to mirror English techniques for estate management and treated Irish woods as resources to be husbanded and exploited as sources of profit” (p. 74). Periodically, amidst domestic English fears of wood scarcity and supposed deforestation of the Isles, the empire looked towards Ireland to provide a store of trees. To Pluymers, what connected colonies in the Atlantic, more so than people or commodities, were “fears of wood scarcity and competitive efforts to exploit woodlands,” which “created multiple, competing geographies built from the material world and ephemeral linkages” (p. 107).

Virginia, the subject of “The Political Ecology of Woods in Virginia,” had one of the most substantial alterations of political ecology in the English Atlantic world. For the first years of English settlement, colonists treated “Virginia’s woods as nuisances to be cleared rather than as commercially viable resources to be preserved with measures like those used in England and Ireland” (p. 109). Promotional writers and colonists, however, tried to turn these vast, seemingly untapped sylvan resources, either through trade in the trees themselves or their production of iron, into economically useful products. This lag before using Virginia’s forest bounty exemplifies the heart of Pluymers argument: as he puts it, “English colonists did not simply discover abundance across the Atlantic: they needed to create it” (p. 127). But the abundance in Virginia, as colonists sought to create iron works by burning the vast quantities of trees, came to naught as Powhatans attacked the iron works, ending one chapter of English political ecology. Once again, the trees that surrounded their settlement became a nuisance, as “Virginia’s government recast the surrounding woods as sites for war, not commercial enterprise” (p. 124).

“Conservation and Commercialization in Bermuda” takes a somewhat different tack from the rest of the book, homing in on two different species of trees with similar ecological adaptations to Bermuda’s environmental conditions that were valued very differently. Despite early experiments with turning a profit by exploiting mangroves, yellowwood, and other plants, colonists settled on Bermuda cedars and palmettos, with both serving an important function on the island. Both trees “had adapted to Bermuda’s unique environmental conditions, developing root systems, bark, and leaves tolerant of high winds and salt spray” (p. 135). Cedars were a straightforward trade good; regulations protected stands so landowners could continue to make profits and because cedars could provide useful windbreaks to protect the island from storms. Palmettos, in contrast, “were an essential and omnipresent part of life in English Ber-
muda, but they did not yield any commodities salable in transatlantic markets,” so they were not initially protected (p. 143). Similar plants produced very different political ecologies on the island.

The penultimate chapter, “Deforestation and Preservation in Early Barbados,” treads the most familiar ground. Between 1627 and the 1670s, “most of the native woods had been removed and sugarcane fields dominated Barbados’s landscape. For both early modern observers and modern historians, the pace and extent of ecological change sparked concern” (p. 167). Far from offering a simplistic narrative of declension from unbridled overuse, Pluymers argues that the “transformation of Barbados from a wooded island to a landscape dominated by sugarcane took place deliberately” (p. 169). It was the availability of other Atlantic sources of wood that ultimately saw “a shift toward a political ecology and geography of wood in Barbados, serving large plantation owners’ desires to maximize sugar production by emphasizing trade and connection to acquire resources” (p. 181).

Chapter 6, “Toward an Atlantic or Imperial Political Ecology?” uses John Evelyn’s Sylva, or A Discourse of Forest-Trees and the Propagation of Timber (1662) as a jumping-off point to analyze an English empire-wide political ecology. While other “historians have hailed Evelyn’s Sylva as a foundational text for English environmental thought,” Pluymers convincingly argues that it should “be understood as a work of political ecology,” as throughout the work he wavers “between full-throated calls for an English empire and concerns about cost and efficiency in the provision of timber” (p. 237). It is here that Pluymers knits together the English Atlantic he has described by noting how “Caribbean demand was essential to the changed landscape of wood in the English Atlantic,” as intercolonial trade “gave value to woods in Virginia and New England that fears of domestic scarcity had never provided” (p. 232). The political ecology of the English Atlantic responded to on-the-ground colonial concerns and enmeshed parts of England’s empire in a broad system that had, as its lynchpin, policies and desires related to wood.

This book fits into an emerging body of scholarship on environmental history across vast early America. Pluymers’s emphasis on commodities, and wood in particular, serves as a useful complement to work by Jennifer L. Anderson, Molly A. Warsh, and Strother Roberts, among others.[1] The book is indispensable for scholars of the early English Atlantic, environmental history, and historical political ecology. It surely will appear on reading lists for graduate students and—because the chapters stand so well on their own—could easily be digested by undergraduate students as stand-alone pieces or serve as an introduction to political ecology.

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