

12-2005

## **Review of: Forests in Time: The Environmental Consequences of 1,000 Years of Change in New England, Review of: Sightseeking: Clues to the Landscape History of New England**

Kent C. Ryden

*University of Southern Maine*, [kryden@usm.maine.edu](mailto:kryden@usm.maine.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/anes>



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#)

---

### **Recommended Citation**

Ryden, Kent. "Forests in Time: The Environmental Consequences of 1,000 Years of Change in New England." *The New England Quarterly* 78, no. 4 (2005): 649-51.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences at USM Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in American and New England Studies by an authorized administrator of USM Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [jessica.c.hovey@maine.edu](mailto:jessica.c.hovey@maine.edu).

*Forests in Time: The Environmental Consequences of 1,000 Years of Change in New England.* Edited by David R. Foster and John D. Aber. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004. Pp. xiv, 478. \$45.00.)

*Sightseeking: Clues to the Landscape History of New England.* By Christopher J. Lenney. (Hanover: University of New Hampshire / University Press of New England, 2003. Pp. xvi, 360. \$26.00 cloth; \$18.95 paper.)

Why does rural New England look the way it does? Driving down one of the region's rural highways, it is easy to take the passing landscape for granted. We see it as pleasant scenery enlivening our trip from point A to point B, perhaps, or view it through the romantic haze that often surrounds bright fall foliage and stately colonial houses. It takes a deliberate effort of attention and imagination to stop, look, and understand where that everyday landscape came from, how it has resulted from specific human decisions and historical processes. Fortunately for the geographically curious among us, two recent books provide useful guides for how we might read New England landscapes as cultural and historical texts: David R. Foster and John D. Aber's *Forests in Time* addresses the forested landscape, and Christopher J. Lenney's *Sightseeking* discusses the more obviously manipulated and artifactual aspects of our surroundings.

For many people, forests are prime examples of a natural landscape, standing at the opposite physical and conceptual pole from the world of buildings and pavement. To the authors of *Forests in Time*, however, evidence of past human activity is everywhere in the New England woods, and so "one inevitable conclusion . . . is that modern New England is a cultural landscape, shaped extensively in pattern, structure, and process by the far-reaching hand of human history" (p. 73). In this respect, the book joins Lenney's *Sightseeking* in examining the same object of study: a physical environment that, no matter where you look, is the product, direct or indirect, of human minds and hands working together. *Forests in Time* also adds a scientific, ecological approach to current discussions of the cultural construction of nature among historians, literary ecocritics, and others working in the environmental humanities. The many authors of the chapters brought together by Foster and Aber amply demonstrate that nature is a physical as well as a cultural construction; the composition and structure of New England forests can best be accounted for by the history of disturbance events, not as a simple function of soil and climate.

Not all forest disturbance is a result of human activity, of course, and *Forests in Time* summarizes much work on the effects on the New England woods of such natural factors as wind damage, long-term climate change, and pests and pathogens introduced by nonhuman means. Yet the bulk of disturbance, in amount and aftermath, has come at the hands of humans, first Native Americans and then European colonists and their successors: fire, land clearance (and then reforestation following farm abandonment), timber harvesting, introduced species. Although the book's chapters cover a wide range of topics, taking full advantage of the breadth offered by its title, its leitmotif is that New England's forests today have been fundamentally shaped by land use history. The book has a practical, and quite timely, thrust as well: What can one thousand years of change teach us, from an ecological perspective, about managing New England's forests into the future?

I have been emphasizing the cultural implications of *Forests in Time*, but the book is very much a scientific work, albeit shorn of much of its scholarly apparatus to make it more congenial to a general readership. Still, while it is probably not the sort of book often perused by readers of the *New England Quarterly*, for some of us it should be: if we're going to talk about nature in literature, history, and the like, we should at least have a good understanding of how nature works lest it become a cultural construction and nothing else.

Viewing the New England landscape from a different angle, Christopher J. Lenney invites us to go "sightseeing," which he defines as "systematic sightseeing" with an eye toward understanding "the fundamental theme developed in this book: spatiotemporal variation" (p. 1), the process by which landscape artifacts develop through specific historical processes that play out differently in different places. Following Hans Kurath's *Linguistic Atlas of New England* (1939-43), Lenney develops what he calls his "Kurathian Hypothesis," an assumption, familiar to folklorists and historical geographers, that distribution patterns of vernacular artifacts, be they words or things, indicate the presence of cultural subregions conditioned by patterns of original settlement and subsequent migration. As with the structure and composition of New England forests, the continued presence of linguistic and material culture subregions indicates a world of past human activity even if that world has long since vanished. Lenney elucidates his idea through extended historical examinations of six categories of vernacular landscape artifact: place-names, boundaries, town plans, roads, houses, and gravestones.

Having laid out his hypothesis in his opening pages, though, Lenney largely abandons this interpretive framework in favor of an accumulation of admittedly fascinating details. He keeps at least some of his attention on landscape patterns—the sharp divide between place-names modified by “Great” and “Big” in the state of Maine, to take one intriguing example—and suggests their relationship to settlement history, but he does not pursue his thesis in a thoroughgoing way, and certainly not on the regionwide scale of Kurath; that is, he does not examine overlapping patterns of artifact distribution in order to elucidate subregions within New England as a whole along the methodological lines of, say, Henry Glassie’s classic *Pattern in the Material Culture of the Eastern United States* (1968). As a result, the value of *Sightseeking* lies not in its conceptual sweep but in the sheer amount of historical information it contains about a myriad of specific things in each of Lenney’s categories. The book is amply researched with an enthusiast’s devotion—Lenney is a Harvard librarian—and every bit of that research seems to have gone into its pages. For readers interested in understanding why the world seen through the windshield looks the way it does, *Sightseeking* joins *Forests in Time* in helping us to appreciate, both generally and in detail, how our everyday rural New England landscapes can best be understood as the result of long, complex, intertwined natural and historical processes.

Kent Ryden is the director of the American and New England Studies Program at the University of Southern Maine and the author of *LANDSCAPE WITH FIGURES: NATURE AND CULTURE IN NEW ENGLAND* (2001).

*Revolutionary Mothers: Women in the Struggle for America’s Independence.* By Carol Berkin. (New York: Knopf, 2005. Pp. xviii, 202. \$24.00.)

A quarter century after Mary Beth Norton and Linda K. Kerber constructed their path-breaking studies of women’s role in the American Revolution, Carol Berkin has drawn together a comprehensive yet concise survey of the female experience during the Revolutionary age. In some respects, the publication of *Revolutionary Mothers* marks a new phase in the field of women’s history—the academic fruit of a generation’s worth of investigation. For while Norton’s *Liberty’s Daughters* and Kerber’s *Women of the Republic* had to demonstrate