

# The Story of Vermont

## A Natural and Cultural History

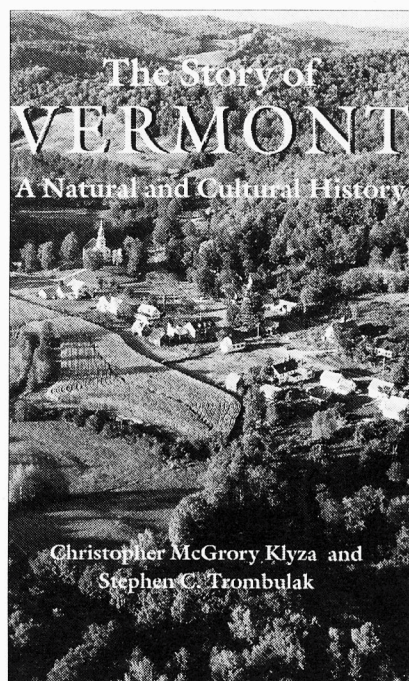
By Christopher McGrory Klyza and Stephen C. Trombulak.  
Hanover: University Press of New England, 1999

BOOK REVIEW BY GLENN MCRAE

After years of working on different environmental issues in Vermont it was refreshing to read a concise and well-written treatise which attempts to bridge the gap between human history and natural history. Klyza and Trombulak's *The Story of Vermont: A Natural and Cultural History* is an accessible overview of the various forces, cultural, geological and biological, which have shaped the Vermont landscape today. It also presents Vermont with a series of challenges for its future development.

*The Story of Vermont* finds itself in a diverse landscape of scholarship. There are more in-depth natural history studies such as Harold A. Meeks', *Vermont's Land and Resources*, and more sweeping studies in cultural ecology such as William Cronon's *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*. There have also been more intimate accounts that connect Vermont's human and natural communities, such as John Elder's *Reading the Mountains of Home*, which was published the previous year.

Glenn McRae lives in Essex Jct., Vermont, and works as an environmental consultant. He is an adjunct faculty in Anthropology at the University of Vermont and is completing his doctorate in Anthropology at The Union Institute in Cincinnati, Ohio.



What makes *The Story of Vermont* stand out, however, as a usable general reader, a sound teaching tool, or a fundamental resource for policy makers is evident in its nature as an accessible resource that puts Vermont firmly in a bioregional context. In terms of accessibility, the authors strive to interpret concepts in natural and physical science, concerning the development and transformation of the Vermont landscape into a format that is readable and gripping without sacrificing either rigor or thoroughness. Glaciation and plate tectonics are hardly the stuff of a fast paced story, but they are handled in a way that can sustain interest without losing content.

The reader can also say that at the end of the story one can comprehend why an understanding of these early forces shaping Vermont is important to the issues faced today. This is a significant achievement.

In the historical framework, the authors maintain an active cultural historical approach — rather than succumbing to a chronological political-military historical framework — which keeps the volume from lapsing into a rather boring date, name and place construction.

The second area of notable achievement for the authors is that they present a picture of Vermont which, while maintaining its focus on the state, never isolates Vermont from its broader bioregional framework. One never feels that the edges of the mental or physical map the authors are drawing fall off into the blank white nether regions outside the crisply marked political state lines. Vermont is always treated as a physical, natural and socio-cultural entity that is closely tied to the neighboring regions, north, south, east and west.

The Vermont mystique is maintained without being parochial. The authors stress, without being blunt, that Vermont's past as well as Vermont's future is tied to forces beyond its borders.

While the book has numerous attributes to recommend it to a wide audience there are at least two areas that fell short in my reading. The first, was



that it did not live up to its potential to be a truly integrative study of the physical, biological and cultural story of Vermont.

While the subtitle projects this work as a natural *and* cultural history, the emphasis on the 'and' is often a separator rather than a connector. The reader is often taken from natural history to cultural history and back to natural history so that the sense is one of being connected but not integrated. The inclusion of an entire section with three chapters on the ecological communities of Vermont shifts the reader out of what has been an excellent accounting of historic and natural forces shaping the present to a more typical natural history reader and guide. One is jolted out of the flow of the writing, and often feels like skipping to the conclusion in the hopes of catching up the thread of the story once again.

The authors also miss an opportunity to explore the emergent scholarship in studies of the first peoples inhabiting Vermont. Relying heavily on William Haviland and Margory Power's still excellent volume *The Original Vermonters* (1994,

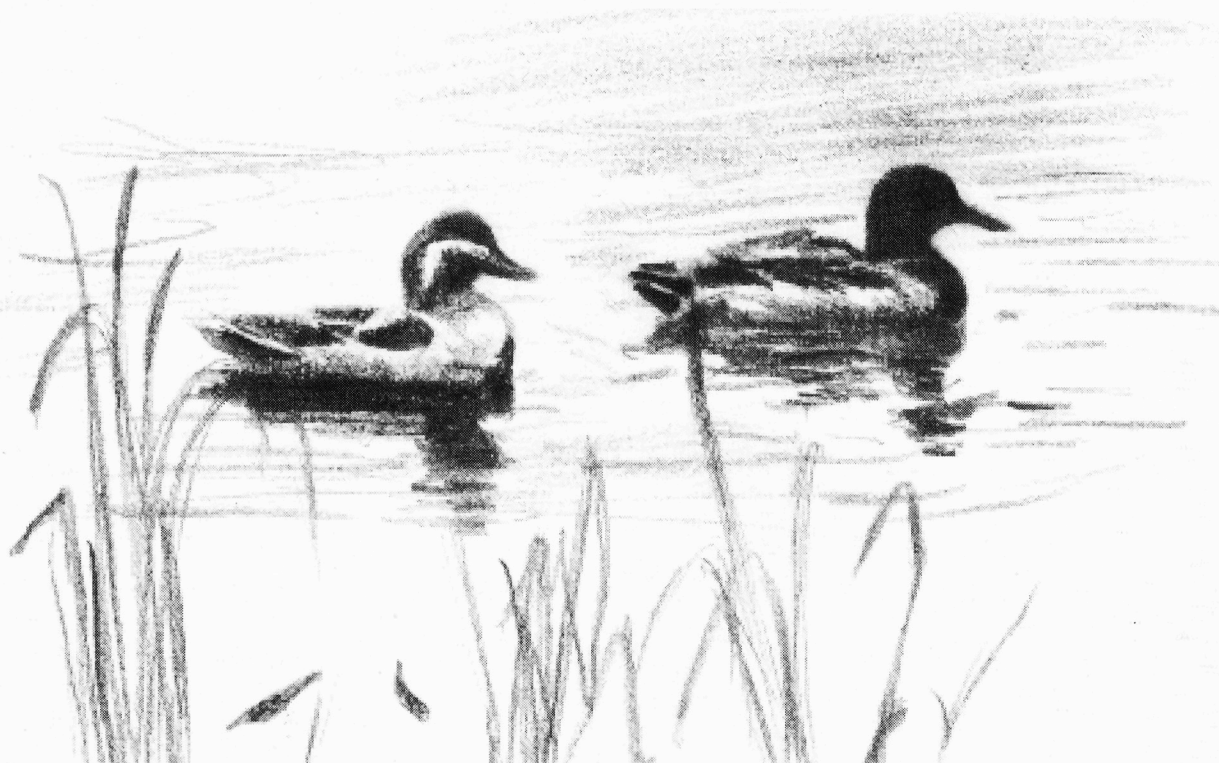
revised) the authors "disappear" the Abenaki with the coming of Vermont statehood as do most conventional histories. After the revolution the Abenaki and indigenous settlement of the state are no longer considered significant enough to mention, though Abenaki have remained in communities in Vermont throughout its history.

In the final chapter on "Vermont Futures" there is no mention of a reestablishment of a formal Abenaki presence in Vermont or the possible ramifications of federal recognition and land claims that could impact a small state like Vermont significantly in terms of future choices for land use and development. This scenario is no more hypothetical than many of the others that the authors lay out and warrants some notice.

Klyza and Trombulak have created a sound and thoughtful reader which I would recommend to anyone interested in understanding the bioregion that Vermont is part of. In addition I would hope that the policy makers in government and the private sector take the opportuni-

ty to read this concise and accessible guide. It would be an interesting base for future debates if all players actually had access to a similar understanding of the shaping of Vermont, and then were able to apply that understanding to contemporary debates on the future of their communities. The authors have in some ways already started that process by the extensive work done with policy makers in collecting the data that made up the book.

Perhaps Middlebury College which is cosponsoring the new series in Environmental Studies with University Press of New England, of which this book is the first, could make use of this opportunity to enhance future deliberation by ensuring that each legislator and major policy maker in the state receives a copy. This and hopefully future volumes in the series can contribute to the ongoing discourse about Vermont futures and help place it in a more interdisciplinary and holistic context. The return of scholarship to active service in public discourse would be welcome.



TASHA TURAN