The Adirondack Park: A Wilderness Quilt

By Barbara McMartin, Syracuse University Press, 1999

REVIEW BY JEFF FLAGG

In The Adirondack Park: A Wildlands Quilt, Barbara McMartin moves away from previous historical studies such as her 1994 Great Forests of the Adirondacks and back toward the regional “Discover” series of Adirondack hiking guides that she wrote beginning in the mid-1980s. A notable difference in this most recent work is McMartin’s attempt to view the Park’s “Forever Wild” Forest Preserve holistically, and to understand not only the means by which the Park’s quilt-like pattern of land ownership emerged, but also the recreational value inherent in each individual “piece,” from the huge and still largely pristine Five Ponds Wilderness to the small remnants of Wild Forest that dot the predominantly private northern tier. Seen from this perspective, Wildlands Quilt is a valuable resource for those seeking either to utilize the wide range of publicly owned recreational resources inside the Blue Line or, from an administrative standpoint, to encourage others to do so. Such a work is not only welcome but necessary, particularly in light of the recreational overuse of such areas as the High Peaks Wilderness where, as McMartin notes, “the state’s inability to impose reasonable limits on access to the region makes it difficult to see why this area is called a wilderness.”

Arranged as a series of short vignettes, Wildlands Quilt itself resembles a literary quilt, complete with maps and photos complementing each of its forty-two chapters. Text of the chapters includes a brief history of each region covered, along with a general description of the area’s prominent physical characteristics, particularly those unique to that area. A short “Views and Visits” section completes each chapter, offering suggestions of easily accessible places within that particular region. Not surprisingly, most of the recommended trips are short outings designed for auto-tourists, suggesting that McMartin’s intended audience here is day tourists, rather than the overnight hikers, backpackers and canoeists courted in her “Discovery” guides.

Though Wildlands Quilt is largely useful as a general guide to some of the Park’s underused areas, one problematic shortcoming of the work is McMartin’s implication of the metaphorical quilt as an acceptable (and perhaps even desirable) pattern of land-use. While the analogy accurately reflects the evolution of the Adirondack Park over the course of the last century, her insinuation that the present pattern of haphazard ownership is sufficient fail to address the need for land use boundaries in the Park drawn around ecosystemic, rather than economic or recreational criteria.

Another aspect of the work bound to cause a degree of confusion among recreational users and consternation among environmentalists is McMartin’s occasional inconsistency in her recommendations of use. While most of the hikes and canoes suggested by the author follow existing trails and canoe routes, in a few places McMartin calls for bushwhacking through unmarked trail areas. While such means of access are of course necessary in places where existing trails do not exist, such as in Shaker Mountain Wild Forest, McMartin might better have suggested (as she does regarding parts of the trailless Pepperbox Wilderness) that certain places remain untrammled, entirely devoid of human presence. Such an acknowledgment might better clarify the Adirondack Forest Preserve as a truly diverse ecosystem, and thereby complete the analogous quilt with patches of land whose shapes, textures and colors require full use of the human imagination.

Those small considerations aside, McMartin does a fine job of clarifying the distinctions—or, in some cases, the lack thereof—between Wild Forest and Wilderness lands in the Park, distinctions that have frequently been made as much for political and economic reasons as for environmental ones. The use of such subverted criteria, combined with what McMartin describes as the culturally-constructed appeal of the term “wilderness” in the minds of those seeking solitude, has resulted a paradoxical situation in which the most sensitive parts of the Forest Preserve (like the High Peaks) have become the most overused, while many pristine Wild Forest areas are scarcely used at all. Wildlands Quilt is an attempt to address that paradox, and an exhortation to hikers, backpackers, and canoeists to seek out and enjoy the less-used portions of the Forest Preserve that could both support heavier recreational use and provide nature-lovers with the experiences in nature that they come to the Adirondacks in search of.
Adirondack Literature

During the annual meeting of the Adirondack Research Consortium in May, Gary Chilson, Editor of AJES, wanted someone to periodically compile a bibliography of recent scholarly publications on Adirondack issues. In a moment of weakness I volunteered to compile such a list for 1998 and the first months of 1999. The following represents my search efforts. It intentionally leaves out articles from magazines such as Adirondack Life, the NYS Conservationist, and other popular sources that are widely read by those interested in the region. It should by no means be viewed as comprehensive and if people send omissions to me I would be glad to include them in a future list.

—Al Schwartz, St. Lawrence University

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