

“Living with the Adirondack Forest: Local Perspectives on Land Use Conflict”

By Katherine Henshaw Knott, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998

REVIEW BY ELIZA DARLING

If there remains any doubt that environmental conflict in the Adirondacks is above all a battle waged over the relative ecological privilege afforded by class, let Katherine Henshaw Knott's new book finally put the matter to rest. *Living with the Adirondack Forest: Local Perspectives on Land Use Conflict* describes the Adirondack region as a long time victim of colonialism, its landscape and population serving alternately as capitalism's target for extractive exploitation and paternalistic preservation. Caught between the competing interests of various factions of the wealthy, working class Adirondack residents have been crudely and systematically excluded from land management decisions by a state government evincing little concern for the region's high rates of poverty and unemployment.

The author expresses a profound respect for rural inhabitants that is neither nostalgic nor patronizing. Far from being ignorant of either ecology or aesthetics, she argues, Adirondack residents espouse their own complex philosophies about forest management. Henshaw Knott points out that for many woodspeople, it is not merely a question of whether the forest should be preserved, but in what condition and opinion varies widely as to what kind of forest is most desirable from an aesthetic as well as an economic perspective. Many feel that the state's over concern with land acquisition precludes the allocation of sufficient resources for dealing with acid rain. Others feel that the state doesn't manage its own land ade-

quately, allowing blowdowns to become tinderboxes for forest fire. Nor are local people generally in favor of large scale private development, expressing concern over both the ecological and social impact of private enclosure, particularly along lakefronts.

The hunters, trappers, guides and loggers portrayed in the book know the forest because they depend upon it for a livelihood, and yet they do not negotiate their relationship to Adirondack wildlife merely through routine exposure, but display remarkable ingenuity in conducting research, observation and experimentation when their own experience fails them. From the picture Henshaw Knott paints, indigenous knowledge seems to differ from “scientific” knowledge not so much in content or method as in the absence of institutional legitimization. It should come as no surprise, then, that the conclusions of scientists often concur with the observations of woodspeople. The common assessment of residents and ecologists alike that the Adirondack forests are not in good health raises serious questions about the state's environmental agenda. Ironically, however, Park management decisions are generally made neither by locals nor by scientists, but by lawyers and zoning specialists with an eye to the aesthetic rather than the ecological.

Henshaw Knott's incidental ethnography of such power brokers, including members of the Adirondack Park Agency as well as the Commission on the Adirondacks in the Twenty First Century, proves even more revealing than her description of woodspeople. The primacy of aesthetic considerations alone betrays the hopelessly upper class origins of Cuomo's Commission, from its absurd Martha Stewart

like endorsement of earth-toned house paint to its hope to banish all human structures outside the hamlets from sight of the roads. One wonders, in fact, why residents didn't paint their towns bright pink in contempt of such outrageous (and banal) dictates of taste. Henshaw Knott notes that for preservationists the aesthetic oftentimes outweighs or even displaces the ecological: if it looks wild, it must be wild. Her background check reveals far more alarming facts, not only about their attitudes toward the environment, but about their material relationship to it. The Commission, she notes, included members who have gained their fortunes from such companies as Exxon and Pepsico — names not exactly synonymous with environmental responsibility — exploiting the environment for profit with their hands while espousing preservationist philosophies with their tongues.

George Davis once publicly remarked that the members of the Governor's Commission were chosen for their intelligence. One is compelled to wonder, upon reading this book, why such an impressive concentration of acumen failed to forewarn these luminaries of the impending local backlash to their report. Education overriding common sense, they apparently never anticipated such ferocious dissent, and the resulting political maelstrom has been a thorn in the side of preservationism ever since. State regulators paid dearly for their oversight, the author notes, as their exclusion of local people from land use decisions turned even the most progressively minded Adirondack citizens against the Commission, the APA, and environmentalism writ large, creating an unnecessarily tense polarization. Their exclusionary tactics are in

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retrospect difficult to fathom and impossible to excuse, betraying a deep seated ignorance of rural politics in their naive hope for simple compliance.

Although Henshaw Knott's account vindicates many of the objections residents have raised to Adirondack land management, including elitism, classism, tokenism, and paternalism, she is also sympathetic to the continuing dilemmas faced by a beleaguered Adirondack Park Agency now painfully aware of local concerns. In this spirit, the author closes her account with some potentially constructive solutions to the Adirondack dilemma, most of

them calling for increased participation in land use decisions by local stakeholders. But the colonial metaphor lingers uncomfortably in the reader's mind. Like colonialism in the Third World, there may be no peaceful resolution to environmental conflict in the Adirondacks, but rather a slow and steady degradation into less obvious forms of manipulation and exploitation. The author herself puts it best: "What does it mean when people who have chosen to work for companies that have committed environmental damage on a scale of magnitude that outstrips anything that the whole Adirondack population could

accomplish then participate in decisions to impose regulations on poorer people in order to preserve areas of recreational value and scenic beauty for their own enjoyment?" (pp261) It would seem to mean that working people struggling for a measure of environmental justice, in the Adirondacks and elsewhere, have a long battle before them. This book is highly recommended, not only for residents who may finally get to see the story of that struggle in print, but for the decision makers whose lofty positions isolate them from the daily realities faced by those who must truly live *with* the Adirondack forest.

Verplanck Colvin Appreciated

Adirondack Explorations: Nature Writings of Verplanck Colvin

Ed. Paul Schaefer. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997.

Footsteps through the Adirondacks: The Verplanck Colvin Story

By Nina H. Webb. Utica: North Country Books, 1996.

REVIEWS BY R. LYNN MATSON

Verplanck Colvin died virtually alone in an asylum in Troy, New York, in 1920, a seventy-three-year-old certified lunatic. The last of his life he lived a recluse at 175 Western Avenue, Albany, New York, forgotten, unappreciated. That lack of recognition, however, is being remedied in the 1990s. Two splendid books about Verplanck Colvin, Superintendent of the Adirondack Survey, have appeared recent-

ly: Paul Schaefer's anthology of Colvin's writings, *Adirondack Explorations*, and Nina Webb's biography, *Footsteps through the Adirondacks*.

For those unfamiliar with Verplanck Colvin, reading Webb's book and then Schaefer's will give an excellent introduction to this remarkable surveyor who was the first to chart accurately the vast expanse of the pathless Adirondacks. Born into an old Albany British-Dutch family of privilege in 1847, instead of following his father's path, a lawyer and State Senator, he followed his boyhood interests in maps and military deployments (his older brother, whom he idolized, served with General Sherman in the Civil War and became a colonel). He never went to college. After climbing Mt. Marcy on his first trip to the Adirondacks in August, 1867, and taking barometric readings, he submitted a report to the New York State Museum of Natural History, calling for preservation of the Northern forest. Though he was not the first to do so, he proved to be one of the most effective. When a drought diminished Albany's water supply, a new Commission of State Parks was established to investigate making the Adirondack watersheds a protected area, and Colvin, still in his early twenties, was appointed a member. The Legislature ignored the Commis-

sion's report, which Colvin wrote, calling for the establishment of a state park, but it did authorize \$1000 to begin a topographical survey, and Colvin was appointed superintendent. The young man was well connected in the state's capital.

What follows is a lifetime of arduous and painstaking work, extending twenty-eight years and compiled in twenty-three reports to the New York State Legislature, a stingy one, by the way, which sometimes forced Colvin to dip into his own pockets to keep the work going. Before Colvin's survey, New Yorkers had little knowledge of what they had in the great northern wilderness or how valuable it was. Earlier surveys, relying on magnetic compasses, were wildly inaccurate, as anyone can imagine who has ever seen his compass go berserk amid ore deposits in the Adirondacks. Webb's book carefully and clearly explains Colvin's technique of using a theodolite, an instrument accurate to within one tenth of one second of arc, to make line-of-sight observations for triangulation and then adding triangle to triangle. To get good sight lines, Colvin's men often had to clear-cut mountaintops or burn them off. And so it went, mountain peak to mountain peak, through black flies, mosquitoes, gnats, blow-downs, heat, cold, and rain for

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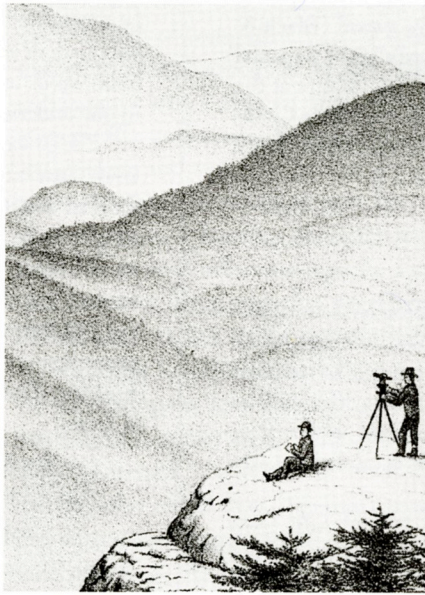
twenty-eight years. But New York got its Park, finally realizing what wealth its attic stored.

Webb's book tells the Colvin story economically and factually, concentrating on matters that will most interest Adirondackers. It is the story of a career, moreso than the examination of a life. The book is loaded with illustrations, including many of Colvin's, who was a yeoman sketch artist. The book is indexed and contains a bibliography, but lacks, alas, footnotes. Readers who would like to follow up a reference will not be able to.

The late Paul Schaefer's *Adirondack Explorations: Nature Writings of Verplanck Colvin* makes a sampling of Colvin's writing accessible to the general reader. Most selections have helpful introductions by Norman J. VanValkenburgh, well known to all Adirondack readers. (VanValkenburgh found and published in 1989 a long-lost Colvin 1898 report to the New York State Legislature.) As a writer, Verplanck Colvin was no John Muir or John Burroughs, but we must remember that he was writing for the consumption of Albany politicians, who were no different from the ones we have now. Colvin, indeed, had his enemies in Albany. He was involved in a turf battle with the State Engineer, who wanted the Adirondack Survey under his department and also had the support of then-Governor Grover Cleveland. Somehow Colvin prevailed. Perhaps this annual battle to ensure state funding for the Survey and defend it from his enemies explains his propensity to beat his own drum. Writing of himself in the third person in an 1882 report, he says, "He has personally measured and climbed all the highest mountains of the State; has found in his explorations a great number of lakes unknown to geographers, and was the first to discover 'Lake Tear of the Clouds,' . . . His explorations and valuable topographical works are known in every portion of the civilized world . . ." (p. 5). Or, in the same report, he notes that ". . . I became at length so accustomed to the wilderness, that even the guides deferred to what they deemed, my

superior knowledge of the wilderness." (p.16).

He was not a modest man, he had no reason to be. Neither did he seem to possess a sense of irony. One time, while traversing the shore of Wolf Lake, he got stuck in quicksand. He reported, "In one of the wadings I suddenly entered a cold, heavy quicksand, and descended so suddenly that I had barely time to grasp some laurel bushes (*Kalmia angustifolia*) at the shore and with difficulty escaped entire submergence and drowning." (p. 191).



Detail from a sketch by Verplanck Colvin from his Report on Adirondack State Land Surveys for 1886.

Schaefer's selections make clear — which Webb's book does not — that Verplanck Colvin was no greenie, in the modern sense. He based his appeal to protect the Adirondacks on strictly utilitarian grounds. He was of the generation of Gifford Pinchot, First Forester of the United States. Wilderness preservation in the name of some grand esthetic or spiritual cause was not popular, Thoreau, Muir, and Burroughs notwithstanding; it would take a generation for the land ethic of Aldo Leopold and Bob Marshall to catch the popular imagination. Colvin was practical. New York City and New York's canals

needed water. Much of that water was in the Adirondacks. Well-managed forests could be harvested — under state supervision — and the profits from timber sales would keep taxes down. This was the prevailing view of the wilderness' value in the late nineteenth century, the "wise use" advocated by Pinchot and others who had come under the influence of German-style silviculture. (Interestingly, it was Gifford Pinchot's friend, patron, and champion of the outdoors, Teddy Roosevelt, who, as Governor of New York, fired Colvin and ended the Survey in 1900.) In his First Annual Report Colvin wrote,

"In France and Germany there are natural forests which are preserved and properly cared for, affording supplies of valuable timber for house and ship building. Should an Adirondack park be created, careful consideration should be given to the utilization of the forest." (p. 113). However, he also declared in the same report, "The forest is in itself a natural park, and it would be improper to think of enclosing and fencing it, for it should be a common unto the people of the State." (p. 115).

For the most part, I think Schaefer chose selections wisely to show Colvin's writing and work on the Survey, and all but one selection are presented in full. One twenty-three-page piece, however, about a trip to the Rockies, "Dome of the Continent," could have been omitted in favor of more local observations. The Adirondack pieces are delightful, and while Colvin was no stylist, neither was he a dry technocrat. He observed, he recorded, and for the modern reader it is the non-technical observations sprinkled through the Reports that are the most interesting.

These two books are valuable additions to the literature of the Adirondacks and deserve a place on everyone's Adirondack bookshelf. Perhaps they will pave the way for a comprehensive biography of Verplanck Colvin, Superintendent of the Adirondack Survey, and inspire the republication of his complete Reports to the State of New York.

The Artists

Ken Rimany

Ken Rimany is the Director of Development and Outreach for The Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks. In his photography, Ken, who was mentored and befriended by the late Paul Schaefer, focuses on photo journalism and historical documentation of people and places in the Adirondacks and Catskills. "Paul taught and inspired in me a heightened appreciation and respect for the human fabric, and the wondrous landscapes and wildlife of the Adirondacks and Catskills. Combined, they add up to one of the most unique and priceless regions in the world."

Just this year, Ken's work has been recognized at several exhibitions and competitions including a 1st place award (Black & White Category) at the Arts Center/Old Forge's 1998 Biennial Photographic Exhibition, and 1st place in Black & White at the 1998 Kodak International Newspaper Snapshot Awards Competition sponsored in part by the Five Star Frame & Arts Shops in Schenectady, NY.

Jim Kraus

Jim Kraus has been searching for light, subject and composition in the Adirondacks for almost 30 years. Because these three elements change with each moment, day and season, he sees that there are endless opportunities for photographs wherever one finds himself in this region. He also states that while photographing may help a person to see with their eyes, the real seeing is done with the human heart and mind.

Jim's photographs have appeared in *Adirondack Life*, *Gray Sporting Journal*, calendars, *AJES*, and other publications. He has also produced several slide presentations and film strips and has worked with Charles Alexander on three videos for Cornell University, one of which has won a Society of American Forester's Award. Jim is a Professor of Forestry at Paul Smith's College.

Mark Kurtz

Mark Kurtz works as a freelance location photographer based in the Adirondack Mountains near Saranac Lake. Mark photographs locales with the diversity of landscapes ranging from the deep woods of the Adirondacks to the open spaces of the southwest to that place where the land and sea meet along the coast of Maine. He also explores the "less beautiful" landscapes with a more abstract vision which include empty night spaces in his pavement series and the roadside cultural clutter in his multiple frame images. His art is represented by North Country Artists Guild in Saranac Lake.

When photographing the ice storm in January 1998, Mark didn't need to go any farther than his side yard. Although without power and phone, he could still photograph and proceeded to document the storm, both its destruction and its beauty. Except for some images he made for the Red Cross where he went to shelters in Watertown, Altona and Bloomingdale, the photographs were made within three miles of his home.

The AJES Peer Review Process

Following discussions among the officers and members of the Adirondack Research Consortium, an article review board has been established for *The Adirondack Journal of Environmental Studies*. The aim is to create a section of the journal that offers a perspective, tone, and authoritativeness different from those of the opinion pieces and articles composed in a more popular mode.

We have in mind articles that are interdisciplinary and scholarly but that are written for the literate non-specialist. In other words, any article written by a scientist must be accessible to non-scientists; ditto for articles by social scientists or humanists. We anticipate articles of about 5000 words that are free of specialized jargon and that add to our understanding of any feature of the Adirondacks.

The process for evaluating these articles will be as follows: Gary Chilson, AJES editor, will review submissions for their suitability for this section of AJES and then send them to me. I will choose two members of the panel to review them. The reviewers will perform as anonymous referees (i.e. they will not know the name of the author, nor will their names be given to the author), and they will recommend publication, resubmission with revisions, or rejection. Their assessment will consider these four general areas:

1. Significance: Does the article address an issue important to the study of the Adirondacks?

2. Methodology: Does the article explore an appropriate mix of primary and secondary sources? Are important sources overlooked? Is the analytical mode appropriate to the subject and satisfactorily applied?

3. Presentation: Is the article well written? Is it organized coherently? Does the introduction adequately state an argument? Is this argument properly addressed in the body of the article? In terms of accessibility, is the style and mode of presentation suitable for an interdisciplinary readership (i.e., is it free of specialized vocabulary and intelligible to a variety of readers)?

4. Scholarly Apparatus: Are the citations adequate and consistent? Are the citations excessive? Are there too few?

I will review the readers' reports and then recommend publication, revision, or rejection to the editor.

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