

“Contested Terrain”

By Phillip Terrie. Syracuse: The Adirondack Museum/Syracuse University Press, 1997

BOOK REVIEW BY GLENN HARRIS

The premise of this book is that previous histories of the Adirondacks are narrowly focused because they draw upon the experiences and ideas of only a few people who have had an interest in the region. These people were largely wealthy persons living predominately outside the area, and their perceptions, although privileged in both character and history, are only some of many. In particular, the stories of year-round residents have been absent in prior accounts of the region, and as a consequence, the Adirondacks are being defined in a limited way.

The author, a professor of English and American Culture Studies at Bowling Green University, cites even his own earlier work as an example of history with an elitist emphasis (*Forever Wild: Environmental Aesthetics and the Adirondacks Forest Preserve*, Temple University Press, 1985), and incorporates new material conveying the activities and perspectives of permanent residents. He casts new light on well known accounts of early explorations by nineteenth century Romantics and recreationists who visited the region for only short periods. We learn, for example, about the significance of Penobscot Indian Lewis Elijah Benedict, who guided Ebenezer Emmons for the New York Natural History Survey in 1840. More importantly, he writes about the way that poorer, permanent residents viewed the natural world as they tried to forge a living through agriculture, logging, and guiding. We learn from the recollections of William Reed about subsistence farming in Franklin County, from Martin John Bryne about frontier life near Minerva, and from Livonia Stanton Emerson and Henry Conklin about early settlement of Long Lake. Drawing on archival material from the Adirondack Museum, documents reprinted by the Saranac Free Library, and more conventional histories produced by several book publishers, Terrie weaves together various narratives to create a vivid representation of permanent residents in the central Adirondack Mountains in the mid-nineteenth century.

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One of the strengths of this book is the author's ability to separate the many human voices of the Adirondacks. For him, it is not simply a case of an outside elite versus the hard working year-round resident. He notes how, in the last decades of the nineteenth century, the very rich bought large private preserves; they wanted to enjoy nature without hassle from numerous members of the managerial classes attracted from cities by the writings of Adirondack Murray, the construction of railways, and the development of extensive tourist facilities. He observes that, in more recent years, some permanent residents favor actions to protect the environment, such as the Residents' Committee to Protect the Adirondacks, while large timber corporations and conservationists work together to protect forests from second-home development. Adirondack voices are complex and paradoxical; Terrie's book is a good first attempt at sorting them out.

However, some environmentalists may be disappointed. While outside and permanent residents may have perceived nature somewhat differently, what is the significance for environmental protection? Will public policy of elites protect the life-supporting natural world more or less than appreciation derived from daily contact? Or, are both insufficient, being derived from Eurocentric roots, so that in the end, corporate interests from outside the area work together with the economic and political attitudes of year-round residents to produce environmental harm? A more promising approach for ecological sustainability may be found in a thorough examination of the limited indigenous experience with the region. And while this book undoubtedly enlarges the human perspective on the Adirondacks, even if largely Eurocentric, it is still anthropocentric and does little to tell the story from an ecological viewpoint. We learn

that much wildlife in the nineteenth century fared poorly, whether at the hands of the poor, who warred on wolves and panthers, or the rich, who tortured trout and deer. On events like the devastating forest fires of 1903 and 1908, or the huge blowdown of 1950, we learn about human activities and policy making, but not about ecological response. A

scant paragraph is given to the effects of acid precipitation, and no mention is made of historically important phenomena, like the disappearance and rejuvenation of beaver, or current controversies, such as proposals for reintroduction of moose and wolf. For insights on some of these issues, environmentalists should seek Terrie's *Wildlife and Wilderness: A History of Adirondack Mammals* (Purple Mountain Press, 1995). In *Contested Terrain*, the important question for Terrie is

“what is this region good for” (p.xvi), clearly utilitarian in orientation. An ecocentric history of the region, which might include work by the Nature Conservancy, Adirondack Council, and others attempting to restore ecological integrity, remains to be written.

Nevertheless, environmentalists and all others should be grateful for this new book that expands the human dimension of Adirondack history. It is imminently approachable for the lay person, beautifully illustrated with numerous photographs, and meticulously documented for the more serious scholar who wishes to learn about Terrie's source material. The reader is rewarded with tidbits of cultural history, from the murder of Orrando Dexter to the gridlock of the Northway motorcade, from the importance of Mitchell Sabattis to the significance of the Grumman canoe, from the demise of Piercefield Falls to school budgets now exceeding state average. *Contested Terrain* is highly recommended.

