

The Great Experiment in Conservation

Voices from the Adirondack Park

William Porter, Jon Erickson, and Ross Whaley

Syracuse University Press, 2009

Reviewed by JERRY MCGOVERN

The *Great Experiment in Conservation: Voices from the Adirondack Park* is an ambitious work. That it was attempted is wonderful. That it succeeds is a gift to readers now and well into the future.

Consider the problem facing editors putting together "Voices from the Adirondack Park." That the voices should be experts is obvious, but experts in what? Environmental science? Legislative and political history? Public policy? Corporate stewardship? What should readers learn about conservation in the Adirondacks, and from whom should they learn?

William F. Porter, Jon D. Erickson and Ross S. Whaley, editors of *Great Experiment in Conservation*, gathered the contributions of thirty-nine scholars from various disciplines and organized the essays into three sections. The first section explores the Adirondack ecosystem, its influence on the human economy in the Adirondacks, and then how that economy altered the environment. Thirteen scholars write about topics such as geology, soil, mining, forestry, and acid rain.

For example, any discussion of Adirondack economics must include recreation and tourism, and Chad D. Dawson's essay covers the last 150 years. He reminds readers of the public's lack of interest in the Adirondacks during the Westward expansion: "In 1806, Lewis and Clark were making more detailed

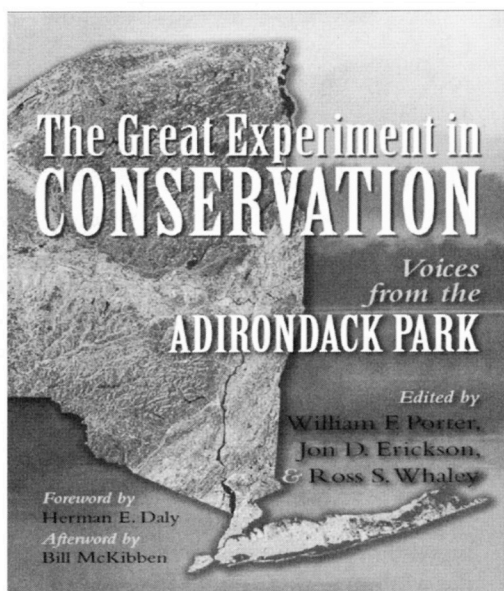
maps . . . in the northwestern United States than existed for the Adirondacks." Dawson also notes how the Adirondack forests went from being ignored to being harvested and then "back to a largely intact forested landscape."

The pendulum swing to that "forested landscape" is the subject of the second section of *Experiment*. Ten writers investigate the cultural history of the Adirondacks, tracing the change in values reflected in the 1885 establishment of

ogy and seeking genuine development in Adirondack communities." A history of that balance is provided by Philip G. Terrie's wonderful essay, "Cultural History of the Adirondack Park." Terrie describes how the Adirondacks became one of "America's sacred places" as a result of a "confluence of European romanticism, the rise of industrial capitalisms, the emergence of a professional class with leisure time, and the increasing wealth of many (but hardly all) Americans."

That "confluence" has resulted in various legislative actions, from the creation of the Forest Preserve to the establishment of the Adirondack Park Agency. The controversy surrounding such legislation is the subject of much of the eleven chapters of section three. For example, the late Barbara McMartin writes of polarization between those who support the "extremes of environmentalism as well as in the extremes of opposition to governmental regulation." McMartin and others in this section make clear that the "balance" everyone says they desire has been, and will be, difficult to achieve. Asking people with fiercely held but different value systems to trust each other and seek common ground is no easier in the Adirondacks than anywhere else.

The Great Experiment provides many facets of a complex area: more than 100 peaks, 2800 lakes, a tangled legislative and public policy history, and about 130,000 year round residents. Experiment gathers those elements in a rich collection of intelligence and scholarship. The book is a tremendous contribution to Adirondack scholarship, intelligently describing the past and present, providing direction for the future.



the Forest Preserve followed by the 1894 article's "Forever wild" language. Until this time, if the Adirondack region was visited at all, its natural resources were exploited as they were everywhere else. In this section's introduction, however, Jon Erickson wonders why, at the end of the 19th century, New York suddenly decided to conserve rather than exploit the Adirondacks.

Section two, then, reviews the various institutions created to balance, as Jon Erickson writes, "economy and ecol-

Jerry McGovern writes for Plattsburgh's Press-Republican, and is an adjunct lecturer at SUNY Plattsburgh.