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Review: A Landscape History of New England

Blake Harrison and Richard W. Judd (Eds.)

Reviewed by Fred Mason

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Harrison, Blake, & Judd, Richard W. (Eds.). *A Landscape History of New England*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011. 413pp. ISBN: 9780262016407. US \$34.95, paperback.

A Landscape History of New England is an edited collection of 20 chapters that takes diverse perspectives on the idea of “landscape” going beyond just a physical space, to involving human interactions with the environment, and the social meanings constructed around it. Contributors come from a variety of academic disciplines, including geography, history, sociology and American Studies. The book’s stated purposes are to give a historical overview of landscape change and perception from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, to provide an introduction to the study of past landscapes and the varied methodological approaches in doing so, and to give “an overview and an assessment of recent scholarship on the history of land use, landscape perceptions, and environmental change in New England” (p. 4). The essays collectively address these wide aims. All six New England states receive some attention, with chapters considering landscapes from the mountains, to urban environments, to forests and coastlines, and even the bottom of Boston Harbor.

The essays are arranged into five parts, with the first section on “Landscape, Nature and Regional Identity” introducing one of the collection’s central issues—how “New England identity” has been fluid over time, and how this influenced the symbolic meanings attached to typically “New England natural features.” From there, the essays are grouped topically, around forests and mountains, rural (mainly pastoral) landscapes, coasts, and “Villages, Towns and Cities.” Across the collection, a number of aspects consistently crop up—how work has shaped the landscape, how recreation and leisure are importantly implicated, and how landscapes become imbued with a variety of meanings cutting across social categories including social class, gender and ethnicity. Social memory, conservation and preservation also frequently come into the frame.

The variety of perspectives, approaches, and the sheer range of spaces under consideration means that just about anyone who is interested in the physical and cultural landscapes of New England will find something. This also leads to some lack of coherence as a whole. In their conclusion, the editors try to bring together the chapters across five very broad themes. For example, one is that “New England’s landscapes have been shaped by a diversity of social groups” (p. 382). That strikes as a rather vague theme across 20 essays. This is perhaps less of a weakness, than a result of the aim to geographically and conceptually (and figuratively) cover a lot of ground.

The quality of the writing in edited collections can often vary, but the essays in this book are consistently good. All of the individual chapter authors approach their subjects with a critical eye and a passionate style. Most of the essays are short (around 20 pages) and easily consumable in a sitting, and appealing images and maps appear throughout the work, including many archival images.

One of the editors’ hopes is that the collection will serve as a starting point for anyone wishing to do further work on the history of the New England landscape, in seeing the directions pointed to and gaps left out. This will serve as a standard reference on the topic of New England’s landscape specifically, and on landscape theory more broadly. The audience will primarily be an academic one, but with the variety of landscapes included, individual chapters should find a wider audience among the interested public.

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