

Americans and Their Forests: A Historical Geography, by Michael Williams. Studies in Environment and History. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989. xxii, 599 pp. Illustrations, maps, graphs, tables, notes, index. \$49.50 cloth.

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Michael Williams has achieved a remarkable scholarly synthesis, bringing together several related topics to show the overall significance and relationship of forests to the American people. His book is not a history of land settlement, lumbering, fuel use, conservation, the Forest Service, forest taxation, technology, or recreation, yet all are discussed in scholarly detail. Williams focuses on the relationship of people with forests, and how this natural resource changed as different demands were made on it.

Williams reminds us that according to Frederick Jackson Turner's famous frontier thesis, democracy "came out of the American Forest" (17). Williams, unlike Turner, stresses that the land was inhabited prior to European contact. Many Native Americans had well-developed crops on cleared land. Native Americans also changed the land greatly by burning it, probably deliberately. As a result, much of the American forest was park-like. Euro-Americans prized Indian fields, much preferring them to the kind of wilderness that fits the image of the European as conqueror.

For Iowans and other midwesterners, chapters five, six, and seven should be especially interesting. Those chapters describe agricultural clearing and the quickening pace of industrial impact (1810-1860), the lumber industry, and the assault on the forests of the Great Lakes states (1860-1890). The essentials of the story of cutting, hauling, rafting, mill sawing, and distribution of lumber in the Mississippi River valley are told precisely.

The volume is strong on the history of intellectual thought concerning American forests, and we gain insight into the character of persons such as Gifford Pinchot and John Muir. Williams reviews the controversies over forest management, such as the classic disagreement between Pinchot and Muir: Pinchot was loyal to civilization and forestry; Muir to wilderness and preservation.

Williams explains that in the twentieth century, forest decline was halted as new harvests were allowed to grow, cropland was abandoned and reverted to forest, fire was suppressed and controlled, trees were replanted, existing stands were managed better, and demand for lumber-derived goods fell. The pleas of the past, such as Bernhard E. Fernow's, that the forest should be treated as a crop to be

tended carefully, are now respected. "The vast majority of lumber companies," Williams states, "have long since tried to shed their image as ruthless woodland destroyers, and . . . they have done a lot to put the forest back" (478).

A recurring theme of the volume is that trees will grow back again. During the colonial era, exhausted land was abandoned to weeds and the rapid regrowth of pine forests; after two or three decades, the forests were cleared and farmed again. Yet as late as the 1930s, Williams notes, few people realized the capacity of forests to regenerate. Now, though, "the conclusion seems unavoidable that the forest is being reborn" (467).

Williams is a *historical* geographer. His interest lies in discovering the truths and consequences of past events. In that pursuit he does an exemplary job. His book falls just short of the mark of excellence, however, when applying things learned from history to the most important questions concerning the forest in America and our relationship to it at present and in the future. In the final chapter of the book, Williams excludes or discusses only briefly the many debates raging over lumbering and forestry today. The use of pesticides in replanted commercial, private, and publicly owned forests raises the ire of many conservationists, yet Williams merely mentions the fact and provides no analysis of the benefits and detriments of that practice. Only a couple of sentences are devoted to the ever increasing loss of habitat and the effects on native wildlife of disrupting ecosystems, thus causing the extinction or near extinction of hundreds of uniquely North American species that were thriving only decades ago. And what of the effects of air and water pollution on new growth forests? There have been numerous studies, the findings of which Williams does not divulge. He touches on the issue of the huge industrial corporations such as Weyerhaeuser and Georgia-Pacific ingesting smaller firms and threatening monopoly power, but he dismisses the trend with the comment that "no corporation holds more than 4 percent of the total capacity of the industry" (494).

Most readers will welcome this book's smooth readability. The onslaught of technical jargon usually found in research publications is thankfully missing. Yet the in-depth statistical research lets the reader know exactly where, when, how, and why the forest and forestry have been affected since precolonial times, and it is supported by fairly easy-to-read graphs and tables.

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