

## WHAT'S WRONG WITH SYNTHETIC TREES?

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**Eric Rutkow**, *American Canopy: Trees, Forests, and the Making of a Nation*. New York: Scribner, 2012. 406 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$29.00.

A 1774 British cartoon often reproduced in U.S. history textbooks, “The Bostonians Paying the Excise-Man” by Philip Dawe, shows revolutionaries forcing tea down the throat of an already tarred and feathered royal tax collector. In the background, additional turncoats dump boxes of tea into the harbor. Yet the artist places less emphasis on the Tea Party than a tree—an American elm—that looms above the mob attack. Engraved upon its bark are the ironic words “Liberty Tree”; its main branch sports a noose. Today, most Americans would connect the image of a tree-bound noose with the history of slavery rather than freedom; few outside academia recall the symbolic importance of the Liberty Tree—once as famous as Plymouth Rock—and its emblematic outgrowths, liberty poles. In collective memory, the Boston Tea Party has supplanted Boston’s Liberty Tree.

“Trees are the loudest silent figures in America’s complicated history,” writes Eric Rutkow (p. 9). Despite the manifest importance of forests, trees, and wood in the development of the United States, it is surprising that no historian until now has attempted an overview for a popular readership. Previously, the closest thing was Gayle Brandow Samuels’ *Enduring Roots* (1999), a book of essays that oddly doesn’t appear in the bibliography of *American Canopy*. One must admire the ambition and brio of Rutkow—currently a Ph.D. candidate at Yale—for attempting a synthesis, a genre generally reserved for mid- and late-career scholars. But therein lies the problem. The historiography of American trees, though voluminous, is uneven, incomplete, often dated and slanted. Although Rutkow wants to present U.S. history in a new way, he ends up replicating a familiar approach.

*American Canopy* is less a synthesis than a chronological compendium of “pivotal moments.” Rutkow is a capable if sometimes heavy-handed writer, and the stories go down easy. You might think of this as a “dad book” or “NPR book”—the perfect gift for a male history buff of a certain age. Academic historians may find Rutkow’s presentation and analysis unoriginal, yet his tome is a goldmine, containing dozens of excellent short narrative summaries

of lecture-ready episodes. Chances are you don't have time to read Thomas J. Campanella's *Republic of Shade* (2003), Douglas Cazaux Sackman's *Orange Empire* (2005), or Susan Freinkel's *American Chestnut* (2007). Rutkow does it for you, summarizing the tale of trees in the United States from colonial times—when Richard Hakluyt realized that American greatness would derive from wood—through international global warming conferences. He covers, among other subjects, New England's white pine masts; John Bartram's cataloging of native flora; George Washington's arboretum by the Potomac; John Chapman's disseminated apple seed; and manifold products made from trees—from cider to Kleenex.

As the nineteenth century progressed, Americans used ever more wood—for housing, fuel, tannin, turpentine, railroad ties and trestles. Lumbermen moved the center of production from New York to Maine to the Lake States. The Great Peshtigo Fire demonstrated the dangerous waste of early industrial logging. Some timber bosses moved on to the longleaf pine country of the Deep South, establishing giant mills, company towns, and union-busting policies. Others, including Frederick Weyerhaeuser, moved shop to the Pacific Northwest's expanses of Douglas fir and ponderosa pine, and began practicing rudimentary forestry, starting with fire control.

Seeds for a tree-based conservation movement were sowed by Thoreau's transcendental botanizing, Olmsted's Central Park, and Marsh's *Man and Nature*. J. Sterling Morton of Nebraska inaugurated Arbor Day; Congress incentivized tree-planting in the West; and New York lawmakers, inspired by Charles Sprague Sargent, set a proactive example by protecting the Adirondack forest. In the Sierra Nevada, John Muir called for the federal preservation of giant sequoias and other natural wonders. The first German-trained American forester, Gifford Pinchot, got the ear of Theodore Roosevelt, who took advantage of the Forest Reserve Act and, with a stroke of his pen, greatly expanded the national forest system in the West.

Rutkow's pro-government narrative also tells how Washington claimed the nation's supply of Sitka spruce during WWI in hopes of creating a wooden air force. After the Great War, Americans memorialized fallen servicemen, including Joyce Kilmer, with trees. During the Depression, FDR created a peacetime "tree army"—the CCC. Roosevelt pushed for a national Shelterbelt despite opposition and ridicule. During WWII, West Coast forests once again became critical resources, as recognized by the Japanese enemy, who launched incendiary balloons. The wartime government mounted a public relations campaign against forest fire, which led to Smokey Bear. No amount of federal effort, however, could solve the problem of plant pathogens. A new quarantine system stopped the first shipment of Japanese cherry trees but did little to slow the advance of two invasive fungi that destroyed whole forests of American chestnut and beloved rows of American elm.

In the postwar period, William Levitt and other suburban developers built a forest of houses with new products like plywood, particleboard, and fiberboard. Suburbanites habituated to paper towels and plates. Worried that the government might regulate private forests, the logging industry began the "Tree Farm" program. As for public forests, Americans began to think of the land as their playground thanks to roads, cars, and the car camping example of Henry Ford. Roads also led to an appreciation of roadlessness—a movement driven by Aldo Leopold that culminated in the Wilderness Act.

Gaylord Nelson further expanded environmental consciousness with Earth Day; modern environmentalism remade forestry into forest ecosystem management. This transition produced conflict in the Northwest over the old-growth habitat of the endangered northern spotted owl. Tree-huggers also began looking abroad; they made the Amazonian rain forest a cause célèbre. The issue of global warming first hit home with the Yellowstone fires of 1988. Although Americans today are much better stewards of their tree resources than in the past, Rutkow concludes, our changing climate presents new challenges.

Criticisms of history books usually begin with omissions; even in a book as well furnished as this one, I noticed large absences. I won't gainsay the author's choice to exclude pre-settlement indigenous peoples, but the invisibility of Native Americans in the national period is peculiar, and probably inexcusable. Fundamentally, this is a book about white men and wood. Black labor shows up briefly in the early twentieth century; otherwise the book has basically no African Americans, including slaves. (George Washington seemingly planted hundreds of ornamental trees by himself.) The geographic coverage of the book is also spotty. Rutkow is committed to an east-to-west-to-global trajectory, which leads him to ignore the Weeks Act (1911) and the subsequent growth of the national forest system in the East, as well as the general reforestation of the region. For this important story, one can turn to Ellen Stroud's *Nature Next Door* (2012) and Christopher Johnson and David Govatski's *Forests for the People* (2013). Rutkow also slights the Southern Rockies. There is nothing about the recent pine beetle crises (discussed in Andrew Nikiforuk's *Empire of the Beetle* [2011]) and its relationship to wildlife suppression policies and ex-urban development. *American Canopy* ignores New Mexico, where land ownership by the National Forest Service conflicts with the use-right claims of Hispanos descended from Spanish/Mexican grantees—an incendiary topic examined in Jake Kosek's *Understories* (2006). As for the Northwest, although the book takes on the tangled subject of old growth, it doesn't make use of the best historical study: Nancy Langston's *Forest Dreams, Forest Nightmares* (1995). Similarly, although Rutkow nods toward street trees, he misses an opportunity to tell a neglected story of Progressive governance—the municipal street tree movement—by not using Henry W. Lawrence's pathbreaking *City Trees* (2006). Rutkow strays the most in his final chapter, where he covers the "Save the

Rainforest" campaign but skips the domestic politics of acid rain and the most raucous tree-based controversy of recent memory: the legislative fights over the creation and enlargement of Redwood National Park and the subsequent judicial and extra-legal battles for the nearby "Headwaters Forest," including the radical activism of tree-sitters. Rutkow favors more genteel protagonists. He privileges the political over the social, the material over the cultural. After the Liberty Tree, there are precious few emblematic, artistic, or literary trees in this work. *American Canopy* is a different species than anthropologist Laura Rival's edited collection *The Social Life of Trees* (1998) or cultural geographer Owain Jones' *Tree Cultures* (2002). In his section on the Big Trees of California, Rutkow doesn't even draw on art historian Lori Vermaas' *Sequoia* (2003).

Unwittingly, perhaps, Rutkow has demonstrated the limited popular appeal of "new" environmental history. His book, published by a major press for a mainstream audience, owes more to Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1967) than William Cronon's "The Trouble with Wilderness" (1995). Rutkow could probably use a dose of political cynicism like Shaul Ephraim Cohen's *Planting Nature* (2004). His bibliography includes a few contrarian voices like Karl Jacoby, but one doesn't get the sense that histories of subaltern victims of forest conservation made a deep impression. This is a sincerely hopeful book, not a declensionist narrative, which would be refreshing if it weren't also so old-fashioned in its emphasis on great white men. I know from frustrating personal experience how hard it is to find many women in the archives of forest history, but still I was shocked to find essentially no females in a 350-page narrative about "the making of a nation."

Rutkow could have been forward-looking had he taken an even more old-fashioned emphasis: horticulture. Tree gardening, unlike logging and forestry, historically included many women, not to mention ideas of femininity and domesticity. *American Canopy* has perfunctory sections on Johnny Appleseed, California oranges, and Arbor Day, but it misses something bigger. The way Rutkow tells the story, horticulturism was merely one contributor to the rise of conservationism and later environmentalism. I would tell it differently: "tree culture" was America's original environmental movement.

Before his untimely death, Philip J. Pauly prepared the ground for a new U.S. horticultural history in *Fruits and Plains* (2008), a re-tilling and re-fertilization of a field defined for decades by U. P. Hedrick's *A History of Horticulture in America to 1860* (1950). Pauly ably demonstrated that the history of arboriculture is also the history of science and political economy. Ian Tyrrell, one of our greatest living historians, anticipated Pauly with *True Gardens of the Gods* (1999), a model transnational study examining networks of knowledge and power that permitted the introduction of Australian trees to California and vice versa.

California is key to any history of American tree culture. After the Gold Rush, the lowland Mediterranean zone of the Pacific Slope became a laboratory for a cosmopolitan mixture of people and plants. Commercial tree-planters staged a landscape revolution: the region now contains more trees than at any time since the late Pleistocene. John Muir, one of Rutkow's forest conservation heroes, was complicit in this history. Through marriage, Muir became owner-manager of a large, lucrative orchard. Yet this chapter of Muir's life doesn't appear in Rutkow's section on Muir. (Rutkow's omission of Luther Burbank, the world-famous plant breeder from Sonoma County, is also telling.)

Instead of writing more biographies and hagiographies of the triumvirate of Muir, Pinchot, and T.R. (e.g., Timothy Egan's *The Big Burn* [2009] or Douglas Brinkley's *The Wilderness Warrior* [2009]), American historians would do well to revive the memory of Liberty Hyde Bailey, who appears in Rutkow's book in the most fleeting and tangential way. Bailey, arguably the most important horticulturalist in U.S. history, was as influential as Muir. Today, if remembered at all, he is relegated to "rural studies" or "agricultural history"—classifications that say more about our time than his.

Narratives like *American Canopy* reinforce the professional triumph of forest conservationism—with its accredited foresters managing delimited reserves—over tree culture. Professionalization, despite its many positive outcomes, exacted costs. We would do well to recall how U.S. horticulturalists, notwithstanding their overall amateurism (and their considerable racism), thought of nature holistically: by cultivating trees in all kinds of space—urban, rural, wild—they meant to preserve, restore, and complete the environment. As the term "tree culture" suggests, they did not draw a strong normative distinction between the natural and the cultural. This species of environmental thinking wilted in the twentieth century as John Muir's late-life message—that our "real" home is out in the wilderness, away from the world of work—flowered in U.S. environmental thought. More recently, there has been a regrowth of environmental scholarship stressing labor, design, and dwelling. Today, in a world where anthropogenic influence seems irrevocably entangled in ecological systems, the nineteenth-century horticultural movement seems newly relevant. Aaron Sachs argues something similar in *Arcadian America* (2013).

Rutkow wasn't able to use horticulturalism as an interpretive canopy because he chose to toggle between three narrative modes—the history of forests, the history of wood, and the history of trees—rather than integrating them. The first mode is dominant. The literature on forests, forestry, and forest conservation is large and accessible; as a professional field, U.S. environmental history grew out of forest history. For environmental historians, then, the forest-themed précis of *American Canopy* will be familiar, though not unwelcome, given the length and density of the standard works: Thomas R. Cox's *The Lumberman's Frontier* (2010), Michael Williams' *Americans and their Forests* (1989), and the multi-authored *This Well-Wooded Land* (1985).

Rutkow's second and least prominent storytelling mode is history of technology. The literature on woodworking and wood products is highly specialized, and Rutkow has little choice but to scratch the surface. We are still waiting for an update to Brook Hinle's edited collection *America's Wooden Age* (1975). A model for such a synthesis is Joachim Radkau's prodigiously researched *Wood* (2012), a semi-global history told from a Germanist perspective. Radkau contends that the age of wood never really ended; we don't see it because we have rendered the arborescence of our wood products invisible.

Rutkow's third mode requires seeing the trees in the forest—taking them seriously as organisms, biological entities with lives and deaths of their own, autonomous beings that don't always behave as we desire. Woody plants interact with soil, climate, weather, insects, and diseases in unpredictable ways. In his fine retelling of the decline of chestnuts and elms, Rutkow demonstrates his acuity for natural processes. But the rest of his book is far less biological than, say, Michael Pollan's *The Botany of Desire* (2001). In the United States, the grand old master of tree-based history was Donald Culross Peattie, author of *A Natural History of Trees of Eastern and Central North America* (1950) and *A Natural History of Western Trees* (1953). In recent years, the leading practitioners have focused on individual types or single species: Michael P. Cohen's *A Garden of Bristlecones* (1998); Lawrence S. Earley's *Looking for Longleaf* (2006); Jennifer L. Anderson's *Mahogany* (2012). Anderson offers the new state of the art—a unification of ecological history, commodity history, social history, cultural history, and natural history. Her beautifully crafted book discusses human lives, slave and free, that transformed Caribbean forests into timber, and the many afterlives of mahogany furniture. By tracing Atlantic networks in the "Age of Mahogany," Anderson maps out the possibilities for American arboreal history better than the rigidly national *American Canopy*.

Nevertheless, academics can and should glean from this book. It's a good resource and a good read. I suspect that many general readers will love it. The book's scholarly flaws mainly betray its proto-professional origins. In time, an older Eric Rutkow, laboring over his revised dissertation, may look back with amusement at his statement of accomplishment in *American Canopy* that he carried his project "for more than half a decade" (p. 349). I hope that Rutkow's precocious effort inspires many more tree-themed articles and monographs so that someday we can truly have a new synthesis of the nation's arboreal history, a book that includes women and men of all classes and races and ethnicities, and their relationships with trees in all their states of being: biological, ecological, economic, ornamental, symbolic, artistic, artifactual, artificial. I look forward to a fuller history of American flora that integrates plastic trees and old growth, liberty poles and lynching trees.

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