

Maine History

Volume 25
Number 2 *Rural Maine*

Article 4

9-1-1985

Book Reviews

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Recommended Citation

Schrivier, Edward, and William H. Pease. "Book Reviews." *Maine History* 25, 2 (1985): 114-119.
<https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mainehistoryjournal/vol25/iss2/4>

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BOOK REVIEWS

Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England. By William Cronon. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983. Pp. 241. Cloth. \$15.95. Paper \$6.95.)

This is a remarkable book. William Cronon, a Yale professor, has achieved a high standard and has added as well a significant study to a small but growing list of early American environmental histories.

The author is aware of the pitfalls involved in his endeavor and has discussed several of them in the introductory pages. It is clear that there are dangers in using evidence gleaned from the subjective accounts of early travelers, naturalists, and observers. Colonial town, court, and legislative records also must be studied with care. Perhaps even more hazardous is the necessity to cross disciplinary lines to locate evidence. Also potentially troubling is the realization that there may be certain situations in which ecological change has left no discernible evidence.

Fuzzy nomenclature looms as still another difficulty. European names applied to American species renders the identification process that much more uncertain. The *Post Hoc Ergo Propter Hoc* argument (attributing changes in the land to certain activities which came earlier) is another pitfall. The heart of the historian's dilemma appears "when one asks how much an ecosystem has been changed by human influence and then probes further to find out how it has changed in relation to what?"

Despite these problems, the author deserves high marks for his work. His thesis is not completely new, but it is buttressed with unprecedented sophistication: the shift from Indian to European dominance in New England certainly entailed important changes in the way these peoples organized their lives. But it also involved fundamental reorganizations in the region's plant and animal communities.

This thesis is carefully illustrated. After the first Europeans settled on the New England coast, they sought the available “merchantable commodities.” James Rosier, who accompanied George Waymouth to the coast of Maine in 1605, noted that there were “profits and fruits which are naturally on these lands.” Viewing the landscape in terms of commodities to a large extent fueled the process that forced changes in the use of the land. There was indeed an abundance of resources for taking: fowl, fish, timber, and animals.

The diversity of these resources had been taken into account by the Indians who had used them carefully. The Indians had been mobile; their villages often were near the shore. Maine Indians, for instance, had access to the coast, and many of their supplies came from river and seashore. The area around their villages was humanized, to be sure, but they made minimum demands on ecosystems.

Different perceptions of the environment generated some significant cultural and economic conflicts. The Indians viewed property rights as functions of the way the land was used. Different claims could be made on the same tract of land. Hunting rights, for example, were separated from planting rights. On the other hand, the English believed in permanent settlement, and New England towns employed the concept of land as a private commodity, rather than a public commons.

Trade between settlers and Indians also mirrored their conflicting cultural understandings of their relationship to the landscape. The exchanges between the two cultures were often profound. Old World diseases were transmitted to the Indians who had little defense against them. Smallpox was among the most lethal of these ravages. To make matters worse for the Indians, their land was taken from them as well.

The colonists pressed their advantage relentlessly. Trees were vigorously harvested: white oak for timbers, black oak for underpinnings, and white pine for masts. Forests were cut as if the stands of trees would last forever. Interestingly enough, Cronon demonstrates that the farmers, bringing to the New World European settlement and land-use patterns, were the

chief agents in reducing the New England forests. Deforestation was one of the most sweeping and destructive consequences of the European migration.

The belief that “wilderness should turn a Mart” powered the assault on the landscape. The shift from Indian to English dominance in New England included the replacement of an earlier village system of shifting agriculture and hunter-gatherer activities by an agriculture characterized by household production, fixed property boundaries, and strong links to outside commercial markets. The process carried on by the colonists was to a great degree ecologically self-destructive.

Some readers will no doubt quarrel with the author’s method and will reject his conclusions. While it is true that the net has a wide cast, the result is a salutary one. The bibliographical essay reveals that the author has thought it important enough to discuss primary documents and material on the New England Indians and colonists, but he has also included bibliographical data on ecological literature and ecological and economic anthropology.

Changes in the Land is not the last word on New England ecological history, but it is a very significant contribution to a new ecological perspective on our colonial roots.

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The Transformation of Political Culture: Massachusetts Parties, 1790s-1840s. By Ronald P. Formisano. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983. Pp. xiii + 496. Cloth. \$35.00.)

Just what is “political culture”? And exactly what is meant by “transformation”? To both questions Ronald Formisano provides answers edifying in their directness yet overwhelming in their inclusiveness. What does one make of a political culture which — perhaps tautologically — means “all those parts of a culture which are political,” especially those

which are “obvious and universal” (p. 4), or of a transformation which, rather than being revolutionary, is merely developmental, innovative yet at the same time traditional? One naturally thinks of Morton Horwitz’s *Transformation of American Law* — narrowly about law but really about a sea-change in socio-cultural values and perceptions — about “modernization” as Richard D. Brown has had it. But Formisano’s canvas is larger in a way. He really doesn’t limit himself to things political as his vehicle for unravelling the skein of his transformation process — unless of course one includes (as he does) religion, socio-economic status, wealth, class, notions of power and sovereignty, and a battalion of similar broadly-defined “cultural” factors in his definition of political. And having thus made his definition, he has his work cut out for him to keep the thread of transformation within the bounds of a clear case study which focuses upon American politics (in the more usual sense of parties, factions, cliques, and their interactions) as played out in Massachusetts between 1790 and 1850.

His analysis of process is clear enough. Antiparty sentiment, a child of the Revolution, dominated political structure and action (political life, that is) until the 1840s. It was encouraged by fears of faction, absence of efficient mass communication, low levels of electioneering, patterns of traditional deference, coalescence around crisis issues primarily, and a lack of permanent follow-through. Only as each of these issues gave way to its opposite could party become permanent — in theory at least, if not in practice.

And that sets us off on Formisano’s second theme: the persistence of an essentially antiparty sentiment even into the 1840s. Although Whig and Democrat battled head-on, two seemingly clear-cut parties, in the struggle of Whigs to maintain power in Massachusetts. Democrats to gain it, or in the maneuvering of coalition politics, antiparty sentiment still persisted. But why such persistence? Because, Formisano avers, there was in America an essential democratic thrust, a spirit (defined at least for the 1830s as a sort of middle-class, Middling Interest, non-revolutionary populism) grounded in the ideals of the Fathers. By the middle 1830s, the mechanisms of modern

party structure and practice threatened rigidity, which in Massachusetts translated largely into Whig, urban, monied, upper class, entrepreneurial dominance. Nevertheless a counter-movement, including among others the Workingmen, Anti-slavery, and later in the 1850s the Know-Nothing forces, both fed a latent antipartyism and helped maintain a political flexibility otherwise perhaps lost.

And that pattern identifies for us Formisano's third theme: the contest between Center and Periphery — between country and city; wealth and poverty; agriculture and commerce or manufacturing; class and mass; aristocracy and plebians; Boston and the hinterland; or indeed Washington and Massachusetts. What is perhaps most interesting about this model is not its novelty but Formisano's sense that it may provide a working model for national political culture as well (a point made elsewhere, although not so much in the present book).

So brief a summary hardly does justice to a story told with verve, fullness, sensitivity, and good sense. And it is good because complexity is not reduced to simplicity; multiple themes are not buried in a demand for ideological purity (nor even just for a "single cause" strategy). Yet the telling creates problems in explicating a process of political development the broad outlines of which are common property among today's historians. Does the insistence that the "first party system" is a misnomer really matter? Is there really a "transformation?" Certainly in structural terms it would seem so, but if the central point of his study falls about 1830-1840 — as it seems to — then the "populist" dissent argues as much for continuity as for basic change. After all, Formisano himself allows that the process was "developmental" — a combining of traditional forms and practices with innovative departures. And one wonders whether a Middling Interest populism doesn't do damage to both sides of that term. Are we not really talking about a fairly traditional sense of unease, dissatisfaction — about a hoary third party tradition?

But no matter. Although it rarely mentions Maine, *de jure* before 1820 and *de facto* thereafter a sturdy part of that periphery — geographically isolated, solidly Republican, and

standing politically against the Whiggish center in Boston, this book will serve historians of the most northerly of the New England states well. For in the internal history of the state, where is its center? Where is its periphery? What means Portland, Augusta, or the County? What means a forest economy or a fishing one? Like all other politics, Maine's, Formisano would surely agree, is part of the process of political culture transformation which informs this book.

This is a book to ponder: first-rate in breadth, clarity, and intelligence. That the author is a democrat — may one even hazard a sort of populist — gives vitality to his analysis, preference to his emphases. But he is too good a historian not to step back and balance his judgments and temper his conclusions. In the end, we all understand better the process of change, the complexities of structure, the intricate interlacings of a significant segment of American society in the early national period. And we do so because of Formisano's willingness to venture largely.

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JUST RELEASED:

revised edition of John E. Frost's

MAINE GENEALOGY: A BIBLIOGRAPHICAL GUIDE

published by the Maine Historical Society
485 Congress Street, Portland, Maine 04111

This new (1985) edition of Frost's 1977 bibliographical guide contains major additions gathered at the end of each section. The updates enable the reader to review efficiently the most important advances in the field since 1977.