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Title

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Permalink

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Journal

Electronic Green Journal, 1(27)

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Publication Date

2008

DOI

10.5070/G312710775

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Review: Making Mountains: New York City and the Catskills

By David Stradling

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Stradling, David. *Making Mountains: New York City and the Catskills*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2007. 311pp. ISBN: 978-0-295-98747-7. US\$35.00, hardback.

One's first impression of a book entitled *Making Mountains* might be that it is some geology text with a catchy title. But, what makes *Making Mountains: New York City and the Catskills* by historian David Stradling different and an engaging read is its focus on and exploration of the bridgeable chasm between the country and the city, the rural and the urban, the metropolis and the mountain chain, places of change and places of assumed stasis. The essence or gravity of Stradling's scholarship is the entanglement or blending of the rural and the urban that he attempts to keep alive with each chapter and with each page. *Making Mountains* is not about the imperial take-over of the country by the urban elite, but instead a story about a "blending process" (p.15) depicting a "landscape shaped by many hands, many minds—some urban, some rural, many that were both. And so this work reveals no conspiratorial power of the city over the country—no real empire" (ibid.). With its close ties to and tensions with the work of cultural historian and literary critic Raymond Williams, particularly his influential *The Country and the City* (1978), this book is as much a personal memoir as it is a scholarly work with theoretical import in rural-urban relations discussions and debates. With family roots in the Catskill region and a keen knowledge of the environmental and cultural history of this rural territory of New York, Stradling cleverly connects his interest in his own family history with his commitment to constructing a responsible historical account of the Catskills economy and landscape vis-à-vis the natural and cultural demands of New York City.

Making Mountains contains chapters dedicated to a variety of forces marking the Catskill landscape, including natural resources, industry, art, adventure, and tourism. Neither is entirely autonomous and it is their combined influence that seems to be critical to this piece of scholarship. As a terrain that helped shape early 19th century American conceptions of "nature"; as a landscape visually captured, reconfigured, idealized, and even mythified by the enthusiastic flood of Hudson River School painters (e.g., Thomas Cole, Frederic E. Church, Asher B. Durand, and Sanford Gifford) and literary legends (e.g., Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, and John Burroughs); as a stomping ground for the vacationing urban resident seeking a break from the loud, fast, and tainted environment of the city; as an industrial space once home to many tanneries connected to a global leather trade network; as a rich watershed region supplying cost-effective water to quench the thirst of the "Big Apple" to the south; as a place juggling economic development and the "fear of suburban encroachment" (p.238); the Catskills are as much a place of rural culture and natural beauty as they are a landscape victimized not necessarily by full-blown or explicit urban imperialism, but instead by an "imperialism of a sort," as Stradling puts it.

Stradling (p.6) insists that "To understand what happened in the Catskills, one must explain why so many New Yorkers came to the mountains and saw them as they did—so incompletely, so inaccurately. Why were they unlikely to see evidence of change in the mountains? More important, why did so many city residents come to regret those changes they did see in the countryside?" The Catskills, as Stradling repeats multiple times, are simultaneously culturally constructed and actual geologic formations. In many ways, nature and culture are not mutually exclusive forces shaping or *making* the Catskills the nature/culture forms that they are.

Making Mountains will be insightful for all scholars working on the friction and contentious contact zones and conditions that emerge when rural and urban realities and their cultural producers and discourses are brought into play. Stradling has written a book that will also be of interest to New Yorkers wishing to know more about New York history and political ecology.

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Electronic Green Journal, Issue 27, Fall 2008, ISSN: 1076-7975