

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England. By William Cronon./Ceremonial Time: Fifteen Thousand Years on One Square Mile. By John Hanson Mitchell.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2cm9z8v1>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 9(2)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Vecsey, Christopher

Publication Date

1985-03-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

niques and successes of the MacArthur Foundation "genius." Lincoln subtly probes the texture of Silko's treatments and themes, "the 'Whirling Darkness' . . . turned back on itself" (p. 250). Yet another noteworthy chapter results, a graceful, enlightened, and enlightening journey that ends a regenerating journey. The word "Sunrise" concludes both Silko's *Ceremony* and Lincoln's volume, echoing the Lakota Sun Dance Prayer from Red Bird that has introduced the latter. The cycle is complete, yet ongoing: *Native American Renaissance* captures the luster of Silko's works and the worlds from which they spring. Its illumination of an acclaimed artistry, verbal and visual, is simultaneously an illumination of the total Native American Renaissance and of the centuries of language that have inspired it.

What follows is also impressive: thirty-five pages of informative "Notes"; sixteen of wisely "Selected Bibliography"; and thirteen of a valuable "Index." But the worth of the book lies not in its critical apparatus but in its critical impact: like the literature it treats, it represents art shaped by memory, eloquence reaffirming the past while redirecting the future. Momaday, Silko, Welch and their contemporaries expand the parameters of American literature; Lincoln, the parameters of American literary criticism.

R. W. Reising
Pembroke State University

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

Ceremonial Time: Fifteen Thousand Years on One Square Mile. By John Hanson Mitchell. Garden City, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1984. 222 pp. \$15.95 Cloth.

Scholars have repeatedly plowed through the documents relating to New England history; one might suspect that the field is barren by now. And yet, two authors have worked the ground afresh by concentrating on the ecological dimensions of New England life, by comparing Indian and white participation in the New England environment, and by producing works of fruitful research.

William Cronon's *Changes in the Land* is the academically proficient work, drawing upon numerous books and articles which Cronon discusses in a concluding bibliographical essay. John Hanson Mitchell's *Ceremonial Time* is more personal, quirky, and uneven. Cronon is the historian, Mitchell the engaged journalist. Cronon focuses on the colonial period, from around 1600 to 1800, while drawing upon patterns throughout New England. Mitchell focuses on one square mile of land thirty-five miles west of Boston, but endeavors to observe its changes from the last ice age to the present. The two books cross-fertilize one another and come to precisely the same conclusions about Indian and white relations with the New England ecosystem: that Indians have been active agents in altering their environment to suit human needs and desires, but that whites have ravaged New England for profit.

In Cronon's view, Indians were not upholders of some perfect ecological order. They consciously adapted their environment to suit their values and cultures; however, when Europeans arrived in the early seventeenth century, they were "dumbfounded" by the "incredible abundance" of animal and plant life: cod, waterfowl, wild turkeys, passenger pigeons, bear, deer, wolves, foxes, beavers, otters, martins, moose, wildcats, forests of hard and soft woods in great variety. They found a patchwork of landforms: quaking bogs, salt marshes, parklands, oyster banks, and so forth, the result of thousands of years of warming since the last ice age, and the result of careful Indian tending.

There were 70-100,000 Indians in New England in 1600, including highly productive farmers who made up around 80% of the population, living primarily in the river valleys and coastal areas of southern New England, and the more sparsely populated, more mobile gatherers and hunters of northern New England. For both farmers and gatherer-hunters there existed a diversity of food sources, a diversity of ecological adaptations (e.g., to seaside and hillside), and a diversity of seasonal occupations. The farmers had the greater environmental impact. They chopped and burned sections of the forest, creating their farmlands which depleted nutrients every six to eight years; then they moved to another area with fresh soil and wood supply. Cronon indicates that they developed a highly productive system of many crops, creating "very high yields per acre, discouraging weed growth, and preserving soil moisture" (p. 44).

What amazed the invading Europeans was what they perceived as the "poverty of Indians who lived in the midst of a landscape endowed so astonishingly with abundance" (p. 33). Here is the crux of Cronon's book. For the English, the Indians were not exploiting, developing, their resources to the proper potential. Drawing upon John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*, Cronon argues that the English conceived of being "rich" as the condition of producing much and accumulating much property. Indians, on the other hand, considered themselves "rich" by desiring and possessing little. The goods of the land were meant to be shared, consumed, used, but not accumulated. Because Indians accumulated little, the English thought them impoverished. Because Indians produced little, the English thought them unworthy of land ownership, and thus their property could be expropriated by a "more productive people" (p. 56). Because the English regarded land as a means to accumulate wealth—indeed, it was their major "private commodity" (p. 74)—they fenced it in, fought over it, evicted Indians from it, accumulated it as capital, bought and sold it, speculated on it, and wrenched from it quick profit without regard for its future usefulness. In the process, the invaders conquered the New England Indians by conquering their source of life, their environment.

Cronon documents the demolition of the furbearers and the forests; the effects of European diseases, trade items, alcohol and firearms on the Indians; the introduction of domesticated animals—pigs, cows, horses, sheep—which trampled Indian crops; the coming of European weeds and pests—dandelions, stinging nettles, black flies, cockroaches, grey rats, and the like. He states that "*animal crowding*" (p. 141, emphasis his), not human crowding—the European population of New England in 1700 was only 93,000—forced the expansion of White New Englanders further west. At the same time, "deforestation, grazing, plowing, erosion, and watershed changes all contributed to a problem that became endemic to colonial agriculture in New England: soil exhaustion" (pp. 149–150). The result? By 1800 whites had pushed the dwindling Indian populations to the least desirable lands as the wilderness became a market. The more land, the more profit, and in their desire for infinite expansion, the white New Englanders destroyed nature wherever they exploited it. Theirs was an ecologically destructive mode of production with far-reaching consequences.

For those who have already read Francis Jennings' *The Invasion of America*, or Alfred W. Crosby, Jr.'s *The Columbian Exchange*, or the other works in Cronon's bibliography, these observations and conclusions will not be startlingly new; however, Cronon has written a very worthy synthetic monograph that is both challenging and convincing.

Mitchell's book is equally challenging, but not as convincing. Mitchell is director of publications at the Massachusetts Audubon Society. A Pawtucket friend of his named Nompenekit, or Man Born Twice, taught him about "ceremonial time, in which past, present, and future can all be perceived in a single moment, generally during some dance or sacred ritual" (p. 1). Tonupasqua (Turtle Woman), a Wampanoag medicine woman, taught Mitchell the mythical origins of "Scratch Flat," where Mitchell lives. She also told him of bear shamans and other Indians who once lived and in spirit continue to live in the area. With these lessons in mind, the author has attempted to bind together the lives of the locals—from 8,000 years ago, when Indians were hunting, gathering, fishing, farming, dancing and praying, to the present day, when the fire department is tearing down old farmhouses and local computer technicians jog the paved roads. Mitchell comments that "we human beings are insignificant little creatures in the perspective of geologic time" (p. 7); Indians and whites alike are only short-term visitors to the place. Time moves on; environment changes; the stories of one people intersect the stories of another, producing the meshes of history.

Mitchell spins these yarns of archaic fishing weirs, prehistoric saber-tooth cats, colonial witches, missionaries and their victims, fences, bulldozers, industrial pollution, parsnips, and town meetings. The charm of the book—its anecdotal subjectivity—is its great weakness. The author has spoken to a bunch of folk who have told him a bunch of tales, which he repeats appreciatively and uncritically. He seems uninterested in separating fact from fiction; therefore, the reader must regard much of the text as the work of imagination. In addition, since Scratch Flat is such a limited space, Mitchell must rely on pretty standard archaeological history of the Northeast to surmise what probably happened in his one square mile.

The role of Indians in his work is problematic. On the one hand, he presents some good historical and contemporary portraits of the locals of Indian descent: the hatred which the

seventeenth-century Indians held for John Eliot the missionary; the mourning ceremony held annually on Thanksgiving Day by Indians during the last decade at Plymouth to mark the coming of the invaders. On the other hand, Mitchell has conjoined Indians and nature in such a way that the passing of wilderness means the retreat of the native Americans. His friend Nopenekit splits for Canada as the industrial park moves in, saying: "Too crowded around here. . . . There's no future for Indian people around here. . . . I mean it's the same thing for the Indian as it is for the white man. You go to work, get money, come home, drink some beer, go to a few weekend ceremonies maybe. . . . We might as well be white people only with a different religion. We're not Indian people as long as we're living around here. No ties to the forest. Nothing" (p. 196). For Mitchell, Indians exist in the past, and they are doomed to disappearance in the face of civilization. In short, he has repeated the myth of the Vanishing Red Man.

And the future? Mitchell quotes the computer wizard, Peter Sarkesian: "'Computers will cover it all. . . . You got Route 495 there and Route 2 and the planners think that's going to make this place into something because the trucks can get here. But the fact is, the stuff you got to sell in the future doesn't come in trucks, it comes in from the mind, on lasers, fiber optics, comes in on microwaves and radio waves'" (p. 205). Here is the world as marketplace, as presaged in Cronon's study of colonial New England. And in this world Indians live on for Mitchell "as an idea" (p. 221). Interestingly, that idea is identical to that found in Cronon's book, that—as Mitchell concludes—"the essence of civilization is not the multiplication of wants, but the elimination of needs" (p. 220).

Christopher Vecsey
Colgate University

Sarah Winnemucca of the Northern Paiutes. By Gae Whitney Canfield. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983. 306 pp. \$19.95 Cloth.

If she were a wealthy white woman, she would "place all the Indians . . . on ships . . . take them to New York and land them