Maine History

Volume 40
Number 1 *The Nature of Maine*

Article 5

3-1-2001

Environment and Imagination in New England

Kent Ryden
University of Southern Maine

ENVIRONMENT AND IMAGINATION IN NEW ENGLAND

BY KENT RYDEN

Kent Ryden, Associate Professor of American and New England Studies at the University of Southern Maine, considers the arguments put forward in the three essays by Judd, Beach, and Sebold published in this issue of Maine History. *He points out that each essay explores the complicated relationship between Maine's physical landscape and the interpretations that are brought to bear on that landscape. Each case study—the Allagash, the oil tanker port controversy, and Maine's salt marshes—illuminate for Ryden the essential confusion caused by the distinction that we draw between "nature" and "culture." Conflicts over the natural environment, he finds, are less about a physical presence than about the contested ideals that presence comes to symbolize. Professor Ryden is the author of* Mapping the Invisible Landscape : Folklore, Writing, and the Sense of Place, *Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993.*

THE YEAR I studied for my Ph.D. exams, I lived in a small apartment in North Scituate, Rhode Island. For two weeks prior to the exams, having decided that my brain was full, I spent a lot of time wandering around in a forest about a half mile down the road. There was something very soothing about the isolation and verdant foliage of that patch of woods. As the canoeists on Richard Judd's Allagash River and the Bostonians who sought out Kimberly Sebold's salt marshes found, this natural landscape provided me with a much-needed balm for my nervous and overheated mind. At the same time, though, my forest was riddled with ironies. It existed in an increasingly developed suburban town only because it was part of the protected watershed for the Scituate Reservoir. My little patch of nature owed its life to a massive cultural intervention in the central Rhode Island landscape. And, as with so many New England forests, my woodland refuge was laced with old stone walls, evidence of the area's agricultural use prior to being taken out of production when much of central Scituate was condemned and flooded. It was anything but a wild retreat or unspoiled pristine landscape; instead, the forest's age, structure, and composition were shaped

by the area's history of agricultural use and subsequent abandonment.

As the articles in this issue of *Maine History* confirm, this is the nature of nature in New England. While popular ideas about nature, environment, and wilderness preservation tend to focus on the wide open spaces of the West, seemingly untouched by human hands, landscapes defined as "natural" in New England are thickly smudged with human fingerprints. They owe much of their form and appearance to past and present patterns of cultural use. Richard Judd's northern rivers running through a working forest, Christopher Beach's coastlines as both scenic resource and the basis of economic livelihood, and Kimberly Sebold's agricultural salt marshes all demonstrate that when it comes to discussing nature in Maine, our culture's conventional division between the categories of "nature" and "culture" are hopelessly blurred and confounded.

This is true not just of the physical landscape, but as it exists in the mind and the imagination. The three articles provide us with intriguing instances in which Maine's natural landscape—an objective physical thing, a collection of water and rocks and plant life—has taken on a thick layer of interpretation and has been most meaningful for a range of observers not as a physical presence but as an idea; or, rather, as a system of competing ideas. The articles speak in part of individuals and groups who look at and act upon natural places as abstractions, as symbolic representations of ideas and priorities. In this case, it may not be correct to say that they can't see the forest for the trees so much as that they can't see the forest for the screen they've erected in front of it, a screen upon which they project images from their own minds. In this way too, nature is shown to be much more an artifact of culture than we might think. The articles not only show how the false dichotomy between nature and culture gets less and less distinct the closer you look, not only show us the power of nature construed as ideas and ideologies, but also demonstrate the extent to which nature can be seen not only as a *geographical* terrain, but also a *contested* terrain, a literal and conceptual place to be wrestled over for physical, legal, economic, and imaginative control. The examples here are most intriguing not as contests over policy or economic and artistic uses of the land, but as contests over meaning, over prevailing frameworks of ideas that make certain land uses both imaginable and permissible. As such, these papers cut to the heart of a central issue addressed by environmental historians: the cultural construction of nature, the ways in which nature does not *inherently* mean but takes on meaning through human perception, which can

have profound real-world consequences. And nowhere do these knotty ideas present themselves more insistently, and play such a prominent role in public life and popular thought, than here in Maine.

It is difficult to divorce battles over nature's meaning from more literal struggles over particular landscapes—the two, in fact, are directly related. One of the strengths of these essays is the light they shine on how concepts and actions work in concert. The essays are not only about contests over meaning but about how those meanings, in turn, can work to reshape nature in their own image. Ideas about nature are powerful things, lenses which can bend and refract the physical world to the point that certain things come into sharp focus, others are distorted, and still others disappear completely. As a result, the Mainers who have occupied and worked in these landscapes have had their worlds redefined around them, with their workaday realities standing in sharp contrast to the abstractions applied to them by various political, economic, and cultural agents. The question then becomes, whose version of nature will prevail? Will it be that of people who understand Maine's nature in the abstract or that of people who have a deep knowledge of nature derived through lifetimes and generations of work?

Richard Judd and Christopher Beach both suggest that sometimes the local and historical definition of nature has prevailed. As Beach notes in the case of resistance to the oil industry, the force and effectiveness of local environmental activism grew to a large extent not only out of an abstract veneration of pastoral scenes, but out of a grassroots understanding of coastal environments as workplaces, sources of livelihood, and centers of community. Defending their hard-earned local perspective from the economic calculus of oil interests, complicating the preservationist views of elite environmental groups from outside the state, Maine's "ordinary citizens whose claim to authority lay in their lifelong experience of the coast" were able to have their definition of nature, and thus the integrity of their environment, prevail in the end.

Richard Judd presents a fascinating story of how one particularly powerful abstraction, a wilderness ideal developed in a western American context, had to be reshaped in a very different eastern context, one in which notions of pristine landscapes unmodified by humans simply did not apply. In the Maine context, paper companies, participants in outdoor recreation, and wilderness enthusiasts all staked claims on the landscape, and the wilderness proposals had to take into account prevailing patterns of Maine life and economy if they were to succeed. The result was river corridors that satisfied a visual definition of wilderness

within a matrix of preexisting land use and attitudes toward nature. The historic blurring of nature and culture in Maine finally "helped refine the wilderness for a more complex world in which the boundaries between nature and culture were indistinct." In an interesting inversion, the simplified American wilderness abstraction became altered by the complex textures of local reality, rather than the other way around.

Kimberly Sebold's essay presents a somewhat different situation, in which the occupants of the working landscape cannot defend themselves. As she demonstrates, the New England salt marsh landscape was already a heavily exploited and reshaped resource by the nineteenth century. In the hands of Boston's elite, however, the landscape was not trammeled by complex, inconvenient human figures but transformed into an almost pure idea, a reversal of the process outlined by Judd and Beach. Both the landscape and its shadowy farmers were no longer agricultural resources and real people in the eyes of elite urban artists, writers, and rusticators, but rather simplified sites of pastoral bliss populated by happy peasants no longer able to resist the powerful revisions of antimodern tastes, tastes which shape perceptions of these once-marginal places even today.

Our authors guide us through the complexities of many seemingly simple words and cultural concepts conventionally applied to the natural landscapes of Maine. Judd demonstrates that "wilderness" is now such a slippery and malleable concept that it can take in both a seemingly pristine riparian landscape and a heavily used industrial forest with no apparent irony—except perhaps for the Maine guide who complained that the Allagash had been wilder before it was designated a wilderness. Beach and Sebold identify "pastoral" as a central concept guiding both activists resisting oil tanker ports and vacationers seeking refuge from urban stresses and the pressures of modern life. They also remind us of the ongoing role that such words and concepts have played not only in regional art, literature, and public policy debates, but also in the very construction and definition of the region itself. They haven't just shown us some of the issues surrounding nature *in* Maine; they have also suggested the extent to which nature, in the popular mind, *is* Maine.

All parties involved in the wilderness debates which Richard Judd chronicles seem motivated by a shared sense that Maine is most properly seen as a land of rivers and forests, with the main issue revolving around how those rivers and forests should be protected and used in order to maintain the true character of the state. The story he tells here is paralleled by the current debate over a proposed Maine Woods National Park,

with park advocates and paper companies both arguing they know the true and only way to keep Maine as Maine and that the other side would destroy the historic essence and identity of the state. This debate seems to be much more about ideas and ideologies than about forest management and land use practices. Christopher Beach begins his essay by suggesting that "landscape features held sacred as regional icons" have historically been central in motivating popular environmental activism. His story of the defense of Maine's famously rock-bound coast, when seen in that light, emerges as a fight over regional symbols as well as seashore, the main fear seemed to be not that sea life might be endangered, but rather that besmirching oil would be smeared across the beloved face of their state. Looking at another aspect of Maine's shoreline, Kimberly Sebold locates salt marshes as central to the construction of a regional image that was very useful culturally to visitors and vacationers more than to local groups. She argues successfully that these unassuming wetlands were a central element in the nineteenth-century tourist invention of New England as a rural utopia, a region defined in the popular mind not so much by its own history and traditions, but rather by what it *didn't* contain and by how it contrasted with the worlds the vacationers left behind.

This question of state identity, finally, emerges as yet another important cultural use and mental manipulation of nature, one that motivates both Mainers and non-Mainers in powerful ways today. One look at our new license plate tells you that. In the recurring battle to find an icon most representative of how the state sees itself and wants to be seen, legislators decided to replace the lobster, which no one ever seemed to embrace very heartily, with the state bird and flower: a chickadee and a white pine twig. Maine is defined by nature even as Mainers go about defining nature on their own terms. One thing about the license plate remains constant through the years despite all design changes, though; Maine is still "Vacationland," and, in addition to the theoretical and conceptual questions these papers consider, they also show us three episodes in the ongoing effort to make that label meaningful for those who would like to vacation in a natural environment—whatever that means.