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Cultivated Landscapes of Native North America (review)

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Cultivated Landscapes of Native North America. William E. Doolittle.

New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. XV and 463 pp., maps, diagrams, photos, and index. \$55.00 paper (ISBN: 0-19-823429-1).

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In the first of a three work series on American agriculture on the eve of the Columbian Encounter, William Doolittle describes and discusses agricultural practices in North America prior to the arrival of Europeans. Doolittle's demarcation of North America extends from present day northern Mexico (roughly the southern edge of the border states) northward into Canada. This extensive and thorough work appeals to researchers interested in understanding both the intricacies of pre-European farming in the New World and the ways to effectively study past landscapes. In this Doolittle's book is notable on two fronts, not only is it encyclopedic in its description of former agricultural systems of North America, it is also an insightful treatise on how to conduct historic research on sometimes (quite literally) ephemeral land use patterns. Through Doolittle's careful historicism we learn how best to reconstruct past landforms.

Doolittle carefully constructs a discussion of pre-European agriculture based on a profoundly geographic principle. The book's "focus is on fields, not crops" (p. 7), and complements Doolittle's definition of academic geography as "the study of the surface of the earth, with emphasis on the shaping processes and combinations of elements such as soils and human activities that result in distinctive regions" (Doolittle 1992, 310). To enforce this notion of

academic geography, Doolittle avoids organizing the text based on traditional regional distinctions, instead focusing on how diverse landscape elements enable different agricultural strategies and thus the formation of distinctive agricultural land patterns. This organizational strategy makes this substantial book highly readable and allows the reader to compile the wealth of information contained within its pages. The text is organized into six chapters: Introduction, Horticulture, Rainfed Systems, Dryland Systems, Wetland Systems, and Conclusion.

The introduction provides an overview of the text to follow and demonstrates how geographers make a significant contribution to the study of aboriginal agricultural systems. By understanding field layout, location, and particular characteristics, geographers can demonstrate how farmers, and people in general, are intertwined with earth system processes as well as each other. This recognition has long been one of the hallmarks of academic geography, although recent efforts at creating a myth of the integrative discipline have glossed over these starting points. In this, Doolittle's book transcends a study of aboriginal cultivation in North America. He shows how trying to understand what anthropogenic features are on the land in fact strengthens our understanding of human-environment interactions in ways that other disciplines do not.

Cultivated Landscapes of Native North

America is based fully on documentary work collected through years of research about aboriginal agriculture. Doolittle strives to exploit primary data throughout the text, although reference is made to a number of secondary sources where no primary documentation is available. Three types of data were collected and used to describe aboriginal field cultivation in North America: documentary evidence, ethnographic evidence, and archaeological evidence.

The richest source of documentary evidence arises in the first hand descriptions of early European explorers such as de Verrazzano, de Ribas and Kalm. Doolittle has tried to analyze the earliest version of these works provided that language and availability were not impediments to research. Because of the difficult or impossible nature of repeating historical observations, Doolittle strives to find separate accounts that reported on the same phenomena. While not always possible, he makes the case that more than one observation by separate observers strengthens evidence of the landform in question. In all cases, however, Doolittle is skeptical of early explorers' reports, trying to decode intents and the possibility of exaggerations for political, social, and other reasons. He further points out that decoding the meaning of early explorers accounts provides ample opportunity for misinterpretation by a later reader.

The second source of information Doolittle exploits is ethnographic evidence. Because most systematic ethnographies were written well after the initial period of European colonization of the New World, using them to ascertain is difficult at best and misleading at worst. Ethnographies of farming systems in the late 19th and early 20th centuries report on what was happening to fields after the demographic collapse of early contact (Whitmore 1992; Lovell 2000; Crosby 1986). Well aware of these pitfalls, Doolittle employs ethnographic evidence as a way to help decode earlier explorer's accounts of what they, sometimes much to their confusion, saw. In addition, ethnographic research in this

text is used to take advantage of the thorough and intimate knowledge that ethnographers may have of published and unpublished works about a certain region or group of people.

The last source of information employed by Doolittle arises in archaeological evidence. While the author carried out much of the archaeological research cited, he also uses others' work that study land use patterns in question. Although archaeology provides the best material evidence of field cultivation practices, it is not without its problems. Indeed, time, gravity, and subsequent land use obscure remnant landforms. Also, archaeological evidence is difficult to interpret and can be misinterpreted based on researcher ability and bias. Finally, dating agricultural landforms accurately is fraught with methodological and epistemological problems. When used in concert with documentary and ethnographic evidence however, archaeological evidence provides a strong description of pre-European agricultural practices.

Cultivated Landscapes of Native North America teaches us a number of extremely important lessons. This is arguably the most thorough and authoritative treatise on pre-European cultivation in North America ever published. The reader is taken through various environments and shown that while each environment presents constraints to cultivation, each one as well provides opportunities that innovative, inventive farmers were able to exploit. For example, floodwater farming in the American Southwest, raised field cultivation in Florida, and rainfed farming in New England all dealt with the same problem, water, in very different ways. For the desert farmers of the Southwest, methods were devised that allowed them to take advantage of early spring flooding and loose, light soils. Wetland cultivators in Florida needed water to be sure, but also needed to regulate how much water their soils contained and thus brought planting surfaces above water tables while taking advantage of water-soil interactions to ensure heightened soil fer-

tility. And finally, farmers in New England generally enjoyed enough rain for cultivation, but needed to enhance soil fertility in an environment characterized by winter's biological slowdowns. We see that like farmers and land users elsewhere, the native cultivators of North America developed efficient, environmentally appropriate systems of farming, a lesson that can never be overstated as development and food supply specialists strive to find alternatives to green revolution monocultures.

The second lesson that we can take from *Cultivated Landscapes of Native North America* is that thorough, exhaustive reviews of primary research can lend important insights to the past, and presumably to the present. Aboriginal people did not only possess unique cultural configurations to Doolittle, they profoundly altered the physical character of regions in the pursuit of food production. And in this endeavor the farmers of native North America were successful. The New World agricultural revolution rivaled that of the Old World, developing techniques and crops, both currently used and forgotten, that enabled population growth, socially complex civilizations, and cultural diversification.

Doolittle's *Cultivated Landscapes of Native North America* is suitable for students and scholars of prehistoric and modern agriculture and those interested in aboriginal American cultures. For the student of history and archaeology the book can teach the reader how to do

thorough, confirmatory research of seemingly untouchable pasts. While dense, this book is a must read for scholars interested in pre-European life in the Americas, although its density may put it out of reach for all but the most intrepid undergraduate students. Keywords: *aboriginal agriculture, archaeology, Prehistoric North America.*

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Cultivated Landscapes of Middle America on the Eve of Conquest.

Thomas M. Whitmore and B.L. Turner II. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. XVI and 311 pp., maps, photos, notes, and index. \$115 cloth (ISBN 0-19-924453-7).

Reviewed by Nigel Smith, Department of Geography, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida, USA.

This is the last of a trilogy of books in the Oxford Geographical and Environmental Studies series that deals with precontact agricultural systems in the New World. This volume is a fine com-

plement to *Cultivated Landscapes of Native America* by William Doolittle and *Cultivated Landscapes of Native Amazonia* by William Denevan. Together the trilogy provides a fascinating glimpse of often