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Cultivated Landscapes of Middle America on the Eve of
Conquest (review)

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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

highly productive agricultural systems at the eve of European conquest as well as the many ways that indigenous peoples transformed landscapes to increase crop output. Aboriginal populations in many parts of Latin America were even denser than rural populations today, and much can be gleaned from a study of indigenous agricultural practices in the past to improve farming today so that it is less damaging to the environment and to people's health. *Cultivated Landscapes of Middle America on the Eve of Conquest*, like the other books in the trilogy, provides a useful synthesis of the literature that is also grounded in field work in the region by the authors.

Thomas Whitmore and Billie Turner, the two seasoned field geographers who authored *Cultivated Landscapes of Middle America on the Eve of Conquest*, provide "a new synthesis on cultivation practices," highlight geographic variation in agricultural practices, and identify gaps in our knowledge. The authors emphasize that they do not subscribe to any romantic notions that suggest that indigenous populations were always wise managers of natural resources nor that they were in balance with nature. While there is much to admire about precontact farmers in Middle America (Mexico, Central America, and the West Indies), mistakes were made in some areas, and landscapes degraded. But there is also evidence that at least some cultures learned from these mistakes and adapted their practices accordingly.

The well-written book is divided into eight chapters, most of which cover specific types of agriculture from arboriculture, such as orchards and agroforestry, to rainfed farming, terrace cultivation, irrigation systems, and raising crops in wetlands. Interestingly, the authors conclude that tree and vegetable cultivation was far more than a modest supplement to the growing of basic staples, such as maize. Rather, arboriculture and horticulture equaled or even surpassed cereal cultivation in importance in some areas, such as the cultural forests of the Yucatán, home gardens in their various forms in both dry and wetter

parts of Middle America, irrigated cacao plantations in coastal Chiapas in Mexico, and the *chinampas*, many of which have been overrun by sprawling Mexico City.

Too bad, though, that Henry Bruman did not get his dissertation published in time to be mentioned in this book. Bruman's *Alcohol in Ancient Mexico* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2000) is one of the finest essays on the cultural geography of agriculture in tropical America that I have read. It is rare indeed to see a dissertation published sixty years after its completion. Whitmore and Turner do, however, cite Bruman's fascinating 1948 treatise on the cultural history of vanilla in Mexico.

Cultivated Landscapes of Middle America on the Eve of Conquest is an intellectual and scholarly tour de force. The bibliography has close to 600 citations and the notes following each chapter are detailed and informative. The reader is also guided by 36 excellent maps, each of which represents a considerable amount of research. The 34 black and white photographs are beautifully composed (if a bit out of focus at times), yet they do not do justice to the grandeur of many of the landscapes because of the book's relatively small format and the fact none of the photos cover more than half a page.

The Editors of the series set the bar a bit high when they state in the preface that in tackling the interconnections between geography and environmental studies "Our goal is to publish the best and original research in the two related fields." While *Cultivated Landscapes of Middle America on the Eve of Conquest* certainly represents first rate scholarship, it is a little unfair to the authors in the series to be held up as the best. They are among the best.

I am tempted to recommend this book for the shelves of all those interested in the history of Middle America as well as tropical agriculture and human transformations of the environment. Alas, the high price of the book (\$115) will discourage many buyers, especially students. Keywords: *agroforestry, cultural forests, rainfed agriculture, wetland farming*