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American Conservation, 1880–1925* by Tara Kathleen Kelly  
(review)

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*The Hunter Elite: Manly Sport, Hunting Narratives and American Conservation, 1880–1925.* By Tara Kathleen Kelly. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2018. Pp. 348. \$50.00 cloth; \$27.95 paper)

When asked to review this book I must admit that I judged it by its cover, or rather, its title. What I believed was going to be a rehashing of John F. Reiger's, *American Sportsmen and the Origins of Conservation* (1975) was instead an impressive examination of published hunting narratives written by elite hunters and the social and cultural context in which these publications emerged. While similar to Reiger's work in its top-down approach to the history of American conservation, Tara Kathleen Kelly's new book emphasizes the development of a particular literary genre that emerged in a particular time and place.

*The Hunter Elite* is divided into three sections. The first is perhaps the strongest and most cohesive of the three. Kelly highlights the cultural and social context, as well as the publication networks, that gave rise to the proliferation of hunting narratives during the Gilded Age. She demonstrates the changes in the post-Civil War economy and suggests that white, Protestant, urban East Coast men increasingly found that "the workplace as a central site for the performance of manly character was disintegrating" and searched for a new way to define their manhood (p. 37). They found it in the hunt for big game, and an expanding publication network allowed for the easy dissemination of their exploits in the wilderness. In their widely read narratives, these elite hunters emphasized the work involved in the hunt and their personal will and character. This section is neatly tied together with its final chapter that examines the life and publications of Caspar Whitney, an American sportswriter turned big-game hunter. Kelly neatly demonstrates how "the sportsman-hunter discourse could find a place in the life of an individual, and in the life of a nation of middle-class readers seeking to understand the changing world in which they found themselves" (p. 133).

Part two examines hunting narratives written and published by American women and British sportsmen. The writings of these two groups, Kelly argues, complicated the genre of the hunting narrative as they were not American men in search of manhood in the wilderness. Instead, these authors utilized the flexibility of the hunting narrative to find different meanings in the pursuit of game. For American women, big-game hunting was leisure; it provided an escape from everyday domesticity. For British hunters, the narrative emphasized empire.

The book's final section considers the social implications of the discourses within hunting narratives. The first chapter of this section centers on the relationships between sportsmen and their guides across

the globe. While these men depended upon the services of their guides, and, in this way, were not in control, Kelly argues that sportsmen could control their narrative even as they lost command of the world around them. Through this lens, hunting narratives often reinforced notions of race and class that readers would have found familiar.

Kelly's final two chapters argue that the discourse of conservation within these narratives was a natural extension of a genre based on self-control and personal will. When sportsmen called for the protection of wildlife they also sought to protect a space in which masculine qualities could be performed. The rhetoric of conservation was successful because it was framed as a national benefit, and the hunting elite went on to shape the larger conservation movement of the early twentieth century. While Kelly effectively argues these points and acknowledges the impacts on rural populations, this book overlooks the practices of rural people and perpetuates a top-down model for the development of American conservation.

As Richard W. Judd's *Common Lands, Common People: The Origins of Conservation in Northern New England* (1997) has argued, conservation was part of some rural resource-use practices in New England well before droves of elite sportsmen considered protecting wildlife in the region. While there is no doubt that the sportsmen in Kelly's study developed a conservation ethic, readers should be reminded that the history of conversation begins before the Gilded Age and is more nuanced than this book acknowledges.

This criticism aside, *The Hunter Elite* effectively examines the development of a distinct literary genre that was as complicated as the writers who produced it. Kelly's insightful analysis emphasizes the distinct time and place that gave rise to the hunting narrative, the personalities who wrote those narratives, and the material manifestation of these publications. This book is a good reminder of why we shouldn't judge a book by its cover...or title.

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