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Book Review

A Claim on the Countryside. A History of the British Outdoor Movement

Harvey Taylor

Edinburgh: Keele University Press, 1997

ISBN 1-85331-166-9 (HB) £35.00. 303pp.

So little work has been done in Britain on the history of leisure, tourism and countryside recreation that readers are sure to greet this particular book as a refreshingly innovative and unique contribution to the development of such a field of inquiry. Taylor is to be congratulated for leading the way in selecting a woefully under-researched subject, and for presenting his findings in a lucid and accessible fashion. His academic vision is to be applauded. Taylor seeks to describe the popular outdoor movement that he maintains has developed generically in both its 'ideological evolution and its practical expression' (p. 16), from the earliest establishment of the Footpath Preservation Societies, through the Campaign for Access, and an Outdoor Movement on Wheels. Later chapters look at the Interwar Outdoor Movement, and the Rational Holiday experience of youth hostelling, progressive education, church groups and the Co-operative Holidays Association. The most striking revelation that Taylor makes is that the beginnings of an outdoor movement were on a far larger scale than traditionally imagined, and drew in a wide range of social groupings, prior to the creation of the respectable and organised national societies with their own recognisable set of ideas and policies. The book addresses three types of recreational activity: rambling, mountaineering and cycle touring, although an early chapter does offer an insight into the amateur passion for all aspects of natural history which has been a fundamental bedrock of the British outdoor movement. Historians writing on southern England may find the scope of this book too narrow and bemoan the fact that there is little here on coastal and heathland recreation; sailing on river, lake or broad; nor, indeed, on any facets of a distinct 'lowland recreation,' or recreation within the urban environment. Taylor has concentrated his research on an area best called 'north Britain' (NE, NW England, with some material from Scotland). A great swathe of countryside from the English Midlands to southern England and Wales remains little touched by his investigations or obvious analytical skills. Is there something in this? Undoubtedly, the northern industrial towns of Lancashire and Yorkshire were instrumental in the origins of an 'upland' outdoor movement (rambling) in the late nineteenth century, ostensibly because of the proximity of many of the milltowns to open moorland and the existence of a good cheap transport infrastructure. The book focuses in on the experiences of certain local communities, in particular, Bolton, Burnley, Blackburn, Huddersfield, Leeds, Manchester, Sheffield and Newcastle. Taylor has not consulted the extensive public archives of the Scottish Rights of Way Society held at the Scottish Record Office in Edinburgh. This would normally have been a disastrous omission from the research remit, yet he writes very well on the access debate and individual rights of way disputes in nineteenth and early twentieth century Scotland. Discoveries such as this make the book appear exceptional, although some reservations must remain about how complete the claim can be that this single tome represents the history of the 'British' outdoor movement. The history of recreation in Britain owes as much to geography, as it does to class, religion, income, personal preference, generative influences, or the rise of leisure organisations and clubs.

It is sad that Harvey Taylor does not want to carry his history on past the late 1930s, for there is so much to tell in the decades after the Second World War in what has become an age of 'recreation for all.' A very short epilogue does try to offer some thoughts for the years after 1945, but does not begin to confront the many social, economic and environmental factors that govern the provision of outdoor recreational facilities, or the choices that we make in the selection of our leisure activities. The epilogue sits rather uncomfortably with the rest of the book. In the modern era, recreation is constantly re-inventing and re-defining itself, outside of a tamer, more traditional outdoor movement. Outdoor recreation has become increasingly planned, commercial, media-led, dynamic and political, and is now an important landuse in its own right in the countryside, which brings it into seemingly perpetual conflict with other more traditional forms of landuse such as sporting rights, farming, forestry and even nature conservation. One error catches the eye. The Cairngorm Club was not founded in 1893 (p.131); rather, its origins lie in the informal gathering of mountaineers at the Shelter Stone in the heart of the Cairngorm mountains on June 23 1887 where the decision was taken to form a club based in Aberdeen. The first meeting of the Cairngorm Club took place on January 9 1889 at which the club was 'officially' founded. It was the first edition of the *Cairngorm Club Journal* that appeared in July 1893. How attractive it would have been for the author to have selected a number of historical archive photographs from the many photographic collections that exist in university or public libraries across the country, to illustrate and accompany the text. There are ample photographic records of countryside recreation, landscape change brought about by recreational activity or of the buildings and events we associate with organised outdoor leisure activity. This is an important archival heritage that more publishers should be making use of. This is a book that social and economic historians, environmental historians, and rural planners and developers should read, along with the organisations that have been charged with the government and regulation of countryside recreation. There is much here for all to digest as we plan for the future of Britain's remoter areas, and begin to understand our own historical relationship to the natural world. This is an excellent book; praise that I give as an environmental historian, naturalist, walker, and a Boltonian by birth, and thus a direct generational product of that northern milltown recreational movement.

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