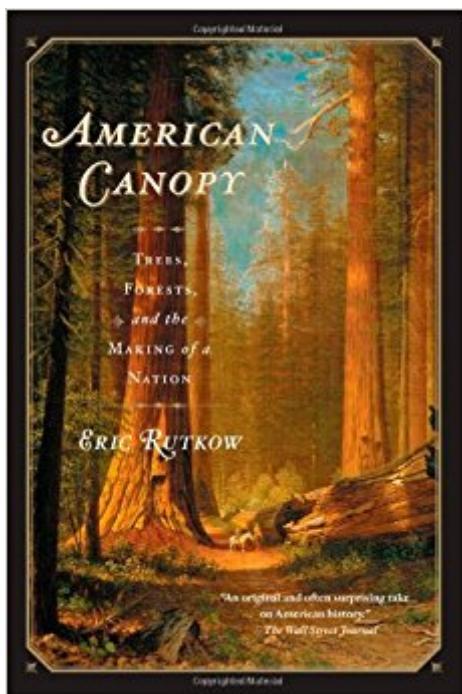


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American Canopy: Trees, Forests, And The Making Of A Nation



Synopsis

This fascinating and groundbreaking work tells the remarkable story of the relationship between Americans and their trees across the entire span of our nation's history. Eric Rutkow's work shows how trees were essential to the early years of the republic and indivisible from the country's rise as both an empire and a civilization. Among American Canopy's many captivating stories: the Liberty Trees, where colonists gathered to plot rebellion against the British; Henry David Thoreau's famous retreat into the woods; the creation of New York City's Central Park; the great fire of 1871 that killed a thousand people in the lumber town of Peshtigo, Wisconsin; the fevered attempts to save the American chestnut and the American elm from extinction; and the controversy over spotted owls and the old-growth forests they inhabited. Rutkow also explains how trees were of deep interest to such figures as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Teddy Roosevelt, and Franklin Roosevelt, who oversaw the planting of some three billion trees nationally in his time as president. Never before has anyone treated our country's trees and forests as the subject of a broad historical study, and the result is an accessible, informative, and thoroughly entertaining read. Audacious in its four-hundred-year scope, authoritative in its detail, and elegant in its execution, American Canopy is perfect for history buffs and nature lovers alike and announces Eric Rutkow as a major new author of popular history.

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Customer Reviews

A beautifully written, devilishly original piece of work. (David Oshinsky, Pulitzer

Prize-winning author of *Polio: An American Story*) "An even-handed and comprehensive history that could not be more relevant...The woods, Rutkow's history reminds us again and again, are essential to our humanity." (Business Week) "Rutkow has cut through America's use and love of trees to reveal the rings of our nation's history and the people who have helped shape it." (San Diego Union Tribune)

Eric Rutkow, a graduate of Yale University and Harvard Law School, has worked as a lawyer on environmental issues. He splits his time between New York and New Haven, Connecticut, where he is pursuing a doctorate in American history at Yale. This is his first book.

When you really stop and think about it, attempting to write a history of trees in a country as massive and geographically diverse as the United States is necessarily a gargantuan undertaking. Evidently, the idea of America's trees and forests as the subject of a broad historical study had simply never been attempted before. But I am here to tell you that first-time author Eric Rutkow pulls it off with great aplomb in his compelling and comprehensive new book "American Canopy: Trees, Forests, and The Making of a Nation." This one is just chock-a-block full of important people, places, events and issues and lays out for the reader a chronological history of the essential role that America's trees and forests have played in the history of our nation. I simply could not put this book down. In "American Canopy" you will discover that the British had designs on the land that would become America as early as 1584. Richard Hakluyt, a prominent British citizen and preeminent geographer proposed establishing permanent settlements whereby transplanted Englishmen would work the land. Hakluyt well understood the treasure trove of natural resources that seemed to be there for the taking. Timber was badly needed to maintain and expand the British naval fleet. Eventually colonies were established and by 1629 a shipbuilding industry was beginning to emerge in New England. But this was just the beginning of the story....As I indicated earlier "American Canopy" chronicles the important people, places, events and issues in the history of America's forests. Eric Rutkow offers up engaging stories involving several American presidents including George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt and his distant cousin Franklin Roosevelt. You will learn about the explorers Lewis and Clark and discover the roles played by a distinguished group of other prominent Americans including Thomas Edison, Frederick Law Olmstead, Daniel Boone, Frederick Weyerhauser, Benjamin Franklin, Henry Ford, John Chapman (aka Johnny Appleseed), Henry David Thoreau, Gifford Pinchot, James Fenimore Cooper and William Levitt to name but a few. Furthermore, you will discover that when our nation was first

settled the forest cover was estimated to be some one billion acres and how over a period of just 300 years that figure would dwindle to just 600 million acres. Rutkow talks extensively about the negative effects clear-cutting, insects, fire and disease have had on our forests over the centuries. This is not a pretty picture but you may actually be encouraged by the way America has chosen to fight back in recent decades. You will also discover the role the federal government has played in the development and protection of our forests and wilderness areas over the years. Rutkow cites the creation of Yellowstone National Park in 1872 and John Muir's remarkable effort to establish Yosemite National Park as particularly significant milestones. I was also pleased to read about the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) that was established by President Franklin Roosevelt back in 1933. As a result of that program a young man from Providence, Rhode Island, who would eventually become my dad, was able to spend a couple of years working in the wilds of Wyoming planting trees, carving out trails, erecting firetowers and building fire protection roads among other things. This proved to be a very rewarding experience for so many young men during that difficult economic time. Meanwhile, Rutkow also documents the origins and evolution of both the "conservation" and "environmentalist" movements in this nation. Merely "protecting the nation's forests" would morph into "conservation" a philosophy that proclaimed that "all natural resources ought to be managed with an eye toward sustainability and efficient use." Then in 1960 with the passage of MUSYA (Multiple-Use Sustained Yield Act) the federal government would declare that "It is the policy of the Congress that the national forests are established and shall be administered for outdoor recreation, range, timber, watershed, wildlife and fish purposes". Note the amazing change in emphasis here. Our nation's forests were no longer merely a resource to be exploited for profit. Very interesting indeed! So whether you are a history buff or just someone who is endlessly curious about the world around you "American Canopy: Trees, Forests, and the Making of a Nation" should be right up your alley. This is a thoughtful, meticulously researched and well-written book. I must tell you that this is easily the best book I have read thus far in 2012. It is such a fascinating topic. In my view "American Canopy" is an extremely important work and I suspect that Eric Rutkow is someone we will be hearing a lot more from in the future. He proves to be a very gifted writer! This is a book that is definitely worth your time and attention. Very highly recommended!

Even if you don't read a lot of history, American Canopy has something to offer for the casual, educated reader while still packing in a lot of detail and some potentially new arguments for the more well-versed. It moves through a series of stories on the impact of trees on the history and development of America. In fact, this reader comes away with impression that America as it exists

could never have happened with our incredible trees. In sometimes heartbreaking fashion, the book shows how trees have been exploited or decimated in the past and highlights some of the consequences of not protecting or managing these valuable resources. See for example, the Peshtigo fire that killed thousands and laid waste to miles of forest. The characters are vibrant and the storytelling really makes this a joy to read. Rutkow sheds light on the close relationship many well known Americans have had with trees such as Washington, FDR and Thoreau. In addition, he tells the story of several fascinating figures such as Johnny Appleseed and the lumber baron Frederick Weyerhaeuser (who I had never heard of before reading this book). Along the way, you learn a lot about the role of trees in shaping the state of our country today. Once you start reading this book, you begin to see trees in a whole new light. How must the first colonists have felt landing among giant forests that have no parallel on the east coast today? If you ever go for a walk in the wood or a stroll in a park, you must appreciate the foresight of those who saw the value of preserving and planting trees. We learn from American Canopy that most of these places, even the wild seeming ones, are not there by accident. Overall, this book really kept me turning pages and I learned a lot.

The best history books bring long deceased historical figures back to life, instilling the same hopes, fears, and passions in the reader that the characters experienced themselves. Usually, these figures are known for their role in major events or for having a positive influence that radiates far beyond their physical lives. Historian Eric Rutkow illuminates one of these under-appreciated participants in the American history narrative, but Rutkow's main character is not a person but rather an easily ignored plant: a tree! As Rutkow notes, "trees are the loudest silent figures in America's complicated history." American Canopy begins with a highly engaging prologue about Prometheus, a tree that stood seemingly unchanged for over Nevada for over 5,000 years. The tragic yet redeeming story introduces Rutkow's premise but differs in one important aspect. Most other trees in America were not frozen, passive observers as civilization expanded around them. As America evolved, its forests changed in tandem. In colonial times, trees were an obstacle to overcome, concealing Indians in the forest and blocking the plow as stumps. As industrialism proliferated in the 19th Century, wood became the "stalwart of American development"--and the conservation movement subsequently responded by curtailing the carelessness and waste that caused forest fires and ecosystem destruction. The automobile and highway building by the CCC made camping and outdoor recreation in national forests accessible to almost all Americans--and Aldo Leopold responded by spearheading a movement to preserve the remaining pristine wilderness. Individual

forests experienced dynamic changes, as uses were discovered for different species, imported diseases wiped out the American Chestnut and Elm, and deciduous trees filled in the white pine forests. Old growth forests were clear cut, converted to farmland, and then later restored into commercial tree plantations. Americans' attitude toward trees changed as well. Within a short period of time, Americans went from cutting trees for firewood to planting trees for fruit and later for shade, drought prevention, and finally to counteract global warming. Rutkow shows that trees are as American as apple pie--or maybe as American as the hard apple cider that sustained countless homesteads in the colonial period. The best aspect of this work is the way Rutkow brings in anecdotes from all sorts of American history themes and relates them to trees. It turns out that quite often trees are not just a side story, but a prominent contributor to more widely known events. For example, Englishman Richard Hakluyt advocated colonial exploration in the late 1500s primarily as a means to acquire ship masts from New England pine trees to counteract supply shortages and keep pace with the Spanish Navy. It was also interesting to learn that a major reason why George Washington ceded power so easily after the Revolutionary War was that he longed to cultivate his tree collection at Mount Vernon. Virtually all aspects of American politics, society, and culture are somehow influenced by trees. Central Park was even envisioned partially as a way to refine the lower rungs of society in New York. For those familiar with American history, especially environmental history, some of the book's material (especially from the progressive era onward) will be a review. American Canopy is in the same vein as environmental history works such as *Nature's Metropolis*, which first brought to light the intricate connections between Chicago and its hinterlands, including the Great Lakes logging industry. American Canopy is unique for bringing together themes from the entirety of American history and for using trees as the common denominator to connect different eras. As an overview of hundreds of years, some of the stories lack depth, and Rutkow spends very little space connecting the themes between the sometimes disparate sections.

Prominent figures like Gifford Pinchot are described in detail, but other important minds get glossed over to an extent. Women were also noticeably absent, perhaps that is the case in the primary source material also (I can only remember Lady Bird Johnson being mentioned). The most amazing facts are the sheer magnitude of uses for forest products and the statistics for the tremendous volume of wood that was extracted. A single English ship required an astonishing two thousand oak trees. Railroads were known as the "iron horse" but they were initially comprised almost entirely of wood--including the bridges, cars, fuel, ties, and even the rails themselves. Each species of tree had specific uses and Rutkow explains in detail why White Pine was preferred for ship masts, longleaf pines for turpentine, and Sitka spruce for WWI airplanes. The various descriptions (by Rutkow and

his sources) make it especially sad to read about the American Elm, "the most magnificent vegetable in the temperate zone," succumbing to disease. After finishing this book, one will almost certainly advocate for increased concern and protection for trees. American Canopy will definitely go down as one of the better history books of the year, but it falls short of the top tier of American history works.

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