



## Book Reviews

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*Johnny Appleseed and the American Orchard: A Cultural History.* By William Kerrigan. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012. Pp. xii, 231. \$50.00 cloth; \$25.00 paper.)

Edward Chapman, a miller from the north of England, emigrated to Boston in 1638 but soon settled in Ipswich, thirty miles to the northeast. His great-great-grandson, John, born in Leominster, Massachusetts, in 1774, was raised in Longmeadow, just south of Springfield, but moved on to Pennsylvania's Lycoming Valley in the 1790s and then to the Wyoming Valley, an area abundant with orchards. From there Johnny, as he was called, went to Marietta, Ohio, where his family lived for a while. But this recitation of sites and dates creates a misleading sense of permanence; by the turn of the century, Johnny had become a restless mendicant with a motive—to plant apple trees in modest nurseries with seedlings for sale (and sometimes handed out) to settlers. He wandered through Ohio, ending his fragmentarily documented life at Fort Wayne, Indiana, in 1845 as a bachelor about whom legends had already blossomed and borne fruit.

New England's economically based preference for cider over beer resulted in a large increase in apple orchards by the early eighteenth century. The consumption of cider as a beverage of choice also liberated the best fields for growing food rather than hops. Property tax valuations commonly undercounted New England's orchards even though cider production flourished, in part because of their "hidden" nature. Tax assessors often failed to find apple trees strewn throughout a pasture or scattered on a rocky hillside. Yet, as William Kerrigan observes, "these unnoticed, diffused, decentralized orchards provided large quantities of fruit each fall for the cider mills" (p. 19).

Kerrigan, the Cole Distinguished Professor of American History at Ohio's Muskingum University, delivers a succinct, meticulous, and fascinating triple biography of the man, the myth, and the American apple—a fine contribution to cultural and horticultural history.

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It supplants *Johnny Appleseed: Man and Myth* (1967) by Robert Price, a volume that got many things right but spread quite a few misperceptions as well. Kerrigan has scavenged through local lore, account ledgers, and receipts to come up with a gently iconoclastic chronicle that changes our image of Johnny from an unarmed, strict vegetarian who proselytized on behalf of Swedenborgianism, distributing tracts the way he did seedlings, to a more realistic entrepreneur. He lived the life of a primitive Christian, often ragged but not quite (or not consistently) penniless. He bought and sold tracts of land. As a new level of material well-being reached the Ohio Valley during the 1830s and '40s, he adapted but did not fundamentally change. Austerity suited him.

Kerrigan deftly illuminates the complexities of land speculation and the claims of land barons and their agents that Chapman faced when he began planting his nurseries in western Pennsylvania in 1796–97. Chapman, the author further informs us, chose to sow his nurseries from seed rather than from budded or grafted stock, despite the disadvantages, because he could acquire free seeds from behind cider mills and carry large quantities long distances without harm in leather pouches. Furthermore, grafted stock was expensive, hard to come by, and could only be obtained in small quantities, and it made little sense to plant pricey stock when many young trees would be lost to flood, fire, and wildlife. Throughout this chapter and all others, Kerrigan predictably peppers the text with such phrases as “perhaps,” “it appears,” “there is no surviving evidence,” “undoubtedly,” “if Chapman was indeed,” and “he was almost certainly”—and this is all quite fine. He is careful and scrupulous in telling the reader when he is speculating and why.

Chapter 6, “Yankee Saint and the Red Delicious,” traces the Chapman hagiography that emerged in the 1870s and '80s. The Johnny Appleseed myth was often aimed at children, with Lydia Maria Child's popular poem “Apple-Seed John” appearing in 1881 and Rosemary and Stephen Vincent Benét making our man the subject of a poem in their children's volume *Book of Americans*. Moreover, Vachel Lindsay labeled him a “New England kind of saint” (p. 177), while Lewis Mumford appropriated Chapman as a symbol of American reform values on behalf of working people and the poor.

The legend of Johnny Appleseed so deeply penetrated culture, Kerrigan shows, that it still carries weight today. In October 2000, when news spread around Leominster that the town's last orchard might be sold and the land developed into a new housing subdivision,

members of the community quickly organized to save it and “played on the town’s connection with Johnny Appleseed in their media campaign, suggesting that the young John Chapman had once wandered among apple trees on the very land under threat” (p. 192). The locals succeeded, the development was defeated, and the land remains an orchard cooperatively managed by volunteers. The battle, according to Kerrigan, was one manifestation of a modern “civic agriculture” movement that is as ambivalent about unexamined forms of economic growth as many of John Chapman’s friends and neighbors were in his own time.

Kerrigan also draws attention to the many ways in which trees and apples took on larger symbolic meaning in Chapman’s time. In one smart chapter, the author explores “suckers,” sprouts that rise from the soil at or near the base of untended trees. In his 1798 essay about the threats of overpopulation to the health of Pennsylvania’s agricultural communities, Benjamin Rush claimed that sending “the idle and extravagant, who eat without working” westward would allow the industrious folks who remained to thrive, “just as cutting off the suckers of an apple-tree increases the size of the tree, and the quantity of fruit” (p. 67). Kerrigan also includes a wonderful passage on the role of apples in political jokes and banter. For improvement-minded Federalists, for example, the seedling tree became an emblem of lazy subsistence farmers, “in their mind the core constituency of a Jeffersonian Republican party that idealized the simple yeoman farmer” (p. 82). And when Zebulon Gillette discovered a sucker growing beneath the graft of a tree he had purchased from Israel Putnam’s nursery at Marietta, he cut it off and handed it to his son, remarking, “this one’s a Democrat, you can have it” (p. 82).

Many readers will be familiar with Michael Pollan’s highly engaging book *The Botany of Desire: A Plant’s Eye View of the World* (2001), which begins with an extensive chapter devoted to “Desire: Sweetness/Plant: The Apple.” Many of his concerns coincide with Kerrigan’s: Johnny’s character, his role as a frontier nurseryman, and his mythologization. Pollan, however, is more interested in viewing Chapman as a Dionysian figure supplanting the second-rate American grape with the apple and wine with cider. Though I find Kerrigan’s argument for New Englanders’ substitution of beer with cider more compelling because the ingredients for cider were so much easier to work with on the frontier, Pollan’s emphasis on Chapman as an agent of apple biodiversity is compelling and remains a major contribution.

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*Nature Next Door: Cities and Trees in the American Northeast*. By Ellen Stroud. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012. Pp. xx, 208. \$26.95.)

Historians divide, parse, and define the world around them, establishing categories for analysis. Ellen Stroud, in contrast, explores the Northeast's interconnected urban and rural spaces and invites readers to reconsider old assumptions about their separateness. Challenging the often-repeated assertion that the region's forests regenerated naturally after decades of clear cutting, Stroud's richly contextualized narrative, complete with well-chosen illustrations, focuses on the crucial part dedicated citizens and governments played in protecting forests and promoting their return in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Though she organizes the volume into four, state-focused chapters—Pennsylvania, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Maine—Stroud still enables readers to make connections across state lines. As she points out, “One of environmental history's most important contributions to our understanding of the past has been to push us away from the narrative and analytical constraints imposed by the conventions of political boundaries” (p. 147).

The author incorporates local actors into the unfolding account to enrich our understanding of the role of cities and city dwellers “in creating and maintaining the new northeastern forests” (p. 10) and to serve as a humanizing presence against “the cliché of environmental decline that pervades so many environmental stories” (p. 10). Stroud introduces the sixty-four-year-old Philadelphia lawyer Herbert Welsh who began his annual summer holiday in 1915 by walking five hundred miles from his home in Germantown to his family cottage at Lake Sunapee in New Hampshire. Once there, as a representative of Sunapee summer residents, he worked to save the White Mountains with forester Philip Ayres and farmer Archie Gove. Back in Pennsylvania, Mira Lloyd Dock promoted the idea of forestry as agriculture, while New Yorkers Bertha and Nathan Oppenheim endorsed their summer state of Vermont as a “pastoral ideal: trees, farms, and isolation from the city” (p. 87). Similarly, Cornelia “Fly Rod” Crosby and her friends circulated leaflets and hunting guides that portrayed