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Books of Note

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Books of Note

In High Places with Henry David Thoreau: The New Hiker's Guide to Thoreau's Mountain Travels

By John Gibson

Woodstock, Vermont: The Countryman Press, 2013

200 pages. ISBN: 978-1-58157-196-7. Price: \$18.95 (paperback)

MOST PEOPLE ASSOCIATE HENRY DAVID THOREAU WITH WALDEN POND, where he spent two years, two months, and two days before publishing in 1854 what is considered the conservation movement's seminal volume, *Walden, or Life in the Woods*. But the celebrated author, philosopher, naturalist, and transcendentalist also extensively explored the rest of New England and beyond, making twenty mountain excursions before his death at age 44 in 1862. He incorporated accounts of his wanderings in essays, journals, and such works as "Ktaadn and the Maine Woods."

In this new guide to places Thoreau explored, author John Gibson takes us to these summits, attempting to recreate what Thoreau experienced as well as reflecting on what has changed during the past century and a half. It's a daunting task because many contemporary trails and landmarks didn't exist then, and retracing nineteenth-century footsteps proved even more challenging because Thoreau was something of a bushwhacker.

I found the most compelling aspect of the twelve ascents highlighted in Gibson's well-researched book is not the actual climbs, but the arduous journeys to the trailheads. Most of us who scale Mount Washington today first drive to Pinkham Notch or Ammonoosuc Ravine and then hike about four miles of well-traveled paths to the summit. Likewise, the most popular route up Katahdin, the Hunt Trail, begins only a little more than a mile from Katahdin Stream Campground.

Thoreau did not have it so easy. For his first visit to the White Mountains—then called the Great White Hills—Thoreau and his brother, John, built a 16-foot vessel equipped with oars, a sail, and wheels for numerous portages, and set out on a 170-mile journey from Concord, Massachusetts. (Thoreau chronicled this leg of the expedition in his book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*.)

At Plymouth, New Hampshire, the pair abandoned their boat, strapped on crude packs, and tramped the rest of the way on foot. Likewise, his expedition to Katahdin, then situated north of even the remotest logging camps, required a long approach by horse and buggy, a grueling slog over wilderness terrain and poling upriver.

I enjoyed reading these descriptions and developed a greater appreciation for Thoreau's spirit of adventure. Gibson, who has written several New England travel books and hiking guides, relies on his own background as well as Thoreau's writings to propel the narrative.

Sometimes the bouncing back and forth in time is a little jarring, which probably has more to do with the book's concept than Gibson's prose. But this is a minor point—all in all, the book succeeds in inspiring us to embrace the wilderness, just as Thoreau did in his many works.

—Steve Fagin
Book Review Editor

Forests for the People: The Story of America's Eastern National Forests

By Christopher Johnson and David Govatski

Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2013

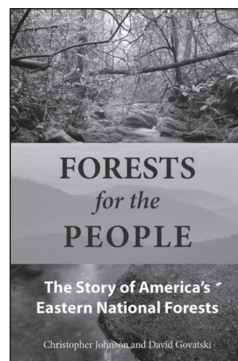
394 pages. ISBN: 978-1-61091-010-1.

Price: \$35 (paperback)

IT'S EASY TO TAKE FOR GRANTED SUCH EXQUISITE treasures as New Hampshire's White Mountains or Virginia's Shenandoah National Park. After all, most people assume that because forests and mountains have always existed they will remain preserved in perpetuity.

In reality, protecting and responsibly managing East Coast woodlands has been a long, often-bitter struggle, and if it weren't for the foresightedness and persistence of dedicated individuals, much of the magnificent natural areas we now enjoy would be dotted with subdivisions, crisscrossed with highways and paved over with parking lots.

In *Forests for the People: The Story of America's Eastern National Forests*, writer Christopher Johnson and forester David Govatski give credit to such pioneering conservationists as John Wingate Weeks, a Massachusetts



congressman who introduced legislation that allowed the federal government to buy privately owned forestlands and start to create the eastern national forests.

Weeks had to overcome opposition from conservative lawmakers backed by timber companies and other business interests, whose arguments more than a century ago sound remarkably like objections to environmental regulation made by modern-day developers. “Not one cent for scenery!” thundered Speaker of the House Joseph G. Cannon, who unsuccessfully attempted to block a vote on the act because he said it represented an unjustified expansion of federal power.

Nevertheless, the proposed bill, championed by such early conservationists as Philip Wheelock Ayres, the first forester of the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests, passed in 1911. The Weeks Act later was expanded and applied to western forests as well, and eventually helped create the Allegheny, White Mountain, Green Mountain, Pisgah, George Washington, and Ottawa national forests.

Forests for the People offers detailed descriptions of political infighting and government policy-making and contains as many charts, maps, and graphs as a textbook, so those seeking accounts of adventure in the wilderness might find it wonkish. But the book is a valuable reference, and a cautionary tale. The authors, who strive for a balance that preserves forests but allows responsible harvesting of trees for timber and firewood, warn that relentless economic pressures continuously threaten our nation’s woodlands.

Johnson and Govatski urge people today to adhere to the principles of one of the heroes of their book, Gifford Pinchot, the first chief of the U.S. Forest Service and a governor of Pennsylvania, who established a policy of planned use and renewal. He also coined the term *conservation ethic*.

“Gifford Pinchot was a visionary who poured his love of forests into one of the great achievements in American environmental history: the restoration of the country’s eastern national forests to provide timber and other services for an expanding nation, protect thousands of valuable species of flora and fauna, and extend healthful recreation for millions of people,” Johnson and Govatski write. “If we heed his words, the eastern national forests will thrive far into the future and continue their rightful role in helping protect the health of the planet.”

—Steve Fagin

Sleeping Island: The Narrative of a Summer's Travel in Northern Manitoba and the Northwest Territories

By *P. G. Downes*

Ottawa, Canada: McGahern Stewart Publishing, 2011

294 pages. ISBN: 978-0-9868600-0-3. Price: \$34.95 (paperback)

ONE EVENING MANY YEARS AGO, AS WE WERE SITTING AROUND THE campfire deep in the Canadian wilderness, the conversation turned to favorite books on canoe tripping. When I asked one of my companions, an avid collector and reader of such books, for his choice, he immediately replied: *Sleeping Island*. By 1966, that book, published in 1943, was then long out of print, but fortunately, I found a copy in our nearby Concord Public Library. Not too surprising, for Concord, Massachusetts, had been the author's hometown.

In more recent times, publishers have reissued that classic, but some editions were marred by errors and sloppy editing. The most recent, and best by far, is this 2011 edition by McGahern Stewart Publishing, with copious notes by R.H. Cockburn and many additional photos, sketches, and maps by the author.

It is an account of Downes's 1939 trip by canoe from the remote outpost of Brochet into the Barren Grounds of northern Canada. Quoting from the introduction by Cockburn, "As a narrative of an arduous canoe voyage, *Sleeping Island* has few equals. Downes was fortunate to have traveled when he did into little-known unmapped country, where the natives still lived on the land. Here are vivid descriptions of trial and error on rivers and lakes, of poling and paddling, and of sweat-drenched portages. Deserted trading posts decay along abandoned trade routes."

Some winter's eve, throw another log on the fire and travel with the author into this land of mystery and way of life that have both now vanished into oblivion.

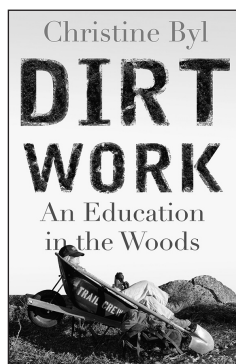
—*Stewart Coffin*

Dirt Work: An Education in the Woods

By Christine Byl

Boston: Beacon Press, 2013

225 pages. ISBN: 978-0-8070-0100-4. Price: \$24.95
(hardcover)



“A WOMAN ON A TRAIL CREW IS LIKE A DOG IN A swimming pool,” Christine Byl writes early in *Dirt Work*, a smart, muscular, and beautiful book that chronicles Byl’s sixteen years as a “traildog” in Glacier and Denali National Parks, hauling boulders, digging drainage, clearing blowdowns, and building bridges. “Even if it can swim, when it jumps in, it gets noticed.” By men and women alike.

“How’d a pretty girl like you get a job like this? What, are all the men too lazy? . . . Who carries your tools up here? . . . Isn’t a girl with a chain saw sexy? . . .”

In light of the Appalachian Mountain Club’s historic commitment to improvements for both women and trails, *Dirt Work* deserves to find wide readership here in *Appalachia*, in pages once edited by Miriam O’Brien Underhill, a pioneer of women’s alpinism who invented a new sport, “manless climbing,” more than 80 years ago to gain access to the world of solo mountaineering.

A generation after Underhill made her historic solo ascent of the Alps’ Aiguille du Grépon, Byl joined her first trail crew, in Glacier National Park. Just out of college and “green as spring,” Byl started swinging and digging at the place where gender and outdoor culture meet—a place, Byl writes, “more interwoven—more interesting—than dichotomies”—education, not labor; male, not female—“allow.” It’s hard not to hear echoes of Underhill: “The essence of guideless climbing is . . . a lot of fun,” she wrote in her 1934 *National Geographic* essay, “Manless Alpine Climbing,” “and I saw no reason why this pleasure should be closed to women.” There are pleasure and fun in the essence of trail work, too, and Byl has written a vivid and passionate tribute.

Dirt Work is “not meant to be a memoir or a how-to manual, not a wilderness treatise or a polemic on how anyone should live,” writes Byl in her introduction, but “a story” and “a love song.” Byl braids passages that are at turns memoiristic, reportorial, and essayistic—an approach that serves the “more interwoven” places she explores. Each chapter begins with a profile of a tool, an elegant choice, respectful of both form and function: *Axe, Rock Bar, Chainsaw, Boat, Skid Steer, Shovel*. “Tools have taught me plenty, free of judgment,” she writes, “and I mean to pay them due by hanging the book’s framework on their pegs.”

Byl, who holds a degree in philosophy, puts the tools to good use, meditating on such questions as what is home, what is work, what is wild: “Wild will fight for itself. Wild is unhemmed, cuffs dragging in the mud, fist balled up, thumping. Wilderness requires paperwork to bolster it, but wildness is wisp of instinct.” In pacing and approach, *Dirt Work* feels very much like a long-distance hike, at least to this reader, with discoveries both big (“No one can do all the dirt work. No one should do none”) and small (“Older Stihls without a decompression button are notoriously hard to start”), steps both simple and hazardous—all of it worthy of lyricism. Like a well-built rock staircase, *Dirt Work* is as poetic as it is practical.

During a recent conversation from her home in Alaska, where she lives with her husband and owns and runs a trail design and construction company, Byl said, “I really enjoy working with men. I really enjoy all-female crews.” Byl hears equally from women and men, she told me. “After readings, a woman will say, ‘I used to drive an excavator.’ Or a man will say, ‘Oh, I worked as a laborer one summer.’ It’s been gratifying that the book’s connection with readers is universal.”

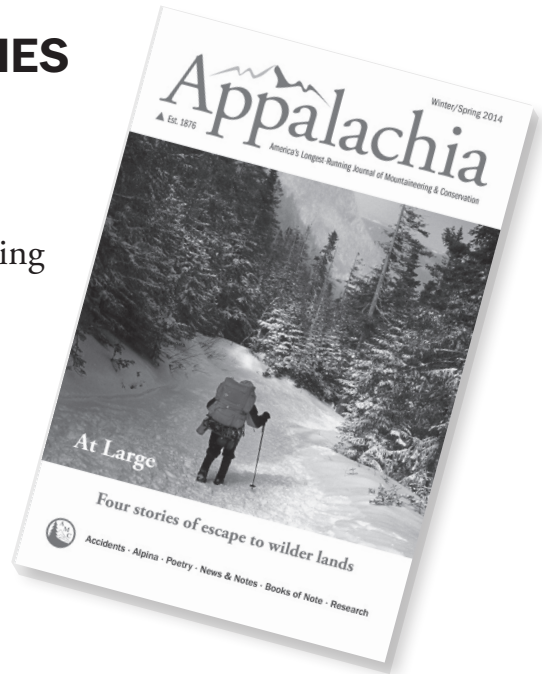
—Catherine Buni

"I started reading Appalachia for the accident reports, but I kept reading for the great features."—Mohamed Ellozy, subscriber

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