



Library

Matthew McKenzie,
Clearing the Coastline.
The Nineteenth-Century
Ecological and Cultural
Transformation of Cape
Cod.

Hanover and London:
University Press of New
England, 2011, 248pp.

Poul Holm

This is a well-researched, well-written, indeed compelling read which, in one slim volume encapsulates economic, ecological, and artistic drivers of change along the Rhode Island-Massachusetts coast from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries. In six chapters we get the story of how 'Wastelands' were managed and turned into 'Workspace' which generated 'Prosperity' but also precipitated environmental degradation. The final chapters investigate how public discourse eventually marginalised fishers as first scientists and later urban tourists took a hold on the coastline and thus cleared the inshore waters of not only fish but also of the local human population. The outcome was an impoverished sea as well as a deserted land which attracted a new generation of tourists who came in search of undisturbed nature. The conclusion is careful to apportion blame between the fishing population, scientists, politicians, and artists who helped both romanticise and eventually abstract the locals from the shoreline. The volume manages to compress lots of information into a flowing narrative which constantly stimulates the reader by original observations and meticulously researched evidence. I most enjoyed the careful analysis of technological sophistication of the latter part of the nineteenth century because the dramatic developments of the latter part of

the century are so much more known. Dr McKenzie enriches our understanding of fishing history by forcing us to understand the intricacies and constraints of hand lining and the enormous consequences of the introduction of tub trawls or long lining in a few years in the late 1850s. Long lines tremendously increased productivity and thus the need for bait which paradoxically put inshore resources under much more pressure as the line fishermen pushed further and further away. The fatal blow to inshore fish stocks, however, came in the 1860s with the introduction of pound nets to catch vast quantities of near shore spawning fish. By 1890, the once bountiful waters of Cape Cod had been fished out. The book uses landscape paintings as a source of information on the public perceptions of the coast. Interesting as the author's analyses of single paintings are, they failed to convince me of their concrete impact on the management of the coast. No doubt such paintings impressed themselves on the urban American public but it is a long shot to connect the paintings with actual developments on the shoreline. Nevertheless, I applaud the attempt to write environmental history with the arts as part of the explanatory framework, and further research will certainly be rewarding.

A compelling read must perhaps eschew some of the intricacies of interpretation. *Clearing the Coastline* is no exception. The environmental narrative holds well together although the exact impact of fisheries on marine animal diversity, distribution and abundance is not made quite clear. The economic narrative is less satisfactory. Dr McKenzie deplores the demise of the hand lining communities of the early nineteenth century because of the detrimental impact of later developments not just on the marine ecology but also on maritime communities. However, from an economic and indeed social point-of-view one must recognise the tremendous welfare benefits to society at large which were secured by vastly increased landings of fish, and the benefits of productivity increases which not only provided larger incomes but also freed labour up to undertake new and less dangerous occupations. However, Dr McKenzie does not discuss the benefits and drawbacks of economic progress but squarely sides with a pessimistic interpretation of nineteenth-century technological development. In doing so, he misses a bow to his string which would have made this book a beautifully orchestrated study of a waterscape. As it is, *Clearing the Coastline* is a first-class piece of marine environmental history.