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BOOK REVIEW

CEREMONIAL TIME:
Fifteen Thousand Years on One Square Mile

BY JOHN HANSON MITCHELL
Warner Books, 1984

On the long drive home from class one evening in the Fall of 1985, I tuned in the car radio to WGBH’s “Reading Aloud” and was surprised to hear Bill Cavness reading an eloquent, intelligent discussion of Paleo-Indians, fluted points, and mastodon kills. He had chosen John Hanson Mitchell’s *Ceremonial Time: Fifteen Thousand Years on One Square Mile* (Warner Books, 1984) for reading that season. Subsequent readings covered the entire prehistoric and historic sequence, up to the present and even into the future, at a single New England location.

Mitchell, a naturalist writer associated with the Massachusetts Audubon Society, has chosen the section of Littleton, Massachusetts, where he currently resides for his study. Reverting to a mid-nineteenth century designation for its euphony, he calls this area “Scratch Flat.” Through this peaceful landscape of rolling hills, ponds and streams, he marches a parade of characters derived from natural history, archaeological research, local history, folklore of both Native American and European cultures, and his own keen observations of places, people, and other lives both substantial and ethereal.

Mitchell’s theme is that linear time, as we observe it in our culture, is not the only way to observe the world. Though he claims always to have been aware of “moments on Scratch Flat when the past seems to me to be closer to the surface, when events that I know took place there seem somehow to be more real,” his contacts with local Native Americans have enhanced this type of perception to the point where it becomes a conscious means of exploration, much akin to Robert Graves’ analeptic moods. “I was able to perceive something more than a simple mental picture of what some past event was like. I not only could see the event or place it my mind’s eye, but would also hear it, smell the woodfires; and sometimes, for just a flash, a microsecond if you care to measure things, I would actually be there, or so it seemed.”

Mitchell’s greatest success lies in his descriptive ability, his uncanny knack of making the reader feel ceremonial time by evoking moods. His deep feeling for New England landscape and ecology, as well as a considerable gift for words, allows him to reveal for us “that undiscovered country which I am part, has few members in that corner of the state; and Mitchell does the intellectual tradition into which *Ceremonial Time* fits is very dearly that of Thoreau’s journals; and Mitchell pays his debt to the 19th century transcendentalist by supposing (not without some basis in historical fact) a visit to Scratch Flat by Thoreau in 1853 to visit Ralph Waldo Emerson’s mentally retarded brother Bulkley. As a 20th century naturalist, Mitchell is haunted by the sense of ecological fragility. He has personally observed the effects, over the past 12 years, of pollution and overindustrialization at Scratch Flat. But lurking behind this slow death are more dire potential ecocatastrophes: the possibility of nuclear war, and the nagging fear that we have not quite left the episodes of Pleistocene glaciation behind us. His discussion of nuclear winter and its probable effects links these two, yet manages somehow to achieve a measure of optimism even in the faces of such events—though not for the human population.

Mitchell’s book is not without its flaws, especially when viewed from the perspective of the archaeologist. Theories thirty years out of date (like the Adena dispersal) are presented as currently acceptable; the Archaic in particular is given short shrift; and (with the exception of a reference to Flagg Swamp Rockshelter) no organized archaeological excavations, professional or amateur, are mentioned. Mitchell’s reason for this omission is that no professional archaeologists have ever investigated the Nashoba Valley. At the time of his writing, this was literally true, although Tom Mahlstedt has since excavated at Reedy Meadow in Pepperell. The Massachusetts Archaeological Society, of which I am part, has few members in that corner of the state; and Mitchell does the Society little service by portraying the amateur archaeologist in the person of Toby Beckwith, a flamboyantly speculative collector. I have learned since reading the book that “Toby” is actually a composite of three individuals — and that too is a flaw. It is not easy to distinguish the factual from the fanciful in *Ceremonial Time*. That works extraordinarily well as art, but readers should not expect to find absolute historical accuracy in this book. Every historical fact Mitchell could glean has been transformed into legend in order to fulfill his artistic goal.

Despite these flaws, the book is a very readable introduction to the prehistory and history of southern New England. Sir Mortimer Wheeler, one of the foremost archaeological technicians of our century, once wrote that “Dead archaeology is the driest dust that blows.” Mitchell’s *Ceremonial Time* excels in its ability to dust off some of the facts we have been accumulating over the years and breathe some life into them — a task in which we have collectively been somewhat remiss. He makes our information understandable, both intellectually and emotionally, to the average reader. This should eventually have the effect of broadening the base of public support for conservation, both of cultural and natural resources. John Mitchell’s real goal, as expressed in the final chapter, is culture change at the grassroots level: “All Scratch Flat needs from America are three or four things — all of them negatives. Population control, clean groundwaters, no nuclear meltdowns at Seabrook, and no nuclear wars. Not much to ask, is it? Then we can remake the world right here... The model was created eight thousand years ago, right here on Scratch Flat.” For this goal, no matter how it may be achieved, we can only express approval.

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