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Brett Grainger. *Church in the Wild: Evangelicals in Antebellum America.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019. 280 pp. $45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-91937-2.

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In *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, Henry David Thoreau's classic 1854 memoir of his twenty-six months spent "alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor, in a house which I had built myself," the author reflected on the wildness of the supernatural and the divinity of the outdoors. "Once or twice … while I lived at the pond," Thoreau wrote, "I found myself ranging the woods, like a half-starved hound, with a strange abandonment, seeking some kind of venison which I might devour, and no morsel could have been too savage for me. The wildest scenes had become unaccountably familiar. I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both. I love the wild not less than the good."[1] While it may be easy to assume that Transcendentalists such as Thoreau and nineteenth-century contemporaries associated with Romanticism were solely responsible for the popular turn to nature in the antebellum era, this would be a mistake. As Brett Malcolm Grainger demonstrates in his perceptively argued and elegantly written book, ***Church in the Wild: Evangelicals in Antebellum America***, evangelicals played central roles in drawing popular attention to the spiritual potential of nature. Evangelicals' practice of what Grainger terms "vital piety" connected them to a world filled with divine presence. In Grainger's portrayal, the American evangelical environment before the Civil War was one in which the spirit and the wilderness were interconnected. Believers' "theology of nature" operated to help them maintain an important place for religion in a time in which many Protestants feared a disenchantment of the natural world wrought by Enlightenment rationalism, empiricism, and deism (p. 12).

Drawing on a wealth of sources including hymns, diaries, correspondence, and published works of devotionalism, Grainger crafts an impressive narrative weaving together perspectives of theologians, itinerant preachers, and everyday believers. Grainger's sophisticated analysis of hymns is particularly strong and provides a convincing glimpse into the interior and emotional lives of evangelicals across many decades of American history. The author does an effective job demonstrating both lived religion and formal theology as central components of evangelicals' natural theology. Additionally, his decision to organize the book along "the course of the spiritual life as evangelicals understood it"—that is, "a path wending from conversion or justification by faith (the new birth) to the pursuit of holiness or sanctification (the new life), and finally to the coming kingdom of heaven and the world to come (the

new earth)"—is an inventive method of further enlivening the already engaging and often moving narrative (p. 14). Through it all, Grainger demonstrates a deep respect for his subjects, their beliefs, and their practices.

Church in the Wild should prompt scholars to question a historiographical tradition reaching back to Perry Miller and reconsider antebellum evangelicals as primary contributors to a vital tradition of American naturalism blending revivalism and the environment.[2] The notion that there is a wide gap between Transcendentalists' natural retreats and evangelical revivalism is largely a creation of subsequent scholarship. Instead, Grainger argues, both embraced spiritual encounters with nature, with evangelicals more likely to esteem nature's potential for social and communal rebirth. More than this, evangelicals led the way in turning to nature for spiritual sustenance long before Transcendentalists did the same. Natural contemplation persisted among evangelicals from the Protestant Reformation well into the nineteenth century.

Grainger begins his narrative by tracing the history of Reformation-era and early modern Protestants' spirituality of nature. The author terms this process "a tolerable idolatry," which Protestants differentiated from the supposed idolatry of non-Protestants (pp. 18-60). Just as Robert A. Orsi has detailed the divine presence which structured Catholic history in the same period, Grainger argues that evangelicals also understood the natural spaces that were often central to their conversion experiences to be filled with God's "abundant presence" (p. 22).[3] Grainger explains that some evangelicals preferred outdoors worship to religion in constructed spaces since God created the former while fallen humans built the latter. Natural locales became for evangelicals the modern equivalents of biblical sites such as Mount Sinai and the Jordan River and also functioned as necessary scenes of both individual and communal revival and rebirth. In effect, believers, the water, and the woods sanctified each other.

Antebellum evangelicals were particularly adept at reading God's work in nature alongside God's revelation in scripture. For these Christians, Grainger argues, nature and the Bible served as companion sources of contemplation. While the Enlightenment and, in a later period, biblical higher criticism and the emergence of Darwinism may have led many evangelicals toward Fundamentalism, more literal interpretations of scripture, and a rejection of the physical environment as a site of revelation, natural contemplation remained popular among many Christians well past the antebellum period. In fact, evangelicals were able to merge the religious contemplation of nature with modern Enlightenment thought, or what Grainger describes as "meditative empiricism" (p. 71). The evangelical harnessing of contemporary trends to their religious practices continued into the early nineteenth century, with the antebellum ideology of gendered separate spheres being reflected in men serving as the primary interpreters of the Bible and women being regarded as the primary interpreters of the natural world. At the same time, natural contemplation and its associated "spiritual habits of gender bending" gave women the opportunity to attain leadership roles in evangelical circles, and the "contemplation of nature provided spiritual and political tools of resistance against the terrors of plantation life" for enslaved men and women, too (pp. 107, 120).

Grainger closes the book with two fascinating chapters on medicine, science, and evangelicals' encounters with nature. In the first of these chapters, the author describes how evangelicals came to regard mineral springs and various forms of the water cure as signs of God's presence and power in the physical world. Ministers were often at the forefront of advocacy of water as divine medicine. For these evangelical leaders, Grainger argues, medical and religious reform in the antebellum period went hand in hand, with many of

these figures combining proto-holistic medicine, revivalism, and temperance. The new "vitalist view of nature" allowed evangelicals to contribute to a reenchantment of a post-Newtonian and post-Enlightenment world (p. 140). In a similar manner, some evangelicals advocated on behalf of mesmerism and therapeutic uses of electricity as methods of reconciling the spiritual and physical realms, and, Grainger points out, they have often been absent from scholarship on these subjects.

My principal criticism of this otherwise exceptional book deals with chronology and context. At several points in the narrative, particularly its first half, timelines often appear collapsed. It is unclear when events are taking place. In a short space, events of different time periods may be discussed alongside one another, even if there is little connecting them chronologically. I also wondered whether the author could have spent more time discussing salient regional differences. For instance, at one point Grainger describes the perspective of Oregon Methodist H.K.W. Perkins from an account published in 1840. This was preceded by a paragraph on northeastern and New England evangelicals in earlier decades of the nineteenth century, and the narrative then moved in a subsequent paragraph backward to the 1780s (pp. 31-32). A similar problem occurs when an antebellum experience is placed in the same context as the colonial period (p. 76). I would have liked to see more attention paid to consistent chronological movement and more commentary on whether different regional contexts played roles in shaping various evangelical perspectives on nature. Altogether, though, Grainger's book offers a profound contribution to the study of both American religion and environmental history. Along with other recent works on religion and place by Orsi and Benjamin L. Miller, Grainger's represents a burgeoning scholarly conversation complicating the secularization thesis and pointing the way forward to productive intersections between history, religious studies, theology, geography, and environmental studies.[4] ***Church in the Wild*** is also a fine example of engaging prose matched with impressive research and persuasive argumentation. This book is highly recommended for scholars of American religion and also for historians of the nineteenth century seeking to broaden their perspectives on the evangelical revivalism that swept through the United States in the decades before the Civil War.

Notes

[1]. Henry D. Thoreau, ***Walden; or, Life in the Woods*** (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1854), 5, 226.

[2]. Perry Miller, ***Nature's Nation*** (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967).

[3]. Robert A. Orsi, ***Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them*** (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Orsi, ***History and Presence*** (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016).

[4]. Orsi, ***History and Presence***; Benjamin L. Miller, ***In God's Presence: Chaplains, Missionaries, and Religious Space during the American Civil War*** (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2019).

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