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Old or new, these are MUST READ (or must watch) pieces of media. Books, video, radio and other media featured here are items we consider essential to your knowledge about our forests, our environment, and the humans who influence each of them. Stay informed about the environment. And tell us about "Must Knows" you find.

Forests: The Shadow of Civilization

by Robert Pogue Harrison
The University of Chicago Press, 1992, 288 pages
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Review by Wayne Jenkins

Georgia ForestWatch members are an odd lot. We have this thing about forests, a connection perhaps not easily described or understood. Harrison's *Forests* may help us grasp the depth of this connection.

This is a challenging read, though I loved its examples of connectivity, the many revelations of past western cultural relations with forests, and more importantly, I enjoyed gaining a deeper understanding of the psychic force that forests held for early western cultures. The book begins with the keen work of the little known Italian political philosopher and historian Giambattista Vico (1668-1744), who observed that the forests were "first", their vast and somber wilderness a precondition or matrix for civilization. The author uses Vico's critique of modern rationalism, his magnum opus, *New Science* as a framework for understanding the mythic, poetic and intimate relationships between forests and man, which Vico believed were natural, immutable and unavoidable. The nature of man, as he understood it, is the driver. Vico's axiom from *New Science*: the nature of people is first crude, then severe, then benign, then delicate and finally dissolute. "Men first feel the necessity, then look for utility, next tend to comfort, still later amuse themselves with pleasure, thence grow dissolute in luxury and finally go mad and waste their substance," he said.

Hmmm ... sound familiar? Man's substance is not all we waste, as we shall see.

Both Greece and Rome were born of the forests they vanquished and constantly pushed further from the city centers. But as western culture pressed from abundant nature its very necessities for existence, it wove the retreating forests and groves into its stories, mythology and soul. As man "plundered" the trees, he also appropriated the forest as metaphor for human institutions.

"From the family tree to the tree of knowledge, from the tree of life to the tree of memory, forests have provided an indispensable resource of symbolization in the cultural evolution of humankind, so much so that the rise of modern scientific thinking remains quite unthinkable apart from a prehistory in such metaphorical borrowings" (Bechman, Des Arbes, 258-263)

Borne of primeval forests, which were everywhere, early western civilization was the counterpoint to "wild Nature." It evolved over time from benevolent sunlit forests to dark wooded recesses haunted by vindictive gods, witches, robbers which reflected the fears and dreams, hopes and disappointments housed in the evolving social mind of man.

Philosopher Vico's views weave like a trail through the author's essays, Harrison using them to link together and illustrate connectivity of such disparate stories, writers and thinkers as Gilgamesh and the Greek myths of Artemis and Dionysos, Euripedes and Socrates, Homer and Plato. His wanderings and poetic story telling explain early language and the underlying meanings (associated with forests) hinting at western development. The path continues through the early Christian era, into the period of the "King's Wood", Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Boccaccio's *The Decameron* and Shakespeare's comedies *Macbeth*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *As You Like It*, all which take place in forests.

It's tough going but press on as Harrison continues into the Enlightenment where stories and myth must fall before the cold light of Descartes' reason, Nietzsche's doubts ("God is dead! We have killed him – you and I".) where we find our modern selves very alone in the woods with our reason and methods. We no longer fear the gods as now mathematical formulae will guide our forest use and the idea of wild woods becomes a measurable commodity. The diversity and messiness of nature can be planned for maximum productivity. We have become the forest's God.

Into our era now the author strives to connect concepts of "dwelling", what we might refer to as "being in place", by linking Thoreau's Walden cabin and Frank Lloyd Wright's *Fallingwater* house, both set perfectly in forested settings, but even the author seems fatigued and finds it necessary to use an Epilogue to bring all this fascinating rambling to some unified closure.

Lastly, we see Vico's great mistake. He concluded that nature and history operated under two different laws. Civilizations eventually fall due to inherent entropy, which results in systemic disorder. Once the cities collapse, the forests reclaim their original ground, replicating a stable yet closed cycle. Vico never foresaw that civilized entropy could threaten the full "domain" of nature.

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