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Between Land and Sea: The Atlantic Coast and the Transformation of New England

This book examines environmental change on and around Narragansett Bay from its first European settlement in 1636 to the dissolution of the Blackstone Canal Company in 1849. It uses one of the largest estuaries on the East Coast, and one situated at the heart of early English settlement in New England, as a means to write estuaries into Atlantic history. Examining the ecological and epistemological complexities that arose at the nexus of land and sea, where improvable space met what has been long considered an eternal or unchanging ocean, this study reframes estuaries as watery borderlands that people used but never fully subdued. In this sense, this work challenges an older historiographical tradition of “progress,” while it advances environmental historiography by examining not terrestrial or oceanic environments but the soggy spaces in between.

This study shows that a closer look at the boundary between land and sea provides new insights into the ways Early Modern people envisioned the boundary between humans and nature. By rewriting the history of an estuary from the ground up, so to speak, this work explores the ways people shaped a watery world and how it shaped them in return. It argues that at the confluence of sweetwater and seawater, in the mixing, muddy margins of an estuary, there developed a whole host of political, legal, and cultural ambiguities that shaped patterns of settlement, trade, resource use, and ultimately the Bay itself. But much more than the passive recipient of human action, the Bay became a cultural manifestation of the people who lived along its shores, and in consequence it was shaped and reshaped to meet the changing demands of human desire.