The Great Meadow: Farmers and the Land in Colonial Concord. By BRIAN DONAHUE. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004. 344 pages. $35.00 (cloth).

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The Great Meadow is not an ethnographic study, not a social history, not a work with an eye toward larger currents within American history, not a history of ideas or politics. It is a history of environmental practice and colonial land use in the context of the town of Concord, Massachusetts. At the book's center are the many meadows that made up the Great Meadow itself. "The meadows lay at the bottom of husbandry in Concord. Without the meadows, agriculture would have required another footing and taken another form" (166). But the Great Meadow served an ecological purpose prior to its use in the agricultural economy. It was the flood plain for the Concord River, and before English farmers could coax it into providing food for cattle it needed to be drained and planted with palatable grasses in a process that took three generations to complete. The constant labor and exquisite economy that held the Great Meadow from the river and kept it central to the lives of the families who owned it tells a story of constancy and transformation.

Farmers tend to leave behind durable signs of their existence. Patterns of land holdings persist in the landscape and in deeds and probate estates. Yet the story of land use over decades and centuries is a hard one to tell in part because these documents obscure as much as they reveal. Reading the landscape itself can be a thrilling experience, but one that usually privileges its most recent inhabitants and points scholars toward core samples and other tools of historical archaeology. Legal instruments furnish only a snapshot of any particular piece of land; they rarely give a complete picture of all the land under the ownership of one family; and they provide only sketchy details about how people used land—as meadow or woodlot, for example. What makes *The Great Meadow* different from any other study of a colonial New England community is that Brian Donahue treats the legal documents as tiny data points to which he adds evidence about soil types, vegetation, and topography in models he created with Geographic Information Systems.[1] The result is a series of "deep maps"—multidimensional representations of the town of Concord—that documents the land holdings of fifty families, for more than three and a half centuries, covering several thousand acres, amounting to almost a thousand different pieces of land.

The maps are the central invention and major innovation of the book, but the book is more than its maps. *The Great Meadow* is a narrative that operates on three levels. It is the history of the town of Concord from the receding of a glacier that made the stony New England soils to the various divisions of the common lands, which Donahue discusses with delicate attention to the interests and changes in each family he considers. It is a history of the Brooks, Hartwell, and Meriam families (along with many other owners), with attention to their English mixed husbandry and the life-cycle events that changed the number, shape, and use of their holdings. And it is a history of the Great Meadow itself, as the central landscape of the town.

While walking in Walden Woods in the 1980s, Donahue observed that prevalent assumptions about the decline of agriculture in New England were not evident in the landscape. Too many years elapsed between the time that Concord reached the apex of its population, with no more land for new farms, and the destruction of its forests: "The timing was wrong. . . . In the final

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[1] "A GIS is a computer system capable of capturing, storing, analyzing, and displaying geographically referenced information. . . . The power of a GIS comes from the ability to relate different information in a spatial context and to reach a conclusion about this relationship." U.S. Geological Survey, "Geographic Information Systems," http://erg.usgs.gov/isb/pubs/gis_poster/.

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decades of the eighteenth century, forest covered 30 to 40 percent of the town. If healthy young Concord husbandmen were so desperate for farmland, why not just clear more? Why didn't they convert the last of the woods until almost a century later, before the eyes of Henry Thoreau? . . . Something must have been holding them back, and that something must have changed" (xiv). The thing holding them back was the "interlocking arrangement of necessary land uses" (226) that prevented farmers from extracting more value from the ecology than the ecology could provide. The meadow, again, was crucial: by limiting the amount of hay that could be produced, it limited the number of cattle and the extent of the improved fields and these, in turn, held in check any further clearing of the forest. Then two things changed: the population finally grew too large to be maintained by town lands alone and farmers began to produce for the market, at the expense of the ecological stability of the Great Meadow.

Concord suffered from the same ratchetting-up of population against the limits of resources that describes the growth of all agrarian societies. Donahue explains how the founding of new towns in the eighteenth century solved the society's needs for spaces in which sons could reproduce the material lives of their parents, and how New England itself served that purpose in the seventeenth century by absorbing the surplus population of England. Yet what started as a social problem—farms for sons—became an agroecological problem, and the market offered a solution. By the 1820s, if not before, farmers had begun to break through the old limits—to buy wheat flour at the store, to produce corn for their dairy cows, to plant fancy apples for the gentle people of Boston who had no taste for hard cider. By the time Thoreau built his hut, no one maintained the meadows from flooding and none took care of the pasture in town. Depleted soils produced declining yields, and the forest looked as though it had been steadily reduced to a cutover after two centuries of population growth and commercial extraction, when all of that had really happened within less than thirty years.

Donahue faces the challenge of anyone pursuing a rigorous case study: his results are much deeper than they are wide. When Donahue frames his book as a response to those who claimed that colonial farming was unstable and shortsighted, he hardly settles the question. Even if capitalism was an exogenous force, one that did not emerge from English mixed husbandry or from village life, critical questions remain. Are agrarian societies inherently unstable? Do they require the constant addition of land? What, exactly, does it prove that the people of Concord went on for two centuries before they neglected the meadows and cut the woods?

Donahue also might have more fully considered the improving farmers of the 1820s. They attempted to recover elements of English mixed husbandry within capitalist premises, and not all of them condemned colonial farmers. Yet this much is certainly true: nineteenth-century improvers condemned Concord for the wrong reasons. They thought they saw a decrepit colonial land use in need of reformation, when what they really saw were the first effects of capitalist agriculture itself. But shortcomings like these in the book do not detract from its accomplishment and its importance for colonial and environmental historians. *The Great Meadow* is a breakthrough in the historical understanding of an agrarian society, revealing all the practices and all the tensions that made up colonial New England land use. This volume is a brilliant and stunningly materialist history, arguing for the ecological stability of rural life until Concord farmers began to extract profit and not subsistence from their Great Meadow.

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