



**Tammy Horn.** *Bees in America: How the Honey Bee Shaped a Nation.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005. xiv + 333 pp. \$27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-2350-9.

**Reviewed by** Laurie Carlson (Department of History, Western Oregon University)

**Published on** H-Environment (February, 2007)

## Our National Insect: The Honey Bee as America's Cultural Symbol

Neither wild nor domesticated, honey bees have held a prominent place in history, not only for their agricultural importance but because they symbolize cultural traits valued by European American society. Bees, productive and obedient—yet dangerously wild—validate selected human activities such as work and social structure with the stamp of natural order. Laboring incessantly for the good of the commonwealth, thrift and industry come to mind as American virtues exemplified by bees in their natural state.

Author Tammy Horn points out that we are drawn to bees because bee society is perfectly engineered. There is no waste; honey bees utilize time and space to perform specialized tasks that preserve a highly structured social system. Horn argues that honey bees' natural behavior reflects American virtues and values, finding them embedded in our cultural symbolism from colonial times to the present.

While honey bees are central to agriculture and food systems in the Middle East, Horn centers on how Europeans adopted the honey bee symbol from Roman and Greek writers, and used the image as a classical symbol to validate stability, responsibility, and industry. As British society threatened to collapse under intense poverty during the seventeenth century, bee symbolism became useful as a tool to fight poverty, suggesting that the natural order of the hive might be a good model for humanity. Male drones have only one job, mating with the queen, and at summer's end the worker bees cast them out of the

hive to save the expense of feeding them through winter. It was the identification of the "drones," the nonfunctional and expendable members of the hive, which provided a simple biological reason for poverty: poor people were simply drones, too lazy to improve their own condition. The drone analogy proved useful for generations as a label for the poor and unemployed, rooted as it was in natural law.

Horn shows how bees symbolized New World colonialism and westward expansion by hiving off into new colonies, then swarming to new territory. Just as colonial expansion was fraught with conflicting ideals, bees represented a continuing dichotomy between thrift and industry versus opportunism. Bees and woven straw skeps to house them were taken to the frontier by settlers intent on establishing a complex ordered society, while at the same time escaped bees raced ahead, establishing themselves in the forests, creating opportunity for "honey hunters," frontiersmen who lived off the land, gathering wild honey by hacking down bee trees, then shipping it to market in barrels. Horn cites Crèvecoeur's description of New England as being like a bee colony, sending out swarms of industrious workers to replicate the world of order and industry at home. But, he also went along on hunts for wild honey, claiming bee trees in the wilderness as new-found plunder.

Native Americans readily adopted bee trees and honey as elements added to a barter economy. They adopted the "white man's fly," recognizing that once bees

arrived, colonists would not be far behind.

Establishing the New World as a land of milk and honey meant importing cattle and honey bees, which Horn links to both European immigration and African slaves, who also came from an intense bee- and cattle-raising culture. Frontier honey-hunting was akin to free-range cattle grazing, where bee hunters lived off the land on the margins of civilization. Just as cattle flooded onto the Plains and southern forests, grazing on “free” rangeland, honey-hunters—frontiersmen living on the edge of civilization—hunted for bee trees in ways similar to wild game. Felling bee trees and plundering hives was widespread and not without critics who feared the voracious hunters would endanger both the forests and the natural bee population. But, beekeeping and honey-hunting laws, like livestock-grazing laws, both common in Europe, were nonexistent in nineteenth-century America. It was indeed a land of milk and honey for those who pushed the environment to its limit.

The American Revolution itself was couched in popular bee metaphors, such as the British as lazy drones living off the work of the industrious colonists. In forging a new independent identity, the Continental Congress adopted the bee skep (with 13 rings) on its currency, an image that united financial stability with national authority. To thwart British counterfeits, Continental currency also bore a red beeswax seal.

Bees’ place in history has been overlooked, but they provide an excellent example of the contradictory values inherent in American society. Those values and issues changed over time, from the contradiction between individualism and independence versus society and community in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to the contrast between scientific progress and agricultural efficiency versus environmental sustainability. Horn examines the range of contradictory values symbolized by bees’ natural state, which parallels American social frameworks for poverty, labor, and religion.

The Mormons established their state of Deseret in Utah by embracing the beehive symbol to represent their goal of an industrious, communal, isolationist society. It

has endured, serving today as a symbol on Utah Department of Highways road signs. The Catholic Church, too, was dependent upon bees for the pure beeswax candles essential as symbols of purity and naturalism.

Horn closes with the current issues affecting bees in a globalized society, but only lightly touches on the devastating effects of pesticides in the decades after World War II. She traces recent problems such as deadly tracheal mites inadvertently brought from Asia that began infesting U. S. bees in the 1980s, and lower-priced imported honey flooding the marketplace. She notes that bees have even been enlisted by the Defense Department to track land mines in Afghanistan and to pick up trace amounts of chemicals, useful in detecting bombs and chemical weapons. Pentagon scientists have even taught bees to fly towards the scent of explosives, rather than flowers.

An experienced beekeeper herself, Tammy Horn uses a vast amount of primary and secondary sources, including recent scholarship, such as Eva Crane’s *The World History of Beekeeping and Honey Hunting* (1999), as well as fascinating sources such as *The Feminine Monarchie* by Charles Butler (1609). Employed as Queen Elizabeth I’s beekeeper, Butler challenged the prevailing bee paradigm, arguing that the queen, not the king, laid the eggs in the hive. Butler challenged patriarchal thinking, placing the queen rightfully at the center of both bee and English civilization, where the bees are loyal to the queen and labor for the good of the commonwealth.

Deliberately light on honeybee technology, Horn provides enough background information about how bees are kept without becoming a technical guide. Rather, she centers on how humans interpret bees, using them to reflect changing cultural ideals, by delving into literature, politics, art, and religion. Citing a range of writers such as Mark Twain, Sylvia Plath, and John Burroughs, she creates a book both entertaining and informative. This is a wide-ranging study of humans and honeybees, which refreshingly puts an incredible insect in the spotlight. One comes away with respect, even admiration, for these amazing bees, as well as fears for their future in an environment that continues to challenge their survival.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment>

**Citation:** Laurie Carlson. Review of Horn, Tammy, *Bees in America: How the Honey Bee Shaped a Nation*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. February, 2007.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12817>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).