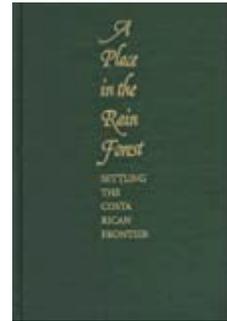




Darryl Cole-Christensen. *A Place in the Rain Forest: Settling the Costa Rican Frontier.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997. viii + 243 pp. \$14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-292-71191-4; \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-292-71190-7.



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A Frontier Perspective

The settling of a tropical frontier, even a frontier without indigenous inhabitants, is a complex process. Too often, though, the complexities give way to historical interpretations that focus narrowly on environmental destruction and leave the reader without any sense of how or why events unfolded as they did. Not Darryl Cole-Christensen's story of Costa Rica's South Frontier. His book probes into the transformations, interconnections, contradictions, and circumstances that shaped everyday life in Coto Brus, the town where he and his family have lived since the frontier first opened. In Cole-Christensen's mind, the frontier experience consisted of a web of relationships, where humans affected nature and nature affected humans. The interactions he describes makes *A Place in the Rain Forest* a provocative work, valuable not only to environmental historians, but also to those intrigued by the frontier process in general.

Settlement in Coto Brus began during the early 1950s after a group of Italians traded their lives in war-torn southern Italy for a life on the seemingly fertile land of southern Costa Rica. An Italian community quickly took root, a community that Costa Ricans and other foreign-

ers joined in the years that followed. Cole-Christensen first ventured into this community in 1953, on a journey north from Panama. Struck by the beauty, hopeful about a future there, and driven by a quest for adventure, he reappeared the following year with his wife and parents. The family grounded themselves on a 130-acre farm in Coto Brus, on what became known as Finca Loma Linda.

As a keen observer of the human and natural events that shaped life on the frontier, Cole-Christensen describes what he saw, felt, and learned over the last half century. Much of the book concentrates on the hardships that continually vexed settlers' physical and emotional worlds. Access to the region, for example, could only be made by two routes: by a long, hot, wet, muddy journey on the *Camino Real*, or by a quicker, but potentially more perilous, route in a single-engine plane that threaded its way ominously through the low clouds clinging to the mountain slopes. Life for the people Cole-Christensen depicts could hardly have been more arduous.

In many ways, this was Cole-Christensen's life, too. He cut trees, burned forest debris, constructed a home, weathered the torrential rains, planted food crops, pro-

duced coffee, and sold produce to United Fruit Company workers in nearby Golfito. Yet his life took a very different course than that of most settlers on the South Frontier. Today he runs Finca Loma Linda, a research station affiliated with the Organization for Tropical Studies.[1] Scientists come to Cole-Christensen's farm to study tropical agriculture, animal husbandry, and natural history. Cole-Christensen is involved with many of the experiments that take place on his farmland or in the forty acres of primary forest that remain standing on Finca Loma Linda. Cole-Christensen's experience on the frontier was therefore not only that of a settler, but also that of a student and scientist.

I suspect it is because of these various perspectives that Cole-Christensen is able to illuminate the complexities that characterized life in Coto Brus. Interestingly, *A Place in the Rain Forest* shows that paradoxes appeared both in everyday life and in the long-term settlement process. From the outset of colonization, settlers saw the landscape as either land or forest. To create land, they destroyed forest and, thus, a beginning became contingent upon an ending. According to Cole-Christensen, the settlers viewed nature as beautiful and, more often, as essential to their survival since it provided shelter, food, water, firewood, and an income. On the other hand, settlers feared and resented the natural world; after all, a rainstorm could destroy their soil, or a snake could kill their child, or the land could fail to produce crops. In this way, I found Cole-Christensen's description of nature to resemble the perceptions held by nineteenth-century Romantics: nature was beautiful, but at the same time, a dangerous, fearful place.

Perhaps the most striking paradox a reader gleans from this book focuses on the reasons settlers came to the frontier in the first place. Whereas they arrived in Coto Brus hoping to live freely and independently, they quickly became tied down by their isolation, by their tenuous life, and by the natural elements that controlled their lives. By making roads, planting crops, constructing schools, and selling coffee, settlers built what they had come to avoid.

It becomes clear from Cole-Christensen's account that nature wove itself into the life of every settler and the author devotes a good portion of the book to this phenomenon. Moisture, air currents, temperature, and light were constant themes, affecting much more than farming. And try as they might to control these forces—by clearing the forest, altering the soil, and spraying pesticides and herbicides—the settlers never could escape

these natural elements. Even today, nature continues to influence crop yields, production, education, transportation, and many other aspects of life in Coto Brus. Indeed, everything was and continues to be deeply interconnected.

A Place in the Rain Forest does well to present the myriad human-land interactions that occurred on the frontier and triggered a transformation of the natural world. Cole-Christensen's work transcends other histories that record the settlement of the frontier simply in terms of deforestation, soil erosion, or general environmental degradation. He laments the loss of primary forest, but points out that the last fifty years have been a learning process and that the natural forces of the primary forest remain an active part of life. The forces have changed form, he explains from a utilitarian perspective, but they have not been erased completely.

Cole-Christensen's story of the South Frontier offers insights into the settling of a frontier. In some ways, his book is an environmental history, where Cole-Christensen interprets humans and ecology from his position as a scientist. In other ways, however, the book takes the form of a primary source, providing a first-hand account of frontier settlement. There are no footnotes, no bibliography, no theoretical framework, and the book contains passages that read more like poetry than prose.

The author shines most when he recounts his own experiences and provides context at the outset. Sometimes, though, he tells other people's stories or fails to explain his role in a story until after his narrative ends. This approach leaves the reader wondering whether a given anecdote is real or hypothetical. In addition, stories can be confusing because the book lacks structure and chronological progression. At times it is difficult to know if events took place in the 1950s or the 1980s, totally different periods on the frontier. Parts of the book are also unclear because Cole-Christensen writes of "we," the people on the frontier. Yet his position as a male landowner and scientist was quite distinct from that of a squatter, a woman, a day laborer, or a migrant coffee picker. Who among these other settlers would draw similar conclusions to those that Cole-Christensen draws about natural forces, the forest, agriculture, and humanity?

Even if *A Place in the Rain Forest* does not illuminate the thoughts and perceptions of most settlers, the book still offers a glimpse into how people lived on the frontier. What distinguishes and recommends this book is that Cole-Christensen effectively reveals the complex in-

teractions that occurred daily between humans and the natural world on Costa Rica's South Frontier.

Notes:

[1]. Today Finca Loma Linda can be visited by anyone via the world wide web. Research projects, publications, internship announcements, and other information about

the farm/research station can all be obtained at <http://www.human.com/lomalinda/index.htm>

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