Jane Costlow, Heart-Pine Russia, Walking and Writing the Nineteenth-Century Forest

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REFERENCES

Jane COSTLOW, *Heart-Pine Russia, Walking and Writing the Nineteenth-Century Forest*, Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 2013, xi + 270 p.

- 1 It is an interesting thing about a forest that one can never really see it whole. From a distance a forest appears as a wall of trees. On the inside it forms a series of limited spaces, each one separate from the next. To get to know a forest well requires time and effort, a spirit of adventure, and a willingness to pursue the unknown. Jane Costlow's study of the forest in nineteenth-century Russian culture takes us on a slow, wide-ranging and surprising journey into the Russian woods. It reminds us that we can never know the whole of such a vast and baffling phenomenon as the significance of the forest in a woodland country, but by the time we emerge we know the terrain infinitely better than we had before.
- 2 *Heart-Pine Russia* is the sort of generous and open-ended study that does not lend itself to a capsule description in a short review. It is not a book of argument but of exploration. Superficially, it consists of six chapters, an introduction and a brief conclusion. Three chapters concern literary evocations of the Russian forest, while three others explore, respectively, scientific and political forestry debates, a study of the painter Mikhail Nesterov, and an examination of Russia's first well-known naturalist, Dmitrii Kaigorodov. Each chapter treats its topic as a separate subject, but Costlow emphasizes the links and resonances between her various topics so that the reader never loses sight of the interconnections between them.

- 3 The forest looms large in Russian history as an economic resource, a marker of identity, a locus of dispute, a site of protection, and of course a sizable portion of Russian terrain, so a comprehensive study of the cultural role of the forest in nineteenth-century Russia has been long overdue. But *Heart-Pine Russia* also makes it clear why such a book was long in coming. To bring to light the forest's multi-dimensional and intricately intertwined meanings in imperial Russia, Costlow has had to venture from literature to environmental politics, from art to science, and from archives to excursions. The chapters in this book each unfold as painstaking efforts to elucidate distinct episodes in the management, cultural construction and historical memory of the Russian forest. By the end the reader comes away with a sense of the forest's powerful, though indefinable, relevance in pre-revolutionary Russia. Not unlike the importance and mystery of the sea for an island people, the Russian forest seems at once to be absolutely inescapable and thoroughly unknowable. It is to Costlow's great credit that she manages to convey not just the facts about the forest and its representation but also its ultimate ineffability.
- 4 *Heart-Pine Russia* should be of equal interest to two constituencies. Those interested in imperial Russian culture will appreciate Costlow's in-depth analyses of figures like Pavel Melnikov-Pechersky and Kaigorodov, who have rarely been accorded such a thorough treatment in English. At the same time, this book will be enormously intriguing to all scholars interested in the pre-history and origins of an ecological consciousness. It is fascinating here to explore the ways in which Russian thinkers, writers and artists both worked their way toward a modern environmentalist perspective and at the same time veered away from it, linking the natural environment with, for instance, folk culture and religious identity. For this reason, *Heart-Pine Russia* should be required reading for those interested in eco-criticism but unaware of traditions outside standard lines that run from Henry David Thoreau to Rachel Carson.
- 5 Costlow is an extremely sympathetic (even empathetic) reader, who follows her main subjects deep into their own unique interactions with the Russian woods. Where another reader might step further back and offer a sharper critique of some of the contradictions and utopian notions put forward by these writers and artists, Costlow brushes past such concerns rather quickly and adopts a position of respectful understanding. Perhaps further critical analysis in the new scholarship this book will likely inspire will serve as a useful corrective, but by and large Costlow's sympathetic approach seems necessary to her purpose. This is not a book that divides and condenses, and Costlow is not the kind of scholar who wraps her findings in neat packages. Rather, the separate chapters here work on a principle of accumulation, in which the prolific meanings of forest in 19th century Russia are gradually opened up and displayed before the reader in all their tangled multiplicity, and Costlow seems determined to avoid the sort of foolish consistency that might prove the hobgoblin of the extremely complex picture she presents.
- 6 The unusual subtitle of this book, on "walking and writing" the forest, suggests both some of the difficulties of the topic as well as the depth of Costlow's analysis. A more focused study, say on forest ecology or the image of the Russian forest in literature or painting, would have been worthwhile efforts to be sure, but Costlow steadfastly holds to what might be called a holistic approach. In refusing to isolate from one another the widely different perspectives joined together here, like scientific forestry and religious painting, she insists on the unspoken resonance of these perspectives with one

another. This approach leaves the book vulnerable to criticism that its analysis is either romanticized or impressionistic (as the term “walking” the forest would suggest), but in fact this decision reveals the boldness of a fully mature scholarship. *Heart-Pine Russia* keeps the lines of communication open between representations, perceptions and experiences of the Russian forest, and therefore the forest here retains its *de facto* vastness and ultimately unknowable character. One senses a Heideggerian spirit at work here, as Costlow does not shy from trying to convey in words what is beyond words. While the writing of this book was clearly a mighty task, readers will discover that they are well rewarded by the effort on nearly every page.

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