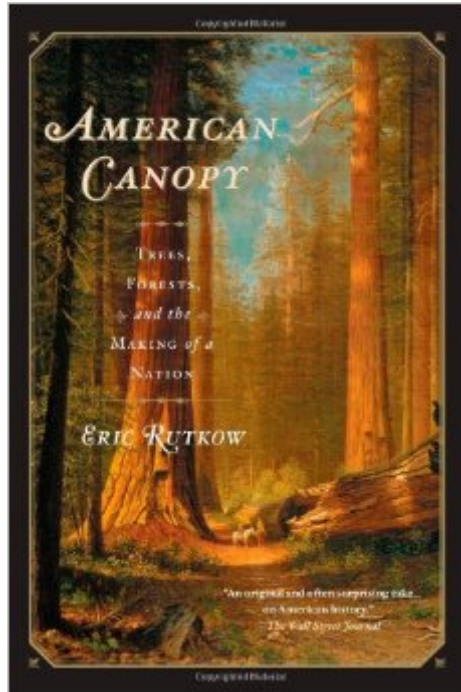


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# American Canopy: Trees, Forests, And The Making Of A Nation



## Synopsis

This fascinating and groundbreaking work tells the remarkable story of the relationship between Americans and their trees across the entire span of our nation's history. Eric Rutkow's "deeply fascinating" (The Boston Globe) work shows how trees were essential to the early years of the republic and indivisible from the country's rise as both an empire and a civilization. Among American Canopy's many captivating stories: the Liberty Trees, where colonists gathered to plot rebellion against the British; Henry David Thoreau's famous retreat into the woods; the creation of New York City's Central Park; the great fire of 1871 that killed a thousand people in the lumber town of Peshtigo, Wisconsin; the fevered attempts to save the American chestnut and the American elm from extinction; and the controversy over spotted owls and the old-growth forests they inhabited. Rutkow also explains how trees were of deep interest to such figures as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Teddy Roosevelt, and Franklin Roosevelt, who oversaw the planting of some three billion trees nationally in his time as president. Never before has anyone treated our country's trees and forests as the subject of a broad historical study, and the result is an accessible, informative, and thoroughly entertaining read. Audacious in its four-hundred-year scope, authoritative in its detail, and elegant in its execution, American Canopy is perfect for history buffs and nature lovers alike and announces Eric Rutkow as a major new author of popular history.

## Book Information

Paperback: 416 pages

Publisher: Scribner (April 2, 2013)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1439193584

ISBN-13: 978-1439193587

Product Dimensions: 5.2 x 1 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 12 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (73 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #82,718 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #22 in [Books > Science & Math > Nature & Ecology > Forests & Rainforests](#) #29 in [Books > Science & Math > Agricultural Sciences > Forestry](#) #51 in [Books > Science & Math > Biological Sciences > Plants > Trees](#)

## Customer Reviews

What single factor most defined the United States, made the country what it is today? Its political

philosophy and governmental structure? Its melting pot? The frontier? Slavery? In *AMERICAN CANOPY* Eric Rutkow proposes a factor that no one else has: trees. The thesis of *AMERICAN CANOPY* is that the relationship with trees "has been one of the great drivers of national development. It belongs in a conversation with other forces that helped to forge American identity: the endless frontier, immigration, democracy, religion, slavery and its legacy, the struggle for labor rights, the expansion of civil rights, and free market and state capitalism." It is a novel concept, to say the least. But in *AMERICAN CANOPY* Rutkow does a good job of marshaling arguments and evidence for his thesis. The result is an educational and enjoyable book. Rutkow begins in 1605 with Richard Hakluyt, then the preeminent geographer in Europe, who was asked by King James I for his views on settlement of America. Of all the resources (fish, fur, rumored gold and silver, etc.) that the New World had to offer, for Hakluyt one stood paramount: timber. In 1605, forests covered about half of what are now the contiguous 48 states. Throughout the book, Rutkow covers various ways in which the country's wood resources were utilized and exploited to fuel its rapid expansion and growth: housing (from log cabins to wood-frame houses); wood-pulp manufacturing; timber for railroad bridges and crossties; the Sitka spruce of the Pacific Northwest for airplane production in WWI; and on and on.

The best history books bring long deceased historical figures back to life, instilling the same hopes, fears, and passions in the reader that the characters experienced themselves. Usually, these figures are known for their role in major events or for having a positive influence that radiates far beyond their physical lives. Historian Eric Rutkow illuminates one of these under-appreciated participants in the American history narrative, but Rutkow's main character is not a person but rather an easily ignored plant: a tree! As Rutkow notes, "trees are the loudest silent figures in America's complicated history." *American Canopy* begins with a highly engaging prologue about Prometheus, a tree that stood seemingly unchanged for over Nevada for over 5,000 years. The tragic yet redeeming story introduces Rutkow's premise but differs in one important aspect. Most other trees in America were not frozen, passive observers as civilization expanded around them. As America evolved, its forests changed in tandem. In colonial times, trees were an obstacle to overcome, concealing Indians in the forest and blocking the plow as stumps. As industrialism proliferated in the 19th Century, wood became the "stalwart of American development"--and the conservation movement subsequently responded by curtailing the carelessness and waste that caused forest fires and ecosystem destruction. The automobile and highway building by the CCC made camping and outdoor recreation in national forests accessible to almost all Americans--and Aldo Leopold

responded by spearheading a movement to preserve the remaining pristine wilderness.

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