

Miller, John M. *Deer Camp: Last Light in the Northeast Kingdom*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992. Pp. xiv, 130. Photographs. \$29.95.

Reading John Miller's narrative and viewing the 60 black-and-white photographs brought back memories of my teen-aged years in central Pennsylvania. We had our deer camps too, and the first day of deer season was an anxiously awaited and regularly observed school holiday. It was a time in a young boy's life, usually at 12 or 13, when he had his first opportunity to participate in a ritual of manhood. Shooting your first buck was a significant event in my hometown and it represented a rite of passage sanctioned by family and peers alike—a multigenerational tradition.

Miller lived in northern Vermont for the first 18 years of his life and returned to his hometown to do the deer camp research 26 years later. Upon his return, he realized he still had strong feelings about his youth and the role deer hunting played:

As I longed for this rural lifestyle, my passion for this area was being rekindled. Through this adventure, I could expand my knowledge of myself, and of men, and heighten my awareness of the power of the hunt in northern Vermont and of the basic human need for this pseudo-religious experience and annual celebration (p. 5).

Miller quickly learned that the hunters going to deer camp believed they were entering “sacred places” which were “primeval” and possessed the characteristics of a “shrine.” For many, the hunt was a “ceremony” and the annual return to camp had “become a ritual, a recreation of their childhood memories and experiences.” Just as inhabitants of the Northeast Kingdom saw their homes and lifestyle as an ‘alternative to the perceived comforts of city living,” (p. 8) hunters at deer camp were there “to enjoy companionship in a place and time removed from the everyday, repetitive monotony of home, with its responsibilities and stress” (p. 17).

As a documentary photographer, Miller captures the essence of the deer hunting experience with his powerful photographs of hunters, rifles, cabins, families, camp stoves, and trophies (horns and mounted heads) from past hunts. He came to these scenes as an outsider, doing his research for three weeks in November for five years. Miller received grants from the Vermont Historical Society and Vermont Folklife Center for his photography and oral histories. He also sought help from notable scholars in the field such as Thomas Altherr, and consulted other historians, museum workers, and game wardens. Miller’s narrative was edited by Meg Ostrum; Jane Beck from the Vermont Folklife Center added an interesting and provocative “Afterword.”

Although the book was enjoyable, the disclaimer at the beginning suggested this was not the type of book I was accustomed to reviewing. *Deer Camp* was identified as “documentary in nature,” with “names, locales, and events . . . changed to protect individuals.” Especially unusual was the statement that “any relationship between the photographs and the adjoining text is purely coincidental” (p. iv). I suppose such anonymity is necessary in a contemporary account in today’s world of privacy and legal challenges, but a warning at the outset tends to cast some doubt and mistrust over what follows. Yet, there still is a feeling of authenticity beautifully portrayed in Miller’s photographs and in the words of the hunters themselves. The excerpts from oral histories are strategically placed throughout the book and add significantly to the reader’s understanding.

Miller’s text is neither a defense of or attack on hunting as a sport. Instead, Miller tries to capture a way of life imbedded in regional folklore and culture. His intent was to portray “a whole microcosm of hunting-camp traditions . . . with attendant descriptions of people and places” (p. 4). Overall, *Deer Camp* is about regional social life and customs.

One particular description of a young boy’s first buck was especially poignant. The boy had watched his grandfather, father, and brothers all go off to deer camp over the years, and it was finally his turn. After a bout of “buck fever,” the boy kills a deer. Then, he learns that gutting it was the next step in his “induction into the fraternity of hunters.” After using his late father’s knife, which his brothers used as “a tradition of honoring him,” the boy “lurched to the side, vomiting.” Miller explains the boy’s reaction as a “confrontation with death, guilt bordering upon horror for having taken the life of

a handsome animal which now lay disemboweled.” The final sacrament was the ritualized “deft removal of the liver and heart” (p. 55) for the consumption of the hunter.

Besides “buck fever,” which Miller defines as “that paralyzing moment when, upon observing a buck in your rifle sights, you can’t pull the trigger,” (p. 104) he also explains “deer hunting fever” as:

the excitement that builds in early fall as hunters orient their thoughts and activities toward the approaching season. This heart-felt feeling, so common in rural Vermont, might be better described as a desire for the camaraderie of one’s companions and for a ritualistic celebration of short duration and great sensual bombardment. The challenge of the hunt, the anticipation of physical exertion, and the scarce chance of ever seeing a deer are all elements of this fever (p. 104).

Miller was also struck by “how deer can figure so prominently in these people’s lives.” With photographs, calendars, lights, shirts, blankets, paintings, gravestones, and verbal narratives in stories, diaries, and poetry depicting a majestic buck, a beloved camp, or a hunting scene, Miller explains these artifacts as “symbols of a multi-faceted way of life in which the past is meaningfully connected to the present” (p. 121).

The book concludes with Jane Beck’s “Afterword.” She puts deer camp and deer hunting in the context of “a personal quest to triumph in nature, on nature’s terms” (p. 125) and suggests the lure is “to test their mettle against nature and the out-of-doors” or “to pit oneself against the wilderness” (p.

126). Beck also argues that deer camp is a “sacred time” and the “quest for a noble adversary,” where “the emphasis is on the elusive quarry and the hunt: the skill of finding a deer, tracking it, and finally triumphing over it” (p.

126). Finally, she suggests “deer camp remains as the embodiment of a way of life that places a man once more—at least in his mind’s eye—on Vermont’s last frontier: the backwoods, where he alone is responsible for his livelihood and all that that quest entails” (p. 127).

Deer Camp will be of interest to the sociologist, psychologist, and anthropologist as much as to the historian. It pertains to families, traditions, rituals, customs, and recreation, among other key components of life. The book also serves as a model for similar studies which could be done in other geographic areas. For example, one could find similar rituals and traditions, along with identical levels of commitment and lore, among steelhead fishermen in the Northwest or fox hunters in the South. Hunting and fishing still prosper and are exceedingly popular in many segments of modern culture. Miller’s research provides some explanations for why this is the case.