VAKANÜVİS- Uluslararası Tarih Araştırmaları Dergisi/ International Journal of Historical Researches, Yıl/Vol. 7, Sayı/No. 2, Güz/Fall 2022 ISSN: 2149-9535 / 2636-7777

Book Review/ Kitap Tanıtımı

Neil Ansell, *The Circling Sky: On Nature and Belonging in an Ancient Forest*, London: Tinder Press, 2021

Sevket Akyildiz[*]

(ORCID: 0000-0001-9545-4432)

Makale Gönderim Tarihi
25.05.2022

Makale Kabul Tarihi
24.06.2022

Atıf Bilgisi/Reference Information

Chicago: Akyildiz, S., "Book Review/ Kitap Tanıtımı: Neil Ansell, The Circling Sky: On Nature and Belonging in an Ancient Forest, London: Tinder Press, 2021", *Vakanüvis-Uluslararası Tarih Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 7/2 (Eylül 2022): 1231-1234.

APA: Akyildiz, S. (2022). Book Review/ Kitap Tanıtımı: Neil Ansell, The Circling Sky: On Nature and Belonging in an Ancient Forest, London: Tinder Press, 2021. *Vakanüvis-Uluslararası Tarih Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 7 (2) , 1231-1234.

Mixing nature observations about the New Forest (Hampshire, England), childhood memoir, and the politics of climate change and land ownership is the focus of Neil Ansells's *The Circling Sky: On Nature and Belonging in an Ancient Forest.* The author visited the forest approximately thirty times during the changing seasons from January to December 2019 to walk alone and ponder and, as a result, has produced an inspiring study. '*You need to see a place in every season, every weather, in order to begin to get its true measure*', says Ansell (p. 6), as he contemplates, among other things, '*Who am I? What am I doing here? Where do I belong?* (p. 7).

The book's straightforward written style and its scope of content highlight it as a work suitable for a broad audience from the general

[*] Dr., SOAS, University of London, United Kingdom, sevket.akyildiz1@gmail.com.
Dr. SOAS, Londra Üniversitesi, Birleşik Krallık.

nature reader to university students on environment-related courses. Ansell fuses his rich knowledge about British and non-British nature with wise words about stewardship of the land for the common good. The author highlights our individual and collective responsibility for nature and the land—and that we should not view nature as something to be 'conquered' but as something we 'collaborate' with (p. 39). Indeed, we need to cherish and share nature and pass it on to future generations.

The book's three components, nature observations, memoirs, and political comments, are interlaced throughout twenty chapters. Each chapter incorporates the three components, creating a tapestry of nature reflection, personal history, and a vision of a fairer society suited to the natural environment.

The nature observations are informed, revealing Ansell's passion and respect for living creatures. His recollections based on his childhood diaries contrast with his visits in 2019. Together they highlight continuities and changes in flora and fauna in time. Set in two hundred square miles, the New Forest National Park (established in 2005) contains ancient woodland, lowland heath and water-logged deep peat valley bottoms (with acid wetland plant communities). Locally, birds, insects, plants and trees are diverse (-though bird and insect numbers in Britain have declined within the author's lifetime). The forest has sustained an almost one-thousand-year *'continuity that is missing almost everywhere else in the country… and is still home to many plants and animals with specialised habitat requirements*' (p. 7). We learn that the New Forest is a working common for about 700 people, '*a way of living with the land that has died out, or more accurately been killed off, just about everywhere else in the country*' (p. 7), and the land is '*grazed by free-roaming cattle and ponies and wild deer*' (p. 20). Indeed, almost 15 million visitors annually experience its 'wild' beauty. On the topic of animals, some of the information, if true, requires thinking about, for instance, '*Just four per cent of mammals on earth are wild animals*' (p. 39). This book makes the reader sit up and reflect. One solitary walk in the forest during heavy rain emphasises nature's wild side: '*Wild weather makes the place seem just that little bit wilder, makes me feel*

that, much as we try to domesticate the world, it will still always retain an element that is untamable' (p. 51).

Ansell's memoirs allow the reader to appreciate the legacy of the forest and its affect on him. He writes, '*Memoirs are not stored intact in our minds just waiting to be fetched out; we have to reconstruct them from their constituent parts, piece by piece, every time*' (p. 26). Adding that family history is '*shared*' and '*contested*' and is remembered differently for different reasons (p. 241).

The book's political commentary is significant. The British countryside would have had many New Forest-type community environments in the past. In terms of people and the land, for over 300 years, government Enclosure Acts permitted landowners to remove access rights to common land and turned '*them into monocultures, largely creating the rural landscape we see today, in pursuit of greater profits.* Other legislations saw the small farming crofter forced off the land in Scotland – some emigrating to North America – to make way for sheep farming (p. 54). Furthermore, today, we learn that the United Kingdom's land is owned by: approximately 30 per cent by the old aristocracy; approximately 30 per cent by families made wealthy during the industrial revolution and slave trade, and hedge-fund managers; while the rest is in the hands of the Church, the army, the water board and the multinational corporations (p. 55).

A further story reinforces the elites' exclusionary practices and the limitations imposed on citizens seeking to establish a life off the land. The English Gypsy community had lived in the New Forest for centuries (p. 228) and seemed to have lived sustainably; however, after the Second World War, the government agencies '*cajoled, pressurised and finally forced*' them '*to abandon their way of life, to leave the forest, and to move into the newly built council estates that had mushroomed around the neighbouring cities*' (p. 232). Ansell states: '*The expulsion of the Gypsies was unfinished business, a tying up of the loose ends left over from the Enclosure Acts and the Highland clearances*' (p. 236). This is a crucial element of the book and situates the forest in the broader debate about class inequality in modern Britain and why homes and land are expansive in this society. The author highlights that '*In a system*

that celebrates the primacy of private ownership of land, self-sufficiency is an act of radical non-conformity, a threat to the status quo' (p.236).

This book is a topical study and is an opportunity to learn about England's New Forest National Park, Ansell's longstanding relationship with its nature, and the politics of land in Britain. Lastly, the author is in a unique socio-cultural position due to his home being on a social housing estate; indeed, how many British nature writers can claim this unique perspective?