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Terry G. Jordan, a cultural geographer and prolific author of works documenting Euro-American settlement and architectural patterns, and Matti Kaups, a well-known specialist on Finnic culture, have collaborated to produce an ambitious, daring, and provocative book, one that surely will be widely cited for years to come. While the book will, no doubt, receive a fair amount of criticism for many of its broad generalizations, it will also receive considerable and well-deserved praise for undertaking the formidable task of explaining nothing less than the ethnic and ecological origins of American backwoods culture.

Through the close examination of the North American cultural landscape, the authors have striven to document "the diffusionary events that shaped cultural regions," and thereby locate the true cultural hearth and domains of colonial America. For these two cultural geographers, previous diffusionist theses and models lacked explanatory power, i.e., they might accurately describe a procession, but they failed to explain process with some causal mechanism. "Why," the authors ask (p.22), "were so few Old World items successfully transferred to the colonial areas? What mechanism governed success or failure?" The answers lie, the authors assert, within the explanatory framework offered by cultural ecology, where culture is seen as an adaptive system, a method of meeting environmental challenges. Pioneering, then, "is the process by which a cultural system's niche is expanded" (p.29). Viewed on the societal level, certain modes of subsistence are adaptive strategies to deal with specific environments, and when migration occurs—for whatever reason—success in a new environment will depend on how well a particular society is already preadapted for the new ecological setting.
The result is a thesis which is not altogether unprecedented, but substantially better documented than earlier attempts: ethnic Finns—specifically the eastern, interior Finns of Karelian and Savoan background who settled the area known as New Sweden along the lower Delaware River in 1638—were "the bearers of a well-developed, beautifully preadapted forest colonization cultural complex," and thereby became the "most significant shapers of the American backwoods way of life" (p.36). Moreover, eastern woodland Indians, especially the Delaware tribe, were "the next most significant contributors to the backwoods pioneer adaptive system"; therefore the resultant adaptive strategy is best described as "Fenno-Indic." The "Scotch-Irish" and Germans (who Glassie, Kniffen, and others have supported as primary culture shapers) provided the greater numbers of people, but much less in the way of culture that had ecologically adaptive significance. These latter groups "were better suited to be secondary settlers" (p.33) who influenced tastes (e.g., the centrally-located external gable-end chimney) but not essential adaptive techniques.

Jordan and Kaups provide what seems to be abundant documentation for their thesis, citing the literature extensively (including the work of many European folklife scholars such as Erxon, E.E. Evans, and Sirelius) and relying on their own wide-ranging fieldwork in both North America and Europe. The backwoods culture that characterized colonial America certainly seems to have predominated in Savo-Karelian Finnish society at the time of emigration. A transient population, disregard for authority, openness to relations and intermarriage with both indigenous and non-Finnic peoples (which helped spread the culture but destroyed almost all vestiges of ethnic identity), and individualism tempered by a recognition for mutual dependence were all traits definitely characteristic of both societies. Savo-Karelian society was also superbly preadapted to the American environment, with their specific use of shifting cultivation, their tendency towards dispersed settlements, and their patterns of subsistence hunting and gathering (which the authors see as the likely foundation for the New World's eventual problems regarding conservation of natural resources). Additionally, the authors demonstrate remarkable architectural continuity between the two worlds, particularly in the form and construction of the pioneer cabin (hewn log houses present complications).

Some scholars, no doubt, will say that all this suggests much, but demonstrates little conclusively. On the face of it, Jordan and Kaups do present a very persuasive argument, supported by some fabulous documentation. But in such a massive presentation, it does become possible to see where the authors have become a bit too selective with the evidence. Many generalizations are bound to raise eyebrows, as in the nutshell portrait of American backwoods culture (pp. 3-4), and the repeated emphasis on the "Germanic obsession with tidy fields" (e.g., p.107). Many folk architecture specialists will certainly disagree with statements like "Recent research has restored and reinforced the more traditional view that Midland log carpentry was derived from Finnish and Swedish practices introduced into the Delaware Valley in the mid 1600s" (p.136). The receptiveness of early Finns to Native American ideas and practices—which was preceded in the Old World by similar relations with the Lapps—is an interesting point, but how well is this interaction documented? The ethnographic
information which the authors use seems awfully scanty. Many folklorists might agree that Jordan and Kaups' use of the Kalevala has a certain rhetorical force—both within the framework of this presentation and within the context of Finnish-American lives—but its use without qualifications is often damaging; for example, is the reality of seventeenth-century Savo-Karelian social life truly revealed in the great epic with ethnographic accuracy (p.71)? Many folklorists will wonder why the authors even bothered to include architectural data from the Far West, when such documentation is still in its infancy compared to the East, a fact which they recognize. (Many of the sources which the authors cite for the Far West are popular pictorial treatments of Western "ghost towns"!)

The discussion of the western single-pen cabin with a gable entrance is particularly curious (especially the "Rocky Mountain cabin"), as the authors seem to ignore the fact that we often simply don't know who precisely constructed these buildings in a highly transient atmosphere. (Quite possibly, many such structures were built [so it appears] by recent immigrants, post-1880s, who were certainly bringing in at least some new architectural ideas from the Old World.) Finally, the authors might have added a few more fascinating pages by considering the apparent continuity of the Finnish cultural drive to be on the periphery well into the 20th century, as is evidenced in rural areas of the Pacific Northwest.

However, these are but meager attempts at criticism of what definitely is a mighty work, representing years of painstaking research. It is a work with which folklorists will have to reckon. In many respects, this is the kind of work that should and must be done by contemporary folklorists, carefully considering the broadest possible range of cultural, historical, and ecological factors in portraits of American regional folklife. Regrettably, except for a very few, folklorists have yet to produce work of the quality and thoroughness exemplified by Jordan and Kaups' The American Backwoods Frontier. Perhaps this new book will stimulate more to take action.