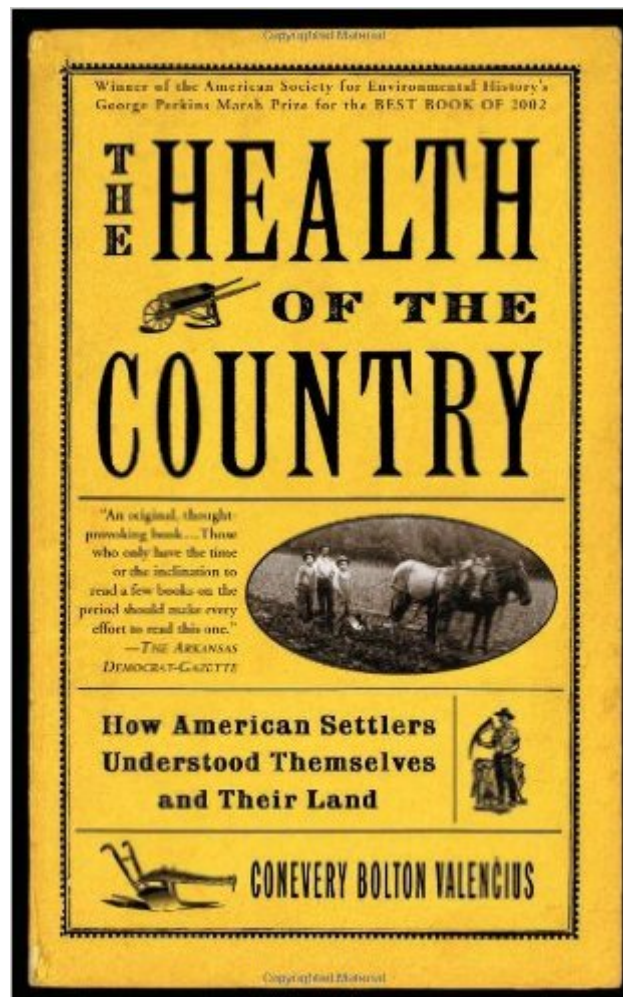


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The Health Of The Country: How American Settlers Understood Themselves And Their Land



Synopsis

In this vivid history of American western expansion, Conevery Bolton Valencius captures the excitement, romanticism, and confusion of the frontier experience as well as another, less renowned reality of settling: how terrifying the untamed wilderness of the West was to its homesteaders. In a time when good health was thought to involve perfectly balanced humors, settlers thought that the wild extremes of the borderlands disrupted the delicate equilibrium of their bodies. Valencius is the first historian to show that the settlers' primary criterion for uncharted land was its perceived health or sickness. This is a beautifully written, fresh account of the gritty details of American expansion, animated by the voices of the settlers themselves.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

For American settlers in the middle Mississippi River basin during the early nineteenth century, the boundaries between self and surroundings were porous. Nebulous notions of health and productivity seeped into the language, everyday actions, and thoughts of Arkansas homesteaders. In *The Health of the Country*, Conevery Bolton Valencius digs into the diaries, letters, and literature of settlers to unearth how these newcomers assessed the character and potential of the land to which they had so recently arrived. Valencius takes a thematic approach to the topic of antebellum medical geography, switching gracefully between narratives regarding overland migration, subtropical epidemiology, yeoman agriculture, water ecology, racial anxiety, and the professionalization (and resulting amateurization) of medical practice. Despite our modern tendency

to compartmentalize the various studies of body and land, Valencius argues that these frontiersmen and women thought in more holistic terms. A fever, for example, could be the result of anything from stagnant water to ethereal miasmas to a recent change in location. Likewise, agricultural success might be due to healthy soil, but it could just as easily be correlated with human fecundity. Simply stated: "As they described the world around them, so too did early Americans describe themselves" (99). Of course, the book has its flaws. To what degree does this synthesis of individual and environmental concerns translate geographically and temporally? Valencius repeatedly remarks on the quintessentially American nature of frontier settlement, but do we see the same occurring farther west of the Mississippi? And later in the nineteenth century? The author does not say.

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