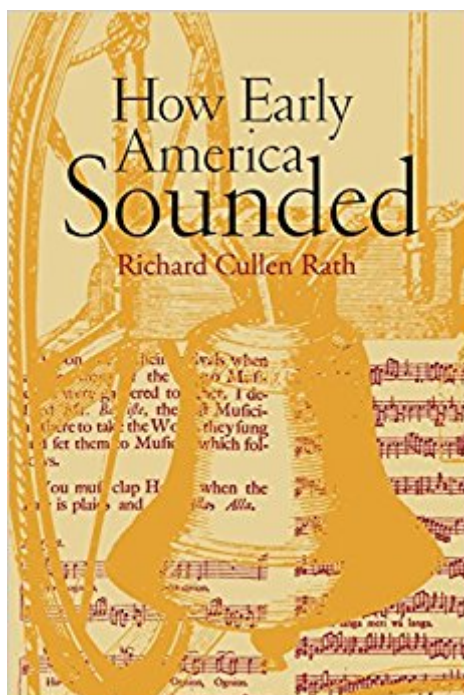


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How Early America Sounded



Synopsis

"My hope is that by attending to sound I have been able to open up parts of these worlds, not to get a glimpse of them but to listen in. These were worlds much more alive with sound than our own, worlds not yet disenchanted, worlds perhaps even chanted into being." —from the Introduction

In early America, every sound had a living, willful force at its source. Sometimes these forces were not human or even visible. In this fascinating and highly original work of cultural history, Richard Cullen Rath recreates in rich detail a world remote from our own, one in which sounds were charged with meaning and power. From thunder and roaring waterfalls to bells and drums, natural and human-made sounds other than language were central to the lives of the inhabitants of colonial America. Rath considers the multiple soundscapes shaped by European Americans, Native Americans, and African Americans from 1600 to 1770, and particularly the methods that people used to interpret and express their beliefs about sound. In the process he shows how sound shaped identities, bonded communities, and underscored or undermined the power of authorities. This book's stunning evidence of the importance of sound in early America—even among the highly literate New England Puritans—reminds us of a time before a world dominated by the visual, a young country where hearing was a more crucial part of living.

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Customer Reviews

In contrast to the modern world, which is ruled by such visual inputs as newspapers, television and traffic signs, early America was a sound-oriented society, according to this engaging and original

academic study. Colonists in the 17th century, for example, believed that thunder could kill. They used church bells, trumpets and drums to regulate their communities and assert social authority. And where today the written text is considered authoritative, early Americans paid more attention to the extra-linguistic components of speech such as accent and tone of voice; the "murmuring" of mobs, the "grumbling" of disgruntled servants and the "ranting" of religious dissenters was as important a gauge of meaning as the words themselves. Writing in a scholarly but accessible style, cultural historian Rath ranges widely over the many facets of the colonial American soundscape, from Native American myths about natural sounds to the musical traditions of slave communities. In making his case for the great paradigm shift from sound to vision in modern society, he sometimes overloads the evidence with historiographical weight, writing, for example, that "the first generation of colonists did not simply choose to believe in powerful sounds, they had no other set of beliefs by which to live." But when he sticks to the history of how sound was used and perceived in early America-especially in a fascinating chapter on how the acoustics of churches both advanced Protestant theological doctrines and subtly delineated the class hierarchies of the congregation-he opens a revealing window on the past. Photos. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

"Mr. Rath rehearses fascinating sound-details from the 17th and 18th centuries, reminding us that what we hear, and how we hear it, is no small part of experience." — The Wall Street Journal, April 16, 2004 "In his new book *How Early America Sounded*, Rath tunes his ears to religious ranting, the roar of waterfalls, the boom of thunder, and other features of the colonial American soundscape. . . . In his effort to deduce the early American soundscape, Rath draws on everything from 17th-century sheet music to the architectural plans of New England churches to the measurements of old bells. But the real challenge is understanding how pealing bells and other sensory events were experienced by people at the time. The past is a foreign country — they heard things differently there. Sounds had an immediate power: They were tangible forces 'laden with intent,' Rath argues." — The Boston Globe, April 11, 2004 "Long before Howard Dean howled in Iowa, Quakers in East Jersey were 'tainted with the Ranting Spirit.' . . . Among their buttoned-up neighbors, the Puritans, these folks were considered possessed in 1675. But what's interesting, observes Richard Rath in this fascinating study, '*How Early America Sounded*,' is that all sounds in those days indicated possession. . . . Rath connects the myriad ways in which sounds exerted social influence. . . . Finally, and most intriguingly, Rath says we may be living during just

such a time again, as the printed transfers some of its authority to a more fluid and ephemeral cyberspace." — The Christian Science Monitor, March 30, 2004 "In contrast to the modern world, which is ruled by such visual inputs as newspapers, television and traffic signs, early America was a sound-oriented society, according to this engaging and original academic study. . . . Writing in a scholarly but accessible style, cultural historian Rath ranges widely over the many facets of the colonial American soundscape, from Native American myths about natural sounds to the musical traditions of slave communities. . . .and opens a revealing window on the past." — Publishers Weekly, January 2004 "Illustrated with graphs, drawings, and photographs of church halls and amply annotated, this tour de force of original scholarship is suitable for all library collections. Indeed, its arguments merit repeated reading." — Library Journal, December 15, 2003 "Rath's range of evidence is broad and his analysis deep. Architectural, musical, religious, and anthropological sources, among others, all figure in his approach to a subject that could have become unwieldy in less skilled hands. . . . By the end of the book, few readers would question that sound mattered deeply to early American individuals and communities. . . . How Early America Sounded is an invaluable contribution to a field of cultural history that is still in the process of self-definition. Rath's original work offers discerning readers and listeners — advanced scholars and the general public alike — a new way to perceive and study the colonial past." — John M. Picker, Virginia Magazine of History and Biography, Vol. 112, No. 1, 2004 "As it moves from natural sounds to sounding boards to fiddles and finally to the rants of early Quakers and acoustics of meeting houses, Richard Cullen Rath's book grows in persuasiveness and argumentative force. How Early America Sounded is a valiant text which stands alone in the diverse fields that it touches." — Robert Blair St. George, University of Pennsylvania "Richard Cullen Rath's study of early American soundways is delightfully original, genuinely new, and always innovative. This is an exciting book of exceptional scholarly merit." — Mark M. Smith, author of Listening to Nineteenth-Century America "What did the world of the early American colonists sound like? The native peoples and colonists alike were very much tuned in to their auditory world. Richard Cullen Rath's How Early America Sounded is a fascinating account of what might be called aural history. In our postmodern 'plugged-in' world, we archive sounds as photographs and video capture pictorial history, but as Rath points out, something has been lost, too. Think of this book as a going back to Walden Pond, but with one's ears wide open." — Ron Hoy, Cornell University

I initially thought that this would be a worthy companion to A. Roger Ekirch's book "At Day's Close. Night in times past"-- and indeed it seemed to parallel the approach in the first sections -- but author

and rock musician Rath had other objectives. By repeatedly shifting the focus, though all related to sound, his book loses its way and become less effective. Nonetheless, there is much of value here, particularly if each part is taken alone. The book is broadly divided into 5 sections: nature and the sonic environment; instruments for communication and communion; acoustic design of churches and meeting houses; the non-linguistic vocal sounds of cries, shouts, hoots, mumbles, and groans; and Native American songs and cries. The era covered is circa 1600 to 1750. The book begins well. Rath examines the soundscape and how it affected cultural constructs, language and metaphors, philosophy, and religious interpretations. He noted oral societies, where the storyteller was also the historian, and differentiated them to the more modern literate societies where sight takes the leading role. In Colonial America, where sightlines were restricted by thick woods, people were more sensitive to sounds, both natural and human made, as they would alert and also locate. Rath particularly discusses thunder (versus lightning and later electricity) as a central cultural power and agent. Thunderclap, thunderbolt, thunderbirds, earthquakes as underground thunder, waterfalls and rapids as constant thundering: the loudest and most terrifying sound at the time was thunder and thunder was regarded as the divine or devilish force of destruction. The second part also captures interest with discussions of bells, whose own loudness were once thought to protect against thunder or at least disperse thunderclouds. Bells were even baptized long ago. Bells, trumpets, conch shells, drums, and gunpowdered weapons were utilized to celebrate, to warn, to gather people and maintain social order, and to establish location. Not mentioned are the ceremonial three-volley gun salute in military funerals and the earlier trumpet warnings of fast moving coaches (equivalent to train whistles and horns of today). And then Rath moves away from general sociology to focus on representative Afro-Jamaican musical forms and instruments in a far too detailed description and analysis. Suddenly, the book becomes ethnomusicology. If there were a similar examination of Native American drum and flute music and colonial European folk and classical baroque musics (beyond mention of fife and drum military bands), the section would be a reasonable detour: music as soundscape. Instead, he goes as far afield as Brazilian capoeira martial arts and berimbau music, slave fiddlers playing jigs, and baton twirling and dancing leaps as part of the Hessian derivations of Turkish Janissary music. With the discussion of architectural acoustics, the book returns to more general cultural aspects. Comparisons with Gothic cathedrals, Reformation churches, rectangular Colonial chapels, and Quaker hexagonal meetinghouses are very interesting and edifying. There is much more involved than questions of vocal clarity and loudness; the differing religious philosophy and social communion are reflected in the building design. Non-linguistic vocalizations had negative connotations, as among disapproving ship crews, mobs, and individual

malcontents. Women had their own set of such, as in childbirth, and groans were regarded as signs of touching the divine. Moans could signify demonic possession. Alternatively, murmuring, ranting, and outright singing had religious ecstatic significance, which irked Puritan conservatives. The final section on Native Americans/First Nations should have followed that of African slaves. The apparent howling, shouting, and whooping of natives in the forests and in dancing, war preparations, and healing rites were (and remain still) a problem of not discerning the language and rhythmic patterns. Some history of native and colonist interactions are provided. All in all, the reader gains some insight in what the sound environment was like in early Colonial America and how it both shaped and echoed the various societies of the land. Today, we are far more sight-ordered, linear, and digitalized. The book provides much for reflection.

Excellent read.

We are familiar with images of colonial America, but it never even occurred to me that the sounds of that period are un-discussed. Just reading about the way that sounds can be researched is enough reason to buy and read this book, but the image of a Native American listening hut and other sections make eye-opening and fascinating for those of us interested in how life was lived and experienced in other times.

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