Melissa L. Caldwell


Melissa Caldwell’s enjoyable and insightful excursion into the world of the dacha explores, with some of the light-heartedness and spontaneity of its subject matter, the lived experience of the post-Soviet Russian summer home. Scholars have been surprisingly reticent about this central feature in many Russian lives. Steven Lovell’s _Summerfolk_ (2003) was the first full-length work in English to weigh in on the subject, but the dacha has been resolutely ignored in Russian scholarship, so that _Dacha Idylls_ now appears to be its sole scholarly companion.

Is the dacha considered too private and personal, or perhaps too timeless and ahistorical, a topic for extensive scholarship? Whatever the reason, these two books now constitute the primary studies of the dacha, and they complement each other well. Lovell’s history examined the dacha from the outside, as a historical and socio-economic entity, whereas Caldwell explores the inner, cultural experience of the dacha from the personal perspective of contemporary Russians. One can imagine designing an undergraduate course on the Russian dacha, using these two books as the cornerstone and supplementing them with works of fiction and materials on the history and theory of leisure.

Caldwell’s ethnographic approach to her topic has its advantages as well as its drawbacks. The majority of the book’s topics emerge from speculative conversation with Russian dacha owners. This approach allows Caldwell to get at certain interesting and important, yet too infrequently discussed, issues in Russian culture, such as shifting conceptions of public and private space, the complexities of Russian/Soviet nostalgia, and the deeply entrenched but extremely problematic Russian quest for authenticity. Caldwell is to be applauded not only for the diverse variety of topics presented here (topics that seem to have first formulated themselves in conversation around the kitchen table), but also for her willingness to examine them in their due complexity. She does not attempt to reduce the ideas of her interlocutors to any sort of schematic analysis.

One does at times, however, sense the limits of the ethnographic approach. For one thing, probably as an inescapable result of the gender separations common in contemporary Russia, Caldwell draws most of her observations from women’s experiences, and this choice gives a certain shading to the questions asked and answers given, as does the fact that this generalized study of the dacha comes from a certain region, mostly around Tver and Moscow. Interviewees seem to belong almost entirely to a certain class of experienced...
"dachniki" whose roots go deep into the Soviet era. We learn from the perspective offered by this core group that newcomers are ruining dacha areas by building large, fenced in “cottages,” which flout traditional dacha ethics and aesthetics. And yet one often wonders about the newcomers’ own views. Are they really such a uniform bunch as they appear to be from the outside?

Another concern arises from Caldwell’s apparent identification with the viewpoint of her subjects. The dacha is, historically and experientially, inseparable from Russian urbanization. Not only is this clear from the coincidence of the expansion of Russian cities and the proliferation of dachas, but it is even apparent on maps that reveal dacha space spread out along train lines in a peculiarly Russian version of the urban outskirts. In order for the dacha to feel appealing as an escape into the world of nature and leisure, however, its implication in metropolitan life needs to be repressed and ignored. That repression is duly accomplished by most dachniki, who manage to conceive of their surroundings as, essentially, natural space, no matter how close to the neighbors, how long the television stays turned on, or how much trash has built up in the local swimming hole. Similar mental acrobatics have allowed visitors to Yosemite National Park, for example, to enjoy pristine nature in spite of the smog that builds up on the valley floor. Caldwell recognizes that “nature” can be “an idealized, experiential state of being” as much as a location relatively free of human interference, but at times she seems to accept the view that dacha space is unproblematically natural. In my view Dacha Idylls could go further to disrupt and challenge this mythology. The dacha participates in a rite of urban civilization that goes back at least to ancient Rome. Russian dachniki are not “living organically” as the book’s subtitle has it, or even connected to a rural environment as its final paragraph implies. They are acting as city-dwellers have the world over: idealizing a perceived absence of “nature” and trying to inject a piece of that missing element into their lives.

That said, the book’s trajectory moves in an interesting way from what seems to be its initial celebration of an especially deep Russian connection to nature (a trope of Russian national identity that is also common to most national identities) to an argument that the dacha plays a key role in post-Soviet political culture and civil society. Dacha Idylls starts out with a celebration of the dacha as a return to nature but winds up revealing the dacha’s main role in Russian culture as a center of alternative sociability that dates back to the imperial period. Dacha space, Caldwell argues, offers a separate environment, almost a laboratory of everyday life, in which it is possible to rethink, and sometimes reinvent, the premises and conditions of Russian culture. To quote one of Caldwell’s felicitous phrases: the dacha is a space of “extraordinary ordinariness and ordinary extraordinariness.” That Russians have maintained their escape