New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies 11, 2 December 2009): 199-237

Reviews

William Beinart and Lotte Hughes, *Environment and Empire*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007, ix + 395 pp. ISBN: 978-0-19-926031-7 (hbk.).

William Beinart and Lotte Hughes have produced a welcome and much needed addition to the 'Oxford History of the British Empire Companion Series'. In nineteen pithy chapters, *Environment and Empire* provides a masterful and compelling overview of the diverse manner in which environmental exploitation made and shaped the British Empire. As the authors note, 'British settler and colonial states sought to regulate the use of natural resources as well as [to] commodify them' (vii). Beinart and Hughes explore the tensions created by the need to use and conserve sources through the idea of resource frontiers. Studying resource frontiers highlights the interconnections between places and people, exploitation and conservation that environmental use fostered. And, I should add, it avoids the unnecessarily declensionist tone of much environmental history.[1]

The work adopts a case-study approach. The first part of the book primarily focuses on the commodification of resources from the beginnings of informal empire – starting with discussion of the Atlantic slave, the cod and fur trades in North America, the spice, cotton, timber and tea trade from India for instance. Later chapters, such as those on ecology and imperial science or national parks and tourism, provide more of a comparative approach. Within each chapter, relatively detailed case studies allow Beinart and Hughes to examine in some depth the complex relationships, both socially and environmentally, of particular resource frontiers in certain areas. Case studies, furthermore, enable the authors to challenge oversimplifications about the nature of interactions between coloniser and colonised. For instance, in chapter eight they highlight the fascinating history of the development of irrigation works in colonial India and Egypt through the example of the hydraulic engineer, Sir William Willcocks (1852-1932). Indian-born and educated Willcocks studied and admired local water systems and was quick to criticise the many environmental problems (notably the spread of malaria caused by British canal recommissioning and rebuilding) created by British and Egyptian water control.

---

1 John M. MacKenzie, 'Empire and the ecological apocalypse: the historiography of the imperial environment', in Tom Griffiths and Libby Robin, eds., *Ecology and Empire: Environmental History of Settler Societies* (Washington and Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), pp. 216-228.

Willcocks and the example of others such as Albert Howard, who subsequently became an advocate of organic farming after observation of agricultural practices in India, serve to complicate over-generalisations about the nature of colonial/local power relations. While acknowledging the asymmetrical power relations that emerged in imperial settings, Beinart and Hughes note that such case studies highlight the complexity of interactions between imperial and local knowledge systems and the manner in which '[i]ndigenous peoples engaged with, bargained, deflected, or resisted the demands of colonial power and traders' (19). This is an important theme that runs throughout the book, and allows for analysis of such *adavasi* (indigenous) protest movements in India during colonial and post-colonial times. The theme of indigenous agency is particularly strong towards the end of the book. Later chapters examine the interactions of local groups, post-colonial governments, and international Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in changing policies over tourism, urban problems, and environmental justice movements (chapters sixteen to nineteen). Together, the many rich examples serve to question the conclusions of authors such as James C. Scott or to highlight 'the facile stereotyping' (78) of authors such as Mary Louise Pratt in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*.[2] I welcome the authors' sensible and sensitive approach to such issues. It is one that acknowledges the asymmetry of colonial relationships, but which also highlights the agency of non-European groups and the complexity of European engagement with indigenous knowledge and people.

If one significant theme running through the book is the relationship between colonial and indigenous knowledge systems, another is the tension between exploitation and conservation. While acknowledging that imperialism wrought great environmental, social and political transformation, the authors also acknowledge that particular environments also caused geographically differential patterns of resource use, political structure and policy. A chapter (seven) on timber extraction in India demonstrates that conservationist policies initially arose in response to deforestation and fears of timber shortages. Another chapter (ten) on the plague in Hong Kong, India, Africa and Australia highlights the different colonial health responses to this disease, and the extent to which those responses invested racial meanings with the healthiness of individuals. Echoing Alfred Crosby's seminal work, *Ecological Imperialism*,[3] elsewhere the authors focus on the epidemiological impacts of European interaction with indigenous peoples in the Americas and Australasia, but caution that such environmental causation should not be taken to extremes.

A great variety of topics are covered in this extremely useful overview of some of the main themes of imperial environmental history. These include a welcome focus on urban environments, planning and environmental justice; disease regimes (plague, tsetse and trypanosomiasis); visual representations of nature (film, posters, photography and artwork); individuals and groups (imperial travellers, imperial scientists, and

---

2 Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Pratt (London: Routledge, 1992).

3 *The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

indigenous protest groups); and particular resources (timber, water, rubber, oil, sheep, fur, wildlife, soils). Obviously painting with such a broad brush means that certain areas are ignored. As Beinart and Hughes observe, 'West Africa, the Caribbean, New Zealand, Sri Lanka, and the Mediterranean Empire are under-represented' (6). But *Environment and Empire* is not intended to be 'a definitive environmental history of the British Empire as a whole' nor 'an environmental interpretation of empire' (1). Instead it presents cross-referenced thematic chapters that add greatly to existing national and trans-national environmental historiography. One area that could have been investigated is the environmental history of the sea, as demonstrated recently by the fascinating work of environmental historian Paul D'Arcy.[4]

In *Environment and Empire*, William Beinart and Lotte Hughes are to be applauded on a magnificent achievement that successfully marries great intellectual breadth and depth with a lively and stimulating narrative that also engages with contemporary imperial and environmental historiography at the same time as conveying a sense of the richness of imperial environmental history. I thoroughly recommend this work to general and specialist readers alike, and believe that it would be an excellent textbook for any imperial environmental course. I am sure that *Environment and Empire* will stimulate other studies – perhaps even a further companion volume of selected primary readings in imperial environmental history?

Reviewed by JAMES BEATTIE
The University of Waikato