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A People's History of Environmentalism in the United States

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The main theme of this book is American environmentalism and the development of the modern environmental movement. Starting with the standard narrative for the development of this movement, Chad Montrie lays out in chronological order how it is incorrect, and how environmentalism developed through the labour movement, and through the working-class moving into towns and cities at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. The standard narrative asserts that after the Second World War, improvements in living standards and increased leisure time allowed people more time to care about environmental issues. In addition Rachel Carson and her seminal work *Silent Spring* (published 1962) influenced the growing environmental consciousness. Montrie maps an alternative narrative, focusing exclusively on the working man and woman, and how their experiences in moving from the country to the city at the beginning of industrialisation resulted in the awakening of their environmental consciousness.⁽¹⁾

The story of modern environmentalism may once again be revisited this year as *Silent Spring* celebrates the 50th anniversary of its publication. Following this and other events, the world's first Earth Day was celebrated in 1970. A growing environmental lobby pressured Congress to establish regulatory controls, which lessened air and water pollution. Then in the late 1970s and early 1980s, two events – one at Love Canal in Niagara Falls, New York State and the other in Warren County, North Carolina – pioneered

grassroots environmentalism which led to the environmental justice movement, tackling toxins and environmental racism. (pp. 3-4). This is the narrative that you will hear everywhere.

Instead, Montrie admits he is writing a revisionist account of environmentalism and whilst he does discuss Carson, it is only after he has framed her book's arrival in the context of earlier events, from industrialisation, to national parks, sanitation reform and New Deal conservation, before he enters the post-war period and looking at pollution and environmental justice. *Silent Spring*, he states, makes a good bookend but if the worker is to be included in the history of environmentalism, the story must be moved back. Whilst they did not call themselves environmentalists, early industrial workers did argue and speak about environmental problems. Montrie says that to peg most or all of the responsibility for the rise and growth of environmentalism in the United States on one author, senator or official is a gross mistake. An incomplete picture is created which lacks the story of the worker's involvement (p. 6).

Montrie adopts a Marxist approach in his study of environmentalism. However it is not always industrialists wrong, workers right. He shows the often complex relationship between the labour force and nature. In his section on the national parks and forests, he describes hostility from working people towards government conservation officials, although gradually the working people were won round to support them.

The book begins in Lowell, Massachusetts, the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution in America, and an area with many canals, dams, mills and factories. This period, in the early to mid 19th century, was one of divergent ideas about nature. As society shifted towards industrialisation, the natural world was increasingly exploited. At the same time, there was a migration from rural to urban centres, which increased people's environmental awareness. Having spent their lives in the countryside living alongside nature, workers in factories living close to one another in cramped conditions yearned for the outside world, away from the pollution and grim conditions. They saw the natural world as a place to escape to. After the Civil War, environmental problems only increased. In 1878 a group of radical public health activists managed to get the Massachusetts General Court to pass a law prohibiting industrial and municipal discharge of refuse and pollution into any stream or public pond in the state. The lower Concord and Connecticut and Merrimack Rivers were exempted however; five years later Lowell's city physician described the lower Concord as a sewer basin. In the following years, the working class neighbourhoods along the rivers were deemed to be the deadliest places to live in the city. Nevertheless a precedent had been set in getting legislation passed to protect the environment and people's health from industry. Conservation became polarised along class lines and the working classes were often blamed as environmental outlaws when in fact the causes of most environmental problems were fishing and recreational hunting.

The idea of class conflict in conservation areas is described and analysed by focusing on national parks and forests. Before the Civil War, there had been common understanding that farmers, fishermen and others could regulate their own use of nature (p. 37).

In the later 19th century there was a shift from local to state and regional bodies as the best people to decide on regulating nature. The forest-conservation movement, which was born out of popular concern, focused on big logging businesses, and paper mills, and their associated problems such as soil erosion, flooding and the failure of smaller logging companies and farms. Although local people were hostile to wilderness protection and conservation, this was not absolute and as industrialisation increased, and labour migrated into towns and cities, their relationship with nature changed. 'It became less a thing to know and engage through labour and more of a thing to escape to or dream about' (p. 38).

Anger began to be directed at wealthy absentee landowners who bought large areas of land and restricted the access of working people. Local people also began to rely on state conservation measures in place of community-based practices. They came to be seen as allies in the fight against outsiders. They were not universally welcomed, and did discriminate on class grounds; nevertheless Montrie shows that over time, local workers began to become aware of environmental problems and fought to reduce them.

His focus then shifts from the industrialised east coast to the Midwest and particularly Chicago. It looks at

the sanitation (public health) reforms in this city in the late 19th century and the battles of working people with city and state legislators to improve sanitation. The worst areas in the city to live were, unsurprisingly, those areas inhabited by the poorest workers. By the beginning of the 20th century public health issues had led to an industrial hygiene (worker health and safety) campaign. Working-class urban residents and organised labour played key roles in these efforts, and that had a sizable impact on their environmental consciousness, which in turn built upon the modern environmentalism that emerged in the following decades.

Montrie tells of the 20-plus year struggle in the city to get their rubbish disposed of properly, rather than just dumped, and shows that those people who co-ordinated these struggles were women. Milwaukee, Wisconsin is also studied; here it was rubbish collection that was the point of activism, although, like in Chicago, wider issues relating to industrial pollution (such as the siting of a glue factory in a working-class Chicago area) were also campaigned on. The chapter also looks at the new field of occupational medicine, and by extension environmental health and health and safety in workplaces, and the struggles working people had to improve their working conditions.

The fourth chapter is perhaps more familiar to historians, given that it studies Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal policies, especially focusing on the Civilian Conservation Corps. Looking at the reasons for the establishment of the Corps, Montrie tells of their successes, of young men who went to work on various projects and who learned about nature and the natural world in the process. This, he shows, further increased their environmental consciousness. Even when it was stopped in 1941, the programme continued to shape people's thinking and values. The millions who ventured into national parks could make use of new amenities put in place by the corps. They established camp sites, footpaths, picnic tables, toilet facilities and built ponds. By the end of the 1930s there was a huge increase in working-class Americans seeking escape to natural settings, and car ownership increased, meaning natural areas were more accessible.

The chapter on post-war environmentalism tells a common story, insofar as most histories of modern environmentalism in the United States begin here. The main focus of this chapter is on trade union activism and especially those of automobile worker unions, which were very environmentally aware. The UAW (United Auto Workers) was led by Walter Reuther from 1946 to 1970, and during his presidency the union's campaigns reflected his passionate interest in pollution control and resource conservation, an interest that was informed by a high level of class consciousness. In 1963, when Carson was too sick to speak at the National Wildlife Federation's annual meeting in Detroit, it was Reuther who took her place. Those who were advocating the greatest environmental protection were those who worked for the industry responsible for a large part of environmental damage. Reuther, Montrie states, was a genuine nature lover (p. 98).

Montrie again explains this environmentalism in terms of a shift from rural to urban ? workers no longer knew nature. They experienced the ugliness and dangers of city life, which gave them a reason to escape to the outdoors. This relied on their being an outdoors left, of course, and so their environmentalism emerged from protecting what was left in nature as a contrast to the industrialised city they lived in. He also shows throughout the book, and here more often, that environmentalism did have a certain political dimension to it. This is not always clear, but Reuther was an old-style socialist committed to a type of unionism that extended beyond merely concern with wages and hours and embraced a host of social issues. This led to the union supporting worker education and recreation which itself helped established the autoworkers' environmental consciousness. Similarly the Oil Chemical and Atomic Workers Union (OCAW), representing many workers in the energy industry, another polluting industry, were also at the forefront of the environmental movement. Relations were such that in the 1970s when OCAW went on strike against Shell, environmentalists supported them. However from the 1970s, after Reuther's death, relations somewhat soured between unions and environmentalists. There was still some support ? by the early 1990s OCAW was realising that they could lobby for environmental issues even without having jobs on the line, and even when there was no labour dispute. Union membership has also declined steadily from the 1970s, which has reduced their influence in this as in other areas.

The final chapter looks at recent activism, especially in the 1970s and 1980s. It focuses on opposition to strip mining in Appalachia in the 1960s by anti-mining groups, which included the United Mine Workers

(UMW). Opposition to strip mining and similar struggles have been absent largely from the standard narrative about the origins and development of environmentalism. Even the mainstream environmental justice movement generally fails in this respect. Scholars point to two areas that define the emergence of the environmental justice movement – the toxic waste incidents at Love Canal and Warren County. Both involved local residents organising themselves at grassroots level to deal with toxic waste, and employed non-violent direct action. In Warren County there was also the ‘discovery’ of environmental racism.

In relation to Carson, Montrie notes that she ignored farm workers in her criticism of pesticides. In switching from chlorinated hydrocarbons (something Carson argued for) which often left a chemical residue to less persistent but acutely poisonous organophosphates, this put workers at greater risk. Again a union – United Farm Workers (UFW) – had been trying to get migrant workers protected. This led to the educating of migrant labourers about environmental protection for their own good, if nothing else. Middle-class environmental leaders were unsure whether defending the natural world and human health demanded engagement with campaigns for social justice, which represents a class issue again. After 1972 UFW began losing ground and whilst they ultimately failed in their aims they still provided a legacy in that the union made explicit reference to and connections between class exploitation, racial discrimination (many migrant workers came from Mexico) and environmental harm.

The book concludes with a retrospective look but also a view to the future. Montrie reflects on certain issues and the wane of a unionised labour force since the 1970s. Much of the research and sources used in the final chapters come from the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labour and Urban Affairs at Wayne State University. Montrie states he is the first person to use these archives to study environmentalism, looking at the connection between people’s experience with work and their relationship to the natural world. He may be right. His bibliographical essay at the end reveals more revisionist accounts; none however take the narrative back to the beginning of the Industrial Revolution and focus exclusively on workers. For the industrial world and the mill girls’ experiences Montrie uses local periodical, *Lowell Offering* which provided poetry and prose not only from a working-class point of view but also from a female perspective.

There is much here to be commendable; Montrie successfully weaves a narrative and connection between workers and the environmental movement (and a developing environmental consciousness) from industrialisation onwards. He shows how working-class people have often experienced the worst of environmental problems, but at the same time, have been at the forefront in dealing with them. He has shown the link between unions and the environment and, perhaps most importantly, shows that whilst Carson was important in terms of a new way of looking at the environment and enhancing environmental consciousness, it is difficult to say *Silent Spring* was the reason the modern environmental movement developed in America. Rather, Montrie has shown that an environmental consciousness was present since the beginning of the 19th century. There are many parallels to Britain, with environmental groups in one form or another existing since industrialisation. What this book does most convincingly is argue that workers should be at the heart of any narrative on environmentalism. From a British perspective, this has not been done and what little work has been done on modern environmentalism in Britain tends to focus on environmental organisations, rather than working people.

One of the biggest problems with the book is the fact Montrie does not state what he understands by ‘environmentalism’ and ‘environmental movement’. It would be nice to have some clarity as to exactly what he means by both terms – after all, at the beginning of his period, people viewed the environment differently to the way they did at the end of it. His book is as much a history of working men’s struggle with the idea of environmentalism as it is a history of environmental activism itself, and knowing what he means by both those terms would help this further. Chad Montrie’s argument that it was primarily the movement of labour from rural to urban environmentalism is heavily discussed, yet it seems to be a somewhat dubious link – people moved into factories and their unhappiness led to their re-evaluation of the natural world. Through his sources from the early industrial period he does provide evidence of this in some cases, but it is a tenuous argument. Montrie also shows he is not the first person to tackle the working class and the environment. As he shows, however, these were about specific issues, such as Elizabeth Blum’s *Love Canal Revisited*, which concerned the toxic waste incident at Love Canal in Niagara Falls, New York state; or Neil

Maier's *Nature's New Deal* which looked at the Civilian Conservation Corps and the New Deal. What Maier does is use these histories and widen the scope, borrowing from works looking at the 19th century and writing a detailed narrative of the relationship between environmentalism and labour.

But these are only minor issues with an otherwise good book, which is a useful revisionist account of American environmentalism, and also of labour history. This book not only reveals working-class attitudes to nature but the reasons this attitude develops (the conditions they work and live in) and offers something to the labour as well as the environmental historian.

Notes

1. Adam Rome, "Give Earth a Chance": the environmental movement and the sixties?, *Journal of American History*, 90, 2 (2003), 525-54. [Back to \(1\)](#)

The author has declined to comment further.

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