

Green Imperialism : Colonial Expansion , Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism , 1600-1860

Review Number:

8

Publish date:

Tuesday, 1 October, 1996

Author:

Richard Grove

ISBN:

9780521403856

Date of Publication:

1995

Price:

£75.00

Pages:

560pp.

Publisher:

Cambridge University Press

Publisher url:

<http://www.cambridge.org/catalogue/catalogue.asp?isbn=9780521403856>

Place of Publication:

Cambridge

Reviewer:

Bill Luckin

With the exception of pioneering work by Clarence Glacken , Keith Thomas and Alfred Crosby , very little has yet been written about early modern environmental thought . This has been partly determined by questions of definition . Thus in a path-breaking overview of English developments between 1500 and 1800 , Keith Thomas framed his subject-matter in terms of 'man and nature' rather than 'environment'. Lack of scholarly activity in the field may also be explained in terms of Whiggism and presentism . Every form of historical writing is rooted in and shaped by heavily loaded contemporary concerns. But global warming and putative environmental collapse are now so pervasively present in collective consciousness that the temptation to depict the past as little more than a prelude to millennial catastrophe is an unusually compelling one . Hence the ahistoricity of so much that is published under the standard of 'green history' , a rapidly growing literature , the bulk of which comprises little more than a prepared script for the predicted self-annihilation of homo sapiens and the nature on which the species has been immemorially dependent . There is little in this corpus about precise historical relationships between economic , environmental and epidemiological variables as depicted in the writings of Fernand Braudel , Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie and other members of the Annales school . Nor is there a recognition that when early modern savants talked and theorized about what is now termed the 'environment', they were invariably preoccupied with concerns and traditions that had little to do with 'global' resource depletion .

A talented practitioner in the history of ideas, Richard Grove has avoided the style of environmental history

which implicitly prepares the way for the future, rather than unravelling the contradictions of the past. Focusing on the multiple meanings of the 'edenic' both in Europe and the newly discovered non-European world between 1600 and the mid-nineteenth century, he has made convincing connections between the ways in which British, Dutch and French men of science were able to draw on everyday experience and specialist knowledge of remote islands to build up an understanding of the potential fragility and exhaustibility of nature. Grove concentrates, more specifically, on deforestation and the partially 'rediscovered' phenomenon of desiccation within an intellectual framework informed by new, dynamic and empirically-rooted ideas in medicine, climatology, agriculture and botany. Within this flexible paradigm, islands could be presented either as symbolic utopias or dystopias. Their inherent 'naturalness' could also be deployed to point to the 'unnaturalness' and 'corruption' of wasteful and 'luxurious' metropolitan life-styles. (In this respect, as Grove notes, real and hypothesized edenic environments sustained and intensified pre-existing tensions, long imbedded in western culture, between 'town' and 'country'). As part of this new, environmentally-driven agenda, furthermore, island-based botanical gardens were established so that experiments might be conducted that would educate and influence elite opinion in London, Paris and Amsterdam about existing or potential environmental deterioration. Living and working thousands of miles from home, Grove's protagonists were unusually receptive to indigenous and holistic belief systems that underwrote non-European conceptions of interactions between man and nature.

When relating a developing body of scientific thought at the colonial periphery to ancient Indian, Chinese and Hellenic conceptions of the environment, Grove excels and presents novel and convincing conclusions. But, taken as a whole, his bulky study too often undermines its best arguments as a result of an undue immersion in empirical detail. Thus a pivotal chapter on the French physiocrat Pierre Poivre and his activities on Mauritius runs to no fewer than ninety pages. Beginning with an account of the economic rationale for France's original settlement of the island, it moves on to a description of Mahe de Labourdonnais and botanical experimentation before presenting a step-by-step analysis of conservationist policies in practice. As if all that were not enough, the chapter also incorporates textual readings of Poivre and Bernadin de Saint-Pierre. (The latter's *Paul et Virginie* is not, however, thought worthy of detailed scrutiny.) At the risk of punning himself out of credibility, the present reviewer quickly became convinced that Grove had repeatedly missed the wood for the trees. Thus, following an impressive fifty page introductory overview, *Green Imperialism* includes a chapter of nearly sixty pages on the English and Dutch East India companies in relation to colonial environmental crisis: over seventy on the British and the forests of the eastern Caribbean; and no fewer than eighty on state conservationism in India between the late eighteenth century and the Mutiny. (There are, though, only fifteen pages on the important sub-theme of the intellectual origins of post-Newtonian climatic environmentalism.) Unthinkable though such self-punishment may have seemed, Grove ought surely to have asked a friendly though critical editor to hack a path through the Amazonian density of his study, in the hope of compressing nearly five hundred pages of text into around three hundred.

But excessive length is only one among several problems. Over-playing the edenic theme, Grove devotes too little attention to possible alternatives to scientific fascination with island milieux as major determinants of emerging global environmentalism. Thus it would undoubtedly have been revealing to have juxtaposed structural similarities and dissimilarities between progressive agricultural intervention in eighteenth century Mauritius against analogous developments associated with enclosure and agrarian improvement in Britain between 1750 and 1815. Such a comparison might have convinced sceptical readers that Grove's tropical scientific experimenters really were more influential than Eurocentric ideologues and cultural critics in preparing educated opinion in England and France in particular for the possibility that 'progress' might generate severe and socially disruptive environmental and indeed global disequilibria. By failing fully to confront such possibilities, *Green Imperialism* inevitably appears to have loaded the dice too heavily in favour of edenic solutions to the intellectual and epistemological problems that it so persuasively generates.

Both in relation to the interchange of information between French and British scientists in island locations, and through perceptive comment on trans-national variants of physiocracy, Grove intermittently promises less linear and predetermined conclusions. A major weakness, however, is that the metropolitan centre is too

frequently presented as an intellectual entrepot, by and through which novel environmental agendas were imported from one island paradise, only to be immediately re-exported to another. This undoubtedly eased - to borrow Grove's knowingly anachronistic phrase - 'scientific networking', and stimulated incremental growth in what would now be termed 'interdisciplinary' activity. Simultaneously - and this is another convincing insight - such interactions frequently either by-passed or ran counter to the policies of interested nation-states. Thus the politics of environmental exchange are made to throw revealing light on larger social and political issues - not least the highly complex and ambiguous status, in relation to formal state structures, of the Dutch and English East India Companies. At the same time, and particularly in his later chapters, Grove posits a precocious internationalization of the environmental sciences, with practitioners in open or tacit conflict with the state-backed or -supported agencies by which they were patronized or employed. These sections of *Green Imperialism* not only undermine a picture of uninterrupted competition and conflict between England and France during the long eighteenth century but also induce a degree of optimism vis-à-vis the independence and autonomy of what would later develop into a genuinely international scientific community. If Grove has succeeded in identifying a hybrid body of knowledge which can only be accurately and meaningfully defined in terms of its 'environmental' and 'global' qualities, then it is certainly both fitting and credible that its leading practitioners should have transcended the boundaries of the nation-state at so early a historical juncture.

Yet to view the metropolitan centre too intensively in terms of entrepot and interchange - reversing the telescope so that Mauritius looms massively large and the Kingdom of France correspondingly minute - leads to distortions. Although Grove makes revealing points about the manner in which theories of global environmentalism were institutionally changed during the interval between 'import' and 're-export', he could well have said a great deal more. Expertly contextualizing the indigenous knowledge that his major historical actors absorbed and carried away with them when they set sail for paradisaic isolation, Grove fails fully to evaluate the part that those self-same repertoires may have played autonomously and domestically in the making of modern environmental thought. Despite providing a very good account of physiocracy as a context for and shaper of fears about potential resource depletion, Grove refuses rigorously to relate that ubiquitous body of thought to Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment discourses on the 'perfectibility of man', and the extent to which the achievement of that state depended, directly and indirectly, on an increasingly ruthless exploitation of nature. Nor - and here the narrow focus on deforestation and desiccation within the context of so large and ambitious a study is undoubtedly debilitating - does Grove engage with salient and related traditions in political arithmetic, political economy and population theory.

To exclude, for example, the Malthus-Godwin debates is to omit a crucial moment in the emergence of discourses that were unequivocally 'global' in their implications. In similar vein to Grove's edenic men of science, Malthus fully understood the extent to which geography and climate delimited and determined the manner in which homo sapiens might coexist, or fail to coexist, with nature and socially constructed agricultural systems. This is deliberately to define Malthus as 'proto-environmentalist', rather than founding-father of demography or reactionary proponent of a reductive and vulgarized political economy which would in time - as numerous studies have established - provoke a wide range of radical, Marxist and neo-Marxist counter-arguments and agendas. In addition, as Robert Young has explained in a now classic article, it was precisely the Malthusian ideological and linguistic resource which finally enabled Darwin to articulate his mature conception of the role of the 'survival of the fittest' in relation to natural selection. Despite the fact that its terminal date might seem to have evolutionary implications, *Green Imperialism* says little about Darwin, except insofar as the 'voyaging' phase clearly paralleled and harked back to the paradisaic and edenic obsessions of Grove's early modern dramatis personae. This is undoubtedly a significant silence, even though Darwin's own role in shaping what would later gradually come to be known as the environmental and ecological sciences remains highly problematic. Nevertheless, Grove's reluctance to trace ideological and intellectual connexions between physiocratic, economic, demographic and evolutionary modes of thought weakens the thrust of his study as he moves from the long eighteenth into the mid-nineteenth century.

David Pepper's recent and useful *Modern Environmentalism: An Introduction* (London, Routledge, 1996)

defines fundamental environmentalist categories before developing a narrative which slots specific thinkers and strands of thought into a somewhat over-determined lineage . Such a criticism cannot be made of Green Imperialism. Grove's study voluminously documents and convincingly reveals the unpredictability, eclecticism and contrariness of a little-known body of scientific thought between the late sixteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries. Simultaneously, however, it raises issues that relate not only to deforestation and desiccation at the colonial periphery but to the history of environmentalism as a whole. In addition, Grove has become over-attached to a single, seductive idea - the sparsely populated island as an environmental and cultural laboratory in which experiments could be conducted, and lessons learnt, about how to live more rationally and holistically with nature. By concentrating so intensively on paradisaic isolation, Grove has underplayed the impact of hurly- burly European urbanism on the social and cultural production of a scientific world-view that was indisputably defining itself as 'environmental'.

In terms of method and approach, however, and more particularly in his successful marrying of environmental to intellectual history , Grove has made a significant contribution . More than thirty years ago, Keith Thomas published his path-breaking *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, a work whose first chapter - prophetically, within the present context - was entitled, simply and provocatively, 'The Environment'. Two decades later Thomas completed his pioneering study on *Man and the Natural World*. Concentrating more on mentalite than science, Thomas traced continuities and discontinuities in the ways in which Englishmen between 1500 and 1800 (women, alas, loomed small) had coexisted with and exploited the environment in which they lived . Several of the themes broached in that volume - particularly those covered in the first and last sections on 'Human Ascendancy' and 'The Human Dilemma' respectively - have been creatively carried forward in Grove's study . Despite its longueurs, therefore, *Green Imperialism* bears witness to a growing maturity within an empirically rooted and hence methodologically credible history of environmentalism and environmental thought.

Other reviews:

H-Net Reviews

<http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.php> [2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/8#comment-0>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/158>

[2] <http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.php?id=297>