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The Environment in World History

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Reviewer:

Greg Bankoff

This is a very small book on a very big topic. Not that I mean this in any derogatory manner. On the contrary, Stephen Mosley sets out to recount the environmental history of the world since 1500 in some 120 pages, as part of the series *Themes in World History* which aims to provide serious but brief discussions on important historical topics. It is a quite impossible task to realise but one that he does rather well. The book is simultaneously a work of environmental history and global history as well as being an introduction to the sub-discipline. Are there omissions? Yes, of course, important ones too. Could anyone do any better? That would be difficult given the restrictions on length and purpose. Perhaps, a better question is to ask whether one should attempt such a task in the first place on those terms. I am ambivalent on that one. It is also quite a moral book in that it conveys an important message about social justice, that endemic poverty and environmental degradation are not entirely unrelated topics but two aspects of the same problem. Mosley also avoids the pitfall of leaving the reader depressed and despairing of humanity's future on an exhausted and dying planet.

It is encouraging to see that environmental history finally warrants a mention in such an important publication series even if it is only belatedly following after volumes on, among many others, gender, consumerism, disease, migration, sport, food, travel, Judaism and, of course, the United States in world history. Environmental history is no longer quite the new sub-discipline that it once was, having a pedigree

now of 20 to 30 years, but it has rather surprisingly never really caught on much outside the United States despite its evident relevance to many of the pressing problems of modern societies. The importance of understanding the environment as a 'product' that has been created over time, not by some deity but by humanity – and therefore presumably something that can be made again differently so to speak – is just so central to our future on this planet that I can never quite fathom why it always ranks so lowly in popular interest, academic appreciation and policy concerns. A book like this one goes a long way to making environmental history something that any and everyone can easily grasp.

The book is divided into six chapters, four of which deal with substantive aspects of environmental history, respectively animals, forests, soils and cities. These are prefixed by a short introduction that briefly explains what the genre constitutes and how the author means to fulfil his intentions in terms of content and periodisation, and suffixed by an even shorter conclusion that attempts to show why environmental history is both instructive and relevant to the present and future. The main chapters follow a standard format that works quite well. First there is a thematic discussion of various aspects of the chapter theme that also have a marked chronological sequence, followed by a case study. Thus the chapter on animals deals with commercial, settler and sport hunting with a case study on the American bison. That on forests looks respectively at their importance, felling and conservation with a discussion of British India. The next on soils follows a similar pattern with an example based on Basutoland in southern Africa. And the last on cities examines their impact in the colonial, industrial and contemporary contexts with a more detailed investigation of Manchester, the subject of the author's own expertise. A lot of thought has evidently gone into this formula to give maximum coverage in terms of geographical, temporal and cultural representation within the space constraints.

Probably the most impressive aspect of this short book is how Mosley still manages to engage with the major themes and debates that are going on within the sub-discipline. A reader without much familiarity with environmental history will be introduced to: the Colombian Exchange and its consequences; the notion of empire forestry and its relationship to colonialism; the debates about soil, irrigation and hydraulic civilisations; and urban studies and pollution – no mean feat in the circumstances. Nor is this theory applied with a heavy hand but it lies lightly with the reader, often more implicit than explicit, and without any trace of condescension or talking down to the audience. This is a book that can be read and appreciated by all: the layperson, the student, the academic as well as the environmental specialist. The author, in particular, should be congratulated on his choice of chapter topics, eschewing tackling directly more mainstream subjects like population growth, energy use and consumption, and including instead human-animal relations and soil management. The former, of course, are also discussed but as part of broader ecological processes. Even if environmental history is your specialisation, there is always something in the text for you to learn about – like the contribution of lead piping to the fall of the Roman Empire! (I cannot remember whether Gibbons included that one as a factor in his magnum opus or not: anyway it was a new one to me.) And its conciseness is a definite asset when it comes to undergraduate teaching in the sense that you may actually get the majority of your students to read it.

There are a few shortcomings, though, that are not related to the book's length. Many of these, I realise, may be more questions about personal emphasis but they still niggle. First is the want of disasters as a topic of discussion. In fairness, the author does recognise this omission but he does not explain the reason for it. Research into how hazards have shaped society and culture over time is a major new direction in environmental history and one that is likely to prove of increasing interest and concern in a future dominated by the challenges of climate change. Next is the absence of a concerted focus on Africa. True, there is the extended example of soil mismanagement in Basutoland under British colonialism but this only serves to highlight its lack of mention elsewhere in the text. Africa too seldom figures in recent historiography and when it does, the examples are mainly drawn from southern Africa as on this occasion. In general, too, there is an over-emphasis on Europe and North America and too little on the rest of the world. Thirdly, there is also an underlying theme that runs through the book that appears to laud the indigenous and local as somehow more environmentally sustainable and by contrast condemns the record of western peoples. The latter may be largely justified, though this is not a complete litany of unrelenting destruction and is perhaps

more a symptom of capitalism rather than anything intrinsic to western cultures. The former, however, is far from the truth and a greater acknowledgement, for instance, of past research such as that of Walter Clay Lowdermilk and his notion of 'suicidal agriculture' in the Middle East among others would soon put pay to such entrenched ideas. And finally, there is little consideration given the physical environment as having an historical trajectory of its own, that it, too, has a past that changes over time. It is not only a question of human society affecting the environment but of the environment acting on society, what Anthony Oliver-Smith call the 'mutuality' between the two that is the very essence of environmental history ? even if he is an anthropologist.⁽¹⁾ There are also a number of minor quibbles that I would take issue with such as whether Dietrich Brandis can be actually credited with 'training' Gifford Pinchot (p. 50) or that water control projects (p. 84) always required a degree of social organisation and cooperation that encouraged urban growth (what about the *subak* irrigation systems of Bali) but these nuances are not worth dwelling on in such an overview of the sub-discipline.

All this being taken into account, *The Environment in World History* is still a very good book that effectively fulfils its aims as a short summary of the subject. Along with Bill McGuire's *Global Catastrophe: A Very Short Introduction* ⁽²⁾ that covers the more physical side of the topic, I already set it as an introductory text for my students. It is also very readable for those without any prior knowledge or understanding of the subject. Mosley is to be congratulated on writing such an eminently useful book and on that score alone, deserves my unreserved gratitude.

Notes

1. Anthony Oliver, *Catastrophe and Culture: The Anthropology of Disaster* (Oxford 2002), pp. 23-47. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Bill McGuire, *Global Catastrophe: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2006). [Back to \(2\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review.

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