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Reviewed by Sylvain Guyot (Department of Geography, University of Paris X-Nanterre, and Institut de Recherche pour le Developpement, France)

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A South African Environmental History: From Settler's Colony to Apartheid Regime

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The environmental history of South Africa is a growing academic field. In fact, even though environmental history may not be a well-defined field theoretically, establishing a link between South Africa's sensitive history and environmental issues is crucial. This book is a first contribution to formalizing the use of environmental issues as an historical interpretative tool, especially to reveal and analyze the numerous conflicts in South African history. Assessing and explaining the "environmental crisis" show how indigenous land-uses have been disturbed, displaced, or replaced by colonial and commercial ones. Also, it deconstructs underlying political discourses: poor environmental management in South Africa is not the result of "black" voluntary action but more the result of the territorial changes caused by white colonialists. Environmental history is an interdisciplinary field because of the multifaceted aspects of environmental studies that intersect with geography, biology, sociology, etc. This book is representative of this

variety of subjects. It has its genesis at a meeting of environmental historians hosted by the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, in 1996 and convened by the late Ruth Edgecombe and Bill Guest (Department of Historical Studies, UN). Eighteen authors contributed to this collective book. I will refer specifically to them when reviewing their particular contributions. The book is divided into three parts: an introduction; essays in South African environmental history and cases studies; and commentaries and comparisons, necessary to generalize and put in perspective the case studies. A one-page preface from Steve Dovers and Bill Guest precedes the introduction.

The purpose of Jane Carruthers's introduction (chapter 1) is to define environmental history, review the environmental historiography in southern Africa, and introduce the two main parts of the book. She defines the core of environmental history as "a deliberation on how people use, manage or interrelate with natural resources and the natural environment, in specific circumstances at given times and places" (p. 4). She warns that environ-

mental history can be also a “non-desired” meeting point of various philosophies and ideologies. “The crucial elements of examining change over time and its narrative power—the essence of history and its special strength—have brought different categories of knowledge together in [this] field” (p. 5). The research position of many contributors of this book is to look at the environment not for itself but because it reveals racial, sociological, and economic tensions. The most interesting contributions in fact explicitly refer to this research position. Maybe the introduction should have insisted more on this position to put the whole work in a clearer and better perspective.

The first part, “Essays in South African Environmental History,” is made up of eleven chapters (chapters 2 to 12) proposing different case studies linking environmental issues, studies, and historical analyses.

Chapter 2 deals with the colonial ecological revolution in South Africa illustrated by the case of Kuruman. Nancy Jacobs uses Carolyn Merchant’s model for environmental history (the theory of the colonial ecological revolution), based on a New England case study, as a theoretical framework.[1] “The introduction to Merchant’s book models the interplay between forces arising from four loci: ecology, production, reproduction and consciousness.... The theory of ecological revolutions explains how interactions between these forces lead to turning points in human relations with the environment” (p. 19). She shows that this model, an “ambitious concept” (p. 20), is not really applicable for South Africa, because “the theory of the colonial ecological revolution does not recognise that tensions could arise from indigenous patterns of production, reproduction and consciousness of the non-human environment, and that these tensions could be a historical force” (p. 23). This interesting case study details the impacts of colonization on the Tswana people of Kuruman. Merchant’s model is used here more as a pretext to show in contrast the richness and complexity of the South African context rather than as a really useful conceptual tool. In fact it could have been sharper to have built a proper concept from a South African perspective and to criticize and upgrade it in every chapter of this book. In my view, South Africa is an excellent laboratory for making new conceptual tools for environmental history, as it is for urban, political, and environmental geography.

Chapter 3 looks at white settler impact on the Durban environment (1845-1870). Beverley Ellis writes a very informative essay on the various aspects of colonial transformation of the natural environment. One might regret

that this contribution relates very useful information but does not manage to use it in a more theoretically developed research position. Parts of this chapter underline the “environmental racial debate” in South African history: “The year 1866 saw a number of free Indians becoming a new group of fishermen at the bay.... Almost immediately, protests appeared in the local newspapers because the small size of the mesh of the Indian’s fishing nets trapped many fry.... The government reacted promptly to the settlers complaints. It appointed a Conservancy Board in May 1867” (pp. 45-46). She shows that in this case, conservation was implemented as a tool to restrict to whites the use of sea resources as whites were the only ones able to afford fishing permits.

John Lambert’s contribution (chapter 4) on the crisis in the homestead economy in colonial Natal is clear and brilliant in explaining the land-use reversal from pre-colonial homestead economy to a segregated capitalist colonial system. The logic of the pre-colonial economy is well analyzed and Lambert shows the narrow links between population density, diet, suitable climatic residential areas, cultivation, and territorial appropriation. This system is described as a well balanced-one: “The homestead economy was affected by years of drought when food shortages could cause considerable suffering, but in most years the inhabitants enjoyed a balanced diet which ensured a healthy existence” (p. 50). Colonization totally disturbed this system in creating Native reserves, which concentrated indigenous people in much smaller and poorer areas. Whites designated vast surfaces of rich land as theirs, the “crown land.” The cash economy transformed traditional exchanges and introduced relations of dependence between local people and settlers. “With the colony relying increasingly on White and Indian farmers for produce, the administration no longer felt obliged to encourage homestead production.... In general, Africans had too little to eat, and what they did eat provided a starchy and unbalanced diet” (p. 57). The environmental and living crisis experienced in Native reserves was directly due to colonial perturbations. “Even for those Africans who were able to recreate a semblance of homestead life elsewhere, the impact of their removal from land intimately associated with their past and with ancestral spirits would have involved a traumatic change of lifestyle, one to which it would have been difficult to adapt” (pp. 59-60).

Studying the Pinetown district (1920-1936), Jabulani Sithole shows in chapter 5 how the resource crisis generated by colonization can create the conditions for conflicts between chiefdoms and also for violence within

the black population. The more space is reduced, the stronger the competition over resources becomes, involving different factions, sometimes artificially created and headed by colonially appointed chiefs. He demonstrates that “the constant shifting of chiefdom boundaries, and the insensitivity of state officials to land shortage, prompted male commoners to participate in the fights” (p. 73). This contribution is sometimes difficult to follow due to the proliferation of details. The author provides many interesting maps, but unfortunately lacking scale.

William Beinart in chapter 6 examines the environmental origins of the Pondoland revolt in which rurally based men, opposing government policy in the homelands, attempted from March 1960 to neutralize state intervention by attacking its local African agents. Beinart shows how a precise and violent event in South African history can be explained by environmental factors. In referring to environmental origins, he means the territorial upheavals caused by colonization and the apartheid regime in the Transkei: “a wide range of new laws and proclamations began to govern, among other things, land occupation, forests, pasture management and burning, hunting, noxious weeds, movement of stock, and soil erosion” (p. 77). Here (as in chapter 5), the role of the “appointed chieftaincy” in conflict was enhanced. The only criticism I can make of this contribution is formulated by the author himself in his conclusion: “A full analysis of the background to the Pondoland revolt would require more extensive discussion of social and economic change in this African reserve in the era of apartheid, of the role of migrant workers and wider African nationalist ideas, of generational and gender conflicts, of the new Bantu authorities, and political tensions between chiefs, educated modernisers and traditionalists” (p. 88).

Chapter 7 analyzes the emergence of privately grown industrial tree plantations in KwaZulu-Natal. To allow South Africa to be independent from the international wood and timber markets, the state started an extensive tree-growing program, and encouraged private landowners and farmers to do likewise. Harald Witt, in a quite technical presentation, shows how massive numbers of alien species arrived in South Africa for the benefit of the whole economy. The historical facts presented by the author on the expansion of the tree industry in Zululand are very useful. This contribution is valuable to understand the tree industry in South Africa in a specific environmental history context.

In chapter 8, Sean Archer points to the effect on land

use in the Karoo and its ecosystem of two technical innovations in the late-nineteenth century: windmills and wire fencing. This contribution is very informative on this particular subject. It is less well linked to the general theoretical approach of the book; thus the reader has to wait until page sixteen of the chapter to learn precisely the aim of the research: “to ask whether and how investment in wire fencing and windmills intensified the ecological degradation of Karoo grazing land” (p. 127). Nevertheless, this contribution is particularly well illustrated.

Lance van Sittert writes an exciting history of the use and rejection associated with an alien plant, the prickly pear (*Opuntia*), and its biological invasion of the Eastern Cape (1890-1910) (chap. 9). This brilliant contribution meshes well with the general theoretical position of the book. He shows how this plant has been controversial and has had different appropriations by race and class. The menace of alien plants is not an objective question, but more a sociological one! “Glimpsed through this lens, with its particular distortions of race, class and profit, *opuntia* no longer appeared as a curiosity or occasional summer bounty, but a direct menace to the very foundations of an already depressed pastoral economy; burdening farmers with the escalating costs of stock losses and eradication, discouraging and corrupting black wage labour, and swelling the ranks of poor Whites by eroding land values and carrying capacities.... The cheap and abundant fruit was also prized by blacks and poor whites for brewing ‘villainous compounds’ which were consumed at ‘drunken orgies’ and rendered them unfit for labour” (pp. 147-150). Eventually, legislation and destruction of the pear did not work. The author concludes that what counts as an ecological problem is not objective ideas but rather perceptions, which sometimes are totally false. This is a very valuable contribution to the current debate on “removing alien plants in South Africa” and how radical and absurd this ideology can be.

Chapters 10 (“Fire and the South African Grassland Biome” by John McAllister) and 11 (“Wakkerstroom: Grasslands, Fire and War: Past Perspective and Present Issues” by Elna Kotze), are valuable contributions on the origins of grassland formations in South Africa. Grassland is a typical vegetal formation perceived as natural by some and as totally humanized by others. These articles set forth arguments around the concept that “natural nature” does not exist at all. Some South African environmentalists should perhaps read these contributions and take heed.

Chapter 12 looks at the dynamics of ecological change in an era of political transformations in the context of the environmental history of the Eastern Shores of Lake St Lucia. The way the people of the Eastern Shores were controlled through colonization and then apartheid are explained well in this chapter. The author writes that:

“This control has resulted in the attitudes and responses of the indigenous people to their environment being, firstly, largely unexplored and, secondly, warped by the inconsistencies and injustices of the apartheid system. The implications of this are evident in the attitudes of the people who have invaded the Dukuduku Forest Reserve, situated at the entrance to Lake St Lucia, which they are now accused of exploiting. Their sceptical attitude towards conservation of the environment is worrying to environmentalists, but it is understandable. These people see no logic in environmental concerns after having been removed from a conservation area where the state subsequently replaced hundreds of thousands of acres of indigenous vegetation with pine and eucalyptus forests. Add to this the fact that white farmers in the surrounding regions have removed hundreds of thousands of hectares of indigenous vegetation to establish commercial monocultural agriculture, and the logic of environmental policy seems obscure indeed” (p. 200).

This chapter, written in 1996, needs some updates, especially on the role in environmental conflicts of a new governance framework implemented in the St Lucia region, in relation to the designation of the Greater St Lucia Wetland Park as a World Heritage Site.

These eleven chapters therefore raise many interesting issues. A map locating the different case studies would have been convenient for readers. Sometimes the general theoretical position of the book is lost in the many informative, but anecdotal, details.

The third part of the book aims to fill this gap by comparing these contributions with African, Australian, South American, and South Asian examples. It comprises five chapters (13 to 17). William Beinart shows in chapter 13 that the environmental history of South Africa has been strongest on state regulation of natural resources and on conflicts between the state and rural people over such policies. The so-called “negative impact” of blacks on land-use has to be qualified:

“As Lambert notes in Chapter four of this volume, even sympathetic novelists such as Alan Paton have used soil erosion in the reserves as a literal and metaphorical sign of decline. Radical historians offered a differ-

ent interpretation of rural decline, blaming external pressures and the migrant labour system rather than traditional African culture, but they used the same evidence of degradation.... Drawing especially on East African examples and on ideas about local knowledge, radical range ecologists in South Africa are now arguing that contrary to widespread perceptions, rangelands in African areas with communal tenure are not generally degraded.... Segregation and apartheid policies were significant in shaping some manifestations of environmental degradation, notably the condition of land in the African reserves or homelands” (pp. 219-222).

Beinart’s chapter is well written and is a good synthesis of the book’s ambitions. It could have been longer, comparing more of the previous case studies. His final conclusion is excellent in defining the value of environmental history as a concept, and possibly could have appeared at the beginning of the book. “Environmental history can help to push perspectives and debates beyond the central and anguished issue of race to explore how all human beings both shape the natural world and are constrained by it” (p. 226).

Chapters 14 (“Commonalities and Contrasts, Past and Presents: An Australian view,” by Stephen Dovers), 15 (“Environment and History in South America and South Africa,” by J. R. McNeill), 16 (“Degradation Narratives’ and ‘Population Time Bombs’: Myths and Reality about African Environments,” by Gregory Maddox), and 17 (The Colonial Eco-Drama: Resonant Themes in the Environmental History of Southern Africa and South Asia,” by Ravi Rajan) compare the South African situation with other continental experiences. Numerous common points exist between South Africa and Australia (settlers’ ideologies); South Africa and South America (invasion and appropriation of alien plants); South Africa and Africa (similar stakes); and South Africa and South Asia (similar eco-drama). To compare various scattered South African cases studies with subcontinental spatial and historical contexts is very ambitious. Even if some of the conclusions of these comparisons are relevant, I wonder if this book would have been better by being more focused, both on a specific South African field and on a precise definition of environmental history.

To summarize, I think that this book is valuable as it promotes a new field of environmental history in which colonization and apartheid are central explanations. I would have preferred fewer case studies, which instead might have been more focused and better illustrated. The comparisons between continents allows this book to start

developing a conceptual reflection on environmental history, but this aim is still to be reached. The overall approach of the book—presenting both case studies and an attempt to reach a theoretical synthesis—lacks clarity. Environmental urban history is also totally forgotten. Nevertheless, it will be useful to researchers, students, and those with an interest in environmental history.

Note

[1]. Carolyn Merchant, *Ecological Revolutions: Nature, Gender, and Science in New England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1989).

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