

# Book Review

**Eco-Cultural Networks and the British Empire: New Views on Environmental History.** Edited by James Beattie, Edward Melillo, and Emily O’Gorman. New York: Bloomsbury, 2015. 344 pp. Illustrations, maps, graphs, notes, and index. Cloth \$120.00.

This volume is a significant contribution to the study of the social and cultural networks that informed the environmental order of the British Empire. It is an unusually well-edited anthology and an excellent and engaging read. What successfully brings the contributions together is a common methodological focus on the importance of networks in the field of environmental history. The volume is a result of a conference at the University of Waikato in New Zealand, and it has, as a result, a refreshingly non-Eurocentric focus with key contributions about historical events mainly in China, Sri Lanka, Australia, and New Zealand.

The anthology seeks to unveil now-forgotten pathways of conquest, trade, and power that mobilized the transfer of organisms and commodities throughout Britain’s imperial territories in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. At the same time, the contributors attempt to understand the ways in which these networks reordered human societies, nonhuman communities, and even entire landscapes. The volume has two parts: the first set of five articles discusses “Regional Eco-Cultural Networks”; the second set of six articles seeks to locate “Local Eco-Cultural Networks” within the British Empire.

The “regional” networks discussed in the first part are perhaps better described as transregional or global because they encompass events happening on different continents in both the Northern and Southern Hemispheres. Nancy J. Jacobs, for example, explains how and why Europeans became authorities on birds in Africa by focusing on their migration. She describes the social and cultural network of the bird-watchers that were required to observe bird routes from southern Africa to Europe, and she argues that these ornithological investigations were

situated in British imperialism. Another well-researched contribution with the telling title “Empire in a Cup” is written by Edward D. Melillo. He tells the story of British tea consumption and the ways in which the production of Lipton tea came to reorganize landscape and labor in British Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) as well as the tea-drinking culture in England. Other articles include discussions of climate and empire, and the transregional nature of agriculture in China.

Part 2 covers different “local” eco-cultural networks including plantations in Ceylon, Cantonese gardens, hunting in China and New Zealand, and domestic animals in Winnipeg, Canada. Perhaps the highlight of this section in the anthology is a well-researched article by Emily O’Gorman on commercial rice cultivation in South Eastern Australia. She describes how international and local networks of rice expertise and the easy flow of materials between 1900 and 1945 enabled the expansion of commercial rice cultivation. She also argues that the farming of rice was deeply imbedded in a culture of racial prejudice and economic policies of imperial exploitation.

At the core of the anthology is an effort to understand the cultural dimensions of ecological change, and most of the authors focus on the production, distribution, and consumption of a specific commodity in order to understand these processes in larger terms. This is a type of methodology in environmental history that harkens back to William Cronon’s classic *Nature’s Metropolis* (W.W. Norton, 1991) in which he described the eco-cultural network of commodities that enabled Chicago to develop as a city. Yet the authors in the anthology do not follow the commodities in the British Empire to the city of London. In a novel way, they investigate instead the eco-cultural commodity frontiers of the empire’s periphery. Another important feature of the anthology is a focus on how commodities change the physical landscape and affect the importance of different climates. Instead of letting climate determine the outcome of their stories, the authors situate climate socially, politically, and economically to show the ways in which different climates represent possibilities for eco-cultural adaptation.

The articles in this anthology tell largely untold stories from regions of the world with a growing body of environmental histories. They represent an important contribution to the increasing literature on the networks of relationships between species and geographic regions within the British Empire, and between the empire and the rest of the world. The rich and engaging new material of this anthology may illustrate the state of novel research in the environmental histories of empires.

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