

Beattie, James: *Empire and Environmental Anxiety. Health, Science, Art and Conservation in South Asia and Australasia, 1800-1920*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2011. ISBN: 978-0-230-55320-0; 320 S.

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“...[I]mperial environmental history cannot be studied without recourse to considering together subtler ideas about environment, conservation, landscape, aesthetics and health.” (p. 3). So argues James Beattie in this forceful new study of those ecological calamities that he labels „anxieties.“ Focusing on South Asia and Australasia (Australia and New Zealand), Beattie claims that the trappings of modernity—urbanization, industrialization, pollution, migration, etc.—led to an increase in concern for the environment that contributed to the development of scientific bureaucratic institutions throughout the region.

The issue of health proved to be of primary concern to many of the nineteenth-century scientists who worked in India and Australasia. Particularly in tropical climates, fear of a general „miasma“ was in evidence. Miasma could mean many things—climate, fog, vegetation, swamps, all were potentially harmful to an individual’s well-being. As the author notes, „the long-standing European recognition that health depended on the interaction of environment and people, climates and constitutions, led to large-scale investigations of newly encountered environments through medical topography as well as monitoring by settlers of any change to their own bodies in response to environmental influences“ (p. 45). Tangential responses included the mass plantation of the eucalyptus tree, and the rise of the hill station as a recluse for Europeans during the hot months, which were seen as particularly dangerous. As such, healthiness in „the tropics“ rested on a resemblance to a European climate.

Urbanization led to further anxieties. Sewage filled the streets of cities across the region, and air pollution became problematic. Urban medical experts increasingly pushed beautification plans, with many believing „that modifications of behavior and environment

(such as through park making and tree planting, sanitation and increased personal hygiene) could help return... areas to their former state of healthiness“ (p. 66).

Halfway through the book, Beattie switches subjects, focusing on individual scientists, first from Scotland and then from Germany. After 1833, medical students at the University of Edinburgh were required to take a course in natural history; this gave them an advantage over other European students. The author claims that the „connection between natural history investigation, medical education, conservation and development“ (p. 116) made the Edinburgh-trained doctors particularly important to environmental anxieties in New Zealand. William Lauder Lindsay, to cite one example, urged for the creation of a natural history museum to study native plants, and argued that „the systematic economical, and complete development of...resources...can be effectively accomplished only by the aid of scientific observations and deductions“ (p. 116).

Beattie travels familiar ground when he turns to the influence of German foresters. Relying on the work of Gregory Barton and Brett Bennett (and more on Richard Grove than he would perhaps care to admit<sup>1</sup>), he describes the critical impact of India’s first three Inspectors-General of the Indian Forestry Service (IFS), all of whom were German. As he notes, „in India, German-trained scientists effectively developed the foundation of state forest conservation laid by Scottish-trained doctors, moving it into a far more professional footing“ (p. 123).

The Germans were replaced by the Americans in terms of influence, as Beattie turns his focus directly to deforestation and desertification. Colonial solutions for deforestation were directed away from the climatic and more toward the hydrological, with an increasing sense that scientific, government-run forest services were the only model for control-

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<sup>1</sup>Gregory Barton, *Empire Forestry and the Origins of Environmentalism*, Cambridge 2002; Gregory Barton / Brett Bennett, *Environmental Conservation and Deforestation in British India, 1855-1947*, in: *Itinerario* 32 (2008), pp. 83-104; Richard Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600-1860*, Cambridge 1950.

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ling the losses of forests. The IFS became the model for Australia and New Zealand, with reforestation taking on moral tones. The third Director-General of the IFS, Berthold Ribbentrop, argued that "a certain proportion of a country must be maintained under forest cover in order to secure the permanency of national progress and prosperity" (p. 161).

Of particular importance to New Zealand was a report on the Appalachian region of the United States. Beattie underlines two conclusions from that report that were especially germane: (1) that the loss of roots with deforestation eroded surface soils, subsequently leading to runoff, and (2) causing a rise in riparian flooding. As such, the study of hydrology superseded climate theory in Australasian deforestation research.

The author concludes with a fascinating look at the anxieties caused by shifting sands. As he perceptively points out, desertification had a fundamental effect on the way a nation or an area reflected upon itself: „Desert and spreading sands represented the antithesis of all that settlement promised. They were terrible, un-Christian, an evil to be remedied. Threatening not only settler economies, they also made a mockery of Christian injunctions to make land fertile, to turn land to productive use.“ (p. 177) Settlers took this symbolism to heart. Volunteerism, in the form of fencing and extensive planting, spread across Australasia. In 1903 New Zealand took this a step further, enacting the Sand-Drift Act. However, government initiatives proved largely unsuccessful. In north India, experimentation with the reclamation of ravines proved moderately successful.

If I have one critique of this insightful volume, it is the scarcity of people. One longs to see the peasant working in the field. What were his anxieties? How did she cope with the day-to-day calamities that she faced? Without individuals, the volume comes off a bit lifeless. Still, it may be unfair to criticize a volume for what it is not; rather, we should congratulate this book for what it is: An incisive study of a rarely researched, yet critical catalyst, to the rise of scientific bureaucracy in the British Empire.

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