The dodo's legacy

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Richard H. Grove

GREEN IMPERIALISM

Colonial expansion, tropical island Edens and the origins of environmentalism, 1600–1860

540pp. Cambridge University Press. £45.

0 521 40385 5

Richard H. Grove's scholarly peregrinations while researching *Green Imperialism* make Marco Polo look like a layabout. In the pursuit of his revisionist history of the origins of Western environmentalism the author has shuffled through documents from Tasmania to Tobago, Mauritius to Montserrat, with stops in Dehra Dun, Dominica, Pietermaritzburg, Quimper, Kew and, it seems, a healthy quorum of all points between. The preponderance of tropical islands on the research itinerary should not be taken as evidence that Grove is a scholar-windsurfer, but rather as testimony to his desire to restore distant and exotic places to their rightful place in the story we tell about the evolution of environmental ideas.

Contemporary environmentalists who cultivate historical sensibilities or who have worked through the reading list of an environmental-studies class are likely to name George Perkins Marsh, Henry David Thoreau, or perhaps Theodore Roosevelt, when asked to give the green pedigree. Pushed to provide an account of the rise of early environmentalism, few students of the subject would fail to tell a story of how mounting disaffection with Western industrialization sparked an increasingly radical and romantic relationship with nature. Grove would like to change the pantheon, and relocate it overseas, to the ecologically vulnerable tropical islands where European explorers, colonists and imperial agents fantasized, botanized and went about their hungry capitalism from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century. He argues that the writings of some of them – colonial administrators and naturalists like Pierre Poivre or Alexander Anderson – belong in the environmentalist's canon. The author wants us to believe that environmental ideas were born not as a result of smoggy metropolitan anxieties, but in the rain forests as offspring of the colonial encounter.

It is an intriguing and plausible thesis, which Grove characterizes (apparently without irony) as "the centrality of the colonial periphery": intriguing in terms of the ambitious revisions it implies; plausible, given the evidence *Green Imperialism* provides. Plausible too in a satisfyingly common-sense way. Islands are microcosms, monuments to the finitude of resources, they provide no frontier save getting back on the ship and setting sail. While the beckoning plenty of a continental interior fuels orgies of rapacious manifest destiny, islands are more conducive to meditations on isolation and precariousness. What geography could better lead to the realization that intensive agriculture, logging, hunting and mining could irrevocably transform a local environment? When the health of a colonial state depended on the steady revenues and stable colonies of such tropical islands, the prospect of environmental collapse rapidly became a preoccupation of forward-thinking colonial administrators, doctors and naturalists. As evidence for dangers of environmental carelessness mounted in the European colonial experience, and as that evidence increasingly found articulation in empirical, quantified, "scientific" form, systematic conservation policies followed; call it green imperialism, environmentalism before its time.

Drawing by Isaac Lamotius showing deforestation in Mauritius, 1677; detail

As Grove tells the story, islands were fertile ground for the emergence of an environmental sensibility, not simply because of their unique geography, but particularly because they were watered in the European imagination by elaborate fantasies about tropical-island paradises and utopic gardens. The orientalist pursuit of a lost Eden and mythologies of "blessed isles" combined to make islands places where wandering seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europeans expected to find nature in its purest and most noble form. Readers of Rousseau might well expect to encounter social paradises as well. These expectations sat very awkwardly with the abrupt transformations precipitated by intensive plantation agriculture, grazing and deforestation. While, in 1650, the island of St Helena could be considered a divine gift to sailors rounding the Horn, a gentle oasis of springs and fruit to replenish empty holds, by the 1780s colonial settlements, deforestation and desiccation had made much of the place a barren waste. While, in 1650, Mauritius could boast vast stands of coastal ebony, the curious dodo and a rich supply of a tasty land tortoise, by 1740 none of these remained. The need to resolve the tension between capitalist development and Edenic fantasy led to colonial conservation programmes motivated by more than simple fear of timber shortages.

In addition to attracting the attention of colonial officials, the precipitous slide from paradise to waste drew the attention of travelling naturalists, who recorded conditions and debated causalities. Instead of seeing the increasingly analytic, objectifying tendencies of Western science as inherently destructive to some preceding holistic and ecological world-view, as many commentators have, Grove points out that it was exactly the quantifying and empirical spirit of scientific observers that provided increasingly persuasive evidence for the extent of environmental change and explanations for its cause. Only when botanical knowledge became sufficiently encyclopaedic to identify unique local species did the possibility of anthropogenic extinction become a disturbing reality, indisputable evidence of environmental fragility, a human violation of the natural order with seemingly ineluctable moral dimensions. As climatic theorists provided convincing evidence of links between forest cover and climate change, environmental decay came to imply drought and illness. If the quality of the environment could be convincingly yoked to the health of the body and the body politic, then policies of conservation and responsible environmental stewardship were the only hope for a natural world increasingly seen (at least in a few places) to be under siege.

In tracing the intellectual currents feeding what he argues was an increasingly global awareness of environmental vulnerability, Grove leaves no source untapped: we are introduced to French physiocrats who made a moral necessity of a properly custodial relationship with the land, to Cambridge Newtonians who built climate theories out of experiments on atmospheric circulation, to Dutch botanists with a penchant for indigenous nomenclature.

The trouble is that "environmentalism" goes undefined for 229 pages, and then receives only a parenthetical and admittedly "partial" definition as "the safeguarding and nurturing of the natural order". What exactly makes that different from the "conservationism" or "forest protection" that appears in earlier chapters? Do any limitations on the exploitation of natural resources count as environmentalism? If not, why not? Without precise definitions or obvious continuity between past and present, Grove's "account of the origins of Western environmentalism" can feel more like a "compilation of things in the past reminiscent of what we now call environmentalism".

On the whole, though, what makes *Green Imperialism* a frustrating book is not that it is ahistorical but that it is ultra-historical. It is a book that only a historian could love. An important challenge to predominant ideas on timely issues – from ethnobotany to global climate change – the book unfortunately confronts readers with a non-user-friendly style that all but ensures that it will seldom be read outside a narrow academic community of environmental historians and historical geographers. A welcome contribution to the academic discourse around tropical islands, it is not the kind of book you would take to one.

Perhaps the highest virtue of *Green Imperialism* lies in the characters it resurrects from historical obscurity, characters whose artefacts, speaking across centuries, evoke a kinship with those who safeguarded and nurtured the natural order before there was a word for doing so. Individuals like Isaac Lamotius, the seventeenth-century Dutch botanist who executed a minutely detailed illustration of the deforestation of the coastal ebony-stands on Mauritius, in which a dodo peers out from broken stumps, the only known depiction of the bird in the little that remained of its natural habitat. Or the schoolteacher and "Acting-Botanist" on St Helena, William Burchell, who scribbled in his journal in December, 1807, that he looked on the fall of one of the giant native gum-trees "with superstitious concern, and the feeling of a fellow creature", because he alone had come to recognize that this was "sacrilegiously destroying the largest of the kind that would ever again be in the world". By the time others came to know this, it would be too late.

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