BOOKS: ENVIRONMENT

What Hath Nature Wrought?

Thomas R. Dunlap

Ted Steinberg wants *Down to Earth* to "change the way you think about American history" by showing you how "the natural world—defined here as plants and animals, climate and weather, soil and water—has profoundly shaped the American past." To do that he takes readers on a tour of American history, from the Indian-made landscapes the Europeans found to the tropical forests and polar icecaps our economy reshapes today. Steinberg, a professor of history and law at Case Western Reserve University, deftly summarizes much of the last 30 years of scholarship in environmental history and arranges the resulting stories into three periods. A short first section deals with the pre-industrial age: what the Europeans found and what they made of it with horses, plows, axes, muskets, and trade goods for the Indians. A second, longer part covers the great expansion of the 19th century. Steinberg shows how Americans used their new technologies to bring all the parts of nature, from land to buffalo bones, to the market and how the market shaped their thinking about nature. The last section tells how 20th-century consumer society processed and packaged nature on an unprecedented scale, and what that did to the land and to Americans.

Down to Earth is noteworthy for several of its arguments. Against the strong early current in environmentalism (and environmental history) that saw human interactions with nature in terms of emergencies and events, it emphasizes nature's constant presence, which shapes our lives and how we make a living. Against the common view of humans transforming some undifferentiated and static "Nature," it insists on the dynamism and variety of natural and cultural systems in pre-Columbian North America. Further, it points out that the benefits of building an American civilization did not go to an aggregation that we call "society" but to particular people and classes of people. The rich (no surprise) did better than the poor, but Steinberg points to a variety of now-abandoned strategies for survival. The interest here is definitely in the details.

Down to Earth
Nature's Role in American History
by Ted Steinberg
Oxford University Press, New York, 2002. 361 pp. $30. ISBN 0-19-514009-5.

Steinberg's eye for telling details, apt quotes, and interesting connections ensures that the messages never overwhelm the many stories. These range from the ways Native Americans shaped North American landscapes and the effect of disease on the Jamestown settlement (in the early years, its death rate was comparable to that in a World War II amphibious landing), through the Southern climate and cotton, the California one and fruit, and on to leaded gasoline, mountains of tires, and boatloads of trash. The author explores such byways as the slaves' role in the colonial South Carolina rice industry (they were the ones who knew how to raise the crop) and the effects of introducing municipal sewer systems (a lower disease rate and better summertime air, but less protein for the poor, because they could no longer let their pigs forage on the streets). He provides an ecological exposé of the meat industry that probably will not have the legislative impact of Upton Sinclair's work on sausage-making in *The Jungle*, though it ought to. Readers may not find every story compelling, but they will find many interesting ones. Unfortunately, they will have to rely on the notes for further reading because the book lacks an annotated bibliography or bibliographical essay.

In telling one story, *Down to Earth* leaves out another. Steinberg deals with nature as a material factor in American history and Americans as consumers. From the text, it is hard to see how Americans understood their land or that they cared about it except as resources. Frederic Church's painting of Virginia's Natural Bridge decorates the dust jacket, but the book hardly mentions American visions of nature or people's attachment to region or place. Although an ecological perspective frames the story line, little is said about how people understood the land. The text mentions 17th-century theories about climate, but passes over local knowledge, natural history as science and amateur pursuit, and the development of the science of ecology. Environmentalism's most radical contribution—translating scientific descriptions of humans' involvement in nature into definite moral tasks for individuals and society—appears only as the bland statement that a "sharpening of the links between everyday life...and its ecological consequences laid the groundwork for...a new moral framework, one that urged Americans to take responsibility for their actions with respect to nonhuman nature." The author glosses over the issue that brings readers to books like *Down to Earth*: the question, as Aldo Leopold put it in a 1946 letter to William Vogt, of "whether the philosophy of industrial culture is not, in its ultimate development, irreconcilable with ecological conservation." That issue, lurking in the background, should give an edge to readers' appreciation of Steinberg's account of how markets and commodification guided Americans in shaping and thinking about nature.

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BROWSINGS

American Sublime. Landscape Painting in the United States 1820–1880. *Andrew Wilton and Tim Barringer.* Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2002. 284. $49.95. ISBN 0-691-09670-8. Paper, Tate Publishing, London. £29.99. ISBN 1-85437-387-0.
An exhibit previously shown at the Tate Britain, London, and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia; at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 22 September to 17 November 2002.

This exhibit and catalog offer ample evidence of the influence of nature on the history of American art. The artists of the Hudson River School and their successors were inspired by landscapes where nature remained untamed. Their paintings often celebrated the awesome spectacle of wilderness and its indifference to humans. Many feature views of the mountains and waters of the Northeast, such as Sanford Robinson Gifford's *Mist Rising at Sunset in the Catskills* from the late 1870s (left). But the show also includes vistas of the Grand Canyon, Yosemite, the Arctic, and Andean volcanoes.