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## Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Environments of Empire: Networks and Agents of Ecological Change*  
by Kirchberger and Bennett

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## Book Reviews

*Environments of Empire: Networks and Agents of Ecological Change*. Edited by Ulrike Kirchberger and Brett M. Bennett. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020. 278 pp., \$29.95, paperback, ISBN 978-1-469-65593-2.

The publication of Alfred Crosby's *Ecological Imperialism* in 1986 had lasting impacts on the fields of the history of European empire and environmental history. Since its release, historians have examined how various biological forces aided and advanced colonial expansion across the globe in the modern era. Despite its enduring influence, however, the work is not without its blind spots. *Ecological Imperialism* is Euro-centric, outward looking, and too often overlooks the complex networks and social meanings of biological exchanges. This is the void that Ulrike Kirchberger and Brett M. Bennett aimed to fill with their edited collection, *Environments of Empire: Networks and Agents of Ecological Change*. The collection offers fresh perspectives on Crosby's work by expanding the geographic scope, adding nuance to the process of ecological exchange, and addressing notions of nonhuman agency.

The first section, titled "The Nation State and the Unpredictability of Nature," examines the role of national governments in shaping the process of ecological imperialism. The essays show how increasingly technocratic governments implemented new agrarian policies across their respective empires. The essays in this section also illustrate how the process of ecological imperialism was a primary force in the development of those bureaucratic and technocratic governments. This can be seen in Samuel Eleazer Wendt's essay that historicizes the development of new sciences and research specifically aimed at preventing invasive species from interfering with colonial resource extraction. Idir Oahes's research on French Mandate Syria and Lebanon tracks the transformation of colonial governance from romantic orientalism to state-organized intervention. Furthermore, the studies in this section examine how European and colonial populations viewed ecological imperialism. Take for instance Alexander Van Wiker's history of the failed implementation of Cuban tobacco seeds in late nineteenth-century France. The essay breathes new life into studies of ecological imperialism, showing how consistent failure to acclimatize the crop abroad drew criticism from the French public.

The second section, "Institutions and Professions," examines how networks of plant exchange and knowledge formalized power structures and created

new nodes of biological information. Semih Celik's essay on the first Ottoman natural history museum and herbarium in Istanbul challenges the "Westernization" narrative in the global history of science by demonstrating an established tradition of knowledge gathering within Ottoman society. Florian Wagner's piece on the influence of the Buitenzorg botanic gardens narrates a history in which the knowledge created in Dutch Java actually affected the implementation of European imperialism in other colonies. By shifting the colonial agrarian model from a Western, plantation model of farming to an Eastern, small-scale model, European colonizers harnessed independent indigenous farmers to promote resource extraction while creating a façade of a liberal and independent farming system. The last essay in the section, written by Carey McCormack, historicizes the codification of botany as a patriarchal science through an examination of Joseph Dalton Hooker. As a collector and director of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, Hooker purposefully excluded the sources of botanical information, eliminating indigenous botanists, colonial wives, merchants, and soldiers from the production of knowledge. What remained was an enduring perception that professional botany was highly individualistic, white, and male.

"Animal Agency," the third and final section of the book, examines the role of nonhuman actors in shaping various aspects of ecological imperialism. For example, Stephanie Zhenle studies how the unique habits of pygmy hippos in West Africa shaped the ways in which Swiss colonial scientists and indigenous hunters developed zoological collections in the late-nineteenth century and challenged the top-down efforts that scientists utilized to collect and categorize the species. Another essay by Jodi Frawley reveals the tangled relationship between colonists, oysters, and capital in late nineteenth-century South Wales. Frawley uses the concept of adaptation to explore how colonists, when facing oyster population collapse, did not necessarily reform their practices but instead shifted their approach to oyster cultivation in a way that often brought even greater ecological decline to surrounding systems. Nicole Y. Chilmer's compelling piece on the colonization of the Esperance Mallee-Recherche Bioregion of Western Australia by Brumby horses challenges traditional assumptions about invasive species and environmental decline. By historicizing the presence of brumbies in Western Australia, Chilmer argues that the presence of those wild horses probably preserved the mallee-woodland ecosystem by replicating practices of earlier herbivorous megafauna.

It is not always easy to gauge the potential impact of a collection of essays. The genre can easily fall into the trap of offering essays that are either too

specialized to find traction with a larger audience, or that simply lack the historiographical interventions necessary to shape future studies. Thankfully, neither of those issues affect *Environments of Empire*. Instead, readers are left with a range of new perspectives and methodologies that examine the varied aspects of ecological imperialism. Agricultural historians will find the collection especially helpful given that many of the essays focus on the development of colonial and modern agricultural practices.

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*Feeding the People: The Politics of the Potato*. By Rebecca Earle. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. 308 pp., \$24.95, hardcover, ISBN 9781108688451.

Rebecca Earle's *The Body of the Conquistador* (2012), a study of the way food shaped the "experience of colonialism," earned her an excellent reputation among food historians. Potatoes play a role in this earlier work, which may have inspired the author to launch the "Potato project." This project yielded the vivid essay *Potato* (2019) in the *Object Lessons* series, and now *Feeding the People*. The research project posed two big questions: how (and when) did the potato spread across the world? And why was the cultivation and consumption of the potato promoted? Although Redcliffe Salaman's *History and Social Influence of the Potato* (1949) and many other studies that followed addressed the history of the potato, *Feeding the People* adds new, unexpected, and stunning insights to our knowledge about the history of food. The author uses the spud to explore central concerns of historiography such as economic development, ideology, social policy, and nutrition. It would have been useful to provide the reader with a short survey of the historiography of the potato, so as to highlight all the relevant contributions of *Feeding the People*.

The book studies the way eating became part of modern politics since the Enlightenment, addressing *en passant* "our fraught relationship with dietary guidelines" that stresses personal responsibility in a neoliberal context (3). To achieve this, the chapters make a clear, logical sequence of strong arguments. Chapter One considers peasant potato consumption in Europe in the seventeenth century; Chapters Two and Three explore the way the potato was studied and integrated in the political economy of the eighteenth century; Chapter Four traces the tuber's worldwide spread up to today; Chapter Five investigates the debates about the potato in the nineteenth century; and the