

William Beinart, Karen Middleton and Simon Pooley, eds.

Wild Things: Nature and the Social Imagination

Cambridge: White Horse Press, 2013

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Wild Things offers a diverse collection of chapters on environmental history, ranging in coverage geographically from North America, Germany and Britain through Madagascar and Haiti, temporally from the mid-nineteenth through the early twenty-first centuries, and topically from hunting and wildlife, colonial and post-colonial encounters with nature, through German folk tales, geophagy and Cold War-era underwater laboratories. A major inspiration behind the title of this edited volume was Maurice Sendak's story of a young boy briefly ruling over and cavorting with imaginary beasts before returning to the comforts of home: *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963). Another was the Troggs' sexually suggestive hit song 'Wild Thing' (1966). With the implications of gender for environmental history applied thoroughly in only one chapter, the possibilities inherent in the latter point of departure remain underdeveloped. Nevertheless, song and story alike do evoke the enticing, attractive states of excitement that many of us so often associate with the wild – as well as our sense of difference from it – and it is a recognition, exploration, analysis and even celebration of these two spirits in unison that attempts, with reasonable success, to provide cohesion here.

For environmental historians, *Wild Things: Nature and the Social Imagination* will be most useful for dipping into and selectively reading chapters on topics of particular interest. The same audience will appreciate the somewhat provocative introduction, which contends that wilderness is not so troublesome after all – the editors argue it can be quite helpful and that it has been marked by diversity rather than uniformity – and that colonisers, scientists and all sorts of 'industrial or urban societ[ies]' in the twentieth century did not so much try to distance themselves from or dominate nature as they simply tried to get closer to it (p. 19). For other historians and scholars farther afield, *Wild Things* could be read cover to cover as an introduction to the practice and some of the major concerns of environmental history. Although the diversity here in terms of methodologies and topical foci could obscure underlying commonalities, the introduction will help attentive readers navigate their way through.

Wild Things is thoroughly illustrated with black and white and colour images as well as a smattering of maps and charts. A rather charismatic crocodile and snake vignette plays unifying motif on the cover and leads the way into major sections of the book (although not heralding the individual chapters). At thirteen pages long, the index looks to be functional (high praise considering the state of many an index). Each chapter has its footnotes and bibliography, and brief author biographies appear at the end of the book. The chapters are

organised into groups, the first dominated by ‘visual elements of environmental history’ (p. 6), the next by animal histories, and the last by a mixture of themes including forest history, ‘nature and national identity’, and ‘human beings and their existential possibilities’ (p. 18).

As with many edited volumes emerging from conferences (this one’s origin was ‘Wild Things: “Nature” and the Social Imagination’, held in October 2011 at St. Antony’s College, Oxford, in association with the European Society for Environmental History and the European Association for Environmental History, UK), the individual chapters do fall short of maintaining a clear unified purpose. There are few cross-references to show how individual authors see themselves engaging with the work of their fellow contributors.

The editors’ introduction, however, does present a clear argument in support of this combined package. The introduction is particularly good at providing historiographical context for what it identifies as the major themes of the book as a whole, and for the topics addressed in the individual chapters. Beinart, Middleton and Pooley posit that their book teaches the ‘concepts of wilderness, wild places and wild things as more positive, exciting and universal notions’ (p. 5) than they usually are acknowledged as being in the fields of American or European environmental history, or in African or colonial studies for that matter. Universalism rarely meshes well with the context-dependent particularism of most historical inquiry, such as the chapters in this book, and – beyond the introduction – the theme of universalism appears somewhat sporadically. This should not detract, however, from the consistently fine quality of the individual chapters when considered independently.

The editors additionally contend that these collected chapters demonstrate that ‘the natural world consistently found not only scholars, but [sympathetic] protagonists’ in the twentieth century (p. 2), such that popular culture and not just the productions of scientists and intellectuals mattered. With minor exceptions, the chapters do avoid scientists and intellectuals to instead attend to livestock farmers, movie directors, boosters and other ‘ordinary’ citizens.

Call me stodgy, but I was disappointed to see several illustrations credited to Wikimedia Commons, especially in one case where the archive that had made the digital image (of a photograph held in their physical archives) available online in the first place ideally should have been credited using its desired credit line. If nothing else, going to the archive or museum sites would have circumvented the notorious instability of Wikimedia content and links, while also circumventing the danger that Wiki contributors had gotten their metadata or copyright attributions wrong. This was not a universal problem. Most chapters (such as those by Halliday, Cornelius, Pooley and Allen, to name a few) followed exemplary image crediting practices.

All in all, the stated purpose of *Wild Things* is to encourage academic readers to view past human interactions with scenic landscapes, domestic animals, wildlife and trees only after first setting aside their usual, trusted scholarly

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lenses – especially those that focus attention on ulterior colonialist or power-grasping motives behind nature appreciation, or that stress simple continuations of colonial oppressions and stereotyping in the policies of independent, post-colonial nations. These grand themes are realised best in the individual chapter contributions of the editors themselves (Beinart's with Schafer on Hollywood films set in Africa, Middleton's on trees and nationalism in Madagascar, and Pooley's delightful piece on Nile crocodiles in South Africa), but they do appear here and there – and sometimes in quite 'positive, exciting' ways – in other chapters, too. Cornelius challenges us to see road building as a means of conserving nature along the Columbia River in Washington State. Halliday asks us to reconsider our lives with (and through) domestic livestock in South Africa. Derby attends to materialism and unites gender and landscape through Haitian *bonbons terres*. Allen reminds us of the all-but forgotten history of otter hunting in Britain. These chapters in particular, and the book as a whole, are well worth a look.

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