



The Broken Promise of Agricultural Progress: An environmental history

A review by Sören Köpke

Author: Cameron Muir
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Cameron Muir's work "The Broken Promise of Agricultural Progress" is an excellent example of what environmental history can achieve. He traces the development of agriculture in a particular region, Australia's New South Wales, from the 1840s to the end of the 20th century. In essence, it is a history of failed attempts; a story of changing attitudes and anxieties, of temporary fads and grand hopes, of conflicts and contradictions. New South Wales is not a land that lends itself easily to agriculture, yet Australians have time and time again tried to reap profit from this land through livestock, groundwater exploitation, and intensive crop cultivation.

"This place isn't romantic enough to write a book about", Muir quotes an unnamed National Park officer at the beginning of the text. New South Wales is an arid to semi-arid region and state of Australia, an unforgiving, hard environment.

Muir's work, however, is anything but dry. It presents a lively, informed account of agriculture in a dryland. The introduction connects the subject matter to other concerns of the environmental humanities research agenda, addressing questions of "ecological imperialism" (Alfred Crosby) or the "Slow Violence" (Rob Nixon) of environmental injustices. Although New South Wales is a specific territory that came into existence only through colonization in the 18th century, its history is deeply enmeshed with global history.

Muir does not only discuss agriculture, but also the way its ambitions are again and again frustrated by environmental conditions. He also weaves aspects like gender roles, racism, ideas on scientific progress and public

health into his narrative. The shifting imaginaries and attitudes to local "nature", be it in science or public opinion, take up a good part of the account. One-word chapter titles like "Hooves", "Wheat", "Dust" or "Cotton" structure the book. Indeed, chapters could almost be read separately. One pitfall of his work could be that it is too densely written. Muir's attempt to highlight the complexity and depths of each phase of agricultural development sometimes affects the clarity of his arguments. On the other hand, the brevity of the chapters also adds to the high readability of the book. Historical photographs, graphs and other source material also aptly illustrate the work.

"The Broken Promise of Agricultural Progress" already bears its conclusion in the title. Modernist expectations of the prevalence of human ingenuity over nature are frustrated. Always, the hardship of working the land connects to problems of water management, to the vulnerability of local ecosystems. Colonization, armed with Western science, produces dissatisfactory outcomes. This is an important contribution to the environmental history of modern agriculture, one that shatters the triumphalist perspective on "progress" that is so often brought forward.

Information about the author:

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