
Book Review

Ted Steinberg, *Down to Earth: Nature's Role in American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2nd edn, 2009), xvi + 368 pp., \$39.95 (pbk), ISBN: 978-0-19-533182-0.

Since Ted Steinberg's *Down to Earth* appeared in 2002 it has become the preeminent survey-level textbook on the environmental history of the United States. It was not, however, the first. That title belonged to Joseph Petulla and his 1977 work *American Environmental History*, and John Opie's hefty *Nature's Nation* also preceded Steinberg's book by some three years. But *Down to Earth* was the most accessible and arguably the most provocative of the group. So it is with the second edition, too, published in 2009. Changes from the first edition are minor: mainly the addition of a new final chapter and some brief material on organic food production and 'e-waste'. These changes add to a fascinating study of the many ways in which America's human history has been entwined with its natural one. Particularly useful is its emphasis on nature as an active agent in human history. The United States' environmental narrative is not merely one of Americans shaping nature, Steinberg argues, but also of nature shaping them—America has been much more 'nature's nation' than either its citizens or analysts have usually realized. My experience using the book with upper-level undergraduates is that they find it stimulating, but professional historians will learn much from it as well. Unfortunately, however, it gives short shrift to religion.

Much in *Down to Earth* is familiar to American environmental historians. The first chapters, for example, explore the causes of the Pleistocene megafaunal extinctions, Native Americans' use of fire as a management tool, myths about 'wilderness' and 'ecological Indians', as well as the importance of Enlightenment rationality and capitalism to the ways early Euro-Americans treated the continent's flora and fauna. Indeed, for Steinberg, the commodification of nature has been the single most important force driving human-induced environmental change in America—most of it negative, in his assessment—and he dedicates much of the second and third sections of *Down to Earth* to exploring its effects. The market revolution of the early nineteenth century, industrialization and the rise of agribusiness in the twentieth century, post-World War II consumerism, automobiles, highways and suburbs, and multinational corporations all figure prominently in a decidedly declensionist but convincing analysis.

Steinberg has an eye for the quirky and unexpected, and is particularly insightful in the chapter 'Death of the Organic City' (pp. 155-72), where he draws on Martin Melosi and Joel Tarr's work to explore the urban sanitation movement's role in destroying the agricultural connections between America's major cities and their nearby farmlands. He also brings into focus some previously neglected subjects, such as the environmental history of the Civil War (in 'The Great Food Fight', pp. 89-98), and the environmental history of Reconstruction and the New South. Sections on the organic farming movement, electronic waste, and peak oil add a sense of freshness and

timeliness to the book's closing pages. Most distinctively and valuably, Steinberg gives nonhuman nature—weather, climate, microorganisms, plants, animals—a co-starring role in the book. As the book's subtitle suggests, Steinberg's history makes 'the earth itself...an actor, a force to be reckoned with' (p. 7). He succeeds admirably, especially in discussions of the impact of disease on both Native Americans and European colonists (pp. 22-32), the effects of the Little Ice Age on colonial New England agriculture and westward expansion (pp. 47-50), and the role of geography and climate in rice and cotton farming in the antebellum South (in 'King Climate in Dixie', pp. 72-88).

Intellectual and cultural historians will likely want more, and those interested in religion will find little analysis of the ways religion has transformed nature, or how nature has shaped religion. Steinberg does include a brief, yet nuanced discussion of Native American spiritual practices (pp. 17-18), but Christianity and Judaism, not to mention Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and other religions, are entirely ignored. This may be because *Down to Earth* focuses so heavily on the market as the main engine of environmental change, and the author's strong materialist orientation may have led to oversights as well as insights. From the Puritans to John Muir to the modern evangelical Creation Care movement, religion has been an important influence on American environmentalism, and *Down to Earth* would be stronger had it incorporated the insights of religious historians and other specialists. Its failure to do so is a significant flaw in an otherwise excellent book. Yet *Down to Earth* remains the standard by which any environmental history of the United States will be judged, and a canonical text for the discipline.

Brian Allen Drake
Department of History
University of Georgia
bdrake@uga.edu