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Charles-Francois Mathis, Jean Francois Mouhot, eds. *Une protection de l'environnement a la francaise ?* Seyssel: Editions Champ Vallon, 2013. 356 pp. EUR 25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-2-87673-606-1.

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Environmental Protection in a Light-Green Country

Do the French have a particular approach to environmental protection? This edited volume sets out to provide a range of answers to this simple yet thought-provoking question. Based on a conference held at the Sorbonne in September 2010, under the auspices of the Association pour l'histoire de la protection de la nature et de l'environnement, the numerous chapters (twenty-two in all, plus two introductory chapters) mean that the volume is marked by diversity. It includes chapters on alfa in Algeria, the reintroduction of large predators onto French soil, nature reserves in Madagascar, debates over acid rain in the 1980s, and the religious roots of French environmentalism. Therefore, the volume is perhaps best dipped into, rather than tackled in one go.

But the volume does not lack coherence. As well as asking what is distinctive about French nature protection and environmentalism, particularly in comparison to Britain, France, Germany, and the United States, many of the chapters engage with Michael Bess's compelling and influential arguments in *The Light-Green Society: Ecology and Technological Modernity in France, 1960-2000* (2003). According to Bess, France has become a "light-green society" in which environmentalist ideas are widespread but shallow; "the result is a social order in which virtually every activity is touched by environmentalist concerns–but modestly, moderately, without upsetting the existing state of things too much."[1] It is noteworthy how the volume turns towards Bess and other Anglophone environmental historians for inspiration, rather than the approaches outlined by the *Annales* school or other French historians interested in the human-nature relations, such as Andrée Corvol.

Bess's arguments inform many of the volume's chapters. Mark Stoll's chapter, for instance, argues that the light-green society can partly be explained by France's Catholicism, which unlike Protestantism has placed less emphasis on nature conservation. So despite a long history of environmental thinking amongst French protestants, their concerns have not resonated with the wider French public (although Stoll does not consider how France's long history of secularism fits into the picture). Karine-Larissa Basset, meanwhile, positions French national parks as light-green institutions and Heike Weber suggests that the widespread use of urban waste products in agriculture up until the 1960s is due to France's strong rural identity, another point made by Bess.

Amongst the volume's authors, Lionel Charles and Bernard Kalaora provide the main challenge to Bess's light-green thesis by arguing that France is still the land of Cartesian thinking and that the French see themselves as more apart from nature than other nationalities. Moreover, they argue that ecology, with its conceptualization of nature as a dynamic process, has exerted little influence in France, meaning that the French do not conceive of nature as an actor or as part of social life. But as a whole, the volume does not challenge Bess's thesis. Instead, it confirms that environmental ideas have infused numerous aspects of French life and that the French have shown initiative in nature protection and environmentalism, even if political ecology has not overturned political structures and social norms.

The work of another Anglophone historian–Richard Grove's *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600-1860* (1995)–has exerted a clear influence over the volume's three chapters on nature protection in France's colonies, which all stress colonial environmental thinking, natural resource management, and the early establishment of nature reserves in the colonies. Hakim Bourfouka and Nicolas Krautberger show how the extension of a 1885 forest law in Algeria sought to protect alfa plants from indigenous and commercial exploitation in a bid to prevent desertification and thereby preserve the colony's wealth. Alfa therefore went from

being a plant used by Algerians to one mobilized by colonists. Although they show how it was in Algeria where the French state's desire for land met with the interests of certain actors (in this case foresters), Bourfouka and Krautberger do not assess the effectiveness of the alfa policy or how local people reacted to it. But their highlighting of the central role of the state dovetails with the findings of other chapters and points to one of the specificities of French environmental protection: the importance of the state. Yannick Mahrane, Frédéric Thomas, and Christophe Bonneuil, for instance, show how institutions with close links to the state, such as the Muséum national d'histoire naturelle, were heavily involved in colonial exploration. The Muséum produced studies of colonial environments to support the "rational" exploitation of natural resources and eventually orientated itself towards nature protection.

One of the volume's major strengths is its willingness to situate French nature protection within the international context. The Muséum national d'histoire naturelle offered an example of French initiative when it organized the first international conference on nature protection in 1923. In addition, France has exerted a strong influence over policies and practices in other countries, such as Lebanon and Italy, where the law of 1922 on the protection of sites (including those of "natural beauty") in the latter country was inspired by a French law of 1906. Luigi Piccioni's chapter on Italy highlights one of the contradictions of early twentieth-century nature protection: the desire to protect sites of national importance and value was often achieved in dialogue with ideas and laws in other countries. Anna-Katharina Wöbse's chapter makes a similar point and shows how European cooperation in nature protection broke down during the world wars and how French nature protectionists who had fought in the French resistance struggled to accept German nature protectionists back into the fold. Jan-Henrik Meyer picks up the theme of national/international tensions in relationship to French involvement in the European Union's environmental policies in the 1970s. On the one hand, France wanted to be seen as a leader in European environmental policy. But on the other hand, the Gaullist desire for intergovernmental cooperation rather than supranational policies meant that it resisted measures that threatened French sovereignty. As in other areas, therefore, France has played an ambiguous role in transnational environmental policies, institutions, and networks.

The question of French exceptionalism that informs the volume demands this transnational and comparative approach, and many chapters rise to the challenge. Some find that despite homegrown initiatives and innovations, France has lagged behind or copied the example of other countries, whether in protecting birds (the focus of Valérie Chansigaud's chapter) or combating urban pollution (the subject of Stéphane Frioux's). Others highlight striking similarities between France and other European countries. Heike Weber finds that in Germany and France incineration and composting of waste went in and out of favor and that both countries faced difficulties in deposing of the plastic packaging that characterized postwar mass consumer societies. In addition, based on his analysis of European Values Surveys, Jean-Paul Bozonnet finds that as in other countries, French support and interest in ecological issues comes in cycles, possibly due to waning media interest and economic cycles.

In conclusion, this excellent volume shows that nature protection in France has a long and fascinating history. Although the volume identifies some of the specificities of French nature protection and environmentalism, such as France's rural heritage and the important role of the state, its most valuable contribution is demonstrating how French nature protection and environmentalism emerged within colonial and transnational contexts. In addition, it convincingly brings to light the contradictions and complexities of French nature protection and environmentalism. As the editors Charles-François Mathis and Jean-François Mouhot argue, France is simultaneously a "land of innovations … and imitations" (p. 23). By highlighting the complexities and diversity of French nature protection and environmentalism, and its transnational connections, the volume constitutes an important contribution to the literature on French environmental history and provides new ways of better understanding France's light-green society.

Note

[1]. Michael Bess, *The Light-Green Society: Ecology and Technological Modernity in France, 1960-2000* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 5.

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