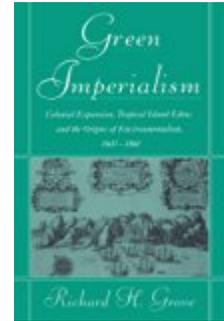


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Richard Grove. *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600-1860* (Studies in Environment and History). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. xiv + 540 pp. \$120.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-40385-6; \$45.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-56513-4.

Reviewed by Jane Carruthers (Department of History, University of South Africa)  
Published on H-Africa (February, 1996)



From its inception as a distinct branch of historical endeavour, environmental history has been dominated by the United States. The publications emanating from that country, many of them by distinguished scholars such as Donald Worster, Alfred Crosby, William Cronon and Susan Flader (to mention but a few), are extremely rich and varied and have contributed substantially to enlarging our understanding of the past. Nonetheless, while appreciating the great value of the oeuvre, historians outside the United States have not been able to relate directly to the north American environmental experience or even to utilize its insights in their own research. Much of American environmental history, for instance, does not apply to countries less developed and less industrialized than the United States, to those with a colonial background or even to those with different climatic conditions.

Consequently there has been a need for a book which gives detailed attention to other parts of the globe, in particular to those whose history has been shaped by imperialism. Richard Grove has now published on this theme and the appearance of *Green Imperialism* (in the Studies in Environment and History series) will benefit environmental historians everywhere. Originally based at Churchill College, Cambridge, and presently at the Australian National University, Grove has produced a work equal to the best that the United States can offer. The author diverts environmentalism from its modern North American focus by locating it in the colonial experience and by reminding us that environmental and conservation issues are not new. Some modern ideas have historical antecedents far back in the past, and even an issue as up-to-date as global warming can be prefigured

in the writings of Theophrastus of classical Greece who believed that human action could induce detrimental climatic change.

Grove has previously made notable contributions in his field: they appear in *Conservation in Africa: People, Policies and Practice*, which he edited with David Anderson (Cambridge, 1987), in "The Politics of Conservation in South Africa," *Journal of South African Studies*\* 15, 2 (1989), in J.M. Mackenzie, ed., *Imperialism and the Natural World* (Manchester, 1990) and elsewhere. His contribution to environmental history extends to his initiation and editorship of the new interdisciplinary journal *Environment and History* which came out in February 1995.

*Green Imperialism* (much of which is based on Grove's 1988 Cambridge Ph.D. thesis) is a fascinating and important book, but it is a difficult one to review because it does not fit easily into any pigeonhole. If there is a precursor for this imaginative work, it is—as Grove acknowledges—Clarence Glacken's *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought, From Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley, California, 1967) or perhaps the total histories of the annalist Fernand Braudel.

In terms of subject matter, sources consulted and underlying ideological impulses, *Green Imperialism* is extremely wide-ranging. The book's long sub-title, while perhaps unwieldy, is needed to indicate the central themes of the contents. The overarching argument which Grove develops by using specific examples is that the expansion of Europe has been critical both to the development of practical state environmental policy as we understand it today, and to environmental epistemology.

Grove explores the interplay between the metropole and the expanding colonial periphery and shows how current ideas about the natural world have evolved from these circumstances.

Using insights from postmodern literary theory, Marxian class analysis, resource economics and many other disciplines, Grove traces the origins of modern environmental concern—intellectually, culturally and practically - to European expansion in general, but especially to contact with islands and tropical biota. He explains the importance of islands in European culture, extracting information from Shakespeare, Daniel Defoe, Darwin, and also from the archives in places as varied as Lyons, Brest, Bangalore, Mauritius, St Vincent, Pretoria, Trinidad and Tobago, Cambridge and Kew. The importance of islands, as Grove explains it, is that being isolated and relatively small, they rapidly and dramatically demonstrated the mechanisms and processes of ecological change brought about by European penetration, thus generating theoretical enquiry about such matters and impacting upon environmental policy.

The book comprises eight chapters; the first is an overview, while the others analyze places as diverse as tropical India, St Helena, the Cape of Good Hope, Mauritius, and the Caribbean, relating their environmental histories to the aims and experiences of various colonizing and controlling joint-stock enterprises (English, Dutch and French) and later colonial states. These institutions are not elevated to powerful monolithic impersonal structures, because Grove evaluates organizational endeavour against the very real transformations which individuals have been able to make. It is both challenging and novel to have a scrutiny of the careers of hitherto little known company surgeons and embryonic naturalists and scientists working in different regions, and it is certain that *Green Imperialism* will stimulate other historians to work in this field. Moreover, this book will also

inform scientists and scholars of literature.

Some historians have considered imperialism to have been totally detrimental to colonial environments by disrupting pre-colonial ecologies and by aggressive resource extraction, but Grove's view is more nuanced. He sees the course of environmentalism as a two-way process, observing it not only from a colonial perspective but also in terms of how that perspective was shaped by the different climates and ecological regimes encountered by the colonizers. Much of what today is referred to as indigenous knowledge, Grove shows, was not rode over roughshod by colonizers, but indeed permeated western science. His evaluation of the influence of India on the science of Alexander von Humboldt is a case in point.

While unreservedly recommending this book, there were parts where it appeared that Grove was not altogether successful in integrating his arguments or of melding his wide assortment of ideas into a totally coherent whole. The short chapter on Stephen Hales is one such example, and there is no doubt that the conclusion is less splendid than the introduction.

Mention must be made of the author's facility in utilizing a remarkable diversity of sources. His understanding of the literature (in many languages) and his wide general knowledge are rare, and, in addition, he writes well. The bibliography is excellent and the interesting (sometimes long) asides in footnotes, entertaining and informative.

Essentially, Green Imperialism can be summarized as the history of how westerners have yearned for a sustainable environment, yet introducing to so many parts of the world so many of the factors which make that impossible. However, far from a 'doom and gloom' position, Grove shows how the interaction between people and environment can be surprisingly constructive and how our cultural history has been affected by it.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-africa>

**Citation:** Jane Carruthers. Review of Grove, Richard, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600-1860 (Studies in Environment and History)*. H-Africa, H-Net Reviews. February, 1996.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=297>

Copyright © 1996 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication,

originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).