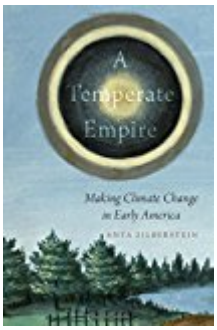
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Anya Zilberstein. *A Temperate Empire: Making Climate Change in Early America.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. 280 pp. $55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-020659-8.

Reviewed by James Bergman

Published on H-Environment (April, 2017)

Commissioned by David T. Benac (Western Michigan University)

The conception of climate instability in colonial America has tantalized us as the subject of introductions, articles, and early book chapters, from Karen Ordahl Kupperman's "The Puzzle of the American Climate in the Early Colonial Period" to James Rodger Fleming's *Historical Perspectives on Climate Change*.[1] The colonization of the Americas undercut the original conception of climate, based almost exclusively on latitude, and opened up debates about the real causes of climate. Likewise, the erosion of these concepts opened up the possibility that climate could be changed through agricultural improvement. Indeed, many colonists, including Thomas Jefferson, found that the American climate was becoming milder and less stormy. Such accounts point to a rich interplay between the representation of climate and its effects on human settlement, but its treatment was never sustained enough to do justice to the complexity of that relationship. It is especially gratifying, then, that Anya Zilberstein has offered an extraordinarily sensitive and textured treatment of the early modern discussion of climate and climate change in *A Temperate Empire*. She successfully combines the history of science and environmental history to provide an account that is relevant both to modern-day discussions about climate change and to early American environmental history.

Zilberstein's book comes amid what she calls a "spate" of efforts to situate the early modern colonial project in the climate of the Little Ice Age, and indeed, such studies as Geoffrey Parker's *Global Crisis* and work by Dagomar Degroot and Sam White have taken climate from a historical backdrop, a condition merely to be overcome, to a historical actor in its own right.[2] The atmosphere, these works effectively argue, should not just be used for atmosphere. Zilberstein's contribution to this literature is to situate these efforts in the scientific debates among elites about natural history. She finds that these debates were inextricable from the colonial project. Boundaries between biogeographic regions were often conflated with political boundaries. Networks of correspondence about natural history were often bound up

in political and cultural connections between elites on both sides of the Atlantic. And settler colonialism was often "naturalized" by describing the way different racial bodies were suited to different climatic regions (p. 95).

Zilberstein focuses on the American Northeast, an area that would now encompass New England and Nova Scotia, but whose boundaries were much more fluid and contested in the eighteenth century. This focus permits a rich treatment of the archival material she has amassed, which includes promotional material, government documents, correspondence between elites, and treatises on the environments of the different colonies. From these texts emerge an extremely open-ended and heavily debated understanding of the climate of different regions. This revolved around several different questions: Where was the "temperate" zone? Who could settle there? And were the climates of the American colonies becoming more "temperate"? Zilberstein traces the substantial instability of the basis for these questions, beginning with the question: what did it mean for a climate to be "temperate," anyway? Before the seventeenth century, this zone tended to center around the Mediterranean. With the northward movement of political power in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries came a northward movement of that zone to center around England and France. With the settlement of New England and the endurance of its harsh winters came a new valuation of a temperate climate among the colonial elites. The cold climates of Vermont and New Hampshire were not "stupefying," as some commentators believed. They provided "vigor," according to local colonial elites writing to skeptics across the Atlantic (pp. 34, 38). Likewise, John Wentworth, the governor of Nova Scotia, countered attacks by abolitionists that relocating escaped Jamaican slaves (maroons) in Nova Scotia was cruel—prevailing views on race held that African bodies were suited to different climates than white bodies—by stating that, in fact, the climate was temperate enough for *all* bodies. This was, in fact, part of Wentworth's campaign to convert his colony from one of English garrisons and absentee landowners to one of "useful and loyal settlers" (p. 117).

Zilberstein's book is beautifully written and enjoyable, as well as rigorous and insightful. She is sensitive to the categories of her actors as she carefully builds the world of colonial natural history and settlement. Those two threads are intricately woven throughout the book. Climate change was part of discussions about agricultural improvement and settlement, but the reverse was also true: the perception of climate change depended on the ambitions of the settlers. However, she is not afraid to read against the grain of her sources, as well. Studies by twentieth- and twenty-first-century historical geographers, for instance, have found that the climate was, in fact, not getting "more temperate," but getting colder (p. 2). This is especially important to note, as it allows her to point out that the perception of climate, and climate change, has historically been bound up in the logic of "improvement." To understand current perceptions of climate change, Zilberstein argues, we need to recognize this, as it has become that much more urgent, with the current consensus on climate change, that those sensibilities be reversed.

Notes

[1]. Karen Ordahl Kupperman, "The Puzzle of the American Climate in the Early Colonial Period," *The American Historical Review* 87, no. 5 (1982): 1287; and James Rodger Fleming, *Historical Perspectives on Climate Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), chap. 2.

[2]. Geoffrey Parker, *Global Crisis: War, Climate Change and Catastrophe in the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013); Dagomar Degroot, *The Frigid Golden Age: Climate Change, Crisis, and Opportunity in the Early Modern Dutch Republic* (New York: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming); and Sam White, "The Real Little Ice Age," *Journal of Inter-*

disciplinary History 44, no. 3 (November 1, 2013):
327–352.