One of the continued traps that historians of environmental thought and activism fall into is teleological analysis. For years, our scholarship was often looking for (and generally finding) the origins of contemporary environmentalism deep in the bowels of the twentieth, nineteenth, or even eighteenth century. More recently, folks (including this reviewer) have critiqued these definitions of environmental reform for focusing on the priorities and backgrounds of one particular set of activists—usually white, male, middle class. In response, new waves of scholarship have explored the long history of environmental justice. But even the best of this work still tends to look backward for origins, rather than understanding activists in their own time.

In *Nature’s Laboratory*, Elizabeth Grennan Browning has provided one of the strongest antidotes yet to these approaches. She plants us firmly in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Chicago and tries to understand how various thinkers, activists, and scholars understood the massive social, economic, and material changes convulsing this shock city, and looked to environmental reform as a possible solution. The result is a truly original and challenging study that helps us think through a world on its own terms, and thus see new possibilities and alternative paths for American environmental thought and reform over the course of the twentieth century.

Browning’s argument is that “the labor problem at the turn of the century was widely seen as the problem of the city. And the city, in the eyes of most Americans, was a completely unnatural place” (p. 4). The solutions developed by the subjects of this book all centered around solving Chicago’s, and really America’s, urban environmental problems. This led to the development of two major strands of environmental thought: “First, the conservation movement and the associated discipline of ecology; and second, the sociological and anthropological study of human societies as ‘natural’ communities where human behavior was shaped in part by environmental (social and physical) conditions” (pp. 4-5). This straightforward but subtle thesis brings together fields of
thought that many scholars have drawn connections between for years. But by using Chicago as a case study, Browning is able to interweave them and show how they were all responding to the most important social questions of the day, especially conflicts between workers and capital, and the place of immigrants and migrants, including African Americans, in the modern city.

The book is organized chronologically around a series of case studies of thinkers, activists, writers, and scholars. Browning begins with the Haymarket bombing and a discussion of the environmental thought of labor activists Lucy and Albert Parsons. Albert was one of four anarchists executed for the bombing, and his wife Lucy continued as a left-wing campaigner and writer for decades afterwards. Browning argues that her vision of anarchism was based around a naturalistic discourse, that a key part of building a new society was healing the rift that capitalism had opened up between working people and the natural world. This labor-centric view is contrasted in the next chapter, which examines Chicago architects and urban planners John Wellborn Root and Daniel Burnham. These two pioneering city builders had an organicist vision for using architecture in modern society, believing that good architecture and city planning could harmonize the divide between labor and capital. This would be on capital’s terms, of course, which is reflected in Burnham’s famous 1909 master plan for Chicago.

These first two chapters are a great example of the real strength of this book, which is reexamining and reinterpreting existing thinkers and events. The next section explores the environmental aesthetics of John Dewey and his work establishing the laboratory school at the University of Chicago. Then there is a chapter on Jane Addams and Alice Hamilton and their activism on labor and occupational health at Hull House. The book finishes with another two-chapter section on the work of Robert Park and the development of the human ecology school at the University of Chicago, and the Hawthorne experiments on worker productivity at the sprawling Western Electric telephone equipment factory in Cicero.

Seasoned urbanists and Chicago scholars might feel that this covers a lot of familiar ground, but by looking at well-known stories from a new angle, Browning is revealing important thematic connections. One of these is the social origins of so much environmental thinking. Dewey, Addams, and Burnham at the turn of the twentieth century, and later on sociologists Park and Horace Cayton and writer Richard Wright, were all trying to understand, and plot solutions to the class and racial conflicts that sat at the center of the challenges facing Chicago and American industrial society more broadly. Environmental historians have often had a weakness when it comes to understanding social questions, but Nature’s Laboratory puts these at the center of the study. And in the process, Browning helps plot a path through and beyond conservation and environmental justice, the two primary interpretative frameworks for understanding environmental reform efforts during this period. She ably shows that ideas about the human rift from the more-than-human world informed a conservationist thinking that could be revolutionary, reformist, or be deployed to justify the existing capitalist order. And activism that we might see as part of the origins of the contemporary environmental justice movement, like the work of Jane Adams, was part of a broad spectrum of efforts to make Chicago a more socially just and habitable place.

By putting us within the world of Chicago’s activists, writers, and academics for this important half-century period, Nature’s Laboratory is a major accomplishment. It is well written and quite focused, making it accessible to scholars from a number of different fields. If the book has any major weakness, it is perhaps too subtle in its arguments. But I would attribute that to the detail and care that Browning is giving these subjects. Also, scholars looking for a social history of labor radic-
anism and the environment might be a bit disappointed. Although Browning works to include the voices and perspectives of regular people throughout the story, this is primarily an intellectual history, focusing on the thoughts and writings of about fifteen people, albeit of a broad and diverse background. But the world this book helps us understand should be the new starting point for social and environmental histories of this period, especially those that focus on cities.

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