



TURKU BOOK AWARD

FOR *Gregory T. Cushman*

FOR THE BEST BOOK IN ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY PUBLISHED IN 2013 OR 2014

Awarded jointly by the European Society for Environmental History (ESEH) and the

Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society (RCC)

The Turku Award is not the first prize to be awarded to Gregory T. Cushman for his book *Guano and the Opening of the Pacific World: A Global Ecological History* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2014). The book has also received the

- 2014 Jerry Bentley Prize of the American Historical Association,
- 2014 Murdo J. MacLeod Book Prize of the Southern Historical Association,
- 2013 Henry Wallace Award of the Agricultural History Society.

Why then grant another prize to a book which has already been highly decorated? – and, moreover, a prize which, according to the prize statute, is preferably “given to books that focus at least partly on Europe and/or to authors who are affiliated with European institutions,” one may ask, because neither is the case? The book is neither focused on Europe, nor is the author affiliated with a European institution—yet.

The committee has both a short and a more elaborate answer to this question. The short answer is: From the many submissions for the 2015 Turku Award, Greg Cushman’s book stands out in many ways. It is a highly original, innovative, and groundbreaking contribution to environmental history, a role model both for future research and narratives in the field.

The extended answer starts with summarizing the essence of the book. It explores how the slimy and smelly avian excrement of Guano, bird shit in other words, has shaped the modern Pacific Ocean and changed the world’s relationship to the region. From the 1840s onwards, the production and commodification of guano developed into a driver of Western industrialization and the emergence of imperialism. *Guano and the Opening of the Pacific World* thus demonstrates how a seemingly peripheral activity—the harvesting of bird

excrement deposits from islands in the Pacific Ocean—became a force of global consequence from Asia to Europe on a scale comparable to the Black Death, the African Slave Trade, and the Second World War in world history.

The committee liked the book for many reasons: First and foremost, Gregory Cushman connects the local history of remote islands off the Peruvian coast to global processes of secular importance such as Peru's Blue Revolution and the Green Revolution in Mexico. With amazing sovereignty of facts and interpretive power, Cushman ranges through time and space, material and geography, connecting Latin America, the United States, East Asia and Oceania, and Europe, as well as the 19th and the 20th century into a coherent story. This is global environmental history at its best.

Second, the book is based on refined theoretical concepts such as Alfred Crosby's ecological imperialism which Cushman contests as a uni-directional process and then adapts to his material by altering it to "neo-ecological imperialism." He avoids, however, a lengthy discussion of such concepts, but rather elegantly integrates them into his narrative.

Third, Cushman conceptualizes environmental history as a cross-disciplinary field which draws upon history of science and technology, political history and international relations, material culture studies and post-humanist scholarship as well as post-colonial and subaltern studies. Environmental history in this sense is not only built on large bodies of scholarship; it is also able to talk to many different scholarly audiences.

The book is both a challenging read and one that challenges its readers. Cushman asks us to follow him as he follows guano around the globe. His complex stories could easily get confusing, were he not such a gifted writer, masterfully weaving together numerous threads into one colorful textile.

In sum, this book is a fascinating account of a "natural" substance which by its production, commodification, and use has changed not only the Pacific world, delivering on its title, but indeed altered world environmental history. Congratulations.

Dolly Jørgensen
President of the ESEH

Helmuth Trischler
Chair, ESEH-RCC Prize Committee

Award Committee 2015

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