

Thinking (and Feeling) Environment in Versailles, Summer 2015

Hot! That is the best way to describe the eighth, biennial ESEH conference in Versailles between 30 June and 3 July 2015. Such were the stimulating presentations and the meteorological conditions during those days in the shadow of the Sun King's chateaux. Within the theme of 'Greening History', nearly 100 sessions hosting some 300 individual presentations, roundtables and posters, and bringing together over 450 registered participants, all kept our blood boiling and brows beading. A handful of 'experimental' sessions could hardly outdo the groups that retreated outdoors in their conversations to seek shady trees and cooler air, lacking only tunics to complete their inquisitive appearance. Members of the ESEH Polar Bear club were satisfying more than a venerable tradition of seeking out a nearby watering hole between sessions, ultimately finding refuge this time in one of Le Roi's reflecting pools.

Understanding Nature-in-Flux was therefore the order of business, with 'climate' or 'weather' appearing as keywords in the titles of twelve separate presentations (and 'Greenhouse' in several others). A month later, *Le Figaro* called it the hottest July ever recorded, landing thousands in the hospital, although it was not deemed as deadly as France's record-breaking summer of 2003. What or who was to blame for this latest heatwave? How had previous societies dealt with cruel and unexpected weather surges and had such societies become better prepared to deal with them? Who amongst us was staying in air-conditioned hotels, and could our own hotel patterns be linked to nationality, creed or academic status? In searching for answers to these prescient questions, we realise that our field does indeed deserve the attention we give it.

ESEH-Versailles was designed to push the limits of an academic gathering, and it certainly reflected one of the most robust and wide-ranging conferences in the society's existence (judging from my own proud experience of perfect attendance). Delegates hailed from every continent, Antarctica included – since Christian Rohr, University of Bern, noted that he had recently traveled there for research. Sessions spanned an enormous range of topics spatially and temporally, to include the special treat of many pre-modern presentations, which are in much scarcer supply in meetings of our colleagues across the Atlantic. Food, leather, waterscapes, disasters, coral, microbes, forests, stamps, sewage and warfare were all shown to have historical agency, as were dictatorships, migration, justice, urbanisation, automobility and bestiality. In addition to a lively poster session and several plenaries, various 'experimental' sessions included a virtual stroll through Vienna's seventeenth-century waterworks, a theatrical performance of an anti-war movement during the Great War, an open conversation between activists and historians and a twenty-year retrospective

of *Environment and History*. In the tradition of engaging in a half-day field trip, conference delegates took Thursday afternoon to spread out across the gardens of Versailles and nearby castles and nature parks. The environmental history of the Louvre was wisely given a rain check, and proposed as a self-guided tour for another day, perhaps on a cloudy afternoon in January.

Martin Meiske took the Best Poster Prize with ‘The Birth of Geoengineering: Large-Scale Engineering Projects in the Early Stage of the Anthropocene (1850-1950)’; Dagomar Degroot won the ESEH Prize for Best Article in European Environmental History over the previous two years for “‘Never such weather known in these seas’’: Climatic Fluctuations and the Anglo-Dutch Wars of the Seventeenth Century, 1652–1674’, (*Environment and History* 20 [2014]: 239-273); and the ESEH/RCC Turku Book Award went to Gregory T. Cushman, *Guano and the Opening of the Pacific World: A Global Ecological History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

In taking this biennial occasion to discover new topics and meet new scholars, it came to mind that we really are curious about scholarship happening on the other side of the language barrier. Specifically, now is an important opportunity to promote a series of synopses of key books not currently available in English. While the Versailles conference displayed an impressive bilingual (and trilingual+) ability, and willingness, to explore Europe’s – and the world’s – growing *non*-English environmental historiography, the next several ESEH notepads will devote a few pages each to critically summarising important new books published outside the English realm. Informed language representatives are being asked to select a handful of recent books that the rest of the EH community would want to know about, especially those works that reflect ideas or trends in environmental history that go beyond the English mainstream.

French (in this case, from France) is therefore a good place to start, and Guillaume Blanc provides the following informative synopses of books that the rest of us should know about. His task was not merely to summarise but, first, to select the books to be highlighted and, second, to describe what is special or particularly noteworthy about each of them. In future notepads, we may even venture beyond European languages to see what is happening with EH in the rest of the world.

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Some insights into French environmental history: 5 recent books

French environmental history became firmly institutionalised in the 1990s. Following in the wake of the *Annales School* and its forerunners attentive to Braudel’s and Ladurie’s ‘histoire immobile’ and Duby’s and Wallon’s ‘histoire écologique’, the next two generations of historians of the French environment

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have continued to explore humanity's perceptions and modifications of the natural world. The first environmental historians of France, so-named, focused especially on early urban and industrial pollution, with the second generation turning to scientific governance of an ever-changing modern environment. Attention has also been given to various other subjects, including the environment's social relationships with institutions, materiality and idealism. The following selection of recently published books reflects these latest trends in French environmental history. Lastly, it should be pointed out that the publisher, Les Publications de la Sorbonne, has just launched a new book series, 'série histoire environnementale'.

Jean-Marc Moriceau, *Le loup en questions. Fantasma et réalité* (Paris: Buchet et Chastel, 2015; coll. 'Dans le vif'), 127 pp.

As an excellent addition to the genre of what might be called 'ecohistory', this book casts *Canis lupus* as a highly social animal. With 10,000 to 20,000 wolves purportedly killing some 10,000 humans from medieval times to the end of the nineteenth century, the Third Republic established hunting bounties to exterminate the predator and ensure the survival of people and their herds. Yet now, a century later, because some 301 individual wolves have returned to the French countryside, annually killing 8,000 farm animals, the Fifth Republic is now paying compensation to livestock producers for ensuring the survival of the wolf, now a fully protected symbol of biodiversity. Jean-Marc Moriceau traces the modern mechanisms of this moral and ecological shift, an ultimate sign of the divorce between city and country on whose behalf the ones living far from the wolf overrode the minority living alongside it.

Grégory Quenet. *Versailles, une histoire naturelle* (Paris: La Découverte, 2015), 224 pp.

This work adds an environmental dimension to the French scholarly tradition of *Lieux de mémoire* – realms of memory. From its birth in 1682 to its violent transformation in 1789, Versailles was the site of an absolutist metabolism: for royal hunting and constant regeneration of game; for gardens, water and a network of canals; and, to meet the needs of an established court, for flows of raw materials. But more than an organic centre of power, Versailles was also a negotiated place. By investigating the entanglement of social and environmental changes, Gregory Quenet clarifies the external limits of power. Indeed, the shaping of Versailles resulted in water scarcity and a resulting trophic cascade that needed to be addressed by a technical governance of nature, requiring environmental police and a concomitant set of requirements able to assert power over men and their materials.

Sebastian Vincent Grevsmühl, *La terre vue d'en haut* (Paris: Seuil, 2014; coll. 'Anthropocene'), 372 pp.

This publication recounts the history of the idea of a unified global environment. For Sebastian Grevsmühl, this saga began with the conquest of

Antarctica at the end of the nineteenth century, opening a new geographic era of ‘the closed world’. It then blossomed during the Cold War when the conquest of outer space fostered both the worldwide building of geodesic domes and, based on this same model, the architectural planning of space colonies. Accompanying and sustaining the emergence of a modern geopower, at first aerial and then satellite images completed the process of envisioning a global environment. This geopower, Grevsmühl believes, has since the Cold War relied on a political metanarrative that represents the earth as a whole. This global vision has given rise to a technocratic illusion and dangerous belief of scientific mastery over planet earth.

Rémi Luglia, *Des savants pour protéger la nature. La société d’acclimatation (1854-1960)* (Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2015; coll. ‘Histoire’), 432 pp.

The history of French nature protection movements is still to be adequately explored. This is the primary goal of this book that focuses on the *société d’acclimatation*. From 1854 to 1960, the reader follows professional and amateur members of the society, their relationships with representatives of the State across metropolitan and colonial territories and their transition of a utilitarian conception of nature to one that is more scientific and biocentric. Rémi Luglia then explains how, after the early twentieth century, these same views of nature resulted not only in the establishment of nature reserves, but also in *bona fide* ecological thinking. Such models and methods of ordering nature proved to be the precursors of the first nature protection policies launched by the Fifth Republic.

Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, Frédéric Graber, Fabien Locher and Grégory Quenet, *Introduction à l’histoire environnementale* (Paris: La Découverte, 2015; coll. ‘Repères’), 122 pp.

This introduction to the field is the first of its kind in France. Following an assessment of the narratives unique to environmental history, from the thesis of decline to the agency of nature, the four authors discuss several core themes of the field. With specific examples drawn from cross-national histories and historiographies, they look at early government control of resources, societal birth of risk and pollution, modes of nature’s production and consumption and global histories of both environment and climate. For sure, this compilation required choices: for instance, a science studies perspective is sometimes given greater weight than equally important cultural and political approaches. But this interpretation is also its strength: not only does the book offer the historical community a complex synthesis of a field, but it also invites its practitioners to a lively debate. Here is a twofold success.

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