



# Eco-Cultural Networks and the British Empire. New Views on Environmental History

A book review by Sören Köpke

Editors: James Beattie, Edward Melillo, Emily O'Gorman

Book title: Eco-Cultural Networks and the British Empire. New Views on Environmental History (344 pages, £ 81.00)

Year of publication: 2015

Publisher: Bloomsbury Academic, London and New York

ISBN-13: 978-1441109835

Throughout global history, empires have always tried to extort natural resources from the peoples and territories they had conquered and colonized. More often than not, these natural resources included agricultural products. The British Empire was no exception. Discussions on political economy, military conquest and political resistance are tried and trusted perspectives on the history of the British Empire. But imperial history is not only about exploitation and conquest. There are new and exciting ways of inquiry into global history, especially into environmental history.

The editors and authors of the volume at hand argue for the concept of "Eco-Cultural Networks." This open and innovative approach advocates an emphasis on interlinkages and exchanges. It looks at commodity chains, colonial institutions, and modes of producing knowledge about and gaining control over ecosystems and people. The book follows in the footsteps of Richard Grove's *Green Imperialism* (1995), a work that highlighted the role of natural scientists in the expansion of the British Empire.

The collection is divided into two parts, "Regional Eco-Cultural Networks" and "Local Eco-Cultural Networks." Several of the eleven chapters are of great interest to scholars of food culture and agriculture, while others, like Nancy T. Jacob's chapter on birds between Europe and Africa, and Kathryn M. Hunter's and Robert Peckham's accounts of hunting cultures, while in itself interesting, may not be as relevant to the field. The different chapters deal with single significant crops – like tea or rice – but also with sites of production, commodity exchange, and consumption.

One of the most vivid examples of Eco-Cultural Networks formed around a commodity is described in Melillo's "Empire in a Cup: Imagining Colonial Geographies through

British Tea Consumption." The British culture of tea, so emblematic of the United Kingdom's cultural identity, is tightly interwoven with its colonial heritage. Melillo traces the evolution of this obsession with tea, connecting it with the British colonial presence in Sri Lanka (then Ceylon), and the corporate policies of Lipton's Tea.

Sean Kheraj tells a local history of animal husbandry in Winnipeg. His description of Canadian cities as multispecies habitats, as places of urban agriculture, has a surprisingly modern tinge. Domestic livestock animals were brought over from Europe as part of the colonization process, but evolved in the "new world," taking part in the creation of new landscapes and livelihood strategies. The chapter reminds us how much introduced species contributed to the colonizing of imperial spaces.

Overall, the volume provides a diverse spectrum of narratives concerning the environmental history of the British Empire. Given the persistent weight of the Empire's historic influence on many of its former colonies, this is a great point of departure for further research into environmental and agrarian history.

## Information about the author:

Sören Köpke is a Doctoral Candidate at the Institute for Social Sciences, Technische Universität Braunschweig. He holds an M.A. in Political Science and English and American Studies from Leibniz University Hannover. He is a Managing Editor at the Future of Food Journal.