

Brad D. Lookingbill, *Dust Bowl, USA: Depression America and the Ecological Imagination, 1929-1941* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2001).

Brian Griffith, *The Gardens of Their Dreams: Desertification and Culture in World History* (Halifax, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing Ltd., 2001).

Brad D. Lookingbill's *Dust Bowl, USA: Depression America and the Ecological Imagination, 1929-1941* and Brian Griffith's *The Gardens of Their Dreams: Desertification and Culture in World History* are two very different books about the effect of desertification on societies. Both are concerned more with how drought affected human experience and the long-term consequences of these climatic events rather than environmental degradation itself.

Brad D. Lookingbill scrutinizes the different narratives produced by those trying to understand the dust bowl in the American Midwest during the 1930s. The dust bowl was one of the greatest ecological disasters that Americans have ever experienced. Since it occurred at the same time as the Great Depression, commentators at that time and afterwards have made close connections between the economic hardships facing the country and the plight of the farmers in the areas that suffered most from the drought. For those that lived through it, the dust bowl was an opportunity to reconsider the founding narratives that encouraged settlement of the region during the late-nineteenth century.

In one of the more illuminating chapters, Lookingbill shows how many residents in the states affected by drought believed that the dust bowl was divine punishment. The jeremiads produced by newspaper editors and other writers concluded that the dust storms and impoverished farms were not acts of nature, but acts of God. National commentators echoed this pessimistic view, seeing the dust bowl as proof of a fallen civilization.

Federal agricultural officials interpreted the dust bowl not as retribution for sins, but as evidence of a misguided agricultural policy. In speeches and pamphlets, they lamented the unplanned settlement of the region. They repudiated the frontier myth which extolled the hardy pioneers and the sacrifices the first settlers made to cultivate the prairies. Such unregulated settlement had turned the heart of the country into a barren wasteland. With careful planning by government officials, the region could again recover the bounty found by the first explorers in the region.

Lookingbill does a good job of studying the discourses surrounding this event. But often his writing is marred by awkward sentences and phrases such as "modernity dissolved contingency into an ideal continuity" (117). Cryptic passages like this and many others in the text are merely distractions.

Whereas Lookingbill analyzes the responses to a drought in the American Midwest during the 1930s, Griffith has the ambitious goal of developing a the-

ory of how desertification has led to cultural transformation in different parts of the world. Using the ancient civilizations of Egypt, South Asia, and China as his examples, he argues that desertification in these regions has given rise to dominating, patriarchal societies. Time and again, Griffith argues, the search for resources has led these societies to invade more hospitable and lush regions to bolster their power. In the final chapters of the book, Griffith discusses how ideas from desert cultures in the Middle East influenced the development of European culture through the Renaissance. He ends his sweeping study by speculating on whether future environmental disasters will lead to the rise of tyrannical regimes, particularly in dryer regions of the globe.

Griffith has read widely. I was impressed by his knowledge of the ancient history of Asia and North Africa and his ability to make unexpected connections. However, I doubted his general rules for desert history. There is no reason why a desert environment should give rise to a patriarchal society that overtaxes the landscape as Griffith states (11-13). Technology and social institutions play just as an important role in what sort of cultural norms emerge; the environment does not dictate the response any society will have to a given environment stress. His caution at the end of his book that modern day desertification of various parts of the globe might lead to the sorts of dominating societies he describes in earlier times seems ahistorical.

I am not normally one to criticize scholars for using non-academic secondary sources in their work. Still, I was taken aback by Griffith's use of some writers, like the popular T.V. nature documentarian David Attenborough. Surely Griffith could have found a more authoritative source for his discussion of desertification in the Mediterranean than Attenborough's book on the subject. Despite the length of *Garden of Their Dreams*, Griffith is forced to rely on a relatively small set of sources for each section of his book. Given the number of regions he explores and the vast time periods he covers, a more thorough study of the relevant literature is warranted. A more focused study on one country or region might have served him better.

Garden of Their Dreams is a provocative, but unconvincing, book. Griffith's grand theory of the role of desertification in world history requires a more nuanced approach to human and environmental relations. Like the environmental determinists of the early twentieth century, Griffith too easily sees the environment as the primary causal factor for cultural transformation. Environmental changes like drought can lead to social change. Yet the results of these crises are more complex and less predictable than Griffith allows.

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