TROPICAL IMAGINATION

Nancy Leys Stepan, *Picturing Tropical Nature*. London: Reaktion Books, 2001. Pp. 283. £25.00 HB.

By Peder Anker

Imagery of the destruction of rainforests should be familiar to anyone concerned with global warming as well as social and environmental problems in the tropics. This fascinating book situates current ecological and social fears of environmental degeneration in the context of changing Western perceptions of natives and tropical wilderness. It is a critical study well worth the read for scholars interested in the history of shifting perceptions of nature.

The importance of imagery in science has lately come to the forefront in historical studies. For example, at one prominent conference (resulting in *Picturing Science and Producing Art*, London, 1998, edited by Caroline A. Jones and Peter Galison), a set of well-known historians underscored the importance of aesthetic language and techniques of persuasion for both the arts and the sciences. Stepan alludes to the anthology in her title and seems to have been inspired by the conference volume in shaping this book. She argues that scientific as well as popular perceptions of the natural world are shaped by visual representations, and that consequently one must untangle their social, political and aesthetic codes in order to understand dominant past and present views of the environment and the tropics.

The book consists of seven loosely connected chapters focusing on the role of images in understanding Latin American nature. Some of the chapters are new versions of previously published pieces that Stepan has woven together with new material into a coherent whole. The discussion starts with Alexander von Humboldt's prints from his expeditions to the region and the widespread interest they sparked. Stepan situates the popularity of Humboldt's travel books in the culture of commercial travellers collecting and trading tropical specimens. This commercialisation depended on popularising tropical nature in the form of dramatic imagery, generally in travelogues with romantic or grandiose sceneries. With Alfred Russel Wallace's evolutionary perspective, Stepan argues, came a different

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set of imagery of the tropics, namely that of "the human misery that mastery of nature and the accumulation of wealth had produced" in the British Empire (p. 76). The juxtaposition between the magnificent Humboldtian nature, and the human misery caused by its destruction documented by Wallace, sets a historical tension that evoked environmental concerns in Europe for tropical nature and its people. Inspired by Richard Grove's *Green Imperialism* (Cambridge, 1995), Stepan highlights the importance of managerial debates about the tropics for the history of environmentalism.

The Edenic narrative of human arrogance and fall from grace was also important in the pictorial imagery of the tropical body. The visualisation of races and their alleged degeneration in tropical environments was the theme of Louis Agassiz's photographs of Brazilians. In her analysis Stepan uses Michael Foucault's perspective to unveil the language of oppression in Agassiz's photos. They "robbed a person of dignity and humanity" (p. 99), she argues. William James was a young field assistant to Agassiz, and some of the most interesting pages in the book suggest that his later psychological and philosophical work had its origin in his questioning of Agassiz's research on racial purity and degeneration due to miscegenation. Stepan continues with a discussion of the medical history of racial transformations in Brazil. It is an interesting story of how Brazil's racial mixtures became something of positive rather than negative value in the name of nation-building. Tropical pathology further serves as a contrast to images of the ideal human type. Medical historians have hardly discussed the role of images in tropical medicine. By looking at the photos Stepan presents one can understand why. They are quite gruesome, yet they do illustrate how disease portraits continued the Western angst regarding imagined and real tropical diseases.

Modernist architecture and design was to *avant-garde* Brazilians a key remedy to healthy living, and Stepan ends her book with a likeable chapter about the Brazilian landscape designer and artist Roberto Burle Marx. His project was to create an artificial landscape that responded to what was seen in the wild from a Brazilian point of view. His famous pavements and garden designs along Copacabana beach in Rio de Janeiro were meant to have tropical edge and yet be urban, clean, progressive and modern. Architectural critics of today's International Style, such as James C. Scott in *Seeing Like a State* (New Haven, 1998), often point to Oscar Niemeyer's design of Brasília as a prime example of failed modernism. Stepan provides some interesting nuances to this line of argumentation by focusing on the gardens Marx designed for that city. As an environmentalist and ecologist Marx tried to unite humans, nature, and the machine

into a harmonious balance in his work. The gardens were supposed to avoid the pitfalls of Western romance with natives and tropical wilderness, by designing them so that they would reflect a Brazilian modernist vision of humanity united with a healthily construed natural realm.

Stepan has done an excellent job of bringing to the forefront the importance of visual representations in tropical sciences. She also shows that imagery of tropical nature is embedded in aesthetic, cultural, and political language crucial for understanding the wider public's appreciation of rainforests and their inhabitants, or lack thereof.

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