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Imperial ecology. Environmental order in the British Empire, 1895-1945

Peder Anker. London: Harvard University press, 2001

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Most ecologists are preoccupied with their subject matter of flora and fauna and their distributions and interactions; few realize how and why the subject of ecology arose from its roots in botany and how and why it rapidly gained acceptance in the scientific and political spheres of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Anker examines these developments in six chapters that focus on the major players of the time, notably Arthur Tansley, Jan Smuts and their supporters.

Interestingly, the formulation of the founding ecological theory coincided with the final years of the British Empire; perhaps the most notable departure from accepted ideas was the inclusion of humans in this new science, thus questioning the view of people as being 'above nature'. Tansley's links with Freud and links between psychology and Tansley's mechanistic ecology are set in the context of academic rivalries at Oxford University. Similarly, Smuts' holistic ecology developed in tandem with his military/political career in South Africa. These rival approaches dominated ecological research agendas and influenced political policies on the management of people and resources throughout the Empire and firmly associated ecology with economics.

Anker captures the essence not only of the political and academic climates of turn of century Empire but also the personalities of the focal players and the exhilaration of defining a new scientific discipline. Engaging and illuminating, this book highlights the interrelations of politics and ecology in the past, a reminder that not much has changed in a hundred years!

A M Mannion

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