Dark Green: The Gloomy Side of Environmentalism

BY STEPHEN BRAIN*

PEDER ANKER. *From Bauhaus to Eco-House: A History of Ecological Design.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010. viii + 188 pp., illus., index. ISBN 978-0-8071-3551-8. $34.95 (cloth).

JACOB HAMBLIN. *Arming Mother Nature: The Birth of Catastrophic Environmentalism.* New York*:* Oxford University Press, 2013. x + 298 pp., index. ISBN 978-0-19-974005-5. $29.95 (cloth).

EDWIN A. MARTINI. *Agent Orange: History, Science, and the Politics of Uncertainty*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012. xvi + 302 pp., illus., index. ISBN 978-1-55849-975-1. $24.95 (paper).

REBECCA PRIESTLEY. *Mad on Radium: New Zealand in the Atomic Age*. Auckland, NZ: University of Auckland Press, 2012. xii + 284 pp., illus., index. ISBN 978-1-86940-727-8. $34.95 (paper).

The origins of environmental history, rooted in the environmental movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, imbued its pioneering works with an activist spirit that to a large degree persists today. Young historians gravitating toward the field likely feel drawn, at some level, to examining modern environmental problems and injustices from the "side of right." However, a thorough interrogation of any political movement or ideology inevitably reveals its less idealistic side, and the application of the insights of post-modernism to environmentalist positions has cast serious doubt upon any discussion of nature as it is "supposed to be," favoring instead analyses of how given interest groups prefer to construct it. As such, environmentalism, and along with it environmental history, has been relativized over the past twenty years or so,

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creating a new space for historians to examine the less appealing aspects of environmentalist thinking.[1] The four works considered here serve to illustrate this trend in various ways, each portraying a different dark side of environmentalism.

The book of these four that most directly takes on the still-popular conception of environmentalism as a moral force for good is Jacob Hamblin's *Arming Mother Nature: The Birth of Catastrophic Environmentalism*. Hamblin reveals a different and distinctly unappealing variety of environmental thought, one adopted by military planners of the Cold War era who sought to apply ecological insights when designing more effective attacks on the Soviet Union and other ideological foes. Hamblin describes the efforts of agencies like the United States Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Central Intelligence Agency, the National Security Council, and the President's Science Advisory Group to devise war plans that would upset the ecological balance of enemy states, thereby indirectly destabilizing their militaries, or weakening their resolve to fight. In addition, such planners also had to consider methods to protect their own ecologies from external attack, thus encouraging thought about environmental research that had nothing to do with wilderness, aesthetics, or the moral aspects of nature protection. Such plans included weather control, cloud seeding and disruption, leading possibly even to intentional climate and sea level change; biological attacks on humans and plants, especially agricultural crops; and chemical warfare, extending to mustard gas, arsenic, and defoliants like Agent Orange. Inventing and deploying these weapons meant understanding them, as well as their full ecological contexts. As Hamblin writes, scientists and war planners "found the prospects of such power over nature intriguing," and invented the terms "environmental warfare" and "living weapons" to refer to the complex of new military tools (138). Taken to its extreme, one NATO working group imagined a form of environmental warfare that could "attack essential links in various ecological chains," and "force the ecology of an enemy

1. A comprehensive list of works that draw attention to environmentalism's capacity for advancing the interests of the powerful while feigning selflessness would be too extensive to provide here, but the trend was initiated by essays and books such as William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1995), 69–90; Karl Jacoby, *Crimes against Nature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Douglas Weiner, "A Death-Defying Attempt to Articulate a Coherent Definition of Environmental History," *Environmental History* 10 (2005): 404–21; Shepard Krech III, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2000); and Roderick P. Neumann, *Imposing Wilderness: Struggles over Livelihood and Nature Preservation in Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

landscape to accept dependence on some crop or animal which cannot live at all in the homeland"—without a formal declaration of war or even without the targeted population realizing that an attack was underway (139).

Hamblin devotes most of his attention to the newest and most exciting weapons of the Cold War era: nuclear and radiological devices. As the long-term environmental damages wrought by these weapons became clearer over the course of the 1950s, after the inadvertent irradiation of the Japanese fishing trawler *Fukuryu Maru* and the International Geophysical Year of 1957–1958, the would-be builders of living weapons were forced, as Hamblin writes, to conduct synoptic environmental monitoring in order to more fully understand the ecological systems they hoped to disrupt. Some American analysts went so far as to contend that these weapons, even if used bilaterally, would be useful because they would hurt the Soviet Union, with its inflexible centralized system of command-and-control, more than the innovative capitalist West. Eventually, however, the American military command turned away from living weapons because of their relative inefficiency; it would be easier simply to use a thermonuclear device if one wanted to destroy the ecology of the Soviet Union.

While shedding light on an unfamiliar, chilling type of environmentalist thought, Hamblin nevertheless discerns a progressive narrative of collective learning. According to Hamblin, the close attention paid to global environmental conditions convinced Western military planners that humans were a cause of environmental change, and as a result they "were less interested in finding new methods of maximizing human death through nature and much more concerned about avoiding inadvertent destruction" (241). This narrative shift, coming at the very close of Hamblin's story, lacks the evidentiary proof found earlier in the book, and it runs counter to another contention from Hamblin's conclusion: namely, that the cataclysmic but ultimately inaccurate forecasts about impending environmental catastrophe from groups like the Club of Rome have served to strengthen the position of those who argued that ecological degradation is a manageable problem, if a problem at all. It may be too soon to draw definitive conclusions about the effect that environmental warfare had upon global environmental politics, but Hamblin has provided scholars of environmental studies with a thought-provoking book offering much to dwell on.

The theme of environmentalism's dark side, and the related thorny question of how to determine the existence and seriousness of environmental damage, recurs in Edwin Martini's *Agent Orange: History, Science, and the Politics of*

Uncertainty. The first two chapters of the book are dedicated to the military history of Agent Orange, documenting the origins of the decision to use defoliants in Southeast Asia. Martini is careful to show that the earliest proponents of Agent Orange, although clearly deluded in their belief that economic might and chemical superiority could effectively replace soldiers to project military power, did not know about the risks to human life and did not intend to create environmental hotspots where the herbicide was applied. Martini explicitly criticizes the use of Agent Orange on military and ethical grounds, but his primary aim is to examine the postwar attempts to determine Agent Orange's toxicity. Here, Martini employs the concept of the "politics of uncertainty," central to Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway's *Merchants of Doubt*, to analyze the efforts of Vietnam War veterans to receive compensation for medical maladies they believe are related to herbicide exposure.[2]

The politics of uncertainty, in fact, cast a shroud over the book as a whole. The reader is never quite certain whether Agent Orange exposure did or did not result in long-term health problems, and whether accountable governmental actors honestly or cynically pled that the environmental chemistry of Agent Orange was simply too complex to reach actionable epidemiological conclusions. The majority of evidence presented by Martini supports the position, as well as the sincerity, of those who denied medical benefits for Agent Orange exposure on grounds of scientific ambiguity. For instance, Martini suggests that the truth about the medical ramifications of chemical warfare in Vietnam resides "squarely in the gray zone that occupies so much space in the long history of Agent Orange," and that when trying to determine links between herbicides and chronic disease, "a good case can be made either way" (244). Moreover, he refers to the "dubious, unreliable, unsubstantiated claims" of the Vietnamese activists who seek restitution (245). That said, there are repeated hints that less honorable motives were at work among those trying to escape financial responsibility—for instance, when he talks about how "the American legal system is designed to reward the type of evidentiary uncertainty on which the chemical companies thrive, despite the fact that knowledge about dioxin and its effects on human health grew exponentially in the twenty years" between 1985 and 2005 (244).

Environmentalism's dark side emerges as a factor when Martini discusses, with discernible frustration, the growing list of maladies that qualify Vietnam

2. Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010).

veterans for medical benefits, a list developed not through the application of strict scientific support, but rather based upon the public suspicion of large corporations and an exaggerated perception of environmental risk. This list includes, for instance, Type 2 diabetes—a very common disease among Vietnam veterans—despite the very tenuous statistical relationship between diabetes and herbicide exposure. Perhaps the *reductio ad absurdum* comes when Martini discusses the "Blue Water" naval veterans, an advocacy group that published its own report claiming medical harm from herbicide exposure, despite the fact that Agent Orange was always sprayed over land. Although the proof for exposure amounted only to recollections of seeing an unidentified aerosol spray drift offshore over boats, and the fact that granting benefits to the Blue Water veterans would leave the door open to nearly all personnel who served in Vietnam during the war, their argument shares the "same fundamental weaknesses of most veterans' claims about Agent Orange": proving exposure and subsequent health problems is almost impossible (255). Yet this impossibility has not stopped veterans' groups from successfully lobbying Congress to expand benefits, and Martini links their success with the image of the Vietnam veteran as a victim of circumstance and governmental duplicity. The House Committee on Government Operations, for instance, published a report in 1990 entitled "The Agent Orange Cover Up: A Case of Flawed Science and Political Manipulation," although the historical record, as Martini shows, points to honest disagreement rather than a cover-up.[3] Thus a heightened perception of human vulnerability to environmental hazards led to a nonsensical allocation of resources; environmentalism acts in Martini's book as a paranoid ideology useful for glossing over inconvenient contradictory evidence, "using the language of conspiracy and cover-up to offset historical and evidentiary gaps" (150).

The capacity of environmentalism to mask self-serving, even self-deluding motives is further explored in Rebecca Priestley's *Mad on Radium: New Zealand in the Atomic Age.* Priestley challenges New Zealand's reputation, especially popular among Kiwis themselves, as an ardent environmentalist, antinuclear society. She demonstrates that New Zealand eagerly and consistently sought to construct a nuclear infrastructure until it became clear that New Zealand was

3. Martini's analysis of the episode leads him to agree with the conclusions of this report, submitted in 1986 by the retired army general John Murray to the White House Agent Orange Working Group: "Vietnam was not designed as an epidemiological laboratory. As a result, the data does not support a scientific cause and effect relationship between Agent Orange and Veterans' ailments alleged to it" (176).

not well suited for a nuclear industry. In other words, Priestley argues that New Zealanders made a virtue of necessity, adopting an environmentalist national identity only after the possibility of constructing a more profitable or powerful identity evaporated. New Zealand's decision to eschew military applications of nuclear energy, to adopt only peaceful nuclear technologies, and to avoid nuclear power production, uranium mining, and research reactors, "was not because of any ideological reasons, but because of a series of economic decisions" (252). By implication, New Zealand's principled antinuclear environmentalist stance emerges essentially as a posture.

Priestley, herself a native of New Zealand, traces the long history of nuclear politics in her country, highlighting the key role that New Zealanders played in the development of nuclear science, and underscoring the enthusiasm that Kiwis felt for the atom. In the first decades of the twentieth century, as Priestly shows, New Zealand welcomed the atom for its purported curative properties and its practical applications as an aid to shoe fitting and an additive to shoe polish and incandescent paint. In addition, New Zealand, as represented by scientists such as Ernest Rutherford, greatly assisted in the global effort to tame the atom and develop nuclear weapons. After World War II, the New Zealand corporations lobbied the government to subsidize uranium exploration and the construction of nuclear reactors, efforts broadly supported by the New Zealand press. (To what degree newspaper editorials reflected public opinion remains an unposed question in the narrative.) These efforts continued throughout the 1950s and 1960s, but when they proved unprofitable and New Zealand remained without an indigenous nuclear industry, the path was clear for antinuclear sentiment to take hold among the New Zealand public. By the 1970s, Priestley writes, New Zealand was "one of the few Western countries not to have some dependence on nuclear technology," and thus it was easy and flattering for New Zealand to take a principled stand against environmental degradation related to nuclear proliferation when nuclear threats were so remote and so few in the country profitted by splitting the atom (211). Priestley relishes puncturing the inflated, self-congratulatory reputation that Kiwis fashioned for themselves.

Environmental thinking as a vain and even cynical phenomenon likewise comes in for criticism in Peder Anker's *From Bauhaus to Ecohaus: A History of Ecological Design.* Anker explicitly contrasts the efforts of architects to bring ecological principles into their designs in the early twentieth century with the less fruitful but more self-consciously environmentalist approach to design that emerged in the 1960s. Anker celebrates Bauhaus architects, foremost among

them Walter Gropius, for their plans to integrate natural principles in the human landscapes they sought to create. "The structure of plans and of their biotic communities," Anker writes approvingly, served "as models for architecture and city planning respectively" in the 1920s and 1930s, and this impulse held the promise, although perhaps never realized, of more harmonious human habitations (15). The blending of nature with design language extended to typography and world atlases, creating cultural artifacts that sought to engender a "harmonic relationship between humans and the natural world" (67). In contrast, Anker characterizes the coldly technocratic architectural stylings of Buckminster Fuller (who emerges here as little more than a mountebank) as a dead-end for humanity, with principles rooted in catastrophic visions of the future requiring an authoritarian response.

The turn toward environmental catastrophic thinking, Anker contends, resulted in an architecture that imagined humans living in spaceships—spaceships escaping from doom—a dehumanizing vision. The cost of this turn was high: the subsequent "narrow focus on the circulation of energy and the efficiency of buildings," Anker argues, "came at the expense of a wider cultural, aesthetic and social understanding of architecture and the human condition" (129). Anker sees signs that more recent environmentalist architects have moderated their views somewhat, abandoning the spaceship metaphor while still striving to blend nature and art, but their designs strongly resemble those of Bauhaus. The intervening years were essentially lost.

These books, it should be noted, do not critique environmentalism so much as they target a certain strand of environmentalist thought that exploits fear, paranoia, and apocalyptic thinking. None of these authors suggests that environmental problems are imaginary, nor that humans need not seek solutions to these problems. The authors do, however, draw attention to the drawbacks of alarmism and its unpredictable consequences. Hamblin notes how "catastrophic rhetoric serves to undermine the credibility of climate science or environmentalists' goals," thereby strengthening the position of those who might suggest that environmental weapons might be used safely (262). Anker laments the lost decades when catastrophic environmentalism pushed architecture toward ugly structures. Martini worries that a generalized fear of pollution, unmoored from scientific evidence, can result in extremely poor public health policy. And Priestley finds the antinuclear fervor of New Zealand to be essentially mere fashion, one step away from conceit.

Taken together, these books help sketch a more nuanced picture of environmentalism as a phenomenon, moving away from the traditional focus on

nature protection by examining environmentalism's impact on the arts, international relations, and military science. Their work raises a number of troubling questions, however, and anyone interested in environmental protection must wrestle with them: To what degree does environmentalism reinforce preexisting power relations and provide a vehicle for people to advance essentially selfish claims? Can nuanced thinking about environmentalism as a social movement be "environmentally responsible" while acknowledging its complicated legacy and rejecting the unselfconscious perspective sometimes present in the works from environmental history's activist phase? Put short, did the introduction of relativism to environmental history undermine the very reason for its existence?