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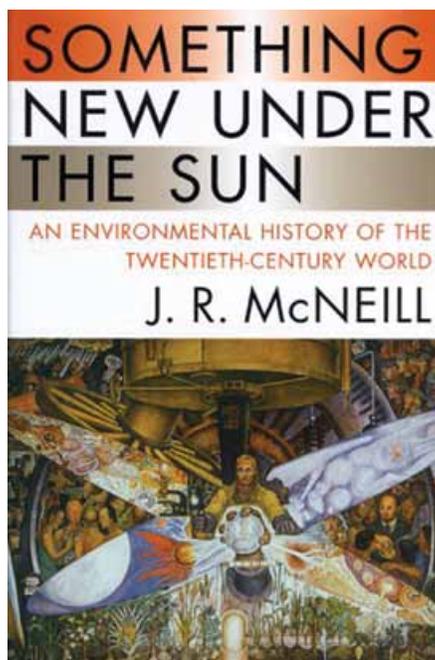
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Deep impact

A FASCINATING ACCOUNT OF 20TH CENTURY ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY AND THE HUMAN FOOTPRINT ON THE PLANET



**Something New Under The Sun:
An environmental history of the
twentieth-century world.**

J R McNeill

W. W. Norton & Company

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http://www.amazon.com/Something-Under-Environmental-Twentieth-Century-ebook/dp/B001YWN9YW/ref=tmm_kin_title_0

This book, which aims to present an ecological history of the 20th century, but which does more than that, is one of the first really comprehensive global environmental history books I've read. It is balanced, mostly neutral in tone, and has a historian's caution in interpreting past and recent events and prognoses for the future. While generally well written, it is a little less engaging in the beginning but becomes better towards the end.

The span is impressive: the book examines environmental impacts on soil, water, air, ecosystems, and biodiversity in a historical perspective. It tackles themes of economic growth, industrialisation, farming of land and water and ocean and the so-called Green Revolution, dams and infrastructure, democratisation, coal, oil, and energy, globalisation, changes in medicine and public health, and, of course, environmentalism itself. Its pages encapsulate an amazing range of items and ideas: from the history of chainsaws and tractors to cars and nuclear power, from the history of chemical fertilizers and leaded gasoline to chlofluorocarbons (CFCs) and greenhouses gases.

Most fascinating of all are the accounts of the people responsible and the nations underlying these changes, and how people and nations have changed and been changed by the environment. There are some interesting sidelights to read here. How Fritz Haber, the co-inventor of the Haber-Bosch process that brought us today's urea and nitrogen crisis, also spent World War I creating poison gas for the German military, which led his wife to commit suicide. How Thomas Midgely, the inventor of 'freon', the first of the ozone-depleting CFCs, and of the use of lead in engine performance, "had more impact on the atmosphere than any other single organism in earth history". Midgely later contracted polio and invented a peculiar contraption to get himself in and out of bed, which ultimately went awry and strangulated him to death.

The chapter on air pollution makes fascinating and compelling reading,

highly relevant in today's context. The author describes how a London fog of 1873 was so dense that people walked into the River Thames because they couldn't see it. How air pollution killed as many people in the 20th century as were killed in both world wars combined, "similar to the global death toll from the 1918-1919 influenza pandemic, the twentieth century's worst encounter with infectious disease". How, for people "... breathing Calcutta's air after 1975 was equivalent to smoking a pack of Indian cigarettes a day. Nearly two-thirds of the population in the 1980s suffered lung ailments attributed to air pollution, chiefly particulates." How "Coal soon signed its own death warrant as London's fuel by killing 4,000 people in the fog of December 4-10, 1952. Chilly weather and stagnant air meant a million chimneys' smoke...". McNeill writes about urban smog and indoor pollution from burning coal and biomass in the domestic hearth, adding chillingly how air pollution only compounded the environmental crisis brought by water pollution in the twentieth century. "Indoor air pollution, particularly in the poorer countries where biomass and coal served as domestic fuels, produced the same ailments and probably killed millions more. That said, it is well to remember that polluted water caused far more death and disease than did polluted air in the twentieth century."

Fascinating and manifold, McNeill recounts a range of events and issues of great environmental import: the Dutch transmigration of 1905 in Indonesia, the Soviets ploughing into the steppes, the Brazilian push into Amazonia, waste management in Curitiba and Tokyo and

Mexico, Peru's anchoveta collapse and the assault on the world's fisheries, the dam-building boom in the 1960s when at least one dam was being built per day on average in the world, the ecological footprint of cities from Delhi to Beijing and Singapore to others, the oil spills in Nigeria and the history of dependence on coal and oil, about medicine and public health and the impact of small pox and its eventual conquest until only "samples of the virus remain in freezers in laboratories in Atlanta and the Siberian city of Koltsovo" and so on and on. McNeill also has a quirky way of looking at world events. Writing about invasive alien species, he says: "So, in the tense Cold War atmosphere of the early

1980s, American ecosystems launched a first strike with the comb jelly and the USSR's biota retaliated with the zebra mussel. The damaging exchange probably resulted from the failures of Soviet agriculture, which prompted the grain trade from North America: more trade, more ships, more ballast water."

Writing about environmentalism and the global fixation on a single-point agenda of economic growth, he also draws on the Gandhi-Nehru divide, quoting Gandhi: "God forbid that India should ever take to industrialism after the manner of the West.... If an entire nation of 300 million [this was in 1928] took to similar economic

exploitation, it would strip the world bare like locusts.' Gandhi was exceptional: most Indian nationalists, like Jawaharlal Nehru, wanted an industrial India, locustlike if need be." And how independence from colonial powers did little to transform the trend of human impact on the environment: "In environmental matters, as in so many respects, independence often proved no more than a change in flags."

McNeill draws a brief history of the environmental movement and how it was fostered by effective communication of science and ideas, singling out the work of the author of *Silent Spring*. "Successful ideas require great communicators to bring about wide conversion. The single most effective catalyst for environmentalism was an American aquatic zoologist with a sharp pen, Rachel Carson (1907-1964)." Yet how has the movement fared in bringing change? McNeill writes: "When Zhou Enlai, longtime foreign minister of Mao's China and a very worldly man, was asked about the significance of the French Revolution some 180 years after the event, he replied that it was still too early to tell. So it is, after only 35 years, with modern environmentalism."

In the end, McNeill highlights how both ecology and history are highly integrative disciplines (as this book itself highlights) and that they need to understand and work with each other if we are to make sense of our environmental movement, past and future.

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THE 11 TYPES OF BIRDWATCHERS

TYPE 3: THE DARWIN

WHOA! SO THE BUZZARD RAISES ITS TAIL BUT DOESN'T POOP FOR THE 3RD TIME! MUST WRITE A NOTE...



TYPE 4: THE LINNAEUS

WHICH WOULD THOSE BIRDS BE, SIR?
Phalacrocorax niger on *Mangifera indica* and *Pycnonotus cafer* on *Ficus benjamina*. Oh! And don't miss the *Xenochrophis piscator* in the talons of *Circaetus gallicus* perched on *Acacia nilotica*.

