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Review: The Tropics and the Traveling Gaze: India, Landscape and Science

By David Arnold

Reviewed by Fred Mason

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Arnold, David. *The Tropics and the Traveling Gaze: India, Landscape and Science, 1800-1856*. Seattle, Washington: University of Washington Press, 2006. 298 pp., 8 illus. US \$50.00 hardbound. Recycled, acid-free paper.

David Arnold's *The Tropics and the Traveling Gaze* deals with the ways European perceptions of the Indian subcontinent, of the land and the landscape, changed over the period of the early to mid-1800s. As he points out, conceptualizations of the landscape, largely created in tandem through travel narratives and scientific writing, were far from benign. Changing visions of the Indian landscape from "Oriental," to later "wild and tropical," fed heavily into imperial policy and helped determine the direction of use and "improvement" of the land.

Arnold links together a number of disparate elements of culture and science in operation at the time. The author's wide-ranging scholarship demonstrates that romantic sensibilities, particularly notions of "sublime vistas" and the tropicality of temperate climates, constituted an integral part of travel in India; that travel in turn constituted an integral part of scientific endeavor in India, particularly for botany; and that science, particularly botany, constituted an integral part of Britain's imperial project.

This work is a solid contribution to the burgeoning historical literature on landscape theory, which considers the relationship that people have with a physical piece of land, with the environment, largely through exploring the influence and development of cultural interpretations and frameworks. Arnold describes how India was slowly made to fit a framework of tropicality, with notions of plenty that go with it, despite in some places being arid and semi-desert. This sense of "tropical India" also brought with it notions of death and disease, which helped people cope with, or at least understand with some familiarity the high mortality rate among Europeans in India. Furthermore, tropicality suggested wilderness and lack of human occupation, which helped erase the memory of the longstanding Indian presence in their own country, thereby enabling colonial dominance with clearer consciences.

The book also makes a good contribution to the history of science. In the last two chapters especially, the author describes a time of complexity and contradiction in science. "Networks of knowledge" established in the field of botany allowed colonial science to come to light in major cities in the British Empire and continental Europe, but created much tension between authoritative, metropolitan science, and colonial, more local forms of knowledge. Arnold's work also demonstrates how scientific endeavor,

pursued in typical “objective” fashion, had major implications in terms of the colonization and attempted subjugation of India and its physical environment. As shown in this historical case, the social and cultural implications of science are always worth considering.

The Tropics and the Traveling Gaze will obviously appeal to readers with an interest in colonial history, environmental history, the history of science and the history of South Asia. However, its readership could be much wider, including geographers, anthropologists, and anyone else interested in a well-researched take on landscape and culture. General readers interested in human relationships with the environment may find the early, more theoretical chapters hard going, but hopefully will find the effort well-repaid as they get further into the book.

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