

Review: Bad Water, Nature, Pollution and Politics in Japan, 1870-1950

By Robert Stolz

Reviewed by Ryder W. Miller

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Stolz, Robert. *Bad Water, Nature, Pollution and Politics in Japan, 1870-1950*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014. 288 pp. ISBN 9780822356998, paper. US \$24.95; also available in hardback.

Bad Water from Robert Stolz, Assistant History Professor at the University of Virginia, is a fascinating exploration of the history of Environmentalism in Japan from around 1870 to 1950, a time period between the end of the Age of the Samurai to the Reconstruction of Japan following the atomic bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. The book explores some interesting perspectives and philosophies, and tells a compelling intellectual story. From the lens of another culture, we can get a better idea here of how to understand and interact with nature. The author notes that some of the Japanese argued that nature was something we could neither transcend nor control. The book ends on a sad note mentioning that nature is also something that we cannot necessarily depend upon to save us.

Bad Water is full of ideas by mostly environmental figures in Japan. There are also references to western thought, in particular Darwin, Marx, and Deep Ecology. Japan struggled with waste from mining operations which made them rethink the way they viewed nature and politics. It also had those who had green Agrarian dreams and those who sought to understand and define man's role in the environment. In this history, the conceptualization of Nature as a provider changed to something that is at the will of our politics. The author argues, like Marx, that nature has been subsumed by capital.

The story presented does seek to make arguments that everybody in the field will not agree with or be happy with. Common terms may mean different things in different political nations with the author having his problems with the ideas of liberalism and sometimes Deep Ecology in these battles.

The author even writes:

"As mentioned, I also completely disagree with the exaltation of an untrammelled, unpeopled nature at work in Deep Ecology. This represents nothing more than the overcoming of the crisis merely in thought, in individual consciousness." (p. 202)

Stolz also attacks Liberalism:

"Throughout this book, I have tried to show in a similar way that a return to liberalism and the liberal subject, with its imagined autonomous bodies, while perhaps understandable in the immediate post war moment, was also a problematic solution to the environmental crisis". (p. 192)

One could imagine that he might be arguing that liberals in America and Japan should care about other living things instead of caring about "ideological intangibles" like wilderness. A memorable definition of a counter argument to a business sector that has exploited natural

systems without providing a remedy to these problems, as in the U.S., does not emerge, however. The book also quotes players who do not believe that personal decisions can change the situation we have created.

Sadly missing was a figure like John Muir on either American or Japanese shores. His idea to argue that nature should be cherished rather than exploited helped inspire the building of a National Park System where people could do so. The book does come across as rural in some places with some of the Japanese thinkers being convinced on some level that the mountains and rivers will always be there. We know now that this is not always the case.

This is a fascinating book for those who are interested in Environmentalism in other countries, especially Japan. The book provides good food for thought, but like many environmental books that are being published now, it does seem like *The Field* has lost track of the Preservationism on which it was founded. One can see what mediation with "the enemy" can cost The Movement. This book seeks to explain the Japanese actors who are part of a natural and political system that goes through redefinitions. It provides some interesting parallels between American and Japanese history, in some cases helping us to understand ourselves better. Missing, however, are some of the folks who pointed out that we need a definition of "Nature" with a capital in which things other than just ourselves have also depended upon, and in large part might have been better off without us. We have learned to argue to protect those things and The Land, and build parks in our history during that time period. That part of the story might inspire another book about the island nation.

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