

Devastation and Renewal: An Environmental History of Pittsburgh and Its Region. Edited by Joel A. Tarr. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2003. 312 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. Cloth, \$32. ISBN: 0-822-94156-2.

Reviewed by Frank Uekoetter

There are many ways to start a book on the environmental history of Pittsburgh. One can either collect documents of its devastating record, as James Parton did in 1866 prior to publishing his verdict on the city, which he summarized succinctly as “hell with the lid taken off,” or, alternatively, one can gather recent quotations celebrating Pittsburgh’s “Renaissance.” One of the less obvious ways to begin is with a stroll through Shenley Park, which was created in 1889 when the name “Pittsburgh” was synonymous with smoke and steel. Joel Tarr chooses the setting of this park to launch this collection of essays, whose central message is that urban environmental history is inherently rich and complex. Tarr stresses early on that industry’s role in the environmental history of cities has been ambiguous: while creating pollution problems, it has also actively contributed to their solution (p. 9). The concluding article, by Samuel Hays, written from the perspective of a “participant observer,” lets much of the air out of the inflated environmental self-image that Pittsburgh has adopted in recent years. Clearly, the city’s history presents a general picture that is much richer than the straightforward trajectory between “devastation and renewal” suggested by the book’s title.

This collection goes back to a conference at the Senator John Heinz Pittsburgh Regional History Center in September 2000. Most of the essays focus on pollution of the air, the water, or the land. In one, entitled “River City,” Edward Muller reviews past modes of water use in the city, a theme explored as well in an essay by Tarr and Terry Yosie on the long-term impact of system design decisions made around 1900 on water and wastewater treatment. Nicholas Casner traces acid-mine drainage, which he calls “the most pervasive and widespread water pollution problem in Pittsburgh’s industrial history” (p. 90). Acid-mine drainage is a fitting example of the environmental dilemmas facing industrial enterprises. In this case, manufacturers quickly realized that the acid

runoff was polluting the large quantities of pure water they were consuming during production, thus necessitating treatment.

Few cities are as closely identified with air-pollution problems as Pittsburgh. The image of a “smoky city” outlasted the actual pall of smoke that lingered over Pittsburgh’s downtown area, yet it is important to take a closer look at who defined smoke as a problem, during what time, and with what implications. Angela Gugliotta looks for answers to this question, thereby moving the field beyond simple juxtapositions of “early environmentalists” and “smoking business.” Unfortunately, Gugliotta treats the 1940s only in passing, though it was during this decade that the smoke-abatement movement was most socially stratified. The famous campaign against domestic smoke was conducted at the expense of the city’s poor, whose fate was systematically downplayed by the antismoke activists.

Lynne Page Snyder’s essay on the Donora 1948 air-pollution disaster seems somewhat out of place, since Donora lies thirty miles south of Pittsburgh, on the Monongahela River. When twenty people died in Donora, Pittsburgh residents concluded that the relatively mild impact on their city of the smog emanating from their neighbor to the south proved that their smoke ordinance was working. Snyder also overestimates the impact of the Donora incident on federal policy; as an explanation for the complex story of the rise of a federal environmental policy in the 1950s and 1960s, the influence of local history inevitably reaches its limits. A third essay, on Pittsburgh’s smoke-control movements between 1940 and 1960, reveals that the general improvement of air quality during that time was not the glamorous success story recounted in Pittsburgh lore. Sherie Mershon and Joel Tarr note that, instead, it was a classic compromise “between rising public expectations for a clean environment on the one hand and persistent public and business concerns about intrusive government regulation and compliance costs on the other” (p. 172). Finally, Andrew McElwaine presents an instructive case study on the development of Pittsburgh’s Nine Mile Run valley, which took place during a period when city planning was becoming increasingly the norm. After efforts to create a public park failed, the valley was used as a slag dump. In recent years, the area has been transformed into an upscale neighborhood—Pittsburgh environmental history in a nutshell! McElwaine’s essay is the only one to cover the environmental history of the

city's land, a reflection of current research priorities in the urban environmental history field.

Tarr and Muller's masterful introduction provides a useful overview of the environmental history of Pittsburgh. The concept of urban landscapes may turn out to be the ideal paradigm for the integration of a field as notoriously fragmented as urban environmental history, as it integrates the different facets of a city's environmental history while leaving enough room to study individual environmental problems. By working within this framework, the book may attain relevance for an audience that extends beyond scholars of Pittsburgh and other industrial cities.

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