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### **Triumphalism and Unruliness during the Construction of the Panama Canal**

“Unruliness” as a concept has many potential applications for environmental history, but it seems particularly useful for analyzing the confluence of imperialism, modernity, and environmental control. Scholars of imperialism have long examined aspects of rule and unruliness in human terms, but have only recently focused on environmental management as a central activity of imperial powers, particularly their limited or mixed success in their efforts to rule the more-than-human world. Environmental forces have sometimes been powerful in reshaping or compromising imperial rule and creating tensions between the ideologies and material practices of empire. Environmental historians would do well to attend to such unruliness. Historical examinations of environmental unruliness are also valuable at moments of high modernity, when environmental managers have been keen to engage in, hide behind, and justify their actions based upon narratives of environmental mastery. In these cases, unruliness seems a potent tool not only for challenging boasts about environmental conquest and for making a case that the more-than-human world was rarely quite so controlled as its modernist masters believed, but also for interrogating modernity’s penchant for splitting the world into discrete social and environmental categories. In this sense, as scholars such as Timothy Mitchell have shown, unruliness can be used to show how the nature-culture divide has itself been a product of, and a crucial strategy for, imperial and high-modernist environmental management. Recognizing environmental unruliness in history, then, is not merely to animate a nature that resists human mastery; it is to point out how such discrete social and environmental categories cannot contain or adequately describe material power.

The moment of imperial modernity for my research has been the construction of the Panama Canal, an engineering feat achieved a century ago by a specially created branch of the US government called the Isthmian Canal Commission (ICC), along with various subcontractors and a massive and diverse labor force. The US entered the new nation of Panama in the early twentieth century with a distinctive vision for imperial administration: the Canal Zone was less a colony or sphere of economic influence—though it did have aspects of both—than it was an engineering and public works enclave, a ten-mile-wide strip of imperial modernity meant to stand in contrast to its environmental and social

surroundings and to define its modernity by that contrast. Within the confines of that strip, the US canal commission was deeply concerned about whether they could control the tropical nature of Panama, particularly the distinctive threats to human health posed by “tropical fevers” such as yellow fever and malaria. Such concerns were not unique to this US errand in the tropics: European imperial powers also worried about the toll taken on the health of temperate peoples, and how they would control, develop, and rule tropical regions under such adverse environmental circumstances. The British sociologist Benjamin Kidd’s 1898 treatise, *The Control of the Tropics*, is a perfect example of this concern about the tropics as an unruly global space. While Kidd was convinced that the tropics held vast riches if the region could be developed to Western standards, he also insisted on “the innate unnaturalness of the whole idea of acclimatization in the tropics, and of every attempt arising out of it to reverse by any effort within human range the long, slow process of evolution which has produced such a profound dividing line between the inhabitants of the tropics and those of the temperate regions.” In the tropics, he noted, “the white man lives and works only as a diver lives and works under water.”<sup>1</sup> Tropicality was thus a powerful imperial environmental imaginary.

Nowhere in *The Control of the Tropics* did Kidd discuss the Panama Canal, but the book was written with a clear sense that “the American people, are, in their relations to the tropical regions of the earth, passing through a period of development which . . . is likely to profoundly influence the history of the world in the twentieth century.”<sup>2</sup> The US entry into Panama in the first years of the twentieth century was central to that “period of development,” and US Americans approached Panama with the same anxieties about how they would—or whether they could—master the tropics. As Kidd intimated, the construction of the Panama Canal was a critical early moment in a long history of US developmental modernism moving out into the rest of the world. It was a project utterly predicated on successful environmental management and a fortified environmental management state. Moreover, and along with the occupation of the Philippines and other new territories of the US empire at the turn of the last century, the construction of the Panama Canal was a classic case of the place of sanitary administration in imperial rule. The successful completion of the canal in 1914, and the public health administration that made it possible, proved to many that the anxieties of commentators such as Kidd were misplaced and that the tropics could be mastered.

1 Benjamin Kidd, *The Control of the Tropics* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1898), 30, 54.

2 Kidd, *The Control of the Tropics*, v.

The completion of the Panama Canal was accompanied by an outpouring of literature on the achievement, marked by what I call “tropical triumphalism.” In a remarkable flurry of books—dozens of them appeared in the 1910s alone—participants and commentators celebrated the United States’ achievement at Panama as a conquest of nature, and particularly of tropical nature. James Bryce, the British Ambassador to the US from 1907 to 1913, nicely captured this triumphalist wave of sentiment when he evocatively referred to the Panama Canal as “the greatest liberty Man has ever taken with Nature.” This Anglo-American triumphalism was thoroughly rooted in a discourse on how US administration, informed by the latest scientific discoveries and technological innovations, had mastered adverse environmental circumstances. Observers celebrated the triumph of modern US science and engineering, which would usher in a coming century of what the historian Michael Adas has termed “dominance by design.” They also crowed about the US piercing of the isthmus and their creation of a new passage to India, a geographical rearrangement that qualified US Americans as a new breed of geological agents. Perhaps most importantly, this triumphalism celebrated the US Americans’ apparent unlocking of the tropics to future development. As Bryce himself put it, echoing many other commentators, the completion of the Panama Canal, and particularly the successful sanitary administration on the isthmus, “has opened up possibilities for the settlement by Europeans of, and for the maintenance of permanent European population in, many tropical districts hitherto deemed habitable by their natives only. To the effect of such an example one can hardly set bounds.” This tropical triumphalism suggested that the completion of the Panama Canal was a moment of environmental mastery that would reverberate through what Henry Luce called the American Century.<sup>3</sup>

I have come to see the “tropical triumphalism” that marked the canal’s completion as one of its most important historical features.<sup>4</sup> In Panama it was a formative expression of a dominant modernist approach to nature, one that masked the incompleteness of US environmental mastery even as it naturalized the social and racial inequities built into the canal-building process. As we mark the centennial of the canal’s completion, it is a particularly important moment to recognize that the lessons US Americans took from Panama would carry through many other major environmental manage-

3 James Bryce, *South America: Observations and Impressions*, corr. and rev. ed. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1917 [1912]), 30, 36.

4 Paul S. Sutter, “The Tropics: A Brief History of an Environmental Imaginary,” in *Oxford Handbook of Environmental History*, ed. Andrew Isenberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 178–204.

ment achievements of the twentieth century—from the construction of the Hoover Dam through the hubristic embrace of chemical pesticides, to the various efforts to export environmental control as a hallmark of US-style development. Such claims of environmental mastery shaped the early field of environmental history in important ways. It was this rhetoric of tropical conquest that first drew me to consider this topic two decades ago, at a moment marked by another critical anniversary—the Columbian quincentennial—when many historians were avidly revising how we understood human conquests of various sorts, and when environmental historians were pointing to the environmental nature of those conquests. Early US environmental historiography formed part of this reconsideration of conquest as a process driven by ideological arrogance and adverse material environmental, as well as human, impacts. Two decades later, environmental historians have raised important questions about the nature of environmental modernity itself, questions that have reshaped my approach to the Panama Canal’s environmental history. Rather than just pointing to the dark underside of environmental mastery, and to the costs of environmental modernity, I have come to question its very logic in Panama. The tropical triumphalism of the US certainly contained a lot of truth: where others had failed, the US completed a canal across Panama, and to a large degree their control of the disease environment was a critical part of that process. But in the two decades since I first stumbled into this research, I have become more intrigued by Panama’s unruliness in the face of US rhetorical celebration, and more critical of how triumphalism sorted the material aspects of US administration into discrete categories like the natural and cultural, or the tropical and temperate.

Tropical triumphalism has acted to obscure a more ambiguous material environmental history of canal construction. The disease problems that US Americans often assumed to be essentially tropical were in fact problems that the canal project had a large part in creating—mostly because the various environmental disturbances of canal construction created ideal breeding grounds for vector mosquitoes while the social arrangements of labor reshaped the epidemiological dynamics of the isthmus.<sup>5</sup> Describing US sanitary achievements in Panama as a kind of tropical conquest glosses over the extent to which US Americans were scrambling to control a set of environmental and social conditions that they themselves were co-creating. Tropical triumphalism also skewed medical priorities in ways that downplayed major public health problems

5 Paul S. Sutter, “Nature’s Agents or Agents of Empire? Entomological Workers and Environmental Change during the Construction of the Panama Canal,” *Isis* 98 (2007): 724–54.

on the isthmus—pneumonia and tuberculosis—which US officials initially neglected because they did not seem tropical and did not threaten white US workers. Indeed, the rhetoric of tropical conquest generally missed how intertwined environmental and labor management were in US sanitary efforts at Panama. In terms of the US sanitary achievement, the Panama Canal was not a place of tropical environmental conquest but a space of hybrid environmental management. This was a lesson not easily rendered in triumphalist rhetoric, which required a discrete nonhuman nature that could be mastered by a superior culture.

In a broader engineering sense, this approach to seeing the unruly in moments of alleged environmental mastery encourages us to see the Panama Canal not as nature dominated by human engineering, but as a piece of infrastructure that mixes both. The anthropologist Ashley Carse has emphasized the incompleteness of the canal's 1914 realization, and by suggesting how much the canal has been a partnership between human engineering and the environmental services of the canal's watershed. Without discounting the important achievements of US sanitary officials during the canal construction period, we might similarly conceptualize the US sanitary program in Panama in such hybrid terms. To the extent that the sanitary program allowed those from the US—and the legions of West Indian, southern European, and other non-US workers—to complete the canal, it might justifiably be celebrated as instrumentally important. But to see it as a conquest or mastery of tropical nature is to misunderstand both the environmental and the social history of canal construction. In Panama, unruliness is thus a concept that allows us to escape the confines of the modernist nature-culture split and to see the unruly in hybrid or co-produced ecologies, perhaps as a defining part of them. Unruliness allows us to push beyond a basic notion of the “agency of nature” to see the more complex causative forces of the more-than-human world.

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