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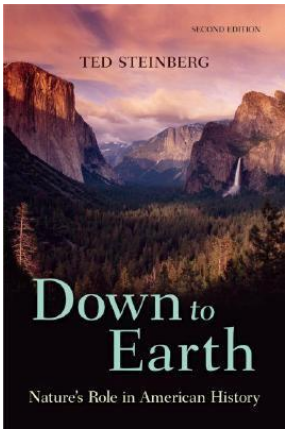
Down to Earth: Nature's Role in American History

Steinberg, Ted



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Steinberg, Ted. *Down to Earth: Nature's Role in American History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Down to Earth consists of sixteen chapters organized into three parts. A brief prologue challenges students to consider why US history textbooks begin the way they do—with the Bering Strait or Columbus or Jamestown—and introduces the basic geology of North America. The three chapters in Part 1, "Chaos to Simplicity," take the reader quickly from Paleoindians to the rise of the market in the early nineteenth century. The seven chapters in Part 2, "Rationalization and Its Discontents," focus on key issues in the nineteenth century, including southern agriculture and slavery, westward expansion, conservation, and Gilded Age urbanization and industrialization. The six chapters in Part 3, "Consuming Nature," move into the twentieth century and explore topics such as consumerism, environmentalism, and globalization. The layout of the book corresponds to Steinberg's thesis that there are three key turning points in US environmental history: the arrival of Europeans on American shores, Jefferson's adoption of the Cartesian grid as the logic by which the United States would be settled, and the "rise of consumerism in the late nineteenth century." He argues that "the transformation of nature into a commodity was the most important single force behind these shifts." In adopting

an openly thesis-driven approach, Steinberg provides a useful pedagogical tool.

(Text adapted from an H-Net review by Mara Drogan.)

Related links:

- H-Environment, H-Net Reviews, reviewed by Mara Drogan
  http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php
- Oxford University Press site featuring this book
  http://www.oup.com/us/catalog/general/subject/HistoryAmerican/

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