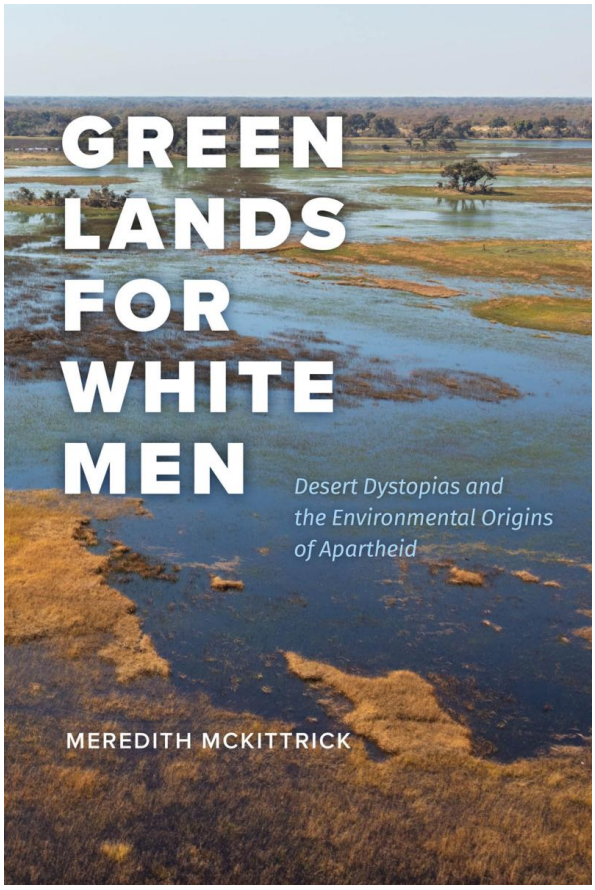
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Green Lands for White Men: Desert Dystopias and the Environmental Origins of Apartheid

McKittrick, Meredith

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Green Lands for White Men. Cover.

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How an audacious environmental engineering plan fanned white settlers' visions for South Africa, stoked mistrust in scientific experts, and gave rise to the Apartheid state.

In 1918, South Africa's climate seemed to be drying up. White farmers claimed that rainfall was dwindling, while nineteenth-century missionaries and explorers had found riverbeds, seashells, and other evidence of a verdant past deep in the Kalahari Desert. Government experts insisted, however, that the rains weren't disappearing; the land, long susceptible to periodic drought, had been further degraded by settler farmers' agricultural practices—an explanation that white South Africans rejected. So when the geologist Ernest Schwarz blamed the land itself, the farmers listened. Schwarz held that erosion and topography had created arid conditions, that rainfall was declining, and that agriculture was not to blame. As a solution, he proposed diverting two rivers to the Kalahari's basins, creating a lush country where white South Africans could thrive. This plan, which became known as the Kalahari Thirstland Redemption Scheme, was rejected by most scientists. But it found support among white South Africans who worried that struggling farmers undermined an image of racial superiority.

Green Lands for White Men explores how white agriculturalists in southern Africa grappled with a parched and changing terrain as they sought to consolidate control over a Black population. Meredith McKittrick's timely history of the Redemption Scheme reveals the environment to have been central to South African understandings of race. While Schwarz's plan was never implemented, it enjoyed sufficient support to prompt government research into its feasibility, and years of debate. McKittrick shows how white farmers rallied around a plan that represented their interests over those of the South African state and delves into the reasons behind this schism between expert opinion and public perception. This backlash against the predominant scientific view, McKittrick argues, displayed the depth of popular mistrust in an expanding scientific elite.

A detailed look at the intersection of a settler society, climate change, white nationalism, and expert credibility, *Green Lands for White Men* examines the reverberations of a scheme that ultimately failed but influenced ideas about race and the environment in South Africa for decades to come.

(Source: The University of Chicago Press)

Adapted and excerpted from *Green Land for White Men* by Meredith McKittrick, published by the University of Chicago Press. © 2024 Meredith McKittrick. All rights reserved.

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