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Guano and the Opening of the Pacific World: A Global Ecological History by Gregory T. Cushman (review)

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Book Reviews

Guano and the Opening of the Pacific World: A Global Ecological History. Gregory T. Cushman. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013. pp. xxii + 393, illustrations, tables, notes, bibliography, index. US \$99.00 hardback (ISBN 9781107004139).

The first time I whiffed the full significance of guano was courtesy of Eduardo Galeano. In *Faces and Masks*, the second part of his epic trilogy *Memory of Fire* ([1984] 1987, p. 217), the Uruguayan maestro evokes the commodity's cycle of boom and bust in one of his trademark vignettes. The year is 1879, the scene of enactment the Chincha Islands off the coast of Peru: "Pure shit were the hills that rose on these islands. For millennia, millions of birds had concluded their digestive process on the coast of southern Peru.

The Incas knew that this guano could revive any land, however dead it seemed; but Europe did not know the magical powers of the Peruvian fertilizer until Humboldt brought back the first samples. Peru, which had gained worldwide prestige for gold and silver, perpetuated its glory thanks to the goodwill of the birds. Europe-ward ships sailed laden with malodorous guano, and returned bringing statues of pure Carrera marble to decorate Lima's boulevards. Their holds were also filled with English clothing, which ruined the textile mills of the southern sierra, and Bordeaux wines which bankrupted the national vineyards of Moquequa. Entire houses arrived at Callao from London. From Paris were imported whole luxury hotels complete with chefs."

After forty years, Galeano concludes, "the islands are exhausted. Peru has sold twelve million tons of guano, has spent twice as much, and now owes a candle to every saint."

The episode that Galeano vividly conjures up is afforded extensive and illuminating treatment by Gregory T. Cushman, the outcome being an absorbing account of how guano and its myriad associations are yet another example of global agency and transformation inexorably at work.

Cushman begins his exposition of how "guano attained its place in fertilizing the world" (p. xxii) by recounting a creation myth from *The Huarochiri Manuscript*, a Quechua text dating from the early seventeenth century but which relates to events and circumstances of far earlier times. From the outset, he locates Latin America at the heart of the matter, even though it "usually escapes mention in works of Pacific history" despite the fact that "twelve of its twenty continental states have touched on the Pacific Ocean for at least part of their history." Similarly, Cushman emphasizes, the vast ocean that makes up one-third of planet earth "is also glaringly absent from Latin American area studies" (pp. 15-16). While other regions besides Latin America played a key role in opening up the Pacific world, Latin Americanists of all stripes, not just geographers, will find much of interest in Cushman's analyses. Peru, of course, figures prominently, but so too do Bolivia, Chile, and Mexico, to say nothing of that resolute

explorer, visionary thinker, and founding father of modern geography, Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859).

In a project as ambitious and eruditely documented as this – some of Cushman’s almost 800 footnotes have seven or more references each – there is much to relish and admire. For me, chapter 2 (“The Guano Age”) is the best of the pick. It begins with Humboldt’s descent in September 1802 from Andean heights to Pacific littoral, where “one phenomenon impressed itself on Humboldt’s senses more powerfully than any other during his time on the Peruvian coast,” namely “a yellowish-brown substance known among locals by the Quechua word *wanu*,” which “smelled so powerfully of ammonia that he erupted in fits of sneezing whenever he got close.” When he inquired about it, Humboldt was told that “as many as 100 barges ... sailed regularly to the Chincha Islands,” where their holds “were filled with guano mined from deposits thought to be at least fifteen meters thick.” Though “indigenous informants swore that these great mounds had been laid down by enormous colonies of marine birds” (p. 25), the *guanay* (Peruvian cormorant) and the *piquero* (Peruvian booby) the two most important of the “billion-dollar birds” (p. 169) in question, Humboldt dismissed their claims and speculated that guano “might have formed as a result of some primordial catastrophe, similar to the coal beds of Europe.” This erroneous conjecture aside, he nonetheless realized guano’s agricultural, food-producing potential and returned to Europe to champion it as a fertilizer second to none. Subsequent tests proved him right, marking “the beginnings of the world’s guano age” (p. 26), which lasted in Cushman’s schema from 1802 to 1884.

“If guano could make Peru’s coastal deserts bloom,” Cushman asks, “could it reverse the exhaustion of soils in other regions?” Believing such a thing not only possible, but a moral mission to be embarked upon for the good of all humankind, “handpicked disciples of Humboldt” sallied forth, “promoting his accomplishments” and “stimulating the international guano trade.” Where these advocates had most success was in Latin America. “Peruvian guano proved so powerful and profitable as a fertilizer,” Cushman informs us, “that it inspired a global rush to locate other similar resources and substitutes – including the vast nitrate deposits of southern Peru” and what was then western, Pacific-rimmed Bolivia. Peru saw in guano an eminently marketable resource, an “incredible geographic advantage” that “provided a means to engineer a modern nation” (p. 27). Off it went.

Cushman is even-handed in his assessment of the repercussions that the golden age of guano had on Peru’s development. To those who claim “that Peru was bled dry by foreign exploitation” (p. 53), he counters with the assertion that “the Peruvian state received 60 percent of the income produced by the guano trade,” thus enabling “Peru’s postcolonial rulers to expend vast sums of money to purchase political order, economic progress, social aggrandizement, and protection from invasion and disease.” Cushman, however, allows himself to ponder “was this money well spent?” (p. 54). Well, not entirely. He reckons that thousands of the “more than 92,000 coolie laborers” that Peru imported from China between 1847 and 1874 “ended up working as virtual slaves alongside convicts and debt peons on the guano islands.” In the 1860s, when the guano boom was at its peak, “the waterless Chincha Islands possessed a population of more than 3,000 and gained a notorious reputation for fights, robbery, murder, gambling, prostitution, alcohol, and opium abuse.” Yellow fever, not

mere “yellow slavery” (p. 55), “exploded into the worst epidemic of this sort in Peru’s history” (p. 57) after the first cases were recorded in the port of Callao. Nonetheless, the lives of “Peru’s guano plutocrats” and “guano age elite” unfolded comfortably, “the latest fashions from Paris and London” arriving to be enjoyed along with “the best French wines, brandies, and Havana cigars” (p.56). The good times for a lucky few, however, eventually drew to a close. Boom begot bust with the outbreak of the War of the Pacific (1879-84).

Cushman describes this little-known war as “one of the largest armed conflicts ever fought in the Americas,” a confrontation that prefigured “the massive wars fought over phosphate, petroleum, *Lebensraum*, and other resources during the twentieth century.” Its origins stemmed from Bolivia’s decision, in January 1879, to seize the assets of the British and Chilean-owned Antofagasta Nitrate and Railway Company to compensate for what the cash-strapped Bolivian government claimed were unpaid taxes. War was effectively declared on February 14, 1879, when “Chilean marines invaded coastal Bolivia to protect the interests of the Antofagasta Company,” which operated in the Atacama Desert, nominally Bolivian and Peruvian territory but over which Chile harbored “a natural right” on account of Chilean businessmen having invested in the region and Chileans having worked and settled there. Well aware that Bolivia and Peru “had signed a mutual defense pact in 1873 for just this sort of situation,” Chile unleashed an attack that saw its troops thrust north beyond the Atacama as far as Lima itself. A long and bloody conflict ensued, halted only by the Treaty of Ancón in 1884, the terms of which saw Chile appropriate the entire coastline of Bolivia and the Peruvian province Tarapacá, culminating in it gaining “sole control over the world’s most valuable source of nitrogen compounds” in addition to “half of Peru’s guano proceeds during the 1880s” (p. 73). The guano age in Peru was over. For Chile, the aggressive invader, a golden age (of sorts) lay ahead. Bolivia has been landlocked and struggling to find itself since.

“The guano age truly deserves its reputation as an ‘age of shit,’” Cushman concludes. Rather than “improving the world’s food supply during an era of profound environmental instability,” he laments, “Peruvian guano mainly served northern consumers of meat and sugar.” Instead of ushering in “an epoch of peace and prosperity,” one that Humboldt and his ilk believed possible, “guano and nitrates inspired wars and fueled the growth of inequalities between classes and nations” (p. 74). A “Pacific world” may have been opened up, but a more pacific world remains elusive.

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Postcards from the Rio Bravo Border, Daniel D. Arreola. Austin: University of Texas Press. 2013. Xix and 258 pp., maps, photos, notes, appendix, bibliography and index. \$40.00 cloth (ISBN 978-0-292-75280-1).

This book is a labor of love from one of the hemisphere’s leading U.S.-Mexico border scholars, Arizona State University geographer Daniel Arreola. In the Preface, Arreola recounts his twenty-plus year passion for collecting Mexican postcards, and subsequent transcontinental pilgrimages to postcard shows and dealers around the continent, from small towns to major cities.