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Review of *The Republic of Nature: An Environmental History of the United States* By Mark Fiege

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The Republic of Nature: An Environmental History of the United States. By Mark Fiege. Foreword by William Cronon. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012. xii + 584 pp. Photographs, maps, illustrations, notes, references, index. \$34.95.

This is not an environmental history of America. That would require several volumes, as William Cronon's foreword acknowledges. Instead, Mark Fiege looks at nine episodes of American history and tells us how nature—the environment—played its part in their unfolding.

The traditional definition of environmental history, expressed by historian Richard White, is the study of the consequences of human actions on the environment, and the reciprocal consequences of an altered nature on human society. In Fiege's fresh view, "humanity's freedom to think and act inevitably encounters the limits that nature imposes."

Each of his nine essays focuses on a specific historical situation, explaining it in terms of its natural setting, the limits imposed by nature and the environment, and the consequences of human invasion. This unusual approach has varying degrees of success in the telling.

The attempt to assign determining significance to natural elements in the first episode, focused on the Salem witch trials, is much less persuasive than in later vignettes. More convincing is Fiege's discussion of the struggle for American independence, a struggle deeply concerned with natural law and natural rights. His treatment of slavery revolves around the significance of cotton agronomy.

One of Fiege's best analyses of the interplay between environment and history is his account of the construction of the transcontinental railroad, including the importance of its course through the Great Plains. Here nature had to be overcome by a deadline, and men struggled against natural roadblocks all along the route.

Other chapters of *The Republic of Nature* take up Lincoln and internal improvements, the Civil War, the Manhattan Project, *Brown v. Board of Education*, and the national response to the 1973–74 oil shock.

Environmental history is a recent academic endeavor, but one that grows increasingly critical as our planet confronts the enormous upheavals brought on by human-induced climate change and global warming. Unfortunately, this is merely a peripheral issue here and lightly treated—a major deficiency in a work that purports to be an environmental history of the nation. Moreover, the arguments for placing nature as the centerpiece of hot political, social, and cultural issues such as slavery, witchcraft hysteria, and civil rights, for example, are often strained and less than convincing. Nonetheless, this book is important in its attempt to seek out a new and potentially exciting way of viewing American history through the lens of nature's influence. Historians should imitate and improve upon this attempt.

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