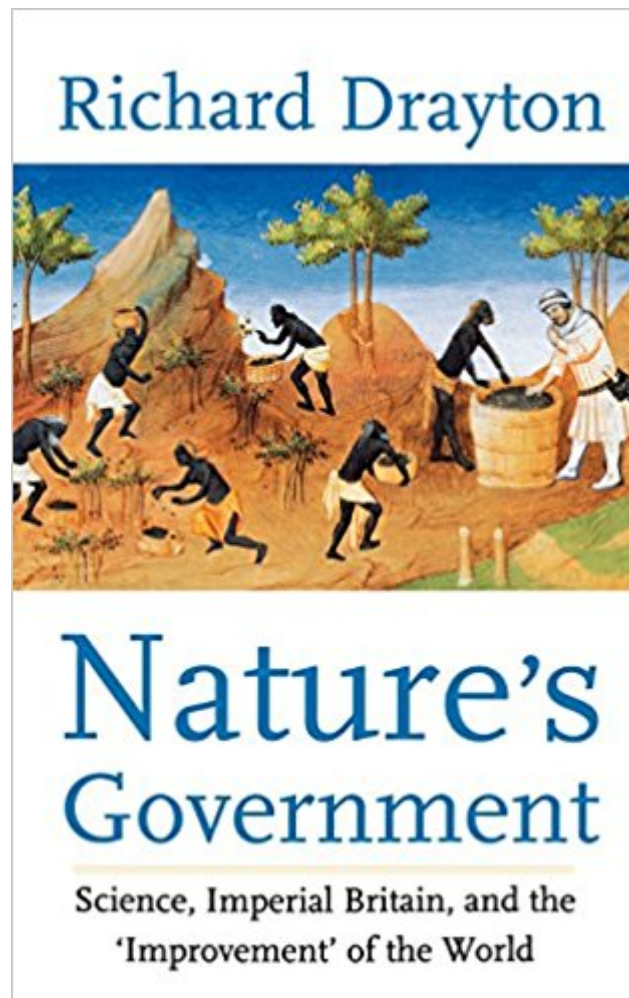




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Nature's Government: Science, Imperial Britain, And The "Improvement" Of The World



Synopsis

Nature's Government is a daring attempt to juxtapose the histories of Britain, Western science, and imperialism. It shows how colonial expansion, from the age of Alexander the Great to the twentieth century, led to more complex kinds of knowledge. Science, and botany in particular, was fed by information culled from the exploration of the globe. At the same time science was useful to imperialism: it guided the exploitation of exotic environments and made conquest seem necessary, legitimate, and beneficial. Richard Drayton traces the history of this idea of 'improvement' from its Christian agrarian origins in the sixteenth century to its inclusion in theories of enlightened despotism. It was as providers of legitimacy, as much as of universal knowledge, aesthetic perfection, and agricultural plenty, he argues, that botanic gardens became instruments of government, first in continental Europe and then, by the late eighteenth century, in Britain and the British Empire. At the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, the rise of which throughout the nineteenth century is a central theme of this book, a pioneering scientific institution was added to a spectacular ornamental garden. At Kew, 'improving' the world became a potent argument for both the patronage of science at home and Britain's prerogatives abroad. This book provides a portrait of how the ambitions of the Enlightenment shaped the great age of British power and how empire changed the British experience and the modern world.

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Customer Reviews

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Richard Drayton is associate professor of history at the University of Virginia.

Drayton's main point is to show the inter-relatedness of imperial control over nature and people. Natural sciences and political economy became related. That is, an understanding of nature's laws would help improve the administration of people and things/environment. Botany facilitated improvement ["a commitment to the reform of the world as a whole" p. 104], and improvement by the state justified empire. He seeks to show this by concentration on Kew as a place where science and expansion converged (even while sitting at the very heart of the center. "What matters is Kew as an agent and product of modern history, as a space in which ideas about nature, economy, and legitimate authority interacted with concrete policies over Imperial Britain's nineteenth century." p. xvii. "From the 1780s onwards, however, it became a de facto national collection, to which seeds and bulbs were sent from every part of the world. More strikingly, Kew became a source of plants, and of gardeners, sent outwards to Britain's overseas dominions." p. 108. He offers this summary: "Botanical knowledge, linked to the global transit of exotic commodities, had come to symbolize an imperium both rational and divine." p. 25. "Systems of classification, as much as sextants and chronometers, allowed Europeans to perceive themselves as the magistrates of Providence,

equipped by their knowledge of its laws with responsibilities over all of creation." p. 45. This knowledge justified their dominion. "British 'improvers' moved, at home and abroad, in the faith that they ultimately knew better than those on the ground. Their confidence depended, in part, on the assumption that they possessed a more profound understanding of how Nature worked." p. 90. Drayton wants to upset the idea of imperialism being simply the center imposing itself on the periphery, rather: "Over all, we should begin to conceive of European 'expansion' as the colonization of Europe by extra-European interests." p. xviii The periphery changed the culture at the center: "Tropical nature [and its defiance of categories framed by the likes of Linnaeus] had again overthrown a system too provincial in its dependence on Europe..." p. 19. Having superior knowledge justified exploitation of foreign lands despite natives, but it also justified conserving resources despite native demands when it suited the empire. These points are Drayton's most interesting for me (I could have used a lot more thinking about this-perhaps at the expense of stuff on personal politics in and around Kew). Drayton insists botany paved the way for empire in a number of ways: knowledge and expertise lent legitimacy to foreign intervention (the enlightened know best), botanists themselves were local agents of empire, and knowledge allowed for redistribution of plants for profit in the center and around the imperial periphery.

This is one of the most exciting books I have ever read. It connects so many different strands of intellectual history, British history, and world history into one elegantly organized story which works over four centuries. It is packed with original arguments and suggestions-- almost too many, at times it is difficult to keep track of all the arguments that are in play at the same time. Drayton has a gift for keeping lots of balls in the air. It is the kind of book which leaves you feeling smarter in a dozen kinds of ways. I thought the conclusion was pretty prophetic about the world of 9-11.

Drayton has penned a remarkable history and historical sociology of the planting of empire, science and of course, plants. A remarkable achievement, complemented by the high quality of production by Yale University Press. Highly recommended, even to those who might believe that they have no interest in either science or empire...deserves more than five stars!

Well, let's hope this is the first of many magisterial tomes from the pen of one of the brightest new stars of academe. Richard Drayton, a man who combines the wit of Mark Twain with the intellectual force of Aristotle, has produced a thrilling read that - like the writing of the great Alan Titchmarsh - reshapes the landscape of imperial history. Tremendous vistas. Striking and unexpected historical

contrasts. I recommend it strongly.

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