

Elinor G.K. Melville. *A Plague of Sheep: Environmental Consequences of the Conquest of Mexico*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967. Pp. 220. Paper \$33.99.

Elinor G.K. Melville, professor of History and Environmental Studies at York University who died in 2006, used her combined expertise in history and environmental studies in *A Plague of Sheep* to explain the unintentional negative environmental consequences of Spanish colonization and subsequent introduction of animals and diseases that were non-indigenous to the Valle del Mezquital, Mexico. Through the sixteenth-century history of the Valle del Mezquital [this valley?], Melville examined the shift from an agricultural economy to pastoralism that brought about the desertification of the land within five decades of introducing goats and other ungulates (hoofed grazing animals). The severe environmental degradation was the result of ungulate irruptions; the uncontrolled and exponential increase of the goat population that resulted in the destruction of grazing areas that the natives had used for crop production. Only when the herds overreached the natural carrying capacity of the land, did the number of goats decline to more sustainable levels. However, the soil erosion and the idea that the Valle del Mezquital is an arid, non-productive region were not reversed until recently. Melville's task was to understand which aspects of the unfolding environmental disaster were "natural" environmental changes and which were the result of human actions, induced by cultural traditions.

The landscape was not the only victim of the destruction brought about by Spanish colonization, but the native population also suffered devastating mortality rates as a result of foreign diseases such as smallpox, measles, influenza, plague and tuberculosis. The indigenous people suffered most among the age groups that were involved in the production and preparation of food, shelter, etc.

Melville includes a chapter on nineteenth-century Australia as a research model of ungulate irruption to illustrate a more recent "experience in colonization and the onset of exploitation of the natural resources by Old World gracing animals." (61) The comparison between Australia and Mexico is justified because both had similar landscapes and the data clearly shows the relationship between gracing and soil erosion.

Melville contends that the physical environment was crucial in the development of the political economy of New Spain. Nevertheless, she is careful to point out that the Spaniards did not intrude upon a paradise and to suggest such a consideration would have been an insult to the history

and culture of the indigenous population. In closing, she states, “by adding completely new and alien elements to the dynamics of social and ecological change, they (the Spaniards) unwittingly triggered a cascade of processes that resulted in a world as alien to the indigenous peoples as it was to the Europeans themselves.” (166)

Melville presents a well-documented model of environmental history that demonstrates the consequences to both land and population resulting from the introduction of non-indigenous microbes, plants, and animals to the New World. However, the abundant utilization of statistical data could cause readers to lose sight of her argument that before the incursion of the Europeans to the New World, “the land was fertile, densely populated, and a complex agricultural mosaic composed of extensive croplands, woodlands, and native grasslands, but with the Europeans came a decline of flora and fauna, death to natives and a disruption of a way of life for the native population.” (31) Melville’s scientific approach makes her work most suitable to scholarly readers such as anthropologists, sociologists, environmentalists and biologists. Historians will find her work valuable because it addresses the environmental impact of colonization.

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Philip Otterness. *Becoming German: The 1709 Palatine Migration to New York*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2004. Pp. 235. Paper \$17.95.

In *Becoming German*, Philip Otterness tells the story of the Palatines 1709 migration from the German southwest to New York. Otterness analyzes the push and pull factors which led first the migrants to London and then to America. It is a micro-history that examines a single immigrant group. The author argues that a German ethnic identity formed among the Palatines in the American colonial world. The first three chapters analyze the Palatines' journey from the German southwest to London. The next four chapters examine their struggles in the Mohawk Valley.

The 1709 Palatine’s migration began when more than fifteen thousand people fled the southwest German territories and Switzerland for London. Otterness uses immigrants' petitions to argue that poverty, the unstable economy, and propaganda were the main causes for leaving. The most