

BOOK REVIEW

Back to the Garden: Nature and the Mediterranean World from Prehistory to the Present. By JAMES H. S. MCGREGOR. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015. Pp. xii + 353. Hardcover, \$38.00. ISBN 978-0-300-19746-4.

This was a difficult book for a classicist to review. Classicists, for the most part, write books dealing with relatively narrow perspectives. Even if the topic is large (say, beauty, slavery, or misogyny) the focus tends to be limited to a given culture (Roman/Greek) or to a given time period (e.g. prehistory, Homeric or Augustan times). This is not the rule, of course, but it is certainly the norm. For better or worse, we tend to paint our books, so to speak, with a normal sized, if not a narrow, brush.

In contrast, the book under review here is painted with an extraordinarily wide brush. It covers about 40,000 years, from Paleolithic to Modern times, deals with a plethora of cultures (more on this below), and wades into the bailiwicks of multiple specialties including philosophy, DNA, and archaeology. It cites sources ranging from *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Homer, Hesiod, and Cicero to Freud, Goethe and Tennyson. It rather reminds this reviewer of certain paintings by Turner, such as "Snow Storm, Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps 1812" or Monet's views of the Rouen Cathedral. Stand too close and you miss the big picture, even, to the extent of losing sight of what is represented and seeing instead seemingly disparate daubs of paint. Stand back, however, and the whole is revealed. In the end, it is a matter of taste. Some prefer the detailed work seen in Durer's "Young Hare" or "Praying Hands." Others laud Monet and Turner. A reader of this book will soon find out which he or she prefers.

Professor McGregor is an emeritus professor of comparative literature at the University of Georgia. Earlier publications were clearly in the comparative literature mold (e.g., *The Shades of Aeneas: The Imitation of Vergil and the History of Paganism in Boccaccio's Filostrato, Filocolo, and Teseida*, 1990; *The Image of Antiquity in Boccaccio's Filocolo, Filostrato, and Teseida*, 1991). He then moved on to the "from the ground up" series (*Rome from the Ground Up*, with like named volumes on Paris and Venice as well). These were cultural histories of cities and led to the current volume which is a "reappraisal of the ecological history of the cradle of

Western traditions” (Bill McKibben, from the book’s jacket). It purports to trace the history of human interaction with nature in the Mediterranean area, tracing the history of the admitted sorry state of ecology in the area today.

The introduction is a very well written and clever picture of Venice, using it and its current environmental crisis as a way to introduce the problems facing the entire Mediterranean and to lay the groundwork for solving them by a return to the principle the author calls “First Nature.” First Nature is a term coined by the author to define our earliest interactions with the natural world, a condition in which we understood our place in the natural world and worked in cooperation with, not antagonism against, it. Here lies one of my major troubles with the book. This simple definition of First Nature is not clearly stated or adequately emphasized in the earliest pages of the book. It is alluded to and quickly described in the introduction (cf. 8) as if the reader should already be familiar with the concept. According to the author’s own index, the next mention of the term occurs on pages 95–96. Yet First Nature is at the heart of the book, being set forth as the ideal to which humanity must return if we are to avert ecological disaster. This is one of many instances when a clearer trail of breadcrumbs would have been appreciated to guide one through the work.

The book is arranged in three parts. Part I, “Forging First Nature,” traces the concept from the Paleolithic until Bronze Age Greece, outlining the concept’s foundation and growth into a successful model for cooperation with nature. Chapters 1–3 were very informative to me since they outline a debate among scholars that finally explains the faddish popularity of the Paleolithic diet. Some scholars castigate the Neolithic revolution during which crops were cultivated and animals domesticated. They see this as the first break with the First Nature contract. McGregor sensibly refutes this, making a strong case the Neolithic cultures actually lived well within the bounds of First Nature. There is, then, no moral imperative for us to revert to a hunter-gatherer existence.

Moving along through time, McGregor deals well with settlements such as Çatalhöyük, the Franchthi Cave, and the island of Gozo near Malta. Chapters 4–5 branch out to study Mesopotamian and Egyptian cultures. It is well to include Egypt, for too many of us forget that although it looked inland to its river, it was, undeniably, on the Mediterranean and partook in its culture. And the comparison of the ways in which Mesopotamian farmers dealt with their river and the Egyptians theirs, was enlightening.

But the fact remains that Uruk is not even remotely near the Mediterranean and at times one feels the author is wandering. The quoting of Sumerian, Ugarit-

ic, and Hittite literature and myth on these cultures' sense of nature seem to be taken from a different book, and one asks one's self when we will return to the Mediterranean. The author tries to justify this section of the book (70) but ultimately, I believe they are more of a distraction than a helpful part of his professed goal. Next in line is the Near East, again a set of civilizations whose Mediterranean context is too often ignored by classicists. Chapter 6 considers the Uluburun Bronze Age shipwreck to make a case for Mediterranean trade and its involvement with ecology. The abundant Linear B evidence that exists for Mycenaean agricultural practices is not addressed however, and this seems a major omission. Earlier Minoan evidence for (and against) a system of agricultural product redistribution should also have been mentioned.

Part II of the book is called "Perseverance and Attack" (Chapters 7–12) and covers the classical Greeks, Romans, Christians, Medieval Christianity, Muslim rule, and the Renaissance, ending with thinkers like Newton and Goethe who marked the beginning of the end of any chance First Nature had to coexist with modern thinking. The Greek section offers several interesting points for a classicist to ponder, but is uneven. The section on the shield of Achilles scene from the *Iliad* was intriguing with its discussion of the similarity of world views between Homer's description of the shield and the cosmos envisioned by the poets of Uruk. The author then compares the coexistence of rural peace and external danger with the cosmic views of Empedocles and Parmenides. At times it seemed to this reader that the conclusions wrung out of the meager fragments of these authors was strained. The discussion of the differences between Plato's cosmology, in which nature is governed by a divine creator (*demiourgos*) and that of Aristotle, in which the cosmos is a self-sustaining entity functioning according to its own innate rules, was very informative. However, this survey of Greek thought gives short shrift to Hesiod. The *Works and Days* offers practical advice to farmers about living in harmony with nature, paralleling such a life with the improper behavior of those in power at the time. One would think that such material could shed light on the author's main thesis. Yet it is reduced to two pages (130–131) on Pandora.

Chapter 8 deals with Roman times, concentrating on archaeological evidence from the Biferno Valley in southeastern Italy and Roman Libya. Lucretius is discussed, but where are the ancient Roman authors who specialized in discussing humans' relationship to nature such as Cato, Varro and Vergil's *Georgics*? It is in cases such as these that one wonders if the author's desire to paint with the

wide brush is not working against him. Chapter 9 deals with the treatment of nature by Christianity and the Middle Ages. Chapter 10 is for Muslim culture, Chapter 11 the Renaissance, and Chapter 12 deals with the late 17th and 18th centuries when, according to the author, the break from First Nature began to become solidified. Parts of these sections are quite interesting, as in the alienating force of seeing nature as “wilderness.” Yet, much of each chapter is devoted to historical summary and wanders from the main theme of the book. We find ourselves once more in places far from the Mediterranean and I frequently asked what I was reading, however generally informative, had to do with the stated theme of the book. I am quite ready, however to ascribe that to my own deficiencies.

Part III is entitled “Age of Crisis” (Chapters 13–14) and seeks to explain how the preceding age has blossomed into the current situation. Chapter 14, “The Modern Mediterranean” brings us back to the book’s theme and is a clear portrait of the ecological issues facing the area. Chapter 15 (“What Is to Be Done?”) claims that the area’s total ecological collapse may well be preventable. If we were to return to First Nature principles, balance with Nature could once more be restored. Examples of areas which are retreating from industrial farming and returning to living in harmony with the natural world are offered. Yet this reader wanted more practical advice upon which to hang one’s hope. How, realistically, are we to convince unemployed Greeks to abandon polluted Athens and return to their subsistence farms? How do we convince countries to choose a reduction in tourism for an increase in forested lands? When and how will we convince fishermen seeking profit from over-fishing to return to their small boats and only sell locally?

In the end this was a mixed read. Areas of interest previously unknown to me were revealed (the outrage of some against the Neolithic revolution; the important differences between Mesopotamian and Egyptian water/land control). Other parts seemed more like recapitulation of historical periods or intellectual movements related to the First Nature theory than to the Mediterranean. Yet, much of this may be due to disciplinary differences and the fact that the author is painting his argument with such a broad brush. Parts of this book will cause the reader to sit up attentively as new ideas are presented but other parts will interest us less. I suspect that which parts do which has more to do with the reader than the author, whose reading, knowledge and thinking extend far beyond the average. While the book certainly could have been tighter and more focused, it has much to offer those unfamiliar with this kind of ecological argumentation.

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