that impression. He examines the variety of habitats destroyed or rearranged to make room for houses and the variety of people who bought them—black and white, upper and middle down to working class—and their experiences, from children catching frogs in still un-channeled creeks to parents challenging aerial spraying of DDT and fighting for clean water. They worked, Sellers says, to save what was around them, paying much less attention to wild lands, even those close by, than to their backyards and parks. His case for a new suburban vision emerges most clearly in the chapter on the fight for clean water, which he presents not simply as an issue of human health or suburban land values but as part of a new understanding of what was natural. Turning to Los Angeles, Sellers brings out another dimension of the story: if historians saw Long Island’s suburbs as part of making a city, critics from the first looked on the spread of Los Angeles as a matter of erasing nature. People on the land, he says, were displaced, but nature was often less erased then rearranged. New grasses replaced the old, and the wildlife changed in composition and visibility. (The recent history of coyotes in cities, and conspicuously in Los Angeles, supports this argument.) As with Long Island, Sellers uses individuals’ experiences to show suburban dreams cutting across lines of race and class, but in Los Angeles he carries the narrative beyond building the suburbs to those who grew up in them. Their experiences led to an understanding of nature that moved old-line conservation beyond a concern with wild areas far away to local plants and animals. Sellers includes a chapter on smog, but here it is less as a marker of Los Angeles than a counterpoint to Long Island’s concern with water, evidence the new movement went beyond “nature” to look at “the environment.”

Highlighting the social complexity of the suburban environmental movement, showing its deeply local character, and illuminating changing ideas of nature, Crabgrass Crucible develops a strong argument for environmentalism sprouting in the suburbs. It is less successful in showing how elements from outside fertilized the grassroots. The great crusade against DDT, for example, came out of the suburbs and was often fought for the suburbs, but activists there depended on scientists’ global vision to frame their cause and on their testimony to make the case. Populist the activists may have been, but they relied on agencies and programs to turn protests into policy. Here we push past Sellers’s contribution—showing the suburban origins and populist flavor of environmentalism—to the task of integrating it with earlier scholarship to extend understanding of the origins of this major social cause and political issue.

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Population would seem to be a political thorn in environmentalism’s side. But it is more correct to view “population” and “environment” as grafted. They have long been so, and Thomas Robertson’s book shows how and why. An important study, it sits as squarely within the history of U.S. foreign affairs as it does within environmental history. It announces the Malthusian moment to be the Cold War, and the Cold War to be the Malthusian moment.

After a short chapter that looks back to the 1920s and 1930s, Robertson focuses on the post–World War II period. The Malthusian moment “begins” in 1948 with a stunning series of publications on world population growth, in particular William Vogt’s Road to Survival and Fairfield Osborn’s Our Plundered Planet. Less well known now than Paul Ehrlich’s touchstone, The Population Bomb (1968), which appeared two decades later, they advanced a similar message and were comparably popular and influential in the late 1940s.

Robertson’s book follows Matthew Connelly’s Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population (2008), which foregrounded international (and U.S.-driven) efforts to regulate fertility. Robertson’s study explains more about the food security agenda that was behind population control activity and the trend toward integrating population control into U.S. foreign policy. Connelly’s was a positioned book, taking intellectual and political issue with the likes of Vogt, Osborn, and Ehrlich. Thanks to such work, we are all fairly familiar with the critique of population control and Malthusianism—feminist, Marxist, postcolonial. But does the critique best explain the likes of Vogt, historically? Robertson thinks not, and his interpretation accrues real freshness in this respect. He is most bold in the preface: “their main concern was not racial or class composition but slowing a headlong rush for economic growth” (p. xv). Other readers will take issue with this claim. I do not. Yet at the same time, such an argument is only possible, or viable to advance, because of the strength of the preexisting critique.

It takes some skill and commitment to write a measured history of historical figures that held extreme views. By any measure, Vogt was one. The outspoken ornithologist shifted his attention from birds to human population dynamics. His apocalyptic views about the limits to growth were both a thorn in capitalists’ collective side and a spur to limit fertility rates locally and globally, especially of the eugenically less “desirable” as he would have put it. Robertson’s assessment balances an acknowledgement of Vogt’s views on race with an overdue investigation of his anti-growth agenda that will sit rather more comfortably with present-day environmentalists in this account of their political birth.

Similarly, Robertson presents the many sides of Ehrlich in an exceptional chapter on the 1960s. Vogt’s Road to Survival inspired Ehrlich as an undergraduate, but it was evolutionary theory’s “modern synthesis” that
engaged the latter as a researcher in biology. Robertson explains the enduring link between ecology in its technical guise (often not about humans at all) and ecology as the emerging political and popular movement (with humans-in-nature at its center). Ecology as evolutionary biology is key to understanding the population problem, as that generation comprehended it. This has been obscured in many ways by critiques of population control as racist and sexist: correct, but dominating. We might (and should) still assess “population control” thus, but Robertson explains the evolution of Ehrlich through population biology specifically. That is what he took into the political world of the 1960s. Robertson then traces his engagement with “race” in the context of domestic civil rights and of international development, in this case, India. All this is located, brilliantly, in the Bay Area. The chapter reminds me of David Livingstone’s call to “put science in its place”; here it is in exemplary operation.

Robertson’s temporal scope is large. If my own work on anglophone world population anxiety tends to look backward to the nineteenth century, his looks forward. In the process Robertson offers an insightful interpretation of the 1970s, showing a decline in anxiety about population growth in a final chapter on Reagan-era New Right economists. He takes the reader up to the end of the Cold War, but not into the late twentieth century. There, perhaps, and in our own time, lies another turn in the fortunes of population control and environmentalism as foreign policy. Along with a suite of recent studies of the Cold War, this is an international history that is in the end a history of the United States: explicitly so. Unsurprisingly, it therefore underscores a U.S.-dominated version of the twentieth century that non-U.S. readers perceive readily. Nonetheless, Robertson’s book confirms a new generation of historians who are clarifying just what that key international history moment was about.

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CARIBBEAN AND LATIN AMERICA


In this innovative work, Kristen Block uses the life stories of a handful of individuals to create an entry into the religious realm of the early colonial Caribbean. Specifically, she seeks to study the ways in which Christianity enabled both inclusion and exclusion in colonial society, and how it guided the means by which those near the bottom of the ladder might pursue justice and upward mobility. Her conclusion is that, from the middle of the seventeenth century, religion came to matter less and less, increasingly trumped by race and by the imperatives of a virulent variety of plantation capitalism that had little respect for theological subtleties.

Employing an unusually broad comparative framework, Block finds her examples in four distinct settings. The first three are located on Spanish colonial soil. Part one follows the experience of a creole woman who ran away from her cruel mistress and stood trial in 1639 in the port city of Cartagena de Indias, on the coast of modern Colombia. Part two concerns the heresy of a Frenchman living in Jamaica, charged with the heresy of Calvinism in 1652. These two examples depend heavily on the voluminous archives of the Holy Office of the Inquisition, particularly the tribunal established in 1610 at Cartagena de Indias. For fine-textured description such materials are hard to beat: the threat of torture and the spectacle of the auto de fe drew confessional statements from heart and soul. These records have rarely been exploited by historians of the Caribbean, partly because, although they serve well the purpose of investigating inner, spiritual lives, they are rather less revealing about everyday life. Inevitably, files grow thick where things have gone against the grain, disrupting the pattern of normal life and creating an eventful archive. They throw light on the ordinary because they connect, even tangentially, with the extraordinary.

Part three of Block’s study draws on the journal kept by an English sailor as a participant in Oliver Cromwell’s Western Design, a strategy intended to remove the Catholic Spanish from Santo Domingo and make the island of Hispaniola a Protestant English colony. Part four is set in English Barbados, stretching over the second half of the seventeenth century, and concerns an enslaved man and woman whose shadowy lives were entwined with that of their sugar-planting master, whose soul-searching led him to a problematic conversion to Quakerism. Here the emphasis shifts to the spiritual and economic life of the planter, which was hardly ordinary. His story is a vital link in Block’s interpretation, however, because the chapters on Barbados are the only ones to provide glimpse of plantation agriculture. The other examples all occur in essentially urban settings, prior to the so-called Sugar Revolution.

Readers will differ in their responses to the individual stories told in this book. Lives make little sense without their contexts, and the richer the texture that envelops the telling of any one person’s experience, the more compelling the historical analysis. What is gained by centering the narrative on the particular lives of a few individuals rather than giving priority to the larger themes and forces driving the development of the “context”? Block’s book is good at illuminating the larger picture but sometimes the individual stories seem to get in the way of pursuing the ramifications of institutions and tendencies.

For example, Block provides a thoughtful and detailed account of the Inquisition in the New World, but this discussion is scattered across several chapters and several lives and makes relatively little connection with an existing and extensive historiography. She also demonstrates convincingly that enslaved people were often