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Eve E. Buckley, <i>Technocrats and the Politics of Drought in Twentieth-Century Brazil</i> Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2017
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PACIFIC CIRCLE NEWS and NOTES

Business Matters

The Circle's email address is: thepacificcircle@gmail.com. Contact the editor should you have any questions, requests, or information to be shared with Circle members.

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Recent Publications, Honors & Scholarly Activities by Circle Members

Congratulations to...

Helen M. Rozwadowski for *Vast Expanses: A History of the Oceans*, Reaktion Books, 2018.

Marc J. Gilbert for the second edition of J.T. Davidann and M.J. Gilbert, *Cross-Cultural Encounters in Modern World History*, 1453-Present, Routledge, 2019.

Zouyue Wang for "Controlled Exchanges: Public-Private Hybridity, Transnational Networking, and Knowledge Circulation in US-China Scientific Discourse on Nuclear Arms Control," in John Krige, ed. *How Knowledge Moves: Writing the Transnational History of Science and Technology*, University of Chicago Press, 2019, 368-410.

FUTURE MEETINGS, CONFERENCES and CALLS FOR PAPERS

<u>10-12 April 2019</u>. British Society for the History of Science Postgraduate Conference, to be held at the Department of History and Philosophy of Science, Cambridge University. Dr. Sujit Sivasundaram will be the keynote speaker.

<u>19-23 August 2019</u>. 15th International Conference on the History of Science in East Asia (ICHSEA 2019), to be held at Chonbuk National University, Jeonju, Republic of Korea. For information, please email secretariat@ichsea2019.org or visit http://ichsea22019.org.

<u>5-6 September 2019</u>. "Rethinking Maritime Encounters, 1400-1900," Hakluyt Society Symposium, to be held at Leiden University, The Netherlands. Joshua Reid (University of Washington, Seattle), will be the keynote speaker. For additional information regarding papers and accommodations, please contact haklluytleiden2019@gmail.com.

<u>11-14 September 2019</u>. British Society for the History of Medicine Meeting, to be held at the M Shed in Bristol, U.K. The Congress will have four themes: History of Medicine at Sea, History of Medicine in the West of Britain, History of Health Care Education, and History of Mental Illness and Mental Disability. Abstract submissions are due by May 31. For additional information, please contact bshm.congress@gmail. com.

BOOK, JOURNAL, EXHIBITION and RESEARCH NEWS

Victorian Studies 60:1 (2018) is a special issue on "Climate Change and Victorian Studies," edited by Elizabeth Carolyn Miller. Articles include Allen MacDuffie's discussion of "Charles Darwin and the Victorian Pre-History of Climate Denial."



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BOOK REVIEW



Eve E. Buckley, *Technocrats and the Politics of Drought in Twentieth-Century Brazil*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2017, 298 pp. 10 Illustrations. 2 Maps.

Table. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Paper \$29.95 and ISBN 978-1-4696-3430-2.

Historian of science, Eve Buckley, explores in this book how scientists, engineers, economists, and bureaucrats tried to solve the twin problems of chronic drought and debilitating poverty in Northeastern Brazil over the 20th century. This area, called "the Sertao," was a vast expanse of land consisting of coastline, which was where most cities and population were, and the interior, which

was dry and inhabited by cattle ranchers and thousands of "*sertanejos*," poor and uneducated people, who often worked for the ranchers. Unfortunately, life for *sertanejos* was extremely difficult because they earned pitiful wages, food was limited in quality and quantity, clean water could be scarce, there were few public health services or schools, and homes lacked both running water and hygienic waste removal systems. When the droughts came, as they did periodically, many tried to migrate to the cities to find work and shelter, but the cities had a tough time handling this massive influx of people, and the result tended to be rampant diseases, starvation, and a huge number of preventable deaths. Brazilians in the south of the country, especially in the capital of Sao Paulo, tended to ignore the problems of the *sertao*, in part due to their racist attitudes towards former slaves and indigenous people who inhabited the northeast. Yet each time the government changed hands, it became clear to the new leadership that the problems of the *sertao* posed a serious problem to the country's economic health and growing modernity. Then they tried to figure out what to do about the drought and poverty cycle.

In tracking this very complex story, Buckley zeroes in on the entrenched social and political dynamic between the ranchers, the *sertenajos*, and the government in southern Brazil, often represented by the various expert groups sent to fix the problems of the northeast. If the key problem was the persistent poverty of the *sertenajos*, perhaps the solution was to address this through various techno-scientific approaches including public health, education, and the creation of smallholder communities furnished with irrigated fields. However, the rancher and rural elite did not see this approach as in their own best interests, and consistently fought to prevent such measures from being implemented. The poverty and lack of education of the *sertenajos*, it seemed, was precisely what allowed the rural aristocracy to thrive. By paying starvation wages for field workers, landowners were able to continue field operations as well as increase land acquisition.

If the key problem was periodic drought, as the engineers tended to think, then the solution was the building of big dams and reservoirs that could capture and store water during the normal rainy season, and provide relief in those years when the rains did not come. However, even when the government-based engineers pushed for this, those allocating the funding – politicians in the northeast as well as those in the federal government – had a hard time choosing to help a region so long regarded as backward and hopeless. Similarly, if the key problem was chronic and debilitating disease, given that several reports in 1920 found that at least 90% of the rural population had hookworm and/or parasites, then it would be urgent to establish health clinics and hospitals, and to remove standing water, educate people about disease transmission, and teach public hygiene. While the Rockefeller's International Health Board did establish a number of demonstration sites throughout the northeast, they agreed with the country's leadership that real progress could not be made in such a "backward" region, preferring to show the power of modern medicine and hygiene in urban Sao Paolo.

Time and time again, the government established new bureaus and directorates that aimed to improve the situation in the *sertao*. Leaders were drafted, research was conducted, listening tours were taken, and ambitious reports were written. Buckley argues that many of these efforts were sincere and well-intentioned; indeed, anyone who toured the *sertao* tended to immediately comprehend the extent of the disaster there, while those who governed from far-away Sao Paolo tended not to understand the depth of the problem or its cost to the state. Over the 20th century some progress was made. Several large dams and reservoirs were built, some irrigation canals were dug, some health clinics were established, and some smallholder plots were created

for the *sertanejos*. But it added up to a mere drop in the bucket compared to the promises made and the needs of the rural population. Thus it is difficult to not be a bit cynical about the intentions of the leadership all the way through.

Buckley links her analysis of the drought/poverty story to the work of Amartya Sen, who argued that drought and hunger are never just facts of nature and climate. They are always also the result of political and social inaction and indifference. Certainly the *sertao* story seems to bear this out, and Buckley's analysis suggests that more studies of poverty and climate in other parts of the world will reveal similar results – that first, the state's unreflective confidence in science and technology to solve problems of hunger and poor health are both foolish and dangerous; and second, problems of health and hunger will only be solved by addressing the core problem of social and political interests that protect the elites and punish the poor.

This is an important book. Buckley did a remarkable amount of archival research, particularly in Brazil, which enables her to tell a story that is both familiar and still shocking. The accompanying photographs speak volumes about both the landscape and the people, suggesting a kind of netherworld that few of us have encountered. Her analysis is fair and thoughtful, and her argument is quite clear. As a case-study that elaborates on a growing theme in the development literature, it is a must-read for everyone who is concerned about the links between science, technology, bureaucracy, and human misery.

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