

Catherine McNeur, *Taming Manhattan: Environmental Battles in the Antebellum City*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014. 312 pp.

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As ever more historians ascribe ever more importance to environmental factors in world affairs, and as we approach the tenth anniversary of now canonical natural-*cum*-urban catastrophe Hurricane Katrina, Catherine McNeur's environmental history of New York is doubly pertinent.¹ *Taming Manhattan: Environmental Battles in the Antebellum City* chronicles the efforts of the municipal New York government to variously reduce, relocate, and redefine American agriculture within the city from 1815 to 1865, especially in its Manhattan borough. Its thesis is that the 'taming' of Manhattan was essentially a class battle: the upper and upper-middle classes *versus* the working class and the informal economy, the urban commons that sustained them. 'Taming Manhattan' *qua* process, then, occasioned no less the progressive fracturing of social divides than, as McNeur frames it, the development of our modern conceived city/country divide (3).

McNeur starts in the late 1810s, explicating the abortive attempts of New York's municipal government to keep dogs (thought rabid) and hogs (intrinsically undesirable) off the streets. In chapter 2, McNeur considers the first (pre-Central) parks devised for New York, explaining how their development was conditional on real estate value and especial taxation devises. Moving from the 1830s onto the 1850s, chapters 3 and 4 deal variously with waste: human, and the foodstuffs offal and swill milk—in which regards feature the indelibly named Piggery Wars. Besides the northwards marginalization of immigrants and shantytowns, chapter 5 concerns the late 1850s and 1860s reformist agenda of Charles Brace and Frederick Olmsted: their realization of Central Park constitutes the chapter's primary thread. In her epilogue, McNeil frames the 1865 Draft Riots within working-class grievances with

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¹ As regards 'ever more historians': I think here of certain historians working on pre-1800 periods: Richard W. Bulliet, on the effect of a 'Big Chill' (his term) on medieval Iran, in *Cotton, Climate, and Camels in Early Islamic Iran: A Moment in World History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Geoffrey Parker, on the effect of the Little Ice Age on seventeenth-century global politics, in *Global Crisis: War, Climate Change and Catastrophe in the Seventeenth Century* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2013); and John Brooke, *Climate Change and the Course of Global History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

the (socially inequitable) urban-environmental initiatives discussed heretofore; she concludes with the founding of the first conscientious Public Health Board.

In this her first book, McNeur proves adroit at the historiographical fundamentals: her tone and recounting of facts are always clear, and the featured primary material vivifies McNeur's New York. In particular, the irreverence of contemporary commentary—the mock counsel against *faux pas* on the promenade (57), the caricatures of Piggery Warfare (169)—complements well McNeur's soberer analysis. Meanwhile, maps, plans, and architectural landscape paintings aid much in one's following and fully appreciating the text's parks material. Additionally, taken together, they attest to *Taming Manhattan's* general quality of breadth. In latter chapters, the text expands its remit from municipal to Democrat/Republican politics, and so as to cover the nascence of the Metropolitan Police (167) and the midcentury immigrant boom (182). The text thereby taps into—indeed builds into itself—the essential expansiveness of this American historical period.

Although McNeur's prior publishing form lies in hog issues (such as she addresses in chapter 1), *Taming Manhattan* is best for my money in the discussion of first private, then public parks (chapters 2 and 5). Here, McNeur realizes New York in panorama: her writing catches the city's quintessence as an assemblage of locales and neighbourhoods. Besides this cartographical one, the text affords us another sweeping perspective: on the coming-of-age of New York's municipal government and its movement from inefficacy and inertia to proper, efficacious governance over the antebellum period.

McNeur's endnotes abound with supplementary primary and secondary references, but perhaps some of those primary references could have been folded into the text proper—particularly, I would aver, into chapter 1. Within said text, McNeur fails to fully exploit her rich, featured historical figures. From corrupt City Inspector Alfred White to property developer Samuel Ruggles, praxis trumps affect in McNeur's value economy. Of individuals' actions, we learn in detail, but of their characters rather less. One feels this absence especially regarding the African-American hog activist Adam Marshall (32-34): his is an interesting subject-position left underexplored.

As regards McNeur's thesis—that class warfare underpinned the taming of Manhattan—I would only query the relevance to it of the dog material. McNeur neither revisits nor resolves chapter 1's issues of proscribed canine rights and dog-catching initiatives: although interesting, this material stays sundered from her subsequent studies. Further, I think McNeur fudges the balance in dog-related discourse between class *rapprochement* (in defense of dogs, 22) and class conflict (in discourse otherwise, 43). Similarly, the borough Manhattan and the city New York rather elide in McNeur's taxonomy, at least for those like myself less acquainted with Manhattanite squares and wards.

Finally, less a criticism than a sentiment: for the comparative-historical interest of doing so, McNeur could have not only identified the modern-day revival of miniature urban agriculture (5) but accounted for it. Nevertheless, *Taming Manhattan* is overall a redoubtable reference point for academic and amateur environmental historians.