

Reviews

Raising Cane in the 'Glades: The Global Sugar Trade and the Transformation of Florida

Gail M. Hollander, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2008, 336 pp, ISBN 0 2263 4950 0 (hardback), US\$45.00.

Hollander titles her first, introductory, chapter 'From Everglades to sugar bowl and back again?', and that – including the question mark – is in many ways a better indicator of the book's content than its actual title is. Within that chapter she states, 'Any effort to understand the historical role of sugar in the diminishment and restoration of the Everglades ecosystem ... must place the issue squarely within the political economy of food and agriculture in the United States' (p. 2), and this represents her overall purpose in the book; she argues that framing this process in terms of changing cultural ideas about swamps, for instance, is insufficient. The book is structured as a 'narrative follow[ing] an historical arc' (p. 16) in which the remaining six chapters take the reader from the late 19th–early 20th century period in which the sugar landscapes of Florida were imaginary ones in the heads of sugar boosters, through several transformative phases during the 20th century, and finally to events of the 1990s and early 21st century in which environmental concerns about the Everglades have ushered in a new kind of political factor which plays out in the context of globalization.

There are several things this book is not. First, it is not a book about the Everglades environment. Though Hollander supplies a page or so (pp. 3–5) of background, readers wishing to understand better what the fuss is all about may wish to refer instead to sources such as Marjory Stoneman Douglas' classic *The Everglades: River of Grass*; geographic articles such as Meindl (2000) and Meindl *et al.* (2002); or some of the numerous excellent websites on the topic, including those of the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Project (<http://www.evergladesplan.org/>), the Everglades Digital Library at Florida International University

(<http://everglades.fiu.edu/>), and the Everglades National Park (<http://www.nps.gov/ever/>).

Second, it is not a book about the 'global sugar trade' as indicated in the subtitle. Instead it is overwhelmingly about 'the sugar question' in the US and the long history of efforts by elite white men to control various parameters of sugar trade into and within the US and to subsidize the sugar industry in the US. Movements of sugar beyond that are but bit players in the book; even Cuba, around which so much of the US sugar story revolves, is but a cardboard cutout in Hollander's story.

Third, in many regards this is not a geography book. Hollander is described as 'associate professor of geography in the Department of International Relations at Florida International University' (back flap), but the book she has produced looks very much more like history than historical geography or political ecology. Readers accustomed to geographic explanation and pattern exploration may find the historical narrative and an emphasis on the individual actions of individual players somewhat uncomfortable. Perhaps more importantly, throughout much of the book Hollander fails to cash in on the fundamental geographic ideas that spatiality matters, that place matters, that things are inter-related. The word 'geography' and variations thereof appear maybe a dozen times in the book, and feel stuck-on rather than integrated into the content or perspective.

My biggest complaint about the book is that the flow of Hollander's narrative in the larger sense is lost under the barrage of detail. Though it's obvious that she has done a tremendous amount of research, which must have taken years, into the letters and meetings of the various players, it is less clear that the reader needs to see the political and capitalist action unfold at this minute level. For readers who are not themselves scholars of US sugar politics, the several chapters' worth of this threaten to overwhelm any impetus to actually finish the book. And yet Hollander has clearly done other kinds of research into the issues as well, and has managed to

summarize those findings and show us patterns and relationships without burying us under detail, notably in the final chapter; I was left wishing that a majority of the book had been like that chapter, which I read with avid interest.

Despite the issues above, Hollander has brought forth several important points that may help readers tie together trends and events, some on a global scale. First and foremost, she lays bare the 'securitizing' (p. 276) of sugar, showing how during World War I the addition of sugar to soldiers' rations transformed it from an ordinary commodity to an issue of national security for the Allied countries, and how during World War II the use of sugar in military-related industrial processes continued this trend. During the Cold War, US perceptions of danger in regards to the Soviet Union played out in the politics of sugar supplies from Cuba, as they did in so many other realms. And finally, coming full circle, the potential of sugar to form ethanol to be used as fuel returns it to a more direct national security role for the US.

Hollander's work also illuminates the influence that the sugar industry in the US has had on dietary trends and government guidelines about sugar intake. Specifically, the industry has used its resources to promote the idea that sugar is a healthful source of energy; to denigrate research that shows it might be harmful or even simply contribute to obesity; and to get the government to moderate certain statements about recommended intake. The industry at one point even threatened the World Health Organization, though with less effect. Overall, these efforts were aimed at increasing consumption, at the same time that parallel efforts relating to price supports, quotas, and tariffs ensured an uneven playing field tilted strongly in favor of highly capitalized US sugar firms.

In discussing labor issues for Florida's sugar growers, Hollander demonstrates the parallels between the slavery inherent in the earlier imperial project of sugar production and the way labor was secured and treated in Florida's neoplantation system during the 20th century. Frustratingly, she does not analyze these parallels, only places them on the page for the reader to see. Another frustrating aspect of the book is the complete invisibility of the indigenous occupants of the area, despite the fact that she describes, in the early part of the narrative, what was essentially a frontier of Euro-American settlement, in which Indian presence and removal certainly played a part.

The endpoint of Hollander's 'arc' brings us back to the big question of whether 'big sugar' belongs in the Everglades at all. The massive environmental changes that were required in order for the Everglades area to be used for sugar production have damaged the unique Everglades system, and there is much concern that restoration efforts now underway – and hotly contested by a wide variety of institutional actors – will be too late, or too little. At the same time, these efforts, if they are carried out as needed for real restoration, threaten the homes and livelihoods of many, and the profits of the few. Hollander ends the book with a most interesting discussion of how the various players, both big and little, are currently responding to the changes brought about by both restoration efforts and globalization. While she never directly answers the question about whether sugar belongs, she does, in the final chapter, do an excellent job of tying together larger forces, unintended consequences, environmental politics, and local scale changes – and of pulling the reader into this discussion.

REFERENCES

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G. Rebecca Dobbs

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
USA

Backyard: Nature and Culture in Suburban Australia

Lesley Head and Pat Muir, University of Wollongong Press, Wollongong, 2007, 190 pp, ISBN 978 1 9208 3151 6 (hardback), A\$69.95.

Backyard is a praiseworthy book, full of interesting information, ideas and insights. The prose is clear and attractive, and there are copious colour and black and white illustrations. *Backyard* has nine chapters: The Conceptual Landscape, The Sewer Pipe and Other Moments in Backyard History, Backyards Studied, Gardens and Gardeners, My Place, Production and Reproduction, Water and the Power to Make a Difference,