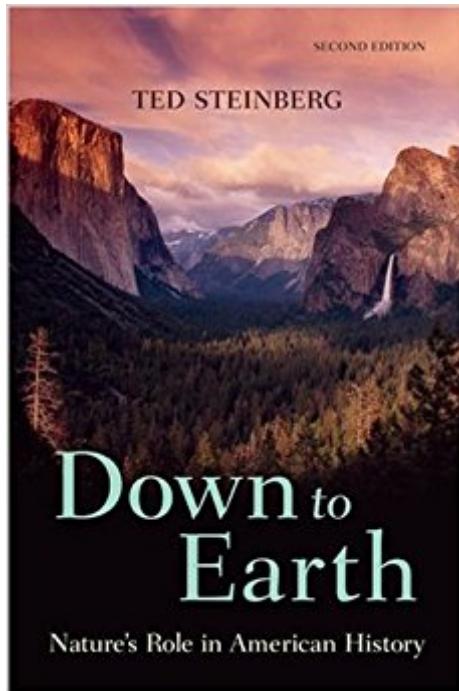


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# Down To Earth: Nature's Role In American History



## Synopsis

In this ambitious and provocative text, environmental historian Ted Steinberg offers a sweeping history of the United States--a history that, for the first time, places the environment at the very center of the narrative. Now in a new edition, *Down to Earth* reenvisiones the story of America "from the ground up." It reveals how focusing on plants, animals, climate, and other ecological factors can radically change the way that we think about the past. Examining such familiar topics as colonization, the industrial revolution, slavery, the Civil War, and the emergence of consumer culture, Steinberg recounts how the natural world influenced the course of human history. From the colonists' attempts to impose order on the land to modern efforts to sell the wilderness as a consumer good, he reminds readers that many critical episodes in U.S. history were, in fact, environmental events. The text highlights the ways in which Americans have attempted to reshape and control nature, from Thomas Jefferson's surveying plan, which divided the national landscape into a grid, to the transformation of animals, crops, and even water into commodities. In the second edition, Steinberg has thoroughly revised and updated the section on the twentieth century. He also introduces a timely new theme--the rise of the corporation. By addressing the ways in which nature functions in the world of big business, as well as the efforts by environmentalists to combat corporate power, Steinberg provides a richer understanding of consumerism. *Down to Earth* is ideal for courses in environmental history, environmental studies, urban studies, economic history, and American history. Passionately argued and thought provoking, this powerful text retells our nation's history with nature in the foreground--a perspective that will challenge our view of everything from Jamestown to McDonald's.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Since environmental history staked its claim to status as an independent subfield of history, environmental historians have clamored for the acknowledgment of the rest of the profession. While many environmental historians have won awards and been honored by the profession at large, injecting the substance of the discipline into mainstream historical scholarship and teaching has been a harder task. The field has come a long way since Donald Worster was asked by his graduate school mates how he would present history from the bear's point of view, but it has long been too easy to consign environmental history to the ghetto of disciplinary subfields. American historians have embraced the idea that the U.S. was and saw itself as "nature's nation," but explored that idea no farther. For the longest time, no one truly attempted to understand what that particular relationship meant in the nation's history. Some of the blame for this circumstance falls on the discipline. For the better part of a generation, synthesis was beyond the reach of environmental history. The field produced brilliant monographs, but little that appealed beyond the boundaries of a growing field to main vein of American history, wrapped up as it was and is in the topics of race, class, and gender. Only in recent years have a series of syntheses been published, paving the way for the next step, the integration of environmental history into mainstream history. Ted Steinberg *Down to Earth: Nature's Role in American History* is a bold attempt to jump that gap. One of the first people to be trained in environmental history by an established environmental historian, Steinberg produced three major works before undertaking this volume. Here he makes the case for treating the American environment as an actor on the stage of national history. He argues that the commodification of nature became the catalytic factor in the transformation of the physical nature of the North American continent. "The benefits of modern, from fast food to flush toilets, for all their virtues," he writes, "have come at the price of ecological amnesia" (xii). Steinberg retells American history through this lens with varying degrees of success. The book is bold and in places wise; simultaneously and despite Steinberg's attempt to create distance from declensionism, he is closely tied to the idea in Marxian terms. His characteristic incisive insights are tempered by the need to cover vast swaths of the past in narrative style, creating something that is simultaneously a textbook and a far more sophisticated argument about the role of nature in history. The complexity of the topic and the need for broad coverage imperil the reader, for the larger argument, that the nature of American nature mattered in the history of the continent, gets lost in the telling and retelling of

American history. While the reader is offered Thomas Midgely, the chemist who put lead back into gasoline to eliminate engine knock early in the twentieth century, and Norman Borlaug, the progenitor of the Green Revolution, it feels like the kinds of stunts textbook writers use to invigorate the past for students, not the dawning of a new appreciation for the role of the physical environment in the human past. Despite the brilliance of the work and the marvelous grasp Steinberg displays, he can't quite bring the role of environment as a driving force to the fore. *Down to Earth* is a marvelous step toward the synthesis that will command the attention of the discipline, but it falls just short of reaching Steinberg's goal of giving environment a place in American history. The best synthesis to yet appear, *Down to Earth* opens the way for the final integration of environmental history into mainstream American history.

(3 1/2 stars would be more accurate) Ted Steinberg is Professor of History and Law at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio. His work in the field of environmental history has attracted attention to his name as a leader in the new generation of environmental historians. His work *Down to Earth: Nature's Role in American History* is his assessment of the natural and human forces that have shaped the United States. This book was nominated for the 2003 Pulitzer Prize in History. Part one (chapters 1-3) entitled *Chaos to Simplicity* chronicles early forces of nature from the breakup of Pangea to the first native settlers of North America and the settlement of the first Europeans. In it, Steinberg discusses overkill and the depletion of the large mammals of North America. He covers themes of disease, animal domestication (and introduction, as with the horse), and early Malthusian forces in New England. This may seem redundant to readers of environmental history, but Steinberg packaged *Down to Earth* as a textbook so that a general understanding of American environmental history can be understood. In later chapters, Steinberg gives innovative analysis to topics such as how the rise of commodities affected New England, the climate of the South promoted slavery and poor land use, and how agricultural discoveries (particularly that of California) drastically changed life on the Eastern coast. Steinberg hits his stride in Part III (*Consuming Nature*) as he described how the evolution of these natural and environmental changes converged to give way to an unprecedented environmental monster we have today. Steinberg points to cultural forces embodied in consumerism and modern conveniences as the culprit that puts distance between the individual and the environmental impact they produce. Of particular interest is his account of America's switch from pork to beef as the predominant meat of choice in chapter 12. His analysis of the origins of the modern environmental movement (chapter 15) and the issues of corporate conspiracy the automobile, and lack of mass transit options (chapter 13) are

also rather informative. The themes of the book steady the line between pure history and editorial commentary. Many of Steinberg's persuasions, as evidenced through his constant reference to laborers and "non-union" areas, make his book read like a political science text. It is true that bias is unavoidable in any work, but the professional historian must make pains to realize the holistic sway of his document. To his credit, Steinberg often makes rebuttals in the opposing side of the argument when his analysis gets personal, as in the case of Ronald Reagan (p. 258) and other politicians. Dr. Steinberg's writing approach invites the reader to enjoy his book on the literary level as well as the historical. At times, especially in the latter chapters, he asserts an irritating habit of quoting out-of-date statistics where more current ones are surely readily available. More research into his bibliography could tell whether this weakness shows itself as lackadaisical research on one hand, or the choosing of the more compelling statistics to make his case on the other.

In *Down to Earth*, environmental historian Ted Steinberg struggles to establish nature as a profound force in the general narrative of American history. The book is rife with interesting facts and fascinating events, but unfortunately it does not consistently build upon the notion that the American past has been shaped by man's interaction with the environment. Steinberg offers some anecdotal evidence early in the text, but he seems to lose track of the book's purpose after the first few chapters. The last half of *Down to Earth*, in particular, leaves the reader wondering if there existed any sort of positive man/nature interaction after World War Two. Still, several far more troubling problems emerge from the book. Too often Steinberg's assumptions pass for evidence, and the author frequently reveals his own ideological biases. *Down to Earth* also neglects many major themes in environmental history, and seminal works by George Perkins Marsh, Frederick Jackson Turner, and Leo Marx do not even show up in the bibliography. *Down to Earth* offers a good deal of trivia, and some breezy reading, but in order to really understand environmental history, erudite individuals should turn to works by William Cronon, Richard White, Donald Worster, and Martin Melosi.

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