

"The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism"

edited by: Greg Garrard

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This handbook of ecocriticism, published in September 2014, offers us a strong indication of where we are now in this new green discipline of literature and the arts in relation to the environment. Edited by the erudite Greg Garrard, it brings together key themes and writers on ecocriticism.

The organisation of the book is of the first order, as one would expect from Oxford University Press. It is beautifully produced, and its headline paragraphs help to focus on what is often a difficult and entangled web of words. At such a high price it is clearly market towards ecocritics, who no doubt will find the selection of essays and their appearance together in one volume extremely useful.

The Oxford handbook is foundational to our understanding of where we are today in relation to nature and the environment, and somewhat wider in scope than is at present being taken up by the media and other powers. For that reason it will remain a standard textbook. But it is also an invitation to inform ourselves more thoroughly as it reminds us that we are part of nature, and that this alienation from nature is toxic to ourselves and to our future.

So what has the Oxford handbook to offer to the general reader? It will help to bring them up to date with the latest theories and research. First of all there are brilliant essays by academics such as Watson, Rigby and Rudd as to what ecocriticism is, and Rudd in a wide-

ranging essay on medieval texts perhaps gives us a clue as what the problems are attending on the word "green". Confluence between pagan and Christian interpretations, for example, help clarify the generalised notions of what the public means and understands by "green" and we have all suffered in this misunderstanding: that the Celtic underworld has been changed into a Christian hell. To counter, there is the example of St. Francis of Assisi, who talked of brother wolf and sister bird. However, in mainstream theological Christianity there has been a strong indication of a scenario that nature is inimical to us. That explains a good deal of public ambivalence today.

Watson deals with a question often asked – given the urgency of the environmental question, why spend time on debates in the cultural past? He answers: the main cause and likely solution to the problem are likely to be human, and "cultures are strong and powerful beasts that can be coaxed in new directions". He gives us a fascinating account of Shakespeare's understanding of the interconnection of the human, of animals and of nature, particularly in "*A Midsummer Night's Dream*" and for this essay alone the book is almost worth its price. It is no less than a cultural landmark.

The book is divided into four sections: History, Theory, Genre, and the View from Here, and throughout the book there are clearly marked paragraphs in larger type to make for clear visibility of text and argument. This will help students to focus on the essentials of their chosen topic.

Some people might like to start in the Section that most appeals to them, such as Genre. Prominent ecocritics of the situation in our cities, like Lawrence Buell, give us indications that things may not be as bad as some of us think, there is every indication that the younger generation is more keyed in to the crisis in the environment than their elders, so Buell's clear account of children's literature and the environment offers extremely useful insights, of crucial episodes of children bonding to cherished outdoor niches. Buell believes that experiences the children have between the ages of five and twelve can morph into an adult lifetime of commitment to the environment and offer a prosthetic help to those who worry about children being nature-deprived in our cities. Buell's essay is among the most compelling and interesting I have read in any of the ecocritical literature.

In the earlier section, History, Timothy Clark, who edited *"The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment"*, has an essay in this Oxford volume. Clarke's finely argued piece on phenomenology which dissects the Enlightenment heresy of so called objective science, proposes instead a place for subjectivity where we can access the primordial world. Tim Clark writes: "Since possession of bodily sentience is a shared feature of all living things, a certain basic common intelligibility exists between creatures". He describes the world "as we organically experience it in its enigmatic multiplicity and open-endedness, prior to conceptually freezing it into a static space of 'facts'." The German philosopher Heidegger described us as projecting onto to Nature an inert otherness, what we need is living engagement and enchantment. So all this is good medicine for the spirit.

Material ecocriticism is on the rise, offers new ways to explore language and reality, avoiding subjectivities such as spirituality and religion, which explains why in this book there are no essays on Gerard Manley Hopkins or our great nature poet, Patrick Kavanagh, and only a brief reference to Wordsworth. (A volume of *"Material Ecocriticism"* was published in October and is edited by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann.)

However, on the whole, in the Oxford handbook offers us a very wide scope, as you would expect from Greg Garrard, who is inclusive as much as he may argue for or against a particular theory – other of his incisive essays can be sourced at www.academia.edu.

Greg Garrard further develops ecocritical theory in this handbook in unexpected but enlightening ways in an essay *"Ferality Tales"* which rewards close reading. Greg Garrard has much to teach us on our own humanness and our relationship to the wild, focusing on the state of being feral. He tells us that there are over 800,000 feral dogs in Italy alone, who have a poor survival rate, and also comes up with *"Tales from the Wild"* which add to the richness of our perspectives.

Elizabeth Deloughrey contributes valuable insights to the debate on post-colonialism, how the preceding centuries "homogenized the world of nature into a binomial taxonomy". She

notes how natural "kingdoms" were being inscribed in the language of empire and used to naturalise a racialised and gendered hierarchy of species.

Joni Adamson writes of indigenous literature and people. Throughout the book, the focus on how other cultures and indigenous people related to nature, such as "We are all Indians now" is helpful. There are essays in The View from Here section, Part IV of the handbook, which are required reading: the account of German ecocriticism by Axel Goodbody, a summation of Chinese ecocriticism by Qingqi Wei, also pieces on ecocriticism in Japan, by Yuki Masami, and Barrier Beach, by UCLA's Rob Nixon. In the Theory Section, Stacey Alaimo adds to the new discipline within ecocriticism of ecofeminism, though a misprint, "from" instead of "form" (p. 199, line 16) might add confusion to the tangled web she writes about in an intriguing essay on the power and relation of image to marine real life.

There is an in-depth account in Swarnalatha Rangarajan's *"Engaging with Prakriti"* which discusses the work of Vandana Shiva, one of the most prominent ecofeminists today. Ecofeminism supports indigenous rights, just as it supports women in the community, notably by the example and teachings of Vandana Shiva. There are essays on ecofeminism but for some ecofeminism has become a contagion area, with theorists battling it out for – well – domination. It seems some ecofeminists have committed the sin of essentialism, that is finding a resemblance between women and nature, while much of post-Enlightenment thinking focuses on scientific determinism and culture as the deciding factor in human consciousness.

Ecofeminism has been amply dealt with in a recent publication *"Ecofeminism (Critique. Influence. Change)"* earlier this year, edited by Maria Miles and Vandana Shiva, available from Amazon at a much lower price. Also published later last year is *"Ecofeminist Intersections with Other Animals and the Earth"*, edited by Carol J. Adams. Feminist ecocriticism offers a much-needed reassessment of the beginnings of ecocriticism, and has developed new ways of approaching the subject.

What cannot escape one is indeed the circularity of some of the discourse, the foundational texts of which are Judith Butler's writing in the 1990s. Critics like Greta Gaard and Caitriona

Sandilands focus on some of the most contentious issues of our times, quoting Isherwood: "The destruction of the environment directly correlates to the production of children. Isherwood infuses the heterosexual act with the power to create a generalised apocalypse". No more than Christopher Isherwood in *"A Singular Man"*, Sandilands sees the heteronormative (another word to add to the dictionary), society as inimical to the environment, and proposes a queer ecology, "if it is to mean anything at all, it must include a continual process of displacing the heterosexual couple at the centre of the ecological universe". Cate Sandilands claims not to know what the word "child" means, after reading her essay, neither did I. I was interested in her reading of *"After the Fire"* by Jane Rule, because her arguments could be used another way, not to find alternative lifestyles free from patriarchy but to bring down the destruction of the world, not only as we know it, but in actuality as the planet it is. It is important that we do not confuse the way our constructs imagine the planet with the real world of global interactions at a physical level, but this is what seems to have happened.

For all the theoretical constructions, it is still a most useful book and all the knowledge within would enhance the reader both activist and environmental scholar. In Part III, Genre, Richard Kerridge guides us towards ecocritical readings in form and genre: a renowned teacher, his essay is a model of clear communication and could be the starting point for those who wish to engage with the book but do not know where to begin. Astrid Brack in an illuminating essay shows us how and what we need to read as ecocritics, and there are arresting insights on some of our art forms. In an essay which seeks to understand folk music as an eco-friendly genre of music, *"The Green Banjo"*, Scott Knickerbocker helps us to think about our cultural predicaments, as in the assertion that Bob Dylan chose to be an artist rather than an activist and how art is best understood today, and its forms and its limitations. Artists and environmentalists are at present actually engaged in this work of building bridges between nature and the arts, a point at which the culture is more than ever in need of this connection between artists and environmentalists.

Kate Rigby from Australia's Monash University gives a most concise and readable account of romanticism with its views both of indwelling or home, and the need to travel, which are both part of the romantic impulse – it is by far the most brilliant account of romanticism I

have read and will explain to many how our modern culture has derived these values that we wish to be simultaneously at home and in a different more exciting place.

The disconnect between ourselves and the environment needs further examination than offered in the handbook. Glenn Albrecht has coined the term "solastalgia" for the lived experience of negative environmental change <http://www.collisiondetection.net/mt/archives/2005/12/solastalgia.php> but it gets no mention in "*The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*".

In the meantime, this handbook on ecocriticism charts the cultural map of what matters to those working in the field of environmental studies, which can filter down to the general public and add informed debate and awareness on the main issues. There is no doubt that the human has done violence to the actual environment, and these scholars are helpful in new directions in our thinking where we cease to do harm and try to do good. However, Adam Trexler makes the valid point that ecocriticism needs to think of solutions as well as its dedication to theory.

This is the value of the book, although succinctly argued at every turn and developed and fine-tuned by specialist scholars, there is a broad range of views here that challenge us to either develop our materialist constructs but not to the point of a tunnel vision pedantry, and to realise in fact that the environmental crisis was caused by a series of experiments that have been sent into the environment in an uncontrolled fashion, such as the plethora of plastics which, as a recent poster said, exist in the environment from the time they are manufactured for aeons ahead. We can oppose such dangerous developments with the human values that have informed earlier ages and to try and find a starting point where our concerns turn into positive action for the environment.

So to be taken seriously ecocritics must realise that actions speak louder than words, particularly when you consider that scholars tend to use a lot of jet travel and carbon miles to meet colleagues and advance their own careers – for the academic world can no longer be a separate place with special rules. As humans all our actions count, and the realisation

that some very clever and dedicated people are working on theory can only strengthen us in our action and resolve.

As stated, this book, though not aimed at the general reader, is a valuable resource for communities academic and activist, and the high level of scholarship need not deter a person from pursuing each chapter, because insights are achieved which more than compensate for the efforts. For activists, it is no small thing to be armed with the knowledge that this book imparts.