

the others for its integration of vital political and social contexts. Recognizing that choices must be made and that records are likely even sparser for these regions, the absence of these regions unfortunately reflects a general shortage of attention to them.

In addition, the choice to frame the narrative in national terms creates some challenges for the contributors and editors. On the one hand, some kind of choice had to be made to limit the scope and scale of any given essay. Yet the choice to opt for modern national borders renders much more difficult the prospect of looking at cross-border events, which are difficult to sort from the national stories. Individual sets of collaborators mention in passing, for instance, the role of ports in the Low Countries—especially Amsterdam—in distributing grain imported from the Baltic regions in ameliorating famine there and in nearby regions of Germany and England. In light of the trends toward transnational history or, indeed, the potential influence of the *Annales* school, one wonders about how studies organized chronologically across borders or ones tracing the routes of the long-distance grain trade that grew progressively more important with each passing year might arrive at different conclusions.

This is not to detract in any way from the admirable work presented here. Specialists will find the volume very helpful for getting a more precise picture of famine and dearth in these regions and periods. However, the volume's chapters, being heavy on data and light on narrative, may prove a heavy burden for undergraduates and lay audiences.

Aaron Hale-Dorrell
Independent Scholar

The Draining of the Fens: Projectors, Popular Politics, and State Building in Early Modern England. By Eric H. Ash. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017. 416 pp., \$54.95, hardback, ISBN 978-1-4214-2200-8.

The best works of recent environmental history are notable for their interdisciplinary imagination, a nimble handling of chronological and geographic scale, and an overall sense that they are asking and answering “Big Questions” through unexpected means. By and large, Eric Ash's excellent new work meets all of these criteria head-on in its exploration of the changing politics of agricultural improvement in the early modern English fenlands. But more than this, it grapples with fundamental questions about political economy, popular politics, and institutional ecology that shaped the creation of modern England.

المنارة للاستشارات

The Fens have always seemed an otherworldly place to the outsider. The peaty wetlands, difficult to traverse and cut off from the “upland” areas of East Anglia and the Midlands, were a place to themselves, with rhythms of life and subsistence practices that were baffling to nonnatives. As one commentator wrote in 1635, “the beastly nasty town, stinking diet, the rugged condition & debauch’d manners of the people give but little.... I know not what to make of them ... [and] how both men & women are able to subsist in winter exceeds my reach. Their climate is so infinitely cold, & watery ... their means so small, & scant” (17). This reputation has stretched down through the centuries, making the projects of draining and “improving” the Fens seem a logical and perhaps inevitable step.

What Ash does so well is to decipher the quiet logic of the pre-drained fenland, which created a vibrant and egalitarian agricultural economy out of a very particular ecology. Common rights were extensive, the economy was diversified, and the entire system was “thoroughly adapted to take maximum advantage of the prevailing ecological conditions” (34). Though this system was put under pressure by changes in climate, the ultimate plans to drain the Fens were *not* inevitable, but rather the result of the triumph of a particular political economy, one grounded in a capitalist market economy that required the “improvement” of an entire region and way of life. This political economy, imposed on the region by new, post-Dissolution landlords, was violently opposed by commoners to whom it represented an existential threat.

So far, this rings rather familiar: in many ways, this seems like just another iteration of the enclosure debates that ran throughout the long seventeenth century (and the historiographical debates about enclosure that lasted through the mid-to-late twentieth century). What sets Ash apart, however—and what makes his book so fascinating—are the peculiar demands of *regional*, rather than local, improvement. Unlike most enclosure, which was possible to enact piecemeal, the Fens required the participation of hundreds of landlords and local officials. The needs of these groups often clashed, which necessitated the direct involvement of the central state.

This is where the book becomes gripping. Ash traces the various governmental strategies toward improvement, most of them failures in one way or another: the Elizabethans who were thwarted by relying on the medieval, hyperlocal system; James I’s Privy Council, whose attempts to centralize were undermined by their lack of local knowledge. Even those who seemed to succeed ultimately failed. Charles I, whose oppressive use of the royal prerogative allowed for the first large-scale drainage efforts, only added fuel to the

anti-royal fire that resulted in his deposition and later execution, while the apparent triumph of improvement under the Commonwealth was destroyed by engineering problems.

A story of failure, though actually quite refreshing, is not the ultimate point. Instead, *Draining the Fens* cannily sketches the transition from state formation, which relies on cooperation of local elites, to state building, which is far more centralized and autocratic. It takes seriously the political agency and sophistication of the local populations, repeatedly unpacking the tactics and ideologies of resistance to the outside. And the core, repeated theme of promoting the conservative and traditional by making recourse to political radicalism is well-argued and exciting.

The weaknesses of the book are relatively minor. The clarity of organization occasionally leads to small redundancies in the framing of the chapters, particularly in Part I. The deepest ecological analyses bookend the text and are largely unintegrated into the middle chapters (with small exceptions such as protests of flooding); we are sometimes left without a clear understanding of how agriculture was really operating during this transitional period. And while Ash persuasively argues that the 1630s saw the traditional “decisively superseded by the more radical, interventionist approach,” just *why* both critics and proponents of improvement made this shift is slightly underdeveloped (215).

Nevertheless, *Draining of the Fens* remains a vital, well-researched, and provocative book. It deftly integrates a wide variety of disciplines so that one would not need a specialist understanding of a particular subfield—say, seventeenth-century agriculture or popular politics—to follow the arguments, while still remaining lively and instructive for those with expert knowledge. Grounded in the local and the specific, it nevertheless asks us to think deeply about overarching questions of power, authority, economy, and the relationship of politics and ecology. It is, in the end, an impressive example of the dynamic and compelling wave of contemporary environmental history.

Lucy Kaufman
University of Alabama

Latin America and the Caribbean

Technocrats and the Politics of Drought and Development in Twentieth-Century Brazil. By Eve E. Buckley. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017. 298 pp., \$29.95, paperback, ISBN 978-1-4696-3430-2.

المنارة للاستشارات

Reproduced with permission of copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

المنارة للاستشارات