

Title—Something New Under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth-Century World

Author—John McNeil

Year—2001

Categories: Environmental History, World History, Economics

Place: The World

Time: 1900-1999

Argument Synopsis:

John McNeil's *Something New Under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth-Century World* attempts to assess the environmental changes wrought by humans during the twentieth century, using various case studies and comparisons with the past. His discussion of the environment is not limited to a specific region, as he attempts to survey the state of the world environment. McNeil chooses to focus on the twentieth century, because of the scale and intensity of ecological change; no other century can compare to the twentieth in terms of environmental effects. McNeil argues that humanity has become the driving force in constructing the environment. In the realms of atmosphere, hydrosphere, and biosphere, McNeil strives to demonstrate how humankind's actions have profoundly changed, and often eroded them.

On a large scale, McNeil cites the booms in economic and population growth over the past few centuries as responsible for the massive environmental changes that occurred in the twentieth century. In order to do this, McNeil attempts to survey the history of a very large time period; structured by the *longue durée* approach. He notes that the growth in economic and population was relatively the same until they diverged at the Industrial Revolution; the economic growth grew significantly faster than population, due to the new technologies that made it easier to amass large profits. As the distance between wealthy and poor countries widened, the environmental tolls of industrialization affected different areas completely different. In terms of ecological disasters, McNeil posits that rich countries are in a better position to weather than poor countries.

McNeil's book does not attempt to discuss the state of the environment in the twentieth century in every part of the world, but rather highlights specific areas that support his arguments. An example would be his discussion of megacities, such as Mexico City, during his discussion of air pollution; he does not try and profile every megacity. His argument comes off as a bit scolding towards humanity for its failures in terms of the environment. The maximizing of resources was the priority, to the detriment of the environment, according to McNeil. The environment is a useful lens to analyze the world, as McNeil demonstrates in *Something New Under the Sun*. Through his environmental history, McNeil is able to illuminate connections throughout the world, as well as the role of economics on the environment and ecological preparedness. Because of the global nature of the environment, environmental history should have a special place within world history.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Twentieth century defined by the maximization of resources at the expense of the environment
- New technologies created through the Industrial Revolution and aftermath made it substantially easier to amass large personal wealth