Taming Manhattan: Environmental Battles in the Antebellum City

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Recommended Citation

Schuetze, Sarah (2015) "Taming Manhattan: Environmental Battles in the Antebellum City," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 17 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.17.2.19

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol17/iss2/18>

Review

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Spring 2015

McNeur, Catherine *Taming Manhattan: Environmental Battles in the Antebellum City*. Harvard University Press, \$29.95 ISBN 9780674725096

Taming the Unruly Results of Antebellum Urban Growth in America's Largest City

An opening scene in a chapter of Catherine McNeur's *Taming Manhattan* depicts a Manhattan resident venturing out for a walk. His efforts were spoiled by "cavorting hogs," unbearable smells, filthy streets where household buckets and chamber pots were emptied, and shanty homes that blocked his passage (6-7). This one story includes many of the unsavory features of New York's urban landscape in the nineteenth century that McNeur details in her richly researched and lively narrated environmental history of the city.

As McNeur's book demonstrates, New York City's immense population growth in the nineteenth century made a huge mark on the urban environment. For every person, business, and animal that took up space in Manhattan, more and more waste accumulated, making life in the metropolis unpleasant and dangerous. The city's policymakers struggled to balance budget with health, and no solution seemed to stay in place for too long.

Rather than centering her discussion on particular neighborhoods or policy-makers, McNeur uses the noisome, noxious, and foul aspects of urban New York as signposts for a compelling historiography. For instance, the book includes in-depth looks at the city's problem with loose dogs and wandering pigs, the massive accumulation of filth and offal in the streets, and the diseased-ridden cows that provided meat and milk to the poor. Each chapter offers a concentrated analysis of these issues in the urban environment, the cause, the effects, and the often-frustrated efforts to resolve them. Thus, *Taming Manhattan* is in keeping with classic works on untamed urban environments like Carl Bridenbaugh's *Cities in Revolt* and Hans Zinsser's *Rats, Lice, and History* as well as Emily Cockayne's more recent *Hubbub*. And yet her work also attends

to both the corrupt and legitimate actions of municipal government to respond to health and sanitation concerns seen in Charles Rosenberg's landmark *The Cholera Years* and Simon Finger's *Contagious City*. Her vivid descriptions call to mind the visual impact of Eric Sanderson's *Mannahatta*.

Forming connective threads between the chapters are themes like class, population growth, popular media, "recycling," and cholera. Most of the health and sanitation problems that McNeur addresses in the book especially affected the poor. Poorer neighborhoods tended to be the most populous, meaning there was even more human and animal waste and offal in the streets outside their doors. These neighborhoods were also often left unattended to by municipal efforts to enforce sanitation efforts. As families grew and more people came to New York from all over the world, the conditions for the poor worsened. Popular media such as newspapers and magazines often critiqued and lampooned the city's unhealthy and unsanitary conditions; thus, these materials are formative to McNeur's discussion. In many ways, the book is a study of nineteenth-century class and media as well as environmental history.

In her study of New York's urban environment and the strategies to "tame" it or make it more sanitary, McNeur recognizes a pattern: Recurring efforts to make use of the city's filth. Although she acknowledges the term "recycling" was not used in the nineteenth century, McNeur touches on the many strategies implemented by entrepreneurs and aldermen to make use of the waste products of piggeries, distilleries, and all the humans living in the city. This theme uses familiar language but is not presentist; instead, it provides a glimpse of McNeur's analytical savvy and voice.

Another important topic of discussion in *Taming Manhattan* is the city's battle against cholera, a bacterial disease that travels through water and had devastating effects. As McNeur explains, cholera was first introduced to New York in 1832, and it returned periodically throughout the nineteenth century. Municipal efforts to respond to and prevent cholera led to the city's public health policies, which were key in the story of controlling Manhattan's health hazards. Cholera played a significant role in politics, health, and daily life, and McNeur's work is a valuable contribution to the understudied topic.

Taming Manhattan traverses the muck and filth of New York City in the nineteenth century when the city's government was as full of problems as the city's streets. McNeur shows that toward the end of the period, the local

government had increased its power over the “nuisances” that accompanied New York’s urban development and population growth. The establishment and management of Central Park was the pinnacle of this change as it provided the benefit of fresh air and green spaces.

McNeur’s book offers a fresh approach to a city with a storied history. Her research was clearly rigorous, yet *Taming Manhattan* offers narratives and visual images that make it a delight to read.

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