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Jim Clifford, West Ham and the River Lea: A Social and Environmental History of London's Industrialized Marshland, 1839–1914

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radical potential. Rather, they ignored or dismissed such women because they identified as housewives. To explain this myopia, Twarog points to radical feminist Robin Morgan's opening remarks to the American Home Economics Association in 1972. "As a radical feminist," Morgan began, "I am here addressing the enemy." (9) By demeaning women who mobilized politically around their domestic responsibilities and denying them a place in the progressive women's movements of these decades, Twarog argues, feminists abandoned them to the radical right and conservatives such as Phyllis Schlafly. Food policy advocates today must learn from that strategic and moral error, she suggests. Rather than vilifying domestic politics, food security activists must tap the energy and vision of consumer activists, whose contemporary iteration can be found most notable in Black neighbourhoods and in the global south, where food security is an urgent problem.

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Jim Clifford, *West Ham and the River Lea: A Social and Environmental History of London's Industrialized Marshland, 1839-1914* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press 2017)

IN FALL 1898, a coalition of labour union leaders and socialists gained control of the municipal government of West Ham, an industrial suburb east of the city of London, England. However brief their term – just two years – the coalition represented the first municipal government controlled by what was emerging as Britain's Labour Party. Historian Jim Clifford takes seriously the explanation for the electoral breakthrough offered by one local conservative newspaper – that ratepayers turned to the group that promised to deal with West Ham's water

problems. In doing so, Clifford takes a key political event and grounds it in the material circumstances of everyday life. Political history meets social and environmental history.

The 1898 election appears half way through Clifford's illuminating study. The first half of the book deals with the impact of the urban and industrial transformation of the Lower Lea River Valley. Using historical geographic information system (GIS) mapping, Clifford details the disproportionate growth of heavy industry in this particular industrial suburb of London. The technique also allows him to show the continuing significance of navigable rivers in the area during the long 19th century, which meant that industry frequently located on marshland. Better off residents stayed well away from these increasingly noxious areas, leaving them to the factories, open sewers, and overcrowded and poorly built homes of low-income, socially-marginalized residents. Although Clifford briefly mentions that the suburb offered some natural amenities not available to residents of the inner city, he primarily surveys the damage done to those living in the Lower Lea environment.

The election marks a turning point in the book. In Chapter 4, Clifford documents the inadequate municipal response to water shortages in the 1890s that prompted a coalition of voters to support Labour politicians in 1898. Unusually dry summers played a role, but the environmental historian underlines how human behavior ensured droughts would become crises. Demand grew, as more and more people expected more and more water to be part of their everyday lives. The local private monopoly proved unable, or unwilling, to expand facilities in response to growing demand, or to work with other companies in the surrounding region to ensure a steady supply. When local political leaders failed to intervene

in the crisis, voters turned to the Labour politicians who promised to do so.

Although the Labour victory was short-lived, Clifford shows in the next two chapters that the alliance of Liberal and Conservative municipal politicians that remained in power after 1900 learned their lesson from the 1898 election. Labour supported the public health officer as he responded to a spike in deaths attributed to typhoid and diarrhea during the 1890s; his hybrid approach of improving sanitary conditions and health services would be sustained by the alliance through the early 20th century. Clifford is sensitive to the complex debates over health of the period, but concludes that the initiative yielded positive results, improving outcomes in West Ham through the early decades of the 20th century. The alliance also proved more sensitive to unemployment crises, even before the adoption of the Labour-inspired national Unemployed Workmen Act. As the local government responded to demands for relief work, they turned to projects aimed at another water issue – flooding. Municipal engineers who wanted to prevent major floods such as occurred in 1888, 1897, and 1904 proposed drainage schemes that offered low skill work to relatively large numbers of the unemployed workers. Two such projects provided relief between 1905 and 1907, although a much larger and more ambitious 1908 plan to address industrial damage to the riverscape of West Ham collapsed. As a result, the district remained vulnerable to severe flooding, and the larger public works project languished until an even more devastating flood struck the district in 1928. The riverscape was improved by a project in the 1930s, although by that time the industrial suburb already had begun a slow economic and demographic decline that would continue through to the next big public works project – the Olympic Games of the 21st century. That

project has undoubtedly improved environmental conditions in parts of West Ham, although whether that has resulted in improved social conditions for those living in the district is less clear.

Did that 1898 election make any real difference in the lives of West Ham residents? The conclusion one can reach from *West Ham and the River Lea* is that the election prompted a belated and limited response to serious environmental damage done by decades of rapid industrial and demographic growth. Municipal politicians had limited resources for tackling the immense problems they faced, especially given that those who regained political control in 1900 had little interest in seeing local taxes increase. In spite of some improvements in health outcomes, many residents continued to live in a seriously damaged environment, vulnerable to the next economic or environmental crisis.

Clifford is a very good guide to the environmental damage and the limited governmental response to it in the industrial suburb of West Ham. His GIS and other statistical analyses offer the reader the geographer's bird's eye view of industrial development and its social and environmental consequences. Throughout the book, but particularly in his chapters on turn-of-the-century local political responses, the historian in Clifford seeks to give a human face to those otherwise impersonal maps and tables. The result is a careful study that will be of interest to a variety of historians who seek to delineate and understand the impact of industrial change on the material, social and political landscape.

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