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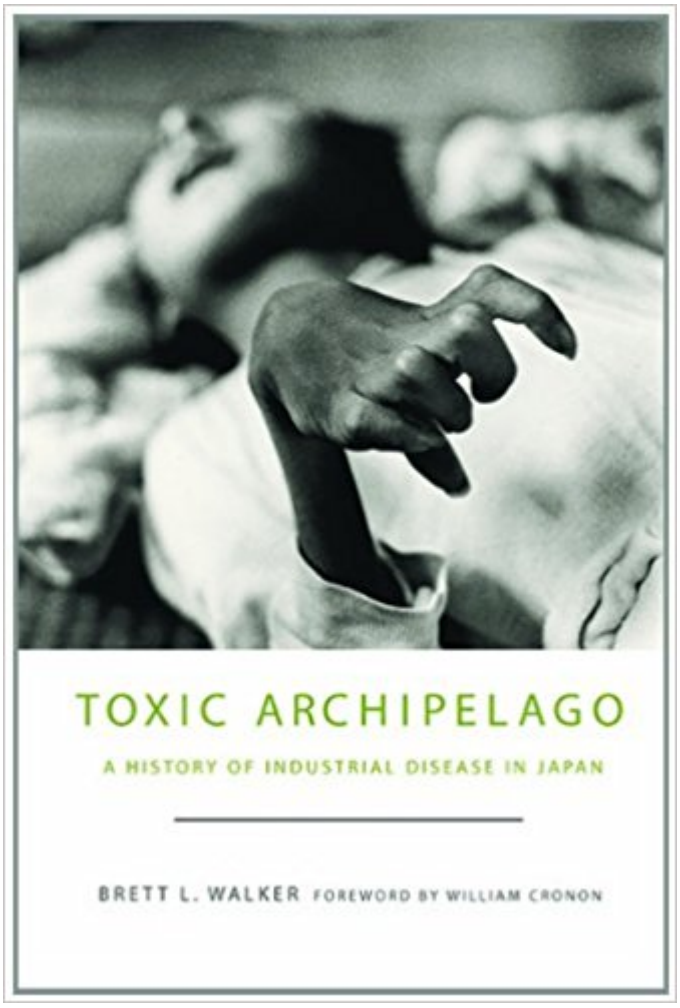

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Synopsis

Every person on the planet is entangled in a web of ecological relationships that link farms and factories with human consumers. Our lives depend on these relationships -- and are imperiled by them as well. Nowhere is this truer than on the Japanese archipelago.During the nineteenth century, Japan saw the rise of Homo sapiens industrialis, a new breed of human transformed by an engineered, industrialized, and poisonous environment. Toxins moved freely from mines, factory sites, and rice paddies into human bodies.Toxic Archipelago explores how toxic pollution works its way into porous human bodies and brings unimaginable pain to some of them. Brett Walker examines startling case studies of industrial toxins that know no boundaries: deaths from insecticide contaminations; poisonings from copper, zinc, and lead mining; congenital deformities from methylmercury factory effluents; and lung diseases from sulfur dioxide and asbestos.This powerful, probing book demonstrates how the Japanese archipelago has become industrialized over the last two hundred years -- and how people and the environment have suffered as a consequence.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"Toxic Archipelago would make an excellent addition to any course on environmental issues in Asia. . . . carefully researched, thoughtfully rendered accounts of industrial disease in Japan make clear that . . . modern technology has . . . tightened the binds between us and the world we inhabit."â •Darrin Magee, Journal of Environmental Studies and Science, Vol. 1 (2011)"Walker's is

an unorthodox approach to academic scholarship. It mixes academic rigor with personal anecdotes and experiences. It is historically grounded, soundly documented scholarship. It is fascinating, but at times sickly so."â •Miranda A. Schreurs, Journal of Japanese Studies, 38:1, 2012"An uncomfortable, but nonetheless compelling, read. Although the author tells it as he sees it, the book is well-written and offers a reasoned and persuasive argument . . . that certainly delivers strong messages. . . . the originality and depth of the research clearly merit a cover-to-cover exploration."â •Catherine Mills, Social History of Medicine, August 2011"Toxic Archipelago would make an excellent addition to any course on environmental issues in Asia. Walker's carefully researched, thoughtfully rendered accounts of industrial disease in Japan make clear that, far from liberating us from nature, modern technology has instead tightened the binds between us and the world we inhabit."â •D. Magee, Journal of Environmental Studies, June 2011"In Toxic Archipelago, Brett Walker breaks new ground with his environmental history of an industrializing Japan over the last two centuries. Building on the literatures of disease and the body, he examines the co-evolution of the institutions of Japanese culture and the biology of the Japanese environment. The link between culture and environment is not simply the body, but the human body in physical and social pain. Walker forces the reader to engage with large-scale transformations of landscape and toxic pollution over time through the prism of suffering and grief with a number of finely drawn personal stories. This nuanced and beautifully written exploration of the meaning of nature and culture in Japan displays the ramifications of the hybrid environments that have evolved and poses powerful questions for people of all cultures and nations."â •George Perkins Marsh Prize Committee, ASEH"Historian Walker effectively links, perhaps for the first time anywhere, the historical processes of the economic, social, and land-use policies involved in modernizing and globalizing Japan with the pain and suffering of its environment and peopleâ |. Never has a book so clearly illustrated the aphorisms 'all politics are local,' 'the personal is the political,' and 'we are what we eat.' This discussion of the evolution of environmentalism in Japan will reflect new light on the understanding of environmental history. Essential."â •Choice"Walker is a superb historian and analyst, as his body of work, considerable for a relatively young scholar, manifestsâ |. Unlike his editor, William Cronon, Brett Walker has immersed himself in a culture whose epistemology features no conceptual space for wilderness as a place where humans are not. His convincing, compelling 'from the genes up' portrait is of a living environment akin to being in Tokyo rush hour, 24/7."â •H-Net"Walker focuses on the complex causations of environmental crises, documenting how cultural practices, social institutions, and biochemical pathways have intertwined with the toxic byproducts of modern industry to produce devastating pollution incidents. . . . This is a thoroughly compelling and important volume that will

have a substantial impact on the study of modern Japan and our understanding of the environmental history of the modern world."â •American Historical Review

"This is a fascinating, original, and persuasive book that makes several important contributions to the field of environmental history. With this work Walker further solidifies his position as the leading environmental historian of Japan writing in English."â •Timothy George, author of Minamata: Pollution and the Struggle for Democracy in Postwar Japan"In this powerful, disturbing new book, Brett Walker turns his attention to the environmental consequences of industrialization in Japan over the past two centuries, focusing especially on toxic pollution and the human suffering it has caused. Toxic Archipelago is a major contribution not just to Japanese environmental history but to the history of industrial pollution worldwide."â •William Cronon, University of Wisconsinâ •Madison"Brett Walker has written an exemplary history of chemicals, pain, and ecological simplification in Japan. In beautifully clear language, Toxic Archipelago explores what Walker calls the 'hybrid causations' of industrial toxicity, helping us understand how toxic substances pervaded Japan's human and nonâ •human communities. Above all, Walker keeps us from turning our faces away from the pain at the heart of his histories. This is an illuminating, compelling, and haunting study."â •Nancy Langston, author of Toxic Bodies: Hormone Disruptors and the Legacy of DES"'Ecology is history,' writes Brett Walker. Toxic Archipelago is a history of unexpected relationships and unintended consequences. It is a passionate reflection on the ecology of suffering and sacrifice and a provocative account of biological and social pain situated deep within the bodies and landscapes that have given rise to a modern industrialized Japan."â •Gregg Mitman, author of Breathing Space: How Allergies Shape our Lives and Landscapes

While Walker tends to hammer the point home, this is a pretty good read. I got this book for an environmental studies class, and I found myself enjoying it, well as much as I could with such a grim subject matter. I'm not really one who likes reading for class, but this was interesting enough to make me really think and not just skim through it like I do most books needed for class.

Overall, the book was a pleasure to read, and the main message Walker wants to communicate to his audience is a worthy cause. Basically, in the pursuit of modernization/industrialization/empire-building, the Japanese state caused pain for some of its citizens and did harm to the environment. Walker presents several examples to illustrate that humans are always going to be affected by their natural environment, and any harm we do to that

environment will hurt us in the long run. The point is well illustrated, but my problem with the book is that this point was made obvious with just the introduction and the first chapter. In other words, I think this work should have been condensed for an article, and the book felt repetitive after the first 100 pages or so. Walker does a nice job connecting local developments (human pain and environmental damage) to broader developments within Japan and its broader empire between the late 19th-20th century, but those connections are too obvious and require little explanation. For example, war required more resources, such as mining, and this increase in mining activities caused greater environmental damage, which caused more physical pain for inhabitants of local communities near these operations. There it is. I just don't think this requires an entire chapter to explain. The message is important, and this specific topic is not covered by many other scholars in the U.S., so the book is significant in that regard, but it felt like a broken record for most of the second half.

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