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Review of *The Republic of Nature: An Environmental History of the United States* By Mark Fiege

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Supreme Court held that under the Doctrine of Discovery, Indigenous nations had lost the full ownership of their lands and could only sell to the government that held the discovery preemption power, that is, the right to be the only purchaser.

Johnson is still the law today, restricting the property rights of American Indian nations across the country and bearing upon tribal nations and their governing powers and economic rights.

As befits such an important case, numerous books and articles have been written on Johnson. Blake Watson's book is less a legal analysis of the case than a meticulous factual and historical look at the attempts of the Wabash and Illinois companies to get confirmation of their 1773 and 1775 purchases of lands from tribal governments located in what is now Illinois and Indiana. The companies and their shareholders knew they were taking big risks by buying directly from tribal leaders, and this book describes the tortuous path they followed in attempting to get approval of the purchases, first from the British Crown, then from colonial governments, state governments, and ultimately the federal government and the Supreme Court. They failed at every turn for fifty years, and instead the United States exercised its preemption right under discovery to be the only purchaser of tribal lands when it purchased most of the lands at issue in Johnson from the tribes in treaties in 1813.

Watson carefully leads the reader through a cast of hundreds and a fifty-year process of bribing, conniving, and planning by these companies to secure the fruits of their deals. He adds valuable information on the characters and events and on this most important case that still affects all American Indian nations. He helps the serious student of Johnson v. McIntosh come to a deeper understanding of the case, the times, and the participants. If you want to delve into the background story of the Johnson case, this is the book for you.

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This is not an environmental history of America. That would require several volumes, as William Cronon’s foreword acknowledges. Instead, Mark Fiege looks at nine episodes of American history and tells us how nature—the environment—played its part in their unfolding.

The traditional definition of environmental history, expressed by historian Richard White, is the study of the consequences of human actions on the environment, and the reciprocal consequences of an altered nature on human society. In Fiege’s fresh view, “humanity’s freedom to think and act inevitably encounters the limits that nature imposes.”

Each of his nine essays focuses on a specific historical situation, explaining it in terms of its natural setting, the limits imposed by nature and the environment, and the consequences of human invasion. This unusual approach has varying degrees of success in the telling.

The attempt to assign determining significance to natural elements in the first episode, focused on the Salem witch trials, is much less persuasive than in later vignettes. More convincing is Fiege’s discussion of the struggle for American independence, a struggle deeply concerned with natural law and natural rights. His treatment of slavery revolves around the significance of cotton agronomy.

One of Fiege’s best analyses of the interplay between environment and history is his account of the construction of the transcontinental railroad, including the importance of its course through the Great Plains. Here nature had to be overcome by a deadline, and men struggled against natural roadblocks all along the route.

Other chapters of The Republic of Nature take up Lincoln and internal improvements, the Civil War, the Manhattan Project, Brown v. Board of Education, and the national response to the 1973–74 oil shock.
Environmental history is a recent academic endeavor, but one that grows increasingly critical as our planet confronts the enormous upheavals brought on by human-induced climate change and global warming. Unfortunately, this is merely a peripheral issue here and lightly treated—a major deficiency in a work that purports to be an environmental history of the nation. Moreover, the arguments for placing nature as the centerpiece of hot political, social, and cultural issues such as slavery, witchcraft hysteria, and civil rights, for example, are often strained and less than convincing. Nonetheless, this book is important in its attempt to seek out a new and potentially exciting way of viewing American history through the lens of nature’s influence. Historians should imitate and improve upon this attempt.

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