



BOOK REVIEW

**Izdebski, Adam, and Rafał Szmytka, eds. *Kraków: An Ecobiography*  
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Inspired by “ecobiographies” of American cities, this coedited, multiauthored book attempts to apply the model “for the first time,” the editors claim, “to European soil,” to explore Krakow’s “centuries-long, evolving—and in [their] opinion unique—relationship with the world of nature” (11). Successive chapters, written by experts including historians, archaeologists, and environmental scientists, illuminate the city’s relationship to its environment over time by exploring its climate, rivers, mediaeval relationship to plants, natural resources, and pollution in the early modern period, and industrialization, as well as the history of its smog and the myth of Green Krakow.

Although there is no concluding chapter to sum up their findings, the cumulative message of the book is clear: Krakow’s climate—as well as its geographical placement along riverine, railway, and other trade routes; in relative proximity to metals, salt, and other minerals; and with forests to the south and east and rich black and brown agricultural soils to the northeast—has meaningfully shaped its history. The experience of smog and pollution in the city is longstanding, even if the principal sources of pollution have changed over time. Prone to inversion more than half of the year, Krakow’s propensity for smog is particularly high. If, in the mediaeval and early modern period, pollution tended to come from tanneries, animal and human waste, accumulating garbage, and charcoal smoke, and the city was befouled by coal smoke from the 1830s onward, by the 1960s pollution had shifted to heavy metals and airborne particulates from the Lenin Steelworks and Skawina aluminium works, turning Krakow into an “ecological disaster zone” (141). Now, car emissions are a major culprit. Due to the city’s climatological situation, Adam Izdebski and Konrad Wnęk observe, its “contemporary problems are really nothing new. Krakow is in a particularly difficult location, and solving problems that have gone unsolved for several hundred years will require extraordinary actions” (160).

Interestingly, even though industrialization came relatively late to Krakow, the city’s modern shift from dependence on its immediate natural surroundings to the use of coal and resources from further afield came *sooner* than for many other regional cities. Thanks to the coming of the railway in 1847, the city’s voracious consumption of nearby resources significantly abated, such that by “the eve of World War I, only milk, potatoes, hay and straw (and probably fruit and vegetables) came from the city’s closest traditional sources” (105). The railway also ameliorated the effect of floods because the city could still be provisioned even when the Vistula was no longer navigable.

The book is dedicated to “scholars of Krakow’s past.” As one of them, I found the text endlessly fascinating, particularly when an aspect of environmental history enlarged or altered my existing conceptions. For example, the flooding of the Vistula contributed both to the Galician Slaughter of 1846 and to the creation of Greater Krakow in the early twentieth century. Andrzej Chwalba argues that the flood of 1903 was a major impetus for mayor Juliusz Leo’s plan to modernize the river channel and incorporate surrounding districts, including Podgórze on the opposite bank. “Thus, the river, the bringer of misfortune, hastened events and decisions of significance to the city and its residents. It became a historical actor par excellence, co-deciding on the fate of modern Krakow” (60). Modern embankments and boulevards begun as part of the Greater Krakow plan succeeded in protecting the city. In May 2010, the Vistula’s highest water level was 5 cm higher than the 1903 flood, but flooding and damage were minor (62–63). In their chapter on climate, Wnęk, Izdebski, and Leszek

Kowanetz speculate that relatively warm winters and cool summers during World War I may have ameliorated the shortages and suffering of those years, while very cold winters during World War II surely placed additional burdens on armies and civilians (33–34). Finally, the concluding chapter by Małgorzata Praczyk shows that despite widely held myths of Krakow as a garden city, thanks to its famous Planty and other parks, Krakow is per capita one of the least green cities in Poland. Afforestation in much-maligned Łódź, Poland’s quintessential industrial city, is at 20 percent, while in Krakow that figure is only 5 percent (175)!

The book is clearly translated and helpfully organized. Inserts that define key terms or people in each chapter—including “the Anthropocene,” “the medieval climactic anomaly,” “paleoclimatology,” “ruderal plants,” “smog,” “Henryk Jordan,” and “Cecylia Malik,” among others—as well as numerous greyscale illustrations ranging from reproductions of images from chronicles to charts, graphs, and maps enrich the text. The book jacket evocatively depicts the green city and its smog, while featuring one of its most famous denizens, the *gołąb* (pigeon), flocks of whom are as ubiquitous a part of Market Square as the *Sukiennice* (Cloth Hall) and who figure prominently in the decor of the recently renovated City Historical Museum. A variety of readers, beyond just scholars of the city’s past, will learn much from this volume, and one can only hope for more “ecobiographies” of Central European cities in the future.