



Land of Big Rivers: French and Indian Illinois, 1699-1778 (Shawnee Books)

M. J. Morgan

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Drawing on research from a variety of academic fields, such as archaeology, history, botany, ecology, and physical science, M. J. Morgan explores the intersection of people and the environment in early eighteenth-century Illinois Country—a stretch of fecund, alluvial river plain along the Mississippi river. Arguing against the traditional narrative that describes Illinois as an untouched wilderness until the influx of American settlers, Morgan illustrates how the story began much earlier.

She focuses her study on early French and Indian communities, and later on the British, nestled within the tripartite environment of floodplain, riverine cliffs and bluffs, and open, upland till plain/prairie and examines the impact of these diverse groups of people on the ecological landscape. By placing human lives within the natural setting of the period—the abundant streams and creeks, the prairies, plants and wildlife—she traces the environmental change that unfolded across almost a century. She describes how it was a land in motion; how the occupying peoples used, extracted, and extirpated its resources while simultaneously introducing new species; and how the flux and flow of life mirrored the movement of the rivers. Morgan emphasizes the importance of population sequences, the relationship between the aboriginals and the Europeans, the shared use of resources, and the effects of each on the habitat.

Land of Big Rivers is a unique, many-themed account of the big-picture ecological change that occurred during the early history of the Illinois Country. It is the first book to consider the environmental aspects of the Illinois Indian experience and to reconsider the role of the French and British in environmental change in the mid-Mississippi Valley. It engagingly recreates presettlement Illinois with a remarkable interdisciplinary approach and provides new details that will encourage understanding of the interaction between physical geography and the plants, animals, and people in the Illinois Country. Furthermore, it exhibits the importance of looking at the past in the context of environmental transformation, which is especially relevant in light of today's global climate change.

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