

## THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY

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### Summary

Among professional historians most of the influential innovations of the twentieth century originated in Europe. Italians launched microhistory. Britons developed an anthropological social history. Most influential of all, French historians invented the famous *Annales* approach, drawing on all the social sciences to create what they sometimes called a total history. Environmental history, however, first took shape in the United States. This essay will chart the evolution of environmental history in general, exploring its origins and growth, its flaws and eccentricities, and conclude with an assessment of its most active arenas.

While scholarship is not an Olympiad, it has from time to time national communities that, somehow, achieve greater international influence than others. That prominence rarely lasts for more than a few decades. In the sphere of environmental history, U.S. scholars in the 1970s and 1980s, writing about U.S. environmental history, especially the American West, achieved such influence and prominence. In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, they appear to have lost it. This is a sign of the robust health and maturity of the field: environmental history since 1980 has come to flourish in many corners of the world, and scholars everywhere have found models, approaches, perspectives rather different from the ones developed for the US context.

### 1. What Is Environmental History?

Like every other subset of history, environmental history is different things to different people. The author's preferred definition is: the history of the relationship between human societies and the rest of nature on which they depended. This includes three chief areas of inquiry, which of course overlap and have no firm boundaries.

First is the study of material environmental history, the human involvement with forests and frogs, with coal and cholera. This entails study of the evolution of both human impact on the rest of nature and nature's influence upon human affairs, each of which is always in flux and always affecting the other. This form of environmental history puts human history in a fuller context, that of earth and life on earth, and recognizes that human events are part of a larger story in which humans are not the only actors. In practice, most of the historical work in this vein concerns the last 200 years, when industrialization among other forces greatly enhanced the human power to alter environments.

Second is political and policy-related environmental history. This concerns the history of self-conscious human efforts to regulate the relationship between society and nature, and between social groups in matters concerning nature. Thus efforts at soil conservation or pollution control qualify, as perhaps do social struggles over land and resource use. Political struggle over resources is as old as human societies and close to ubiquitous. The author would not use the term environmental history to refer to contests between one group of herders and another over pastures; but he would use the term to refer to struggles over whether a certain patch of land should be used as pasture or farmland.

The difference lies in the fact that the outcome of the struggle carries major implications for the land itself, as well as for the people involved. (Mind you, others see this differently than the author). In practice, policy-related environmental history extends back only to the late nineteenth century, with a few exceptions for early examples of soil conservation, air pollution restrictions, or monarchical efforts to protect charismatic species for their own hunting pleasure. This is because only in the late nineteenth century did states and societies mount systematic efforts to regulate their interaction with the environment generally. Because these efforts were spasmodic and often modest in their effects, most of this sort of environmental history deals with the decades since 1965, when both states and explicitly environmental organizations grew more active in their efforts.

The third main form of environmental history is a subset of cultural and intellectual history. It concerns what humans have thought, believed, written, and more rarely, painted, sculpted, sung, or danced dealing with the relationship between society and nature. Evidence of a sort exists from tens of thousands of years ago in Australian aboriginal rock shelter paintings, or in the cave art of southwestern Europe. But the great majority of this sort of work is drawn from published texts, as with intellectual history, and treats the environmental thought contained either in major religious traditions or, more commonly, in the works of influential (and sometimes not-so-influential) writers from Mohandas K. Gandhi to Arne Naess. This sort of environmental history tends to focus on individual thinkers, but it extends to the study of popular environmentalism as a cultural movement.

More than most varieties of history, environmental history is an interdisciplinary project. Many scholars in the field trained as geographers or historical ecologists. In addition to the customary published and archival texts of the standard historian, environmental historians routinely use the findings culled from bio-archives (such as

pollen deposits which can tell us about former vegetation patterns) and geo-archives (such as soil profiles that can tell us about past land use practices). The subject matter of environmental history is often just the same as the subject matter in historical geography or historical ecology, although the sort of sources emphasized normally differs. An illustration is the field of climate history, which is pursued by scholars from at least half a dozen disciplines, including text-based historians. Unlike natural science, most environmental history has to date been done by individual scholars, rather than by teams.

## **2. The Origins and Institutionalization of Environmental History (as a Self-conscious Enterprise)**

Like every twist and turn within intellectual life, environmental history has countless and tangled roots. Some of the earliest extant texts, such as the Epic of Gilgamesh, deal with environmental change generated by human action (cutting cedar forests in this case). Many scholars of long ago, notably Ibn Khaldun and Montesquieu, found in the variations in the natural world, climate especially, a key to human behavior. Historical geographers since the 1870s charted landscape change, especially in Europe. For professional historians, awareness of geographical constraints and influences has long been a hallmark, although not a universal. Fernand Braudel, in what was probably the twentieth century's most influential book among professional historians, devoted a large chunk of *La méditerranée* to geography and environment.

But environmental history as a self-conscious undertaking dates only to about 1970 and, like so much in intellectual life, drew its energy from society at large. Around the world, of course, the 1960s and 1970s witnessed the coalescence of popular environmentalism as a cultural and political force. It was stronger in some place than in others, and took different shapes in different contexts. In the United States it helped a few historians, initially almost all of whom were scholars of U.S. history, to come together both intellectually and institutionally to launch environmental history as a self-conscious undertaking. Among them were Roderick Nash, John Opie, Donald Worster, Susan Flader and a historian of the ancient Mediterranean, Donald Hughes. By some accounts Nash, author of *Wilderness and the American Mind*, an intellectual history of an environmental subject, was the first to employ the term "environmental history".

Between Nash's book and 1985 a small handful of books acquired status as foundational texts in U.S. environmental history. The first was Alfred Crosby's *Columbian Exchange*, one of the few books whose title became part of nearly every Anglophone historian's vocabulary. Revealingly, Crosby had great difficulty finding a publisher for a book that revealed the extraordinary ecological consequences of the regular crossing of the Atlantic after 1492. At that time, a history book that paid close attention to viruses, grasses, and pigs seemed (at least to acquisition editors) too unorthodox to take seriously. But Crosby's book found an audience and remains in print after nearly four decades.

Worster's *Dust Bowl* took an iconic subject in US history and gave it a new twist, mixing careful consideration of climate patterns, soil characteristics and other ecological factors into the story. William Cronon's *Changes in the Land*, which

explored the transformations of the southern New England landscape between 1600 and 1800, enjoyed great success and inspired several imitators. Worster and Cronon soon became the most influential figures in U.S. environmental history, joined by Richard White, who like Cronon featured Amerindians prominently in much of his work, and Carolyn Merchant, who put women front and center. Martin Melosi and Joel Tarr pioneered urban environmental history in the U.S. context.

Primarily through the work of these leading scholars, environmental history won a place on the crowded stage of U.S. history. Of new sub-fields in U.S. history, only women's history has enjoyed fuller acceptance. Only in India, the author believes, have environmental historians attracted the attention of their fellow historians as successfully as in the U.S.

These U.S. scholars, who continued to produce influential work, attracted international attention too. Historians around the world contemplating taking an environmental turn often read them, especially Worster and Cronon, while formulating their own projects. Worster's work on droughts and irrigation, for example, seemed relevant in many settings outside the United States. The themes of cultural clash and colonization, developed in Cronon's, Crosby's, and White's work, found interested readers among those writing about colonial encounters in Asia and Africa. White's concept of a 'middle ground' seemed helpful to scholars of medieval Central Europe and to Tokugawa Japan.

Part of the influence of the U.S. authors must be attributed to institutional factors. The first generation formed the American Society for Environmental History in 1976-77 and by the early 1980s held regular conferences. Most importantly, the ASEH began publishing a journal, now called *Environmental History*, in 1976. Moreover, as in all fields of history, the Americans enjoyed advantages in the form of the general vigor and (comparatively) generous funding of US academia, and in the fact that so many historians around the world could read English (this, obviously, boosted the fortunes of all Anglophones, not merely those in the U.S.)

In contrast, the institutionalization of environmental history came later elsewhere. For example, the European Society for Environmental History began regular meetings in 2001. SOLCHA, the Society for Latin American and Caribbean Environmental History, began operations in 2003. A Canadian network of environmental historians (NiCHE) took shape in 2006-7, as did the Association of South Asian Environmental Historians (ASAEH). An umbrella organization for environmental history around the world formed in 2006-2008 and oversaw the first world congress of environmental history, held in Denmark in 2009.

The journal *Environment and History*, which published chiefly British, European, and imperial environmental history, started up in 1995. A Dutch and Flemish journal *Tijdschrift voor Ecologische Geschiedenis* (Journal for Environmental History), became a regular annual in 1999. A Czech internet journal, *Klaudyán*, began publication in 2000. In 2004 the Croatian journal *Ekonomska i ekohistorija* was launched, as was an Italian one, *I Frutti de Demetra*. An Italian-based but internationally focused journal, *Global Environment*, began publication in 2008.

In every respect, the Americans enjoyed a firmer institutional footing sooner than environmental historians elsewhere. Numerically, Americanists still loom large in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, and at a guess accounted for roughly half of the environmental historians around the world as of 2010.

But the intellectual prominence of the Americanists' examples waned after the 1980s. Scholars elsewhere quickly found their own voices and confronted the limits of the relevance of American precedents. The American environmental historians' emphasis on wilderness, for example, had minimal resonance in most of the world. Beyond that, while almost everyone in the field could read the work of the Americanists, they could not (or chose not) to read the work of scholars elsewhere.

Over time the proportion of environmental history written in Spanish, German, Italian, among other tongues, grew, and most Americanists could not read it. A few prominent works, such as Joachim Radkau's *Natur und Macht* were translated for Anglophone audiences, but only a few. Thus as the enterprise of environmental history globalized, the intellectual exchange expanded but not evenly: by and large everyone around the world read the prominent

Americanists, but the Americanists, for reasons of language and inclination, read only one another. This is not quite as blinkered as it sounds: Americanists were numerous enough that keeping up with their production alone became nearly a full-time job by the 1990s.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

J.R. McNeill was born in Chicago in 1954. He studied at Swarthmore College and Duke University, where he completed a Ph.D. in 1981. Since 1985 he has taught in the History Department and School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University, where he held the Cinco Hermanos Chair in Environmental and International Affairs from 2003 until his appointment as University Professor in 2006. He has held visiting appointments at the universities of Otago and Canterbury, both in New Zealand, and in 2010 at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris. His research interests lie in environmental history generally, and of the Mediterranean world, the tropical Atlantic world, and Pacific islands in particular. He has held two Fulbright awards, a Guggenheim fellowship, a MacArthur grant, and a fellowship at the Woodrow Wilson Center. He has published about 50 articles in scholarly journals. His books include *The Atlantic Empires of France and Spain, 1700-1765* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985); *Atlantic American Societies from Columbus through Abolition* (co-edited, London: Routledge, 1992); *The Mountains of the Mediterranean World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992); *The Environmental History of the Pacific World* (London: Variorum, 2001); *Something New Under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth-century World* (New York: Norton, 2000), co-winner of the World History Association book prize, the Forest History Society book prize, and runner-up for the BP Natural World book prize, and translated into 7 languages; and *The Human Web: A Bird's-eye View of World History* (New York: Norton, 2003), co-authored with William McNeill and translated into 5 languages. His latest book, on ecological change, epidemics, war and revolution in the plantation economies of the Americas (17<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> centuries) is *Mosquito Empires* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).