

An Interview with Donald Worster about Environmental History*

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Traditional historians today sometimes resemble a besieged country defending its resources and culture against an invasion by pushy, clamorous immigrants. The newcomers won't fit in, it is argued, they will fragment the community. Their language is odd; they go to the wrong churches and worship the wrong gods. Many of them are polemical, indiscreet, and anarchical. Let them in and they will use up scarce resources. They will insist on making changes.¹

Introduction

Environmental history offers challenges and possibilities not only to so-called traditional historians, but to the spectrum of left historians as well. On one level its project is 'conservative': it aims to resituate human history to where it has been all along — within nature. But on another level its implications are radical: it calls into question human-centered sociologies, and problematizes the role of humans in transforming the rest of nature.

In Canada environmental history has developed relatively slowly. While in the United States and Europe the environmental political debates of the last twenty years have reinvigorated an environmental approach to history, in Canada a similar political conjuncture has not produced the same productive

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1 Donald Worster, "World Without Borders: The Internationalizing of Environmental History," in K.E. Bailes (ed.), *Environmental History: Critical Issues in Comparative Perspective* (Lanham, MD 1985), 661.

results amongst academic historians. Although some suggest that an environmental perspective on the Canadian past has long been embedded in Canadian historiography,² the corpus of what one might call the 'new' Canadian environmental history has been limited to the contributions of historical geographers and conservation historians. More recently, however, there have been signs of stirring interest, inspired by the international field and the example and teaching of environmental historians of other regions who are based at Canadian universities. At the 1994 Canadian Historical Association meeting in Calgary the interest in the new environmental history was registered in its program, with three sessions devoted to environmental history, and by the invitation of the distinguished American environmental historian, Donald Worster, as keynote speaker to the conference.

Donald Worster has been a leading figure of the new environmental history over the past two decades. Some of his seminal contributions to the field include: *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas*, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* and *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity and the Growth of the American West*.³ Currently he is one of the editors of the Cambridge University Press series on Studies in Environment and History and is Director of the Program in Nature, Culture and Technology at the University of Kansas. At the 1994 Canadian Historical Association meeting in Calgary, Donald Worster spoke on the topic of "Two Faces West: Environment and Development in Western North America." I interviewed him in Calgary at this time on the theme of the internationalization of environmental history, and asked him to consider the levels of analysis upon which environmental historians ought to be formulating questions.

Interview

ME: *The inclusion of environmental history in the program of the Canadian Historical Association meeting this year is a novel development. Although Canadians have made some important contributions to environmental history over the past years, in general I think that in Canada there is only a limited knowledge of the field. Perhaps you could briefly explain what environmental history is about and consider whether environmental history is just another subfield in history, or, as some would argue, a general approach which*

2 Ramsay Cook, "Cabbages Not Kings: Towards an Ecological Interpretation of Early Canadian History," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 25 (4) (Winter 1990-91), 6.

3 Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (New York 1977); *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York 1979); *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (New York 1985).

recasts our understanding of 'total' history.

DW: At its deepest level, environmental history is about what makes change happen in history. There are many contenders for that. In the past the argument was mainly made that it was the ideas of rich and powerful leaders that made change happen. We have been getting below that level for a long time to look at things like class conflicts, ethnic loyalties and so forth. I think environmental history is asking us to dig even deeper to see that our relationships with the natural world have been an important historical force; that much of what goes on in human society, when we look under the surface, is grounded upon a relationship with the natural world; that human relationships, including the relations of labour and capital, in some ways, have their roots in a relationship with nature. Now, I know you can push that argument so hard that people get very wary; they start calling you an environmental determinist. I am simply saying that the relationship is a very important force in history, not in the simplistic sense that the environment 'does this to us.' But I am arguing as an environmental historian that the interaction, the relationship with and the perception of the natural world are very central to much that has happened in human history. It is time that we put the environment back into our understanding of why change happens and the directions that it takes.

ME: *At an environmental history conference nearly ten years ago you proposed that the subjects of environmental history do not necessarily fit within the boundaries of political history; that the nation-state should not be the automatic point of reference for environmental historians.⁴ In keeping with this position, the paper that you presented at this conference was continental in scope. However, the majority of environmental historians (with some very notable exceptions) still define their subjects on either national or local levels. For example, Michael Williams' recent forest history of the United States was defined by political boundaries, while the subject matter plausibly could and should have led Professor Williams north of the border.⁵ Do you think that such 'national' definitions of the subject of environmental history are a hindrance to inquiry, or are those historians who take local and national definitions of their subject just 'acting locally while thinking globally'(!)?*

DW: I do not think that the nation-state should define all our interest in history, as it tended to do in the past. I think we need to be more curious about and more responsible toward the rest of the world that lies beyond whatever nation-state borders we live in. The times have made it imperative that we do

4 Worster, "World Without..."

5 Michael Williams, *Americans and Their Forests: A Historical Geography* (Cambridge 1989).

so. But it still seems to me valid to ask questions about the nation-state and its impact on the land. It still seems valid to form questions that deal with national cultures. I know that is not a popular idea today in some circles, but I believe that the power of the nation-state has helped to define national cultures. We have to look at those national cultures as environmental forces or agents, if you like. So, there are a lot of valid questions to be raised, for instance, about what Washington D.C. intends to do about forests and so forth. You can focus your questions along a whole series of entities. You can look at the family instead of the nation state. But it seems to me that you could also look at how, for example, various cultures, nation states, empires and tribal communities all interacted with Lake Superior and made an impact. You could look at fish stocks off the west coast of North America as a focal point and then bring in these other forces, instead of starting with Washington, D.C. or Ottawa. And it seems to me that it is that kind of change in focus that environmental history promises. We have not always done it, but it should be done more often. It should be legitimate. I know Michael Williams has done quite recently a book that has no nation state focus. It is a global book on environmental problems, very international and planetary-centered. He also has been working on global deforestation. The point is, he did a book on Americans as a nation state, as a national culture acting on the forest, but he is also interested in global deforestation. These are both legitimate ways to frame the picture. If I were looking at, say, the white pine forest of North America, then that national approach might not cut it.

ME: *Well yes, of course, it depends on the types of questions asked.*

DW: Environmental history is simply trying to change some of those questions, not all of them.

ME: *There have been a number of excellent environmental histories of international breadth published in the last ten years. But strikingly, much of this work has been written by historians in the United States. Has environmental history become more international in its subject matter, but not amongst its practitioners? Or is that changing?*

DW: I think it is changing very fast. There are environmental historians working in a wide array of countries at the present; often not in their own country. I could mention Richard Grove, for example. I think he is the first Ph.D. in environmental history from a British University. He has finished a book on the British Empire overseas in a series of environments. That is certainly international history, more so than almost any American I know has written. He is working on a new book on Hawaii and other islands. There is also a

group now in Australia, associated with Australian National University, working on a long-term project on East Asian environmental history, mainly China, but also Japan and other countries. They held a conference in Hong Kong last December. There is an increasing interest in the environmental history of India and South Africa. There is a lot of interest in Europe, and much of that is not centered on the nation state; that's not the spirit in Europe these days. There are studies, for example, of the Ruhr valley, and its air pollution problems. I was at a conference in Finland which was about the whole Scandinavian area around the Baltic sea. There is a lot of interest in Latin America as well. And the Latin Americans do have a sense of internationalism, and a sense of facing problems together. Your mentor Elinor Melville is certainly part of that. I'm going to Panama in August to meet with some environmental historians of Latin American societies. They are thinking in very broad terms about Latin America and its relationship to the outside world in terms of environmental resources. So, I think there are many manifestations these days outside the United States, and a lot of terrific books being written too. Do you know the book *The Silent Countdown*?⁶ It was the first product of the European Association of Environmental Historians. It is a series of essays written by historians from all over Europe. I might add that there is a lot of interest right now in Eastern Europe, looking at environmental problems before and during the communist regimes. There is an interdisciplinary meeting this summer in Prague, and many of the participants are interested in questions about the last half century under communist regimes. So, I think there is a lot of work going on all over the world.

ME: *This international breadth seems important not simply for a spirit of internationalism, but because it is often our local actions on the environment which have global implications. In the environmental history sessions held at this conference there has been concern voiced about whether local case studies or national and international treatments should command our attention. But these definitions of the subject seem to me to be two sides of the same coin. How would you respond?*

DW: I think people are too worried about trying to define the field and draw its boundaries. I have never been very comfortable with drawing strict boundaries. The field is still young; it is too early to draw its boundaries. You should simply pursue whichever level seems appropriate and interesting. If you want to call it environmental history, do so. You don't need anyone's permission!

6 P. Brimblecombe and C. Pfister (eds.), *The Silent Countdown: Essays in European Environmental History* (Berlin 1990).

A field that is centered on making connections seems to me to be a hard field to draw neat little boundaries around; it can be approached from many angles. I do often tell the graduate students who work with me that their best approach is to find something local and get to know it intimately, from top to bottom. I think they learn the tools of environmental analysis more easily if they can apply it to a limited place. But also, I think (and this gets into more personal and philosophical grounds) that much of our education uproots us from where we are. One of my friends says that the only major at American universities is upward mobility — which usually means leaving home and losing a sense of place. It is rather important that environmental history come to grips with that. Part of its mission is to help people look very closely at places, to develop some feeling for those places. It may not be the place you want to spend your whole life in. But I think it is good for all of us to have such a place and work from it. It is important to have a sense of where your place in the world is that you care about, which you study and where you see broader issues reflected.

ME: *This seems to tie in to the talk you gave at this conference on the material and mythological character of comparative development in Canada and the United States. If one of environmental history's projects is to highlight the intellectual bankruptcy of 'development' thought, and the homogenization of peoples and places that it entails, then it seeks to reinsert the particularity of places back into academic historical discourse.*

DW: Well, we cannot undo what has been done and we would not want to, in terms of opening up our minds to other places in the world to get us out of provincialism, a parochial view of the world. But it seems to me also dangerous to be trapped in seeing the world only from a global or national point of view. I doubt that we can ever really analyze and think coherently about the whole globe. If we cannot understand the county or parish in which we grew up, how can we possibly come to terms with and understand the globe? To try to understand it and analyze and explain it can be an act of hubris and in some senses an act of totalitarianism.

ME: *But surely some questions can only be attacked on a global level.*

DW: True, I cannot even write a book criticizing globalization that does not use wood from across the border, paper pulp from Canada, nor send it back into the world without fuel from Saudi Arabia. So, to be a responsible citizen you have to be aware of those things. But there is a danger, it seems to me, in the confidence that we can speak knowledgeably and intimately about global

problems, or even national problems, that we can write the history of all of these places. There are compelling questions, but I am saying that we also need to keep our feet on the ground in specific places. I think it gives us a sense of humility about what we can say about these other levels of abstraction into which history has taken us.

ME: *This seems related to contemporary problems in environmentalism. Some people feel confident that they can speak for the globe. But it seems to me that they, perhaps unwittingly, subsume the interests of others, particularly in the Third World, to their view of internationalism. Globalism is so politicized.*

DW: Yes, people who tear off and agitate about the rain forest who have no knowledge about what is happening in local communities there. So, that paper I wrote a few years ago, "World Without Borders," served a useful function at that point to open up a broader perspective to environmental historians. But I did not want it to be taken as saying that we should all write only international, global environmental history. I work on a number of different levels. I suppose the loyalties that mean the most to me personally are the local *and* the global. I feel a local, regional attachment more than I do to an entity called the United States of America. And I feel a greater interest in and sense of responsibility toward the whole planet with its interconnected systems than I do to an entity called the United States of America. If I had to set up a hierarchy, I guess it would go from the local to the global, and somewhere down the line would be the nation-state. It seems to me that historians, on the other hand, have traditionally almost turned that hierarchy upside down. So, as a maverick, I have to work to turn it back up the way it should be.