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Editorial: New Zealand Environmental Histories

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This special issue of *Environment and History* is given over to current research in New Zealand environmental histories. The seven articles – five of which are written by current doctoral or recent postdoctoral students – explore ideas, themes and methods represented amongst active researchers in the field in New Zealand. As a whole, the collection is intended to give some indication of the insights and interests of people working in a country, the making of whose environments and landscapes has also attracted the attention of numbers of overseas scholars, notable amongst them Alfred Crosby, William Cronon, Stephen Pyne, John McNeill and Donald Hughes.

Why do New Zealand's environmental histories excite interest? One reason is because this was one of the last significant landmasses to be settled by humans, as well as one of the first to have broken free of Gondwanaland. The nature of the interactions of people and nature, following Polynesian colonisation within the last thousand years, and that of Europeans within the last quarter of a millennium, have therefore been unusual and dramatic. 'What in Europe took twenty centuries and in North America four has been accomplished in New Zealand within a single century', wrote immigrant geographer Kenneth Cumberland sixty years ago.¹ We might frame the assessment differently today, but the essential truth about the speed of landscape transformation remains. It is also a transformation that has been well recorded. Two essays in this collection, by Kuzma and by Star, describe the extent of literary and documentary evidence available to environmental historians. A further reason for interest is that the mundane struggles of Maori and Europeans to come to terms with environments and with

each other's desires for control of resources can tell us more about everyday existence, and the experimentation of building new places in new lands, than do many political and social histories.

It matters to us, as well, that after too many years of comparative neglect of these rich stories, New Zealand institutions are producing a concern for and a professional ability to research and to relate them to wider audiences. Two projects conceived in the 1990s, and locating environmental history firmly as an interdisciplinary pursuit, have encouraged this process. The first is the award-winning *New Zealand Historical Atlas*, published in 1997 after a seven year programme involving historians, geographers and cartographers, along with Maori scholars, economists and archaeologists. The rigour of cartographic representation generated a search for the best forms of representation of *inter alia* Maori and European interactions with land and water. It also provoked the need for a lot of new research into such topics as deforestation, species introduction, the generation of environmental hazards and suburban landscapes.

The second project is a collection of essays that we have edited. Entitled *Environmental Histories of New Zealand*, and published in 2002 by Oxford University Press, it draws on contributions from scholars in a range of disciplines. It is perhaps unusual amongst national environmental histories, for its comprehensive coverage by period and theme, and its attempt to tell its stories from different cultural viewpoints, those of both Maori and Pakeha (European). It is also concerned with placing these stories within the broader global and regional contexts and currents that have produced them as well as the specific localities that have given them meaning.²

Such interests also infuse the essays in this present collection, which build on and extend these earlier initiatives. The first two essays, by Wood and Beattie, examine ideas that had considerable traction amongst nineteenth-century European settlers, in New Zealand as elsewhere, but which were later revealed to be based on limited understandings of both science and environment. Vaughan Wood discusses the 'biometric fallacy', which equated biomass and the prevalence of tall trees, or 'bush', with soil fertility; James Beattie uncovers the fears that climatic deterioration would follow the large-scale deforestation that marked European colonisation as it had Maori colonisation before it. Wood's story reveals a legacy of assumptions that New Zealand soils are highly fertile, whereas many are marginal for agricultural production and require continuous additional nutrients from artificial fertiliser. Beattie's story leads, via the initially tentative understanding of the ecological role of bush that emerged later in the nineteenth century, to a twentieth-century tradition of forest and soil conservation.

The next two articles, by Katie Pickles and Robin Hodge, focus respectively on place and person. A tradition of place-based study extends back at least to the New Zealand classic of environmental history, *Tutira*, the story of the impacts of 'reclamation' on land and landscape by Herbert Guthrie-Smith, first

published in 1921.³ Pickles explores an apparently inauspicious place, a pine plantation on the outskirts of metropolitan Christchurch. Neither obviously urban nor rural, yet with elements of both, it is the sort of place that does not usually attract attention. She demonstrates how ‘a focus on the local shows the haphazard “nature” of environmental history – of the collision of discourses from elsewhere with local pragmatism’. These collisions were also represented in the person of an early New Zealand environmentalist, Perrine Moncrieff, the subject of Hodge’s essay. Arriving from Britain in 1921, Moncrieff brought an interest in vitalism, and an enthusiasm for ornithology, at a time of growing interest in the preservation of indigenous birds and their habitat. Perhaps her greatest achievement was the establishment of Abel Tasman National Park, a fine bird habitat and a popular destination for backpacking tourists.

Moncrieff settled in Nelson, at the northern end of the South Island, which is also the setting for Michael Roche’s multi-layered study of the export apple industry in the first part of the twentieth century. Conscious of the rural focus of much environmental history, Roche shows how the orchard is a compact site for revealing hitherto contradictory narratives, such as the necessity for use of chemical sprays to maintain the image of ‘the orchard as an “island” of nature’. It is also a site of production for distant urban consumption and one that ‘provides an example of the ways in which the local and the global in environmental history are simultaneously and mutually constituted’.

The analysis of place, people, and the making of both at the intersection of the local and the global are ways forward for the study of environmental history. The collection finishes with two essays that point to sources and approaches that open up horizons for the future. Julian Kuzma brings together landscape and literature, arguing that the latter yields rich narratives of environmental change, particularly about the transformation of the New Zealand bush into a ‘pastoral paradise’. He makes the point that novels seek to put into words the positions of a range of characters, and not just those prioritised by more conventional historical sources. They can also be read as text, revealing much about the ‘an image of a place, a moment in history and a colonial state of mind’.

Paul Star’s essay is both an assessment of the place and future of environmental history in New Zealand, and of the discoveries that he has made as a doctoral and postdoctoral researcher. He adds to the richness of the recent written record identified by Kuzma, identifying the extraordinary printed volumes of parliamentary and governmental materials, but claiming that ‘our best bet for thorough understanding is in trawling old newspapers’. And he reveals some fascinating discoveries: the surprisingly early and extensive expression of Pakeha interest in and concern for the indigenous remnant of colonisation, yet how little was understood, in ‘system’ terms, of what the ‘environment’ actually was.

In concluding, Star urges ongoing and developing co-operation between the disciplines involved in environmental history and between practitioners in New

Zealand and those involved in parallel and complementary studies elsewhere. As editors, we hope that this collection will help to take us all further towards such goals.

NOTES

¹ Kenneth B. Cumberland, 'A Century's Change: Natural to Cultural Vegetation in New Zealand', *Geographical Review* XXXI (1941), 529.

² Malcolm McKinnon, ed., *New Zealand Historical Atlas* (Auckland: David Bateman/Wellington: Department of Internal Affairs, 1997); Eric Pawson and Tom Brooking, eds, *Environmental Histories of New Zealand* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2002).

³ Herbert Guthrie-Smith, *Tutira. The Story of A New Zealand Sheep Station*, republished, with a Foreword by William Cronon (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999).