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From the Periphery to the Center: North American Environmental History

Andrew C. Isenberg

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North American environmental history was on the edges of the historical profession for most of the twentieth century. The concerns of its practitioners found little purchase within mainstream North American history. Instead, in part because of the inherently interdisciplinary nature of the field, environmental historians found their closest allies in departments of geography, ecology, or anthropology. Starting in the late 1960s, in departments of American studies that brought together Americanists from different disciplinary perspectives, environmental history began to emerge by synthesizing a materialist approach that emphasized environmental agency in the form of diseases and natural catastrophes and a cultural approach that considered the changing apprehensions of nature in human thought. In recent years, North American environmental historians increasingly have applied the insights of environmental history to the central events of mainstream North American history.

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Andrew C. Isenberg

To most observers, environmental history is a new field that emerged in the United States in the 1970s as an outgrowth of the American environmental movement. There is certainly some truth to this narrative of the field's origins: John Opie began issuing an environmental history newsletter to fellow historians and scholars of American Studies in 1974; *Environmental Review* (the forerunner of the



journal *Environmental History*) began publishing in 1976; and Opie founded the American Society for Environmental History (ASEH) in 1977. So attractive is this creation story, with its emphasis on the field's recent origins, that the ASEH narrates it on its website.¹ "The idea of environmental history first appeared in the 1970s", the American environmental historian Donald Worster (and one of Opie's first recruits to the new organization) has written.² The American environmental historian William Cronon endorsed the idea of the newness of environmental history in 1993 at a meeting of the ASEH, in which he grouped environmental history with "several other 'new' histories born or reenergized in the wake of the 1960s – women's history, African-American history, Chicano history, gay and lesbian history, and the new social history generally". Like them, Cronon maintained, environmental history "has always had an undeniable relation to the political movement that helped spawn it".³

Cronon was right that environmental history like some of the other "new" histories of the 1970s aimed to reshape historical practice. Yet American environmental history did not emerge *sui generis* in the 1970s. Nor was the field spawned by the environmental movement, though environmentalism lent it greater visibility, focus, and sense of purpose. Rather, the field's roots are in the nineteenth century; indeed, its earliest articulation, by the frontier historian Frederick Jackson Turner, came not long after the historical profession itself

¹ See aseh.net/about-aseh/history-of-aseh. See also http://aseh.net/about-aseh/copy_of_oral-histories-with-aseh-founders. In oral interviews, the environmental historians who founded the ASEH pointed less to the environmental movement and more to the traditions of American Studies, with its emphasis on literature about nature, for their interest in environmental history. To the extent that then-current issues impinged on their thinking, it was through the printed word: most of the founders of the ASEH read R. Carson's *Silent Spring*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston 1962, or the selections from the book published in the *New Yorker* magazine in the same year.

² See D. Worster, "Appendix: Doing Environmental History", in *The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives in Modern Environmental History*, Id. (ed.), Cambridge University Press, New York 1988, p. 290.

³ W. Cronon, "The Uses of Environmental History", in *Environmental History Review*, 17, 3, (Fall 1993), p. 2.

emerged in the United States. At that time, Turner's version of environmental history was central to the practice of American history. His "frontier thesis", which posited that the history of the United States should be understood as a progressive transformation of wilderness to civilization, was nothing less than historical orthodoxy in the first decades of the twentieth century.⁴ The frontier thesis was so attractive that Canadian and Latin American historians developed their own versions of it.⁵ By the 1930s, however, Turner's critics had rightly dismissed his frontier thesis for its vagueness and inaccuracies.

New studies of the North American environment, some emphasizing material approaches to the environment and others cultural perspectives, appeared in the middle decades of the twentieth century, but they remained largely on the margins of professional historical practice. Historians who worked on the environment had few intellectual allies within history departments; rather, their work was interdisciplinary, overlapping with that of geographers and ecologists. The emergence of environmental history in the 1970s – and its first steps away from the margins and back toward the center of American history – owed itself as much to the synthesis of material and cultural approaches as to the influence of the environmental movement. In the decades since the 1970s, environmental history has moved increasingly toward the center of the American historical profession, a process characterized by the integration of its concerns

⁴ F. Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History", in *American Historical Association Annual Report*, 1893, pp. 199-227. For Turner's influence on environmental history, see W. Cronon, "Revisiting the Vanishing Frontier: The Legacy of Frederick Jackson Turner", in *Western Historical Quarterly*, 18, 1987, pp. 157-176.

⁵ H.E. Bolton, *The Spanish Borderlands: A Chronicle of Old Florida and the Southwest*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1921. A.L. Burt, "If Turner Had Looked at Canada, Australia, and New Zealand When He Wrote about the West", in *The Frontier in Perspective*, W. Wyman, C. Kroeber (eds), University of Wisconsin Press, Madison 1955, pp. 59-77. W.J. Eccles, "The Frontiers of New France", in *Essays on Frontiers in World History*, G. Wolfskill, S. Palmer (eds), Texas A & M University Press, College Station 1983, pp. 42-70. C. Alistar, M. Hennessy, "The Turner Thesis in Latin America", in *The Frontier in Latin American History*, Id. (eds), University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque 1978, pp. 6-27.

with those of mainstream historians. What the field shares with other new histories that had their beginnings in the 1960s and 1970s is an ambition to reimagine history – to have an impact on historical practice commensurate with the influence of gender history, transnational history, or the new social history. Just as virtually all historians now consider gender in their work, and try to place their studies in transnational context, so too do environmental historians aim to have all historians take environmental context into account.

Wilderness to civilization

In the first decades of the twentieth century, the environment was central to North American historians' understanding of the past. The emphasis on the North American environment in Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 frontier thesis was, in part, a response to the Eurocentrism of Herbert Baxter Adams, Turner's doctoral mentor at Johns Hopkins University. Adams, who had studied in Heidelberg, had adopted from German intellectuals something called the "germ theory" of politics, which held that American political institutions evolved from Anglo-Saxon villages. In 1893, at a meeting of the American Historical Association, Turner proposed instead a home-grown theory of American political history in an address to conference entitled "The Significance of the Frontier in American History". To Turner, the frontier was "the meeting point between savagery and civilization". At first, Turner wrote, "the wilderness masters the colonist... [A]t the frontier the environment is at first too strong for the man". But "[l]ittle by little he transforms the wilderness, but the outcome is not the old Europe, not simply the development of Germanic germs... The fact is, that here is a new product that is American.... Thus the advance of the frontier has meant a steady movement away from the influence of Europe, a steady growth of independence".⁶

⁶ Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* cit. Like other professional historians of the late nineteenth century, Turner saw it as his mission to explain, and to celebrate, the emergence of the nation-state. See P. Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession*, Cambridge University Press, New York 1988.

Turner's frontier thesis looked both forward and backward. Like later environmental historians, to help him interpret the past, Turner adopted an explicitly interdisciplinary perspective; he drew on what he called "cognate disciplines": economics, geography, and sociology. Unlike most of his peers, he focused not on great men but on ordinary settlers; his methodology thus not only anticipated environmental but social history. At the same time, Turner's thesis simply put in rhetorical form ideas that had long percolated in American political culture. Turner captured the essence of the Republican Party's mid-nineteenth century motto of "free soil": the existence of "free land" in the West, according to the Republican ideology, provided an opportunity for Americans to live independently, honorably, and prosperously. Yet Turner's essay also looked forward ominously. The catalyst for Turner's essay was the 1890 report of the Census, which stated that for the first time in American history, there was no longer a "frontier" of settlement – defined as an area below a certain population density of white inhabitants. What concerned Turner in 1893 was that the existence of "free land," the condition that had characterized American development for centuries – and happily so, he thought, given the achievements of American industry and democracy – had disappeared. Without the frontier, he implied, the United States was more likely to develop places like Hamburg, Manchester, or Liverpool, that, in Turner's view were characterized by unemployment, attendant labor radicalism, class warfare, poverty, corruption, and degradation? A free and prosperous America, Turner implied, required wilderness.⁷

By the early 1930s, Turner's thesis had fallen into disfavor, as historians of the North American frontier argued that free land, agrarian prosperity, and political liberty were not nearly as common as Turner had made them seem.⁸ In the midst of economic depression, another

⁷ For Turner, see Cronon, *Revisiting the Vanishing Frontier* cit. R. Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*, Harper, New York 1992, pp. 29-62. R. White, P. Limerick, *The Frontier in American Culture*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1994.

⁸ F. Shannon, "The Homestead Act and the Labor Surplus", in *American Historical Review*, 41, 1936, pp. 637-651.

historian of the American West, Walter Prescott Webb, promulgated a competing thesis about the relationship between Americans and the environment. In a 1931 study, *The Great Plains*, published on the eve of the drought that would create the “Dust Bowl” in the southern plains, Webb declared aridity to be the determining characteristic of the grasslands. While Turner had celebrated settlers’ transformations of nature, Webb focused on the limitations that the natural environment placed on human endeavors. The relative lack of precipitation in the Great Plains, according to Webb, dictated the underpopulated and impoverished character of the region. In numerous respects, Webb, like Turner, turned to old ideas in American culture for his thesis; in Webb’s case, he drew on the nineteenth-century notion of the Great Plains as the “Great American Desert.” In a 1957 article, Webb extended his definition of the plains into a general thesis about the western United States. “The heart of the West”, Webb wrote, “is a desert, unqualified and absolute”. Aridity determined that the West would be an “oasis society”, a region of defeated expectations.⁹

While Turner was a leader in the historical profession (he became Professor of History at Harvard University in 1910), Webb, who never completed his doctoral studies, remained on the margins of the profession, and his aridity thesis never enjoyed the influence of Turner’s work. (Although historians of the American West embraced it at the end of the twentieth century: “I know in my bones”, wrote the American environmental historian Donald Worster in 1987, “that Webb was right”¹⁰). Webb’s intellectual allies, who like him tracked the reciprocal influence of the environment and society upon each other, were not fellow historians but geographers, anthropologists, and human ecologists. These included the geographer Carl Ortwin Sauer, whose “cultural landscape”, united geography and culture; and the leading authority on the native hunting groups of Canada, the anthropologist Frank Speck, who argued that natives

⁹ W. Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains*, Ginn, Boston 1931. Id., “The American West: Perpetual Mirage”, in *Harper’s Magazine*, 214, 1957, pp. 25-31.

¹⁰ See, for instance, D. Worster, “New West, True West: Interpreting the Region’s History”, in *Western Historical Quarterly*, 18, 1987, pp. 141-156.

adapted their cultures to their environments, while their hunting techniques functioned to conserve game supplies.¹¹ Yet the work of Sauer and Speck had little influence on historians at the time. At the end of the nineteenth century, Turner had drawn on cognate disciplines to inform his work; in the mid-twentieth century, most historians (excepting Webb and a few others) left the study of people's interactions with the environment to other disciplines.

Culture and materiality

The study of the interaction of people and nature by humanists and social scientists did not disappear in the middle decades of the twentieth century, but it continued to be taken up by non-historians. For instance, only a few historians, among them Clarence Glacken and James Malin, contributed to the massive 1956 volume, *Man's Role in Changing the Face of the Earth*.¹² By the late 1960s, two distinct approaches to the study of interactions between people and their environments in the past had emerged: a materialist approach that emphasized environmental agency in the form of diseases and natural catastrophes (and, to a lesser extent, people's use of natural resources); and a cultural approach that considered the changing apprehensions of nature in human thought.

The materialist approach was exemplified by the work of Alfred W. Crosby, whose 1967 article, "Conquistador y Pestilencia", postulated that Hernán Cortés's conquest of Mexico between 1519 and 1521 succeeded not because of Spanish military superiority but because a member of Cortés's retinue accidentally transmitted the smallpox virus to the inhabitants of Mexico. Indeed, Crosby suggested in his

¹¹ C.O. Sauer, "The Morphology of Landscape", in *University of California Publications in Geography*, 2, 1925, pp.19-53. M. Williams, "'The Apple of My Eye': Carl Sauer and Historical Geography", in *Journal of Historical Geography*, 9, 1983, pp. 1-28. F. Speck, "The Family Hunting Band as the Basis of Algonkian Social Organization", in *American Anthropologist*, 17, 1915, pp. 289-305. Id., "Mistassini Hunting Territories in the Labrador Peninsula", in *American Anthropologist*, 25, 1923, pp. 452-471.

¹² W.L. Thomas, Jr. (ed.), *Man's Role in Changing the Face of the Earth*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1956.

essay that the Mexican example should be applied broadly, and that epidemiology explains why Europeans were “able to conquer America so easily”. In the 1970s and 1980s, Crosby wrote a series of books and articles that expanded his thesis to the rest of North America, as well as to the southern cone of South America, Australia, and New Zealand. He further expanded his analysis of the European ecological invasion of America to include not only diseases but plants and domesticated animals. As Crosby expanded the scope of his analysis, he increasingly depicted people as utterly at the mercy of ecological forces. European colonists “were seldom masters of the biological changes they triggered”, Crosby wrote in 1986. “They benefited from the great majority of these changes, but benefit or not, their role was less often a matter of judgment and choice than of being downstream of a bursting dam”.¹³ In short, over the course of two decades Crosby’s analysis devolved into little more than ecological determinism.

At the other extreme were cultural and intellectual historians who considered the environment solely as an object of human contemplation. These studies took their historiographical cues from post-war American Studies, which returned to Turner’s notion that American identity was bound up in the American environment. Notable in this regard was Henry Nash Smith’s 1950 study *Virgin Land*, which recast the American West not as Turner’s frontier or Webb’s desert but as a garden, a “vast and constantly growing agricultural society”. Smith de-emphasized the land itself, and focused on how literate Americans, among them Thomas Jefferson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Turner himself, understood the land.¹⁴ A yet more sig-

¹³ A.W. Crosby, Jr., “Conquistador y Pestilencia: The First New World Pandemic and the Fall of the Great Indian Empires”, in *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 47, 1967, pp. 321-327. Id., *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492*, Greenwood Press, Westport Ct. 1972. Id., “Virgin Soil Epidemics as a Factor in the Aboriginal Depopulation in America”, in *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 33, 1976, pp. 289-299. Id., *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900*, Cambridge University Press, New York 1986, p. 192.

¹⁴ H. Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Ma. 1950.

nificant study was Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind*, which went through four editions between 1967 and 2001. According to Nash, early American colonists harbored a preternatural fear of wilderness, a fear that impelled generations of settlers to raze forests and destroy wildlife. Yet the seeming near-exhaustion of wilderness by the end of the nineteenth century – the same moment that had inspired Turner's 1893 essay – brought a change. By that time, according to Nash, Americans' fears of wilderness had been replaced by an anxiety that they had become overly mechanized, industrialized, and urbanized. Preservation of wilderness began with the creation of Yosemite Park in 1864 and Yellowstone Park in 1872. It culminated with the passage of the Wilderness Act in 1964, an event that Nash seized on to turn Turner's thesis on its head: rather than celebrating the transformation of wilderness to civilization, Nash celebrated the preservation of wilderness. Yet like Turner (and Smith, and for that matter other titans of American Studies such as Leo Marx and Perry Miller), for Nash wilderness was primarily important as a way to understand American identity: the American mind, rather than wilderness, was, in the final analysis, his primary subject. Wilderness mattered, he wrote, because it is "the basic ingredient of American culture".¹⁵

Environmental history emerged as a distinct field in the 1970s and early 1980s when a group of historians, including William Cronon, Thomas Dunlap, Carolyn Merchant, Arthur McEvoy, Richard White, and Donald Worster, synthesized the material and cultural approaches to the environment.¹⁶ Yet exactly how to conduct such a synthesis remained a

¹⁵ R. Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 4th ed., Yale University Press, New Haven 2001, p. xi. See also L. Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, Oxford University Press, New York 1964. P. Miller, *Nature's Nation*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Ma. 1967.

¹⁶ W. Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*, Hill and Wang, New York 1983. T. Dunlap, *DDT: Scientists, Citizens, and Public Policy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1981. Id., *Saving America's Wildlife*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1988. A.F. McEvoy, *The Fisherman's Problem: Ecology and Law in the California Fisheries, 1850-1980*, Cambridge University Press, New York 1986. C. Merchant, *Ecological Revolutions: Nature, Gender, and Science in New England*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill 1989. R. White, *Land Use, Environment, and Social Change: The Shaping of Island County, Washington*, Uni-

matter of debate. Some left the relationship between the material world and culture vague. For instance, in 1983, Cronon defined the relationship between human society and the environment as “dialectical”.¹⁷ White, writing in 1985, preferred the term “reciprocal”.¹⁸

Worster aimed for a more systematic definition. In 1988, in an appendix to a collection of essays in environmental history, Worster wrote that “there are three levels on which the new history proceeds”: first, “nature itself”; second, “the socioeconomic realm as it interacts with nature”; and third, “the purely mental or intellectual”.¹⁹ Two years later, Worster expanded this essay into the opening article in a forum on environmental history in the pages of the *Journal of American History*. In the essay, Worster recognized that the synthesis of cultural and material perspectives characterized work in the field. He wrote that “most environmental historians seem to have settled philosophically on a position that is at once materialist and idealist; they commonly maintain that the historian cannot rigidly adhere a priori to any single theory of causality but must be open to context and time”. Yet having briefly allowed for synthesis, Worster quickly went on to urge American environmental historians to focus their energies on “the analysis of modes of production as ecological phenomena”.²⁰ The essay struck most readers as advocating a materialist approach to environmental history. In a response to the essay, Richard White summarized Worster’s argument thusly: “Environmental history has a base (natural history), a structure (production

versity of Washington Press, Seattle 1980. Id., *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change among the Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navajos*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln 1983. D. Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*, Oxford University Press, New York 1979. Id., *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West*, Pantheon, New York 1985.

¹⁷ Cronon, *Changes in the Land* cit., p. 13.

¹⁸ R. White, “American Environmental History: The Development of a New Historical Field”, in *Pacific Historical Review*, 54, 1985, pp. 297-335.

¹⁹ D. Worster, “Appendix: Doing Environmental History”, in *The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History*, D. Worster, W. Crosby (eds), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1988, p. 293.

²⁰ Id., “Transformations of the Earth: Toward an Agroecological Perspective in History”, in *Journal of American History*, 76, 1990, p. 1091.

relations or modes of production) and a superstructure (culture and ideology)". This scheme, White argued, reduced culture to "superstructure in the old vulgar Marxist sense".²¹ William Cronon agreed, writing that Worster's definition of the field suffered from "potentially excessive materialism".²² White and Cronon urged environmental historians to pay more attention to culture.

Historians have usually understood the debate between Worster and his colleagues in the field as a dispute between those who advocated a materialist approach to environmental history and those who advocated taking a cultural approach. And the participants in the debate did, indeed, split along these lines – a split that paralyzed the field for some years, undoing much of the progress that had been made over the previous decade in integrating material and cultural history. Many younger environmental historians felt compelled to side either with cultural or material approaches, thus forsaking the integration of the two that was the hallmark of the field. The feud was largely unnecessary: all of the participants in the debate had, in their own work, drawn on both materialist and cultural perspectives. As so often happens in historiographical essays and particularly in forums staged in journals, the distinctions between the approaches were drawn more sharply, and the virtues and failings of each approach cast in exaggerated terms, all for the benefit (perhaps the dubious benefit) of debate.

There was another facet to the roundtable debate. On one side was Worster, who continued to think of environmental history as a field that stood outside of mainstream history and indeed as a field that offered a critique of the assumptions and approaches of mainstream historians. As he had in 1988, throughout his 1990 essay he referred to environmental history as "the new history". On the other side were Cronon and White, who urged environmental historians to integrate their work with what other historians were doing. In the early 1990s, during the historical profession's so-called "cultural turn", that meant doing cultural history.

²¹ R. White, "Environmental History, Ecology, and Meaning", in *Journal of American History*, 76, 1990, pp. 1112-1113.

²² W. Cronon, "Placing Nature in History", in *Journal of American History*, 76, 1990, p. 1124.

The way out of this impasse was in the work of the environmental historians Arthur McEvoy and Carolyn Merchant. In 1988, in the same volume in which Worster first articulated his three-tiered approach to environmental history, McEvoy argued that ecology, economy, and culture should not be thought of hierarchically, with ecology as a base and culture as a superstructure, but rather as equally important, interacting agents of change in environmental history. “Any explanation of environmental change should account for the inter-embeddedness and reciprocal constitution of ecology, production, and cognition”, McEvoy wrote. “All three elements, ecology, production, and cognition, evolve in tandem, each partly according to its own particular logic and partly in response to changes in the other two. To externalize any of the three elements... is to miss the crucial fact that human life and thought are embedded in each other and together in the nonhuman world”.²³ To ecology, economy, and culture, Carolyn Merchant added a fourth dimension: reproduction, an engine of change in all three areas. Moreover, as women have historically had different roles than men in economic production and cultural reproduction, Merchant argued that environmental historians should be at all times gender historians as well.²⁴ Environmental historians, McEvoy and Merchant argued, cannot stand outside mainstream American history but must engage it. To borrow McEvoy’s phrase, to position environmental history outside of mainstream history is to “externalize” it, and thus ignore part of the context for historical change. Rather, McEvoy and Merchant called for environmental historians to place their work in context by integrating the methodologies of environmental history with the work of historians in other subfields.

²³ A.F. McEvoy, “Toward an Interactive Theory of Nature and Culture: Ecology, Production, and Cognition in the California Fishing Industry,” in *Environmental Review*, 11, 1987, pp. 289-305. The essay was republished in Worster (ed.), *The Ends of the Earth* cit., pp. 211-229.

²⁴ C. Merchant, “The Theoretical Structure of Ecological Revolutions”, in *Environmental Review*, 11, 1987, pp. 265-274. Id., *Ecological Revolutions* cit. Id., “Gender and Environmental History”, in *Journal of American History*, 76, 1990, pp.1117-1121. See also B. Leibhardt, “Interpretation and Causal Analysis: Theories in Environmental History”, in *Environmental Review*, 12, 1988, pp. 23-36.

Toward the center

In recent years, North American environmental historians increasingly have followed the lead of McEvoy and Merchant and applied the insights of environmental history to the central events of mainstream North American history, such as colonial settlement, the American Revolution, the California Gold Rush, the Civil War, the New Deal, the Cold War, and suburbanization.²⁵ They have likewise sought to integrate environmental history with other methodological subfields, including gender, labor, and the history of science.²⁶

As a result, such subjects as the study of North American natives'

²⁵ The most comprehensive effort to synthesize environmental history and mainstream United States history is M. Fiege, *The Republic of Nature: An Environmental History of the United States*, University of Washington Press, Seattle 2012. For settlement, see V. DeJohn Anderson, *Creatures of Empire: How Domestic Animals Transformed Early America*, Oxford University Press, New York 2004. For the American Revolution, see E. Fenn, *Pox Americana: The Great Smallpox Epidemic of 1775-82*, Hill and Wang, New York 2002. J.R. McNeill, *Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1620-1914*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2010. For the California Gold Rush, see A.C. Isenberg, *Mining California: An Ecological History*, Hill and Wang, New York 2005. For the Civil War, see L.M. Brady, *War Upon the Land: Military Strategies and the Transformation of Southern Landscapes During the American Civil War*, University of Georgia Press, Athens 2012. M.K. Nelson, *Ruin Nation: Destruction and the American Civil War*, University of Georgia Press, Athens 2012. For the New Deal, see N.M. Maher, *Nature's New Deal: The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Roots of the American Environmental Movement*, Oxford University Press, New York 2009. For suburbanization, see V. Scott Jenkins, *The Lawn: A History of an American Obsession*, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington 1994. A. Rome, *The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2001. C. Sellers, *Crabgrass Crucible: Suburban Nature and the Rise of Environmentalism in Twentieth-Century America*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill 2012.

²⁶ An extraordinary synthesis of African American, labor, and urban history with environmental history is A. Hurley, *Environmental Inequalities: Class, Race, and Industrial Pollution in Gary, Indiana 1945-1980*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill 1995. See also M. Klinge, *Emerald City: An Environmental History of Seattle*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2007. For environmental history and gender history, see V.J. Scharff (ed.), *Seeing Nature through Gender*, University Press of Kansas, Lawrence 2003. N. Unger, *Beyond Nature's Housekeepers: American Women in Environmental History*, Oxford University Press, New York 2012.

interactions with nature have changed markedly. In the 1970s and early 1980s, many American environmental historians, such as J. Donald Hughes, argued that natives lived in a kind of harmony with nature. Hughes wrote in 1983 that natives' "actions in respect to nature were in harmony with their view of the world as a sacred place", and thus they "developed practices, differing in detail from place to place that tended to conserve living creatures and preserve the balance of nature".²⁷ The historian Philip Deloria has characterized this type of "Indian history-writing" as modernist, and filled with "regret" and "nostalgia". This tradition of writing, according to Deloria, "accepted the dualistic division that had characterized the frontier school" of Frederick Jackson Turner, which had celebrated the triumph of Anglo civilization over native savagery. The modernist historians merely "flip-flopped the values assigned to civilization and savagery".²⁸

In more recent years, American environmental historians who write on natives have been part of a wave of scholarship that has challenged the old modernist dualities. The geographer William Denevan, for instance, argued in 1992 that pre-Columbian North America was not a Rousseauian paradise in which natives lived in static harmony with nature. The resources of North America in 1492 (abundant, in the eyes of the earliest European colonists) reflected native choices and practices about population and resource use. Populations were high: tens of millions of people inhabited the Americas before 1492. The city of Cahokia, near East St. Louis, Illinois, contained some 30,000 people at its height in the thirteenth century. Bio-cultural strategies such as relying upon a variety of resources and combining planting, hunting, and gathering (a set of practices that William Cronon and Richard White termed "ecological safety nets") were historically contingent practices developed through trial and error and practiced – like all resource strategies – imperfectly. Archeological records indicate that natives, particularly when fishing or hunting, made mistakes. In California, dense native populations before the eleventh century over-

²⁷ J.D. Hughes, *American Indian Ecology*, Texas Western Press, El Paso 1983, pp. 14, 18.

²⁸ P.J. Deloria, "Historiography", in *A Companion to American Indian History*, P.J. Deloria, N. Salisbury (eds), Blackwell, Malden, Ma. 2002, pp. 13-14.

exploited deer and elk, and later generations, deprived of this resource, were forced to intensify acorn use.²⁹ Later native communities in California overharvested shellfish. Aleutian hunters over-exploited sea otters almost unto extinction, and caribou hunters of northern Canada sometimes squandered their primary resources.³⁰ Natives actively managed the vast forests of eastern North America through seasonal selective burning to eliminate underbrush and attract game – occasionally, those fires escaped their control and burned extensively. In short, all societies that manage natural resources make mistakes, and the natives of North America were no exception. The larger point to bear in mind is that the environment that European colonists encountered beginning in the fifteenth century was a managed one, not a wilderness that natives happened to inhabit without materially altering. Denevan has called this latter assumption the “pristine myth”.³¹

Andrew Isenberg’s 2000 study, *The Destruction of the Bison*, challenged the modernist duality between native cultures living in presumed harmony with nature and a destructive colonial regime. In the case of the mounted bison hunters of the Great Plains, Isenberg noted that these native societies emerged only after colonists introduced horses to North America in the sixteenth century. In the eighteenth century, natives living on the fringes of the grasslands adapted to the ecological invasion, in many cases abandoning villages and farming to become mounted nomads who relied almost entirely on the bison. Their use of the bison may have been sustainable, but only just: in the volatile grassland environment, drought, wolf predation, and competition from other grazers (notably, the natives’ own horses) unpredictably affected the bison population. By the time the natives began trading bison hides to Canadian and American merchants,

²⁹ L.M. Rabb, “Political Ecology of Prehistoric Los Angeles”, in *Land of Sunshine: An Environmental History of Metropolitan Los Angeles*, W. Deverell, G. Hise (eds), University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh 2005, pp. 23-37.

³⁰ T. Ingold, *Hunters, Pastoralists, and Ranchers: Reindeer Economies and their Transformations*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1980, pp. 69-75. McEvoy, *Fisherman’s Problem* cit., p. 19.

³¹ W.M. Denevan, “The Pristine Myth: The Landscape of the Americas in 1492”, in *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 82, 1992, pp. 369-385.

their hunting pressure had noticeably diminished the bison population. Isenberg wrote that “in terms of resource management, by the mid-nineteenth century, the plains nomads shared important similarities with their Euroamerican contemporaries. Like the industrial economy which relied on the unsustainable use of resources, the nomadic societies had come to rely overmuch on a narrow ecological foundation, the bison”. In short, the nomads – mobile, socially atomized into hunting groups, economically specialized as bison hunters, and increasingly commercialized after the onset of the robe trade – shared the resource problems of modern societies because, in terms of resource use, they had many of the characteristics of such societies.³²

The study of cities likewise demonstrates how North American environmental historians have moved toward the center of American historical practice. The first generation of urban environmental historians – such scholars as Martin Melosi and Joel Tarr – were indebted to the form of urban studies that had emerged at the University of Chicago in the first decades of the twentieth century. Led by scholars such as the sociologist Robert E. Park, the Chicago School paid less attention to the inhabitants of cities than to cities’ changing geographies, describing them as evolving organisms. Park wrote in 1915 that despite most cities’ geometrical grid of artificial buildings and streets, a city should be understood as a “growth”.³³ Both Melosi and Tarr borrowed from the Chicago School’s analysis. Melosi, while rejecting the more extreme versions of the urban organism model, settled on “the idea of the city as a system”. Tarr has described sanitation, resource consumption, and pollution as, in sum, a city’s “metabolism”, and has invoked the ecologist Eugene Odum’s characterization of the city as a “parasite”.³⁴ Like the scholars of the Chicago School, Melosi and Tarr

³² A.C. Isenberg, *The Destruction of the Bison: An Environmental History, 1750-1920*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2000, p. 198.

³³ R.E. Park, “The City: Suggestions for the Investigation of Human Behavior in the City Environment”, in *American Journal of Sociology*, 20, 1915, pp. 577-612. L. Wirth, “Human Ecology”, in *American Journal of Sociology*, 50, 1945, pp. 485-488.

³⁴ See M. Melosi, *The Sanitary City: Urban Infrastructure in America from Colonial Times to the Present*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 2000, pp. 2-8. Id., “The Place of the City in Environmental History”, in *Environmental History*

paid as much or more attention to a city's form and to its consumption of resources and production of waste than to its inhabitants.

The most widely-read North American urban environmental history – William Cronon's prize-winning 1991 study, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* – likewise owes a debt to the Chicago School. In Cronon's analysis, Chicago drew in wheat and cattle from its western hinterlands, processed them, and shipped them east by rail for urban consumption. At the same time, the city drew timber from the north, processed it, and shipped it west to provide fencing and building material for the farms and ranches of the treeless plains.³⁵ The book was justly praised at the time of its publication for its synthesis of urban and rural history. Cronon drew much of his theoretical inspiration from "central place theory", a body of thought that originated with the early nineteenth-century geographer Johann Heinrich von Thünen.³⁶ Central place theory imagines the city at the center of rural economic activities; with profitable, perishable goods (for instance, orchards and dairy production) taking place closest to the city; and the production of cheap products in bulk (such as wheat cultivation) in the hinterland.

Central place theory is effectively the organism model of the Chicago School writ large. Like the organism model, central place theory, in its attention to geographical form and its effacement of relationships between people, tends toward a masking of power relations. Cronon's Chicago absorbed resources from the hinterlands and transformed them into commodities. His study pays relatively little attention to the workers in the mills and slaughterhouses who effected those transformations. Shortly after the book's publication, the journal *Antipode* devoted much of an issue to critiques of it; many of the reviews criticized Cronon for his lack of attention to class, race, and labor history

Review, 17, 1993, pp. 1-24. See also J. Tarr, "The Metabolism of the Industrial City: The Case of Pittsburgh", in *Journal of Urban History*, 28, 2002, pp. 511-545. Id., *The Search for the Ultimate Sink: Urban Pollution in Historical Perspective*, University of Akron Press, Akron 1996. See also E. Odum, *Ecology and Our Endangered Life Support Systems*, Sinauer Associates, Sunderland, Ma. 1989, p. 17.

³⁵ W. Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*, Norton, New York 1991.

³⁶ P. Hall (ed.), *Von Thünen's Isolated State*, Pergamon Press, New York 1966.

– concerns that are central to urban historians. Cronon defended his exclusion of these subjects from his analysis, writing that he chose to exclude class and labor history from *Nature's Metropolis* rather than see them, as he once put it, “trump all other analytical categories” – including the environment.³⁷ His silence on these subjects demonstrated environmental historians’ wariness of synthesis with class history in the early 1990s – an indication of a sub-field still then emerging and fearful of being overwhelmed by more established fields.

Yet only four years after the publication of *Nature's Metropolis*, Andrew Hurley’s exemplary study of industrial pollution in Gary, Indiana, *Environmental Inequalities*, made class and race central – yet in no way did they trump the environment as a category of analysis. Though only four years separate the *Nature's Metropolis* and *Environmental Inequalities*, they belong to different eras. Hurley showed how whites fled Gary’s polluted neighborhoods for newly-constructed suburbs in the years after the Second World War, while African Americans, shut out of suburbs that were effectively segregated, were forced to live in close proximity to Gary’s steel mills. Class and race, Hurley argued, continually obstructed efforts to clean up Gary’s environment.³⁸ Hurley’s example of integrating the approaches of environmental history with the concerns of urban historians has been followed, with great success, by such urban environmental historians as Matt Klinge and Ellen Stroud, both of whom, like Hurley, make relations of power between rich and poor, industrialists and laborers, whites and African Americans, central to their analyses. Klinge pays attention to the power of people to reshape the urban landscape (using hydraulic cannons to flatten hills, for instance); to the power of nature to thwart people’s plans; but most of all to the power some people exercise over others, for instance, the eviction of working-class fishers from city parks.³⁹

³⁷ In justifying his exclusion of class and labor history, Cronon argued that for some of his critics, those fields are “so dominant that they trump all other analytical categories”. See M.B. Pudup, et al., “William Cronon’s *Nature's Metropolis*: A Symposium”, in *Antipode*, 26, 1994, pp. 113-176.

³⁸ Hurley, *Environmental Inequalities* cit.

³⁹ Klinge, *Emerald City* cit.

Stroud has shown how in Portland, Oregon, the Columbia Slough, the most polluted waterway in the city, is bordered by neighborhoods of African Americans and recent immigrants.⁴⁰

The study of wilderness – one of the signature topics of American environmental history – has like cities undergone a significant change in the last two decades. Environmental historians once lionized wilderness advocates. According to Nash, for instance, the wilderness creed became increasingly popular but remained more or less unchanged from the late nineteenth century to the passage of the Wilderness Act in 1964.⁴¹ Other environmental historians have similarly seen turn-of-the-century preservationists as the forerunners of twentieth-century environmentalists.⁴² The tendency to see preservationists and conservationists and part of an ideologically consistent continuum leading to environmentalism is no longer current among environmental historians; rather, they treat wilderness protection not as a transcendent value, but as a historical artifact that must be understood in context.

American environmental historians' rethinking of wilderness began with William Cronon's 1995 essay, "The Trouble with Wilderness", which argued that wilderness, "far from being the one place on earth that stands apart from humanity... is a profoundly human creation". Forty years earlier, American Studies scholars had argued that wilderness had created American culture. Cronon turned that argument on its head, positing that American culture, particularly a romantic primitivism and the national myth of the frontier, had created the concept of American wilderness.⁴³

Louis Warren's study, *The Hunter's Game: Poachers and Conserva-*

⁴⁰ E. Stroud, "Troubled Waters in Ecotopia: Environmental Racism in Portland, Oregon", in *Radical History Review*, 74, 1999, pp. 65-95.

⁴¹ Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* cit., p. 115.

⁴² See D.H. Strong, *Dreamers and Defenders: American Conservationists*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln 1988, p. 7. For wildlife protection, see J.F. Reiger, *American Sportsmen and the Origins of Conservation*, rev. ed., University of Oklahoma Press, Norman 1986, pp. 25-49. J. Trefethan, *An American Crusade for Wildlife*, Winchester Press and the Boone and Crockett Club, New York 1975.

⁴³ W. Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature", in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, Id. (ed.), W.W. Norton & Co., New York 1995, pp. 69-90. Also in *Environmental History*,

tionists in Twentieth-Century America, published a year after Cronon's essay, placed turn-of-the-century conservation in a critical new context, one that understood conservation as a process that removed resources from local control. Investigating three case studies – Italian immigrant market hunters in western Pennsylvania; Anglo, Hispanic, and Native American hunters in New Mexico; and Blackfoot hunters in Glacier National Park on the border between the United States and Canada – Warren explored how these local hunters came into conflict with extra-local authorities in the first decades of the twentieth-century. In each instance, the authorities, whether state game agencies representing recreational hunters, the United States Forest Service, or the United States Park Service, presented their efforts as decidedly in the interest of conserving resources. Yet in each instance, conservation not only reserved wildlife for the wealthy at the expense of the less powerful, but shifted control from local to state or national authorities.⁴⁴

The study that has gone the farthest to contextualize the preservation of wilderness in American politics is James Morton Turner's *The Promise of Wilderness: American Environmental Politics since 1964*. Turner argued that the Wilderness Act was not the culmination but a continuation of the effort to define and protect American wilderness. While the legislation set aside some land for the wilderness system at the time of its passage, it was more significant for the way in which it allowed for open reviews of proposals to classify new areas as wilderness. The result has been an ongoing cultural, scientific, and political negotiation over what, and where, wilderness is. Since 1964, wilderness has shifted from being located primarily in the West to including areas in the East; from remote lands to lands once logged or mined; and perhaps most significantly of all, from scenic resorts to biological preserves. In short, Turner charted the geographical and intellectual broadening of both the idea and the reality of wilderness. Ironically, as the definition of wilderness broadened and the wilderness system expanded, the political support for wilderness narrowed: wilderness advocates had enjoyed

1, 1, 1996, pp. 7-28. Also in *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, J. Baird Callicott, M.P. Nelson (eds), University of Georgia Press, Athens 1998, pp. 471-499.

⁴⁴ L.S. Warren, *The Hunter's Game: Poachers and Conservationists in Twentieth-Century America*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1997.

broad bipartisan support in the 1960s (the Wilderness Act passed in Congress almost unanimously) but had become radicalized by the 1990s. As reviews of public lands for inclusion in the wilderness system proceeded in the 1970s and 1980s, logging, mining, and ranching interests became increasingly alarmed, and mounted concerted public relations campaigns to derail wilderness protection. In response, wilderness advocacy groups became increasingly professionalized, and detached from the grassroots organizers who had spearheaded the drive for the Wilderness Act in the 1960s. These battles over the definition of wilderness were inextricably linked to the rise of political conservatism in the 1980s and were a crucial part of the polarization of environmental politics in the 1980s and 1990s.⁴⁵

Other historians of the environmental movement have likewise made the study of their subject more sophisticated in recent years by placing environmentalism within the larger social and political context of post-1945 America. Two recent studies exemplify this trend. *The Malthusian Moment*, Thomas Robertson's 2012 study of the role that concerns about overpopulation played in the environmental movement, understands American concerns about the global population as manifestations of different cultural and material forces. The post-war baby boom, the wave of decolonization in what had once been the French and British empires, and Cold War anxieties all played a role in heightening concerns about population.⁴⁶ Christopher Sellers's 2012 *Crabgrass Crucible* locates the origins of environmentalism not in wilderness advocacy or concerns about overpopulation but in the new post-war American suburbs. Post-war suburbanites transformed nature – their tract housing, shopping malls, and parking lots replaced meadows and farms. Yet Sellers argues that suburbanites were also transformed by their encounter with the environment that they were, through their collective action, destroying. Suburbanites across the country founded local grassroots organizations to preserve nature on

⁴⁵ J. Morton Turner, *The Promise of Wilderness: American Environmental Politics since 1964*, University of Washington Press, Seattle 2012.

⁴⁶ T. Robertson, *The Malthusian Moment: Global Population Growth and the Birth of American Environmentalism*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick 2012.

the edge of the suburbs. On Long Island, for instance, a group calling itself the Long Island Horticultural Society, which had started as a gardeners' group, switched to buying up remnant stands of forest and fields and preserving them. In 1954, they became a chapter of the Nature Conservancy. Decades earlier, the environmental historian Samuel Hays had argued that one of the roots of environmentalism was post-war consumerism: Americans wanted not only larger homes and the lawns of the suburbs, but clean air, clean drinking water, and access to nature for recreational purposes. Sellers's argument goes beyond that of Hays to argue that the suburbs also gave rise to an environmentalism that was not about consumerism but the commonwealth.⁴⁷

Conclusion

At the outset of the twenty-first century, North American environmental history finds itself moving back into the mainstream of historical practice. As a result, neither environmental history nor mainstream North American history will remain unchanged. Environmental history will never be historical orthodoxy as Turner's frontier thesis once was – nor should we wish that it could be. Rather, as environmental historians continue to engage questions and topics that are at the center of North American history, our core assumptions – that the environment is an agent and a presence in human history, and that history has a changing environmental context – are being adopted increasingly by historians who do not think of themselves foremost as environmental historians. Environmental history's engagement with mainstream historical practice aims for something much more important than the brief ascendancy of a particular thesis such as Turner once enjoyed. Rather, like other methodological challenges to established historical practice such as gender or transnational history, it is prompting the reimagination of North American history.

⁴⁷ C.G. Sellers, *Crabgrass Crucible: Suburban Nature and the Rise of Environmentalism in Twentieth-Century America*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill 2012. S. Hays, *Beauty, Health, and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the United States, 1955-1985*, Cambridge University Press, New York 1989.