The Oxford Handbook of Environmental History

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Over 40 years ago, in the preface to his *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492*, Alfred Crosby, a key figure among the first generation of environmental historians, emphasized that ‘Man is a biological entity before he is a Roman Catholic or a capitalist or anything else’ (p. xiii). Yet many members of the community of historians have remained conservative in their conception of what constitutes the proper territory for historical study. At a time, though, when the earth’s ecological condition is arguably the most urgent issue confronting the human species, it’s increasingly difficult to ignore Charles Darwin’s most critical insight: our membership in a community of life that includes other-than-human entities. In other words, the hallowed separation between the human and extra-human worlds (between culture and nature) is ever harder to sustain. With notions of hybridity and co-evolution in vogue, environmental historians extend their gaze beyond the strictly human world to consider interactions with the rest of nature: what different people at different times and in different places have thought about nonhuman nature (just as it matters that a person is a biological entity as well as a Catholic or capitalist, it also makes a difference whether a pig is a capitalist pig or another kind of swine) and what they have done to and with it (and, just as importantly, what it has done to and with us).

The fundamental question all environmental historians ask is this: what happens when we put nature into history and history into nature? The current emphasis, however, is on taking environmental history approaches into areas of historical study where they are not a familiar presence. ‘Should environmental historians confine themselves to subjects that clearly have environmental links, such as stories of pollution, natural degradation, conservation, and wilderness protection?,’ asks Jacob Darwin Hamblin. ‘If the answer is “no”, he continues, ‘perhaps the field of environmental history implies a deeper commitment. Guided by the premise that nature is the essential part of humanity’s experience, shouldn’t environmental scholars have crucial insights on the fundamental episodes of the past?’ John McNeill, a former president of the American Society for Environmental History, echoed this sentiment a few years ago when he pondered the challenge of trying to arouse the interest of other historians in environmental history: ‘To meet (the challenge) better, we need to devote a bit more effort to writing things that other historians will feel that they cannot ignore. The best way, I suspect, is to write environmental histories of things other historians care most about. Whether that means the French Revolution, the Bantu migration, or the ideas of Margaret Sanger, there is an environmental history to it … French Revolution, anyone?’ The volume under review, *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental History*
takes up that challenge. As the editor explains in his Introduction, the current task of environmental historians is ‘to integrate the insights of environmental history into a host of other subfields that are equally as complex … (and) as important as the environment in understanding environmental history’ (p. 10).

If measured by the emergence of professional organizations, then environmental history has truly come of age. In addition to the American Society, there’s a European Society for Environmental History, a Society for Latin American and Caribbean Environmental History (Sociedad Latinoamericana y Caribeña de Historia Ambiental), an Association for East Asian Environmental History and an International Consortium of Environmental History Organizations. The mainstreaming of environmental history since the start of the new century is also evident in the various compendia and encyclopaedias that have appeared. Only one of these, however, is global in reach: Routledge’s three-volume Encyclopedia World Environmental History (2004). Now there’s another volume to place alongside it.

Recent entries in the Oxford Handbook series for historical studies include other relatively new areas such as food history, oral history, medicine and consumption (all published in 2012), as well as staples such as early modern European history, the American Revolution and fascism.(3) So the addition of a volume that takes stock of the past and present status of environmental history – as well as suggesting future directions – is timely and most welcome. The Handbook is arranged in four more or less equal parts (the first contains seven rather than six chapters). Part one tackles a range of ‘Dynamic environments and cultures’, from weather and disease to deserts and forests. Part two is about ‘Knowing nature’ through entities such as technology, science, health, protected areas and cultural landscapes. Part three, on ‘Working and owning’, embraces capitalism, private property, work, consumption, law and cities. Part four (‘Entangling alliances’) covers race and ethnicity, women and gender, the nation state, borders, international relations and the politics of nature. If you don’t take the time to read the introduction first, then you can have a field day reordering the contents among the vessels available. Why is disease located in part one rather than alongside health and bodies in part two? Why do cities feature in part three rather than part one? Why are animals in part one rather than part four? Surely an essay entitled ‘Animals and the intimacy of history’ is a prime example of an entangling alliance. And why is the chapter on work (given that the notion of ‘knowing nature through work’ is currently so popular) not in part two? And why is part three called ‘Working and owning’ when discussion of work and workers is effectively confined to one of its six chapters (there are a large number of index entries under ‘Labor’, but almost all of them point to that single essay).

Read the introduction, though, and all becomes perfectly clear: the editor makes a strong and persuasive case for why each chapter is where it is (though part 3 might be renamed ‘Owning, consuming and working’). Collectively, part one’s apparently disparate essays contend that ‘adaptation provides a more satisfying narrative of historical change than ecological determinism or despoliation’ (p. 11). Part two’s all confront a ‘changing understanding of scientific knowledge’ – specifically ‘a more complex and dynamic idea of ecology’ (p. 11) than the one that prevailed among the first generation of environmental historians. Part three grapples with the intersections between economic change and ‘resource capitalism’ on the one hand, and biophysical environments, including that of the human body, on the other. Part four (unsurprisingly) is all about power and its uneven distribution. Isenberg’s introduction is as robust and convincing a statement as you’re likely to find of the value of environmental perspectives to other branches of historical studies and of the centrality of environmental history to the overall discipline.

Any reviewer can quickly compile a list of topics absent from any work, however large, covering as big an area as a disciplinary sub-field. Granted, there’s a chapter on forests, but, despite what is suggested by the index entry that reads ‘Trees. See Forests’, not all trees are found in forests and not all plants are trees: so there’s a case for a chapter on flora to supplement the forest coverage and complement the one on fauna. You can find out a lot about a handbook, compendium, encyclopaedia or reference work from its index: Western American writer Larry McMurtry memorably remarked in his review of The New Encyclopedia of the American West (1998) on the absence of an entry for chili among its 1,324 pages.(4) In the handbook under review, it’s telling that historian Dan Flores appears in the index, but not flora.
Continuing in this vein a while longer, I note that part one includes chapters on deserts and the tropics (four and seven) in the ‘Western imaginary’, but not on the polar regions. And why is there a chapter on ‘seas of grass’ (i.e. grasslands – the editor’s own fine contribution) but not on mountains? Or, more importantly, about actual seas? Watery environments of all stripes and the activities they support are generally under-represented, though there’s some solid coverage of fisheries in the penultimate chapter (p. 24) on international relations, and, to a lesser extent, in the chapter on race and ethnicity (p. 20). Also, to their credit, three contributors draw attention to W. Jeffrey Bolster’s 2006 article, ‘Opportunities in marine environmental history’. Still, the index carries many more references to Donald Worster than to water. And no religion too (to quote from John Lennon’s ‘Imagine’). ‘Religion’ lacks a single index entry, and the only related ones are ‘religious centers, ancient’ and ‘religious restorationists’. Last but not least, given that environmental historians to date have mainly engaged with the modern era, regardless of national context, and, within the modern era on the period since circa 1800, there’s a case for having included a chapter (not sure where, though) on the pre-modern era.

None of this is intended to impugn the editor’s selection criteria. Anyone brave enough to put together and deliver an edited collection on this ambitious scale deserves our admiration and congratulations (perhaps working on a biography of a larger-than-life character such as Wyatt Earp in tandem with this project gave Isenberg the necessary brio), Isenberg, who has written landmark studies of the near-extinction of the American bison and of mining in 19th-century California, has assembled a distinguished team that numbers many scholars who reside in the vanguard of environmental history and have attracted various awards for their work.

The summary for this handbook’s Amazon page stresses the internationalism of its content: ‘With the current trend towards internationalizing history, environmental history is perhaps the quintessential approach to studying subjects outside the nation-state model, with pollution, global warming, and other issues affecting the earth not stopping at national borders. With 25 essays, this Handbook is global in scope’. This is true, but it is also the case that the profile of the contributors is conspicuously American. Even the few that are not Americans by birth hold positions at US universities. Just one contributor is based beyond the US (Hall), and he’s also American. This is not in itself a problem: France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, North Africa and Central and South America are parts of the world represented in contributors’ research areas. But it can become a problem if the coverage of environmental history provided by American environmental historians becomes more or less, by default, the environmental history of the United States. I’m an Americanist myself, and am the first to recognize that a good deal of environmental history output, including the most exciting developments in the field, has been generated by American scholars writing about the United States. There are no equivalents to the four-volume Encyclopedia of American Environmental History (2012) or The Columbia Guide to American Environmental History (2002) for Europe or any other part of the world. Moreover, the number of survey texts on American environmental history is also unparalleled. The most recent are Jeff Crane’s The Environment in American History: Nature and the Formation of the United States (2012) and Mark Fiege’s The Republic of Nature: An Environmental History of the United States (2012). The latter takes an environmental perspective on some of the classic topics of US history, such as the Salem Witch Trials, the American Revolution, the Battle of Gettysburg, the life of Abraham Lincoln and Brown versus Board of Education. It will be a while, I wager, before there’s an equivalent, for Britain, Germany or any other country, to Republic of Nature.

I also appreciate that the Handbook’s publisher is the New York City branch of Oxford University press and that by far the largest market for environmental history books, both in terms of student readership and the historical profession, is the US. I freely acknowledge, too, that the nature of coverage in any handbook or reference work is always likely to be that of the ‘partial overview’ – a notion characterized by essayist Pritchard in this volume as partial in two senses: ‘necessarily incomplete and reflecting (one’s) own research interests’ (p. 246). Nor do I underestimate the task of compiling a team of contributors and of ensuring high quality across the board.
Nonetheless, some contributors could have made a bit more effort to include parts of the world beyond the US, or at least have been more explicit about their predominately US perspective. (I will not dwell on the irony of the choice of a map depicting light pollution over Europe and North Africa for the dust jacket cover image – nor on the absence of light pollution from the book’s discussion of pollution, or of mention of dark skies defence and the establishment of dark sky reserves as one of the more recent concerns of the environmental movement both in and beyond the US.)

The author of the sparkling chapter on work (p. 16), Andrews, is refreshingly candid about his essay’s US orientation, pointing out that ‘the majority of workscape studies continue to focus on the US case. For this reason, and also because US historiography continues to exercise an outsized influence over historians of other places – a phenomenon especially true in environmental history – this essay focused primarily on the US, with only occasional forays beyond American borders’ (p. 427). (At the same time, Andrews performs a valuable service in underscoring the influence on this US historiography since of the 1990s of British scholars of the 1970s such as Raymond Williams and E. P. Thompson.) I couldn’t help feeling that the chapters on private property (p. 15) and urban environments (p. 19) should have been entitled, respectively, ‘Owning nature: Toward an environmental history of private property in the United States’ and ‘Cities in American environmental history’ rather than ‘Toward an environmental history of private property’ and ‘Cities in environmental history’. The latter’s extra-American coverage consists essentially of a short paragraph on Britain’s garden city movement. Don’t get me wrong. US environmental historians have indeed contributed enormously to urban environmental history. And one of them, Peter Thorsheim, is at the forefront of historical scholarship on British urban environments, which, incidentally, include cemeteries, though this vital 19th-century urban environmental setting is overlooked. (6) Even within its narrowly American parameters, Culver’s chapter on cities omits some stimulating commentaries, among them Jenny Price’s essay on ‘Thirteen Ways of Seeing Nature in L.A’, David Owen’s ‘Green Manhattan’ – which provides a robust riposte to the author’s opening sentence observation that many environmentalists dislike cities, and support for his concluding remark that cities are the front line in our efforts to tackle environmental problems - and Eric Sanderson’s Mannahatta: A Natural History of New York City. (7)

The section within Unger’s essay on women and gender entitled ‘The campaign to save birds’ illustrates further the problem of American parochialism that shapes some essays. (8) There’s no mention of the parallel campaign against the plumage trade spearheaded by female counterparts in Britain, where the (Royal) Society for the Protection of Birds (1891) had its roots in the Plume League and Fur and Feather League. Besides, there’s no mention in the section of this chapter on Carson’s Silent Spring (1962) of the book’s impact abroad as well as at home (as the British biologist and nature conservationist, Julian Huxley, exclaimed in his preface to the first British edition (1963), ‘as my brother Aldous said after reading Rachel Carson’s book, we are losing half the subject matter of English poetry’. (9)

Similarly, chapter 23 on borders and borderlands largely misses an opportunity to venture beyond the three nations of North America. ‘Boundless nature’ reads the title, and the subtitle promises ‘Borders and the environment in North America and beyond (my italics)’. Yet author Graybill’s ‘beyond’ bit consists of a paragraph on borderland preserves in Argentina, another on a highly polluted area between Germany, Poland and the Czech Republic, and a brief excursion to the multinational Rhine. In fact, there’s so much coverage of the US that one wonders whether the chapter (22) specifically on the US experience (‘Nature and nation in United States history’) is really necessary.

Having said that, many other chapters are commendably cosmopolitan. Stoll’s on capitalism (14) is free from the chains of the nation-state mentality, and Turner’s chapter (11) on the transnationalization and diversification of the traditionally US-dominated history of protected areas (in which the ‘American parks model’ (p. 283) has loomed overly large) is another exemplary re-insertion of US history into a larger context (though, ironically, the singularity of the Alaska experience within the US arguably merits more than a sentence). The standout contributions, however, for me, are Carey’s opening essay on the culture and politics of climate history (a model of best practice for a chapter in this particular kind of publication) and
Walker’s dashing and provocative essay on animals. An earlier version of this essay was published in a special issue on animals of *History and Theory* (2013), and was previously available electronically as an unpublished paper. I can see exactly why Isenberg wanted to include it here as well and quote (at some length) to whet the reader’s appetite:

To be eaten by another animal is to become energy for that animal. It is to be forcefully pulled back into the metabolism of the natural realm, ripped from the safe confines of cultural dominion. One may contemplate the advanced technology of the space shuttle, the lofty notes of Johann Sebastian Bach’s *St. John Passion*, or the coarse brushstrokes of Vincent van Gogh’s paintings; however, the debate over whether humans are anomalous, outside nature, exceptional, and separate from other animals abruptly ends when faced with the reality of a wolf’s stomach acids dissolving the flesh of a young mining engineer (p. 54).

Outstanding as well are Klingle’s absorbing and suggestive exploration of consumption; Pritchard’s ruminations on technology and ‘envirotechnical analysis’, a chapter (ten) that is accompanied by a particularly wonderful set of notes; and Hall on restoration and rewilding (that gives European enterprises in Scotland, Germany, Holland, Italy and Switzerland the attention they deserve).(10) The final chapter, on politics, is a tour de force and ensures that the *Handbook* finishes on the same high note on which it began. Zelko examines the politics of nature in every incarnation and ranges far and wide but always coherently across place and time, encompassing Venice, Germany, France, Britain, the Ottoman domains and tropical islands (also the US), and pre-industrial as well as industrial times.

The stated objective of volumes in the *Oxford Handbook* series (according to its webpage) is to provide ‘authoritative and up-to-date surveys of original research in a particular subject area’. It goes on to explain that ‘Specially commissioned essays from leading figures in the discipline give critical examinations of the progress and direction of debates, as well as a foundation for future research’. This latest contribution on environmental history lives up to this billing in many respects.(11) It’s an enormously valuable teaching and research resource for the practitioner of environmental history: many chapters will serve nicely as the first assignment for students working at advanced undergraduate, masters and doctoral levels within the broad thematic and topical areas of individual chapter coverage. It will also be an asset for those coming to the field of environmental history who are curious about the relationship between the agency of non-human nature and environmental determinism (chapter one), between environmental history and science (chapter eight), and with cultural geography and the concept of cultural landscape (chapter 13). It will also enlighten those who want to know about the internal schisms within environmental history (such as the ‘materialist-idealist debate’) that preceded the emergence of the ‘new’ environmental history in the early 1990s (the editor’s introduction). The *Handbook* also lays out the common ground between environmental historians and the historians of medicine and public health (chapter three on the environmental dimensions of disease). And it will demonstrate why those who study the body should heed the work of environmental historians such as Langston (chapter ten). Yet this *Handbook* will be equally valuable as a showcase of what the field has to offer other historians. It will demonstrate with vigour and verve that environmental history, rather than existing out there, somewhere on the margins, sealed off from other fields within historical studies, is actually quite near here, ready, willing and ripe for cross-pollination, and, actually not that strange after all, subject to all the usual trends and turns that shape and reshape historical studies.

Notes

March 2015). Back to (1)
3. Oxford Handbooks cover a wide range of disciplines, including mathematics, physics and psychology, in addition to a range of subject areas within the humanities and social sciences. Back to (3)
7. This chapter on women and gender has a list-like quality, exacerbated by a rash of sub-sections. Chiang’s chapter on race and ethnicity (20) exercises restraint, with six sub-sections, but this one includes 15, some less than a page in length. The entry for ‘Masculinity, hunting and conservation in empire’ is less than half a page, prompting the inevitable question, why bother including it? Back to (7)
10. Prominent British environmental commentator George Monbiot’s Feral: Searching for Enchantment on the Frontiers of Rewilding (London, 2013) presumably also appeared too late for inclusion in Hall’s exemplary international coverage. Back to (10)
11. The Handbook is produced to a high standard, with a minimum of typos, though I did pick up misspellings of Frederic Remington (p. 773), Frederick Law Olmsted (twice on p. 561) and Richard Grove (p. 224). Back to (11)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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