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The Oxford Handbook of Environmental History edited by Andrew C. Isenberg

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Volumes of Insight on Human Interactions with the Environment Over Time

The Oxford Handbook of Environmental History edited by **ANDREW C. ISENBERG**
Oxford University Press, 2014 \$176.00

Reviewed by **LORELEI HANSON**

This compendium provides an insightful and wide-ranging view of the development of environmental history over the past thirty-five years and points ways forward in the evolution of this historical subfield. While the roots of environmental history reach back into the nineteenth century, this scholarly field became recognized within mainstream American history starting in the 1980s. The field was initially marked by a scholarly debate between a materialist approach to environmental history, as advocated by Donald Worster, and more idealist approaches as exemplified by scholars such as Richard White and William Cronon.

Since, the conceptual frameworks have diversified, and the analyses of the interactions between humans and the non-human world extended by blending both materialist and idealist perspectives, and increasingly engaging with the hybridity that characterizes the field of history and the liberal arts today.

The compendium is organized into four sections that together provide a general survey of the diversity of topics common to contemporary environmental history. The first section “Dynamic Environments and Cultures,” features essays on climate, disease, deserts, grasses, forests, fauna and regional environments, with a focus on environmental context. The “Knowing Nature,” section includes essays that wrestle with a changing understanding

of scientific knowledge as highlighted through discussions of such topics as chemicals and the body, technology, protected areas, restoration and landscape. The works in the third section “Working and Owning,” integrate the environment into historical studies of capitalism, private property, labour, consumption, law and cities. The final section, “Entangling Alliances,” illustrates how relations of power are integral to environmental history, as highlighted by discussions of race and ethnicity, gender, nationalism, borderlands, international negotiations, and environmental management and policies.

The range of subjects featured in this volume demonstrates the interdisciplinary nature of the field, and how environmental historians are increasingly engaging with and contributing to historical subfields such as gender studies, studies of science and technology, labour studies, and so on. Further, these detailed and systematic surveys showcase well how environmental history has extended the range of primary sources for historical scholars from traditional texts such as wills, letters, and oral history to include nature and science as seminal sources in formulating historical accounts.

Collectively the essays in this volume demonstrate how non-human nature is an integral element of human experience just as human societies and cultures are embedded in the environment. The authors do not simply tack nature onto an analysis of gender, colonialism, or consumption, but explore their subject matter from a myriad of angles to highlight the diverse ways in which the non-human world is implicated within an understanding of their topics over time and space, as both cause and context.

For those chapters that explore matters often the focus of scientific

analysis, such as deserts, climate, or soils, these essays highlight the diverse ways in which the natural world has been both subject of scientific study and social interest. In detailing the evolution of thought about facets of the natural world, the authors highlight the ecological, material and social implications of such thinking, revealing the myriad forms and implications of the social construction of nonhuman nature. As one example, the chapter on the tropics astutely demonstrates how this designation was used as an organizing construct to sharply delineate a geographical region and closely associate it with specific racial and civilizational generalizations, such as viewing tropical peoples as allegedly more suited to hot, humid and diseased environments than Caucasians. Such environmental logic was reinforced by scholarship conducted in anthropology and medical geography, and employed to naturalize race slavery and justify European imperial expansion. Centuries later the tropics were reconceptualised as a rainforest, an idealized wilderness envisioned as a storehouse of biodiversity and the lungs of the planet, but whose power as a conceptual space still sharply delineates it from temperate regions. While perhaps a more affirmative environmental image, the new tropics and the campaigns to protect them continue to assuage First World people's anxieties and support their on-going exploits at the expense of those who live and rely on these tropical regions. In the chapters that address more social topics, such as gender, private property and borderlands, the authors adroitly trace the complex ways these social constructs are entangled with the natural environment. As one example, the chapter on capitalism

describes well how this social system of surplus is grounded in material relations. Using a historical lens, the authors demonstrate how any social system able to convert organisms and habitats into commodities is devoid of ways to value ecosystem services or acknowledge its failures, and consequently, for example, we see the parallel emergence of industrial agriculture and famine.

While several authors adeptly cross national borders in exploring their subjects, and thereby contribute to an enriched view of the world's diverse societies, cultures, and ecosystems, largely the volume provides an overview of US environmental history. For those of us in Canada and other geographical locations outside of the US, this is a shortcoming for certain. However, the American focus should not prevent consideration of most of the essays in this volume as outstanding examples of environmental history, its methods and range of foci. These essays and their accompanying endnotes serve as useful reference texts, and most offer captivating historical introductions to the evolution of scholarship and popular thought about their specific topics. Moreover, together essays in this volume highlight how the nexus of power relations, social divisions, scientific discourse and cultural constructions have transformed the environment, and in turn how the social world has been impacted by a constantly shifting natural world. In so doing, the chapters in this handbook dispel both a deterministic view of the environment, as well as assumptions of the natural world as a stable, homogenous and homeostatic stage upon which human history has played out.

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Time, that critically evaluates the tensions, challenges and opportunities that emerge when publics are convened to deliberate on climate change. She also holds a fellowship with the Energy Futures Lab, a social learning lab focused on identifying innovation pathways to disrupt and transition Alberta's energy system.