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Editorial

This issue of *Environment and History* completes a third year of the new journal, and presents a useful opportunity for reflection about the state of the discipline. As this issue goes to press popular concern about climate change and a thirst for accurate knowledge about global environmental change and, implicitly, environmental history has reached some kind of a crescendo due to recent extreme events.

In particular, current preoccupations with the 1997 El Niño and the contribution it has made to fires in Southeast Asia, drought in New Guinea and bad weather in Mexico and California has served to highlight interest in the story of severe El Niños throughout documented history. It would be true to say that the whole historical pattern of the incidence of human catastrophes involving drought, storms, fire and famine has always been intimately tied up with the history of El Niño events. But until comparatively recently no serious attempts have been made to use archival sources to reconstruct the long history of the relationship between the El Niño phenomenon and the history of human travail. Now that some researchers are beginning to do so, some unexpected facts are beginning to emerge about El Niño and its dominating effect on the dynamics of global climate change and fluctuations. For example, we are now beginning to learn about the close connections between the El Niño and the incidence of monsoons (and monsoon failure) in Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Indian Ocean and Eastern Africa. Heavy rainfall events in normally relatively dry parts of the temperate and subtropical parts of West Asia, Europe and the Americas can now be attributed to El Niño. Intriguingly, too, there appears to have been some connection between the timing of the Little Ice Age of the temperate zones (and likewise the Little Drought Age of the tropics) between 1300 and 1800, and the incidence of strong El Niño events.

However, we can be almost sure that those politicians gathered at the international conference on climate change at Kyoto in November 1997 will, despite the emphasis of the conference on changes in Carbon Dioxide levels, be little cognisant of long term historical changes in the global environment, and the way that such changes make an impact at the local level. That is why articles such as the one which opens our issue are so important, painstakingly piecing together the physical and archival evidence for environmental changes in the historic period. The evidence for the local impact of the Little Ice/Drought Age and particular El Niño events is, potentially, an especially intriguing aspect of the article authored by Endfield and O'Hara, two major pioneers in Latin American environmental history. Historically the El Niño current has been seen as a largely South American phenomenon. But the current is now serving as the major international stimulant for awakening the general public, in many countries, to the phenomenon of artificial influence on climate change. This awakening is

reflected in a directly disciplinary sense, so that this editor, at least, has the impression that more and more scholars are devoting themselves to writing environmental history, creating, incidentally, very real space problems for a journal such as this. Moreover, a casual inspection of articles submitted to *Environment and History* indicates a remarkable fact; that an unusually high proportion of environmental historians are women. This might be thought surprising for a discipline so rooted in hard-nosed environmental sciences and frequently in fieldwork of a kind once dominated by men. However, a moment of reflection might suggest that this emerging gender weighting in environmental history is a logical outcome of study which frequently involves the analysis of catastrophic events brought about by oligarchies of men. The activities of the Malaysian and Indonesian timber companies in the ruination of the forests of Southeast Asia is only one recent example of this. The men who run such companies seem to have completely lost touch with that which nourishes all of us, whether men or women. But, as this issue of *Environment and History* may demonstrate, a new and vital public discourse has burst into healthy life, at least in academic terms, that might help ultimately to reverse the appalling consequences of a systemic male subjugation of nature.

Our cover photograph depicts the Irrawaddy in full monsoonal spate, adjacent to the town of Pakokku, famed as the inspiration for Kyauktada, the fictional location of *Burmese Days*, arguably George Orwell's greatest novel. Burma is famous, even yet (and despite the recent efforts of the military junta), for its sustainably harvested forests and high proportion of total area under forest cover. We might remember too, in that connection, that some of the earliest papers in what we would now call environmental history were written by Dudley Stamp, while he was a Professor of Geography at the University of Rangoon in the 1920s and 1930s. It seems appropriate to recall these Southeast Asian roots of environmental history at a time when decisions taken in that part of the world have become so vital to all of us on our fragile and smoggy planet.

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