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Editorial: Letter from Canberra

As the millennium approaches it seems that environmental historians are increasingly drawn to the task of writing world history. Arguably this trend began with Clive Ponting's *Green History of the World*, a journalistic but still useful exploration of the theme, which drew heavily on Alfred Crosby's *Ecological Imperialism* and *The Columbian Exchange*. It painted a relatively straightforward neo-Marxist picture of European expansion and consequent ecological transformation which is probably a useful starting point for environmental historians. Kirkpatrick Sale's *The Conquest of Paradise*, an elegantly written book which appeared in time for the quincentenary of the Columbus voyage, was very much in the same vein. More recently Jared Diamond, a brilliant ecologist and biogeographer, brought out his rather alarmingly titled *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, a brash but effective re-interpretation of the importance of distance and geography in the respective fortunes and evolution of successful western societies and their divergence from less fortunate aboriginal societies in, for example, Australia, New Guinea or Pre-Columbian America. Here too, the influence of Crosby was paramount.

But suddenly the millennial genre has become a more serious one. Now it is the turn of the historians themselves and some big intellectual guns have appeared on the horizon.

It seems that several world environmental histories may appear at once, and that a veritable race is on to publish in the year 2000. It is an exciting prospect for the discipline, and many of the proponents of the new trend are closely associated with this journal. Donald Hughes, possibly the doyen of American environmental history, and certainly the master of the environmental history of Ancient Greece and Rome, has for several years now been working away at the prodigious task, and may have his page-proofs, he tells me, by March of 2000.

Meanwhile John McNeill, profiting from his recent one-year break at the Woodrow Wilson Centre in Washington DC (only two miles from his normal stamping ground of Georgetown University), was able to embark on his *Environmental History of the Twentieth Century*. When I saw him back in 1996 in Washington, McNeill appeared despondent and may have felt that he had bitten off more than he could chew. The riches of the Library of Congress can indeed be overwhelming. But the meticulous McNeill seems to have caught his second wind, and for him too page-proofs are now in sight. Seven hours south by train from the American capital yet another historian, John Richards, at Duke University in North Carolina, has turned from his South Asian preoccupations to promise us an environmental history of the world in the period 1500-1800. To write about ecological change during the Little Ice Age is certainly a challenge. The history of the 'World Hunt' as a part of his world history is one of Richards' enthusiasms and, indeed, conceptual innovations. Some of us were lucky enough

to hear him lecture at an NEH Summer School run on World Environmental History at UC Santa Cruz last July run by that great academic entrepreneur, Edmund 'Terry' Burke. Indeed, the very fact that a six-week class with such a title should have taken place now is surely worth remark. But there is another odd observation to be made too about this emerging globalist trend in the field. That is, that it is dominated by Americans and by men. What does this all mean, and where are our women colleagues in all this, and our Old World friends?

World history used to be a speciality of the British. Arnold Toynbee's *A Study of History* is, of course well-known. But less familiar, I think is his *Mankind and Mother Earth: A Narrative History of the World*, a 641 page excursion into what we would now know as some kind of ecological history or socio-biological history. But this momentum was not really carried through by other historians. In Australia, however, some kind of a challenge has now been mounted to Toynbee and his ilk by Graeme Snooks, an icon-breaking economic historian whose work should be of great interest to environmental historians. Snooks' latest book is called *The Laws of History*, and follows on another icon-breaker entitled *The Ephemeral Civilisation*. Like all the best history books, these tomes are probably written before their time and will only make their full impact a few years hence.

But there has been – really since C.E. Brooks wrote *Climate through the Ages* in 1926 and Gordon East published *The Geography behind History*, a few years later – quite another kind of world environmental history writing, and that is climatic history, which is intrinsically global in its approach, and has been Anglo-French in inspiration. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie continued the theme with his 1971 *Times of Feast, Times of Famine*, relying heavily on the work of Gordon Manley, the great Lancaster geographer. It is then perhaps surprising that the alarums raised in the last few years over global warming and all it portends, should not to date have produced an equivalent kind of world history. Instead it has taken the millenium to do this, and for understandable reasons. The environmental historian is in a special position to teach his colleagues about the enormous rates of ecological change that have taken place not so much in the last millennium, but in the last twenty-five years!

Moreover at long last it seems that the fear of climate change may be about to provoke its own particular brand of world environmental history, not through an apprehension of global warming, but because of some radical new understandings of the impact of the El Niño phenomenon in the history of recent civilisation. The work of Mike Gagan and James Shulmeister of the Australian National University is showing that the modern El Niño is only about 5000 years old. This is the same age as the great riverine societies of the Nile, Tigris, Euphrates and Indus. Periodically El Niño produces catastrophic rainfall and drought events, and we are beginning to learn a lot more about them. The Assyrian empire may have fallen because of an El Niño drought, as may have the Indus civilisation and even Troy itself. These dramatic happenings will form the

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very stuff of a new kind of world history, rather like the 'Pulse of Asia' once envisaged in 1907 by Ellsworth Huntington. And one can predict that this new world history will originate not in America but in the monsoon climes of India and Australia. A new book shortly appearing from White Horse Press, *El Nino: History and Crisis*, will hopefully make a start in this direction

And now to this journal itself. *Environment and History* has not only reached the end of its fifth year. It has also reached the millennium. It is thus an appropriate for the editor and editorial board to thank our authors, our referees and our publisher. Together we made it to the millenium, which is no mean feat. May the discipline of environmental history also thrive after 2000!

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