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Editorial

The majority of articles in this issue of *Environment and History* shed some light on the relationship between colonialism and the environment and on colonial constructions of nature. They have been written, moreover, at a time when the centre of gravity of environmental history appears to be moving rapidly eastwards. In this way scholarly attention is being focused increasingly on Africa, South Asia, East Asia, Australia and the Pacific. In these regions the colonial impact has become a much more urgent preoccupation than it has been in North American or European environmental history. For some scholars the temptation has been strong to characterise the colonial period as ecologically disastrous and to see the pre-colonial period as a 'golden age'. At first glance some of the articles presented here tend to reinforce such arguments. Michael Mann's work, for instance, surveys the astonishing transformation of the landscape of northern India in the first half of the nineteenth century. However, he also shows how the deforestation and droughts of the period gave rise to a considerable contemporary colonial awareness of the dynamics of deforestation, drought and famine. Similarly, Vinita Damodaran has established, perhaps for the first time, a clear connection between growing colonial interventions in forests and the onset of famines in areas of India that had previously been relatively famine-free.

But these themes can also lead us into troubled historical waters. Above all they can lead us, through fear of environmental determinism, to neglect the very real influence of global climatic change on social and historical processes, and to exaggerate the extent of the colonial impact. We need to distinguish carefully between human-caused change and underlying climatic impacts. Fortunately, the work of some historians is now allowing much greater use to be made of archival findings by scientists seeking to explain the incidence and effects of extreme climatic events in history. In particular we are beginning to learn much more about the historical effects of major climatic fluctuations such as the Little Ice Age, El Niño-Southern Oscillation events, and the effects of volcanic eruptions in written history. In the past historians were generally able to ignore such phenomena, safe in the knowledge that very little was known about the dynamics of climate change. But that time has now gone. For example, the record of severe El Niño events is now known in such detail for the period 1510-present that historians can longer avoid trying to answer basic questions about the social impact of those events, just as scientists can longer avoid consulting the archival record. Perhaps of greatest interest for the early modern and modern historian is the question: what happened in the tropics in the 'Little Ice Age', or in what we may now perhaps rather call 'The Great Drought Age'? It is increasingly clear that what early modernists knew as 'the long seventeenth century' was a period characterised by a high frequency of extreme and often prolonged drought events

in South and South East Asia, Arabia, East and Southern Africa, the West Indies and Central America. In Central Africa, the level of Lake Malawi fell by up to 150 metres during the seventeenth century, with unknown social consequences. This global pattern of droughts in the period 1590-1790 has never been investigated as such. One might argue that a start should now be made in a series of regional studies, beginning perhaps by assembling a history of drought, deforestation and famine in South Asia, a task which both Mann and Damodaran begin to address in this issue of the journal. Fortunately, the documentary material for this region and for South-East Asia is extremely rich. However, for Africa, Australia and Central America the task is a much more difficult one, but a project that ought to be a challenge for historians of those regions.

Two of the other articles in this issue also represent the iceberg tips of much larger projects. Bonyhady is embarking on a formidable documentation of the social history of environmentalism, in Australia, while Hawes also tackles an area of study which to date remains almost untouched. It is remarkable that at a time when green politics has acquired such prominence in Britain, we still have no comprehensive social history of environmentalism in Victorian Britain. Indeed, one might argue that in our anxiety to document the environmental history of the colonial periphery we have neglected the metropolitan centres. Future issues of the journal may help to fill this gap at the centre.

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