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This, that and the other

John Mackenzie's recent and spectacular critique of Edward Said's *Orientalism* is becoming deservedly well known and much quoted.¹ Said, Mackenzie tells us, is simply not rigorous enough for the historian, attractive as he may have been to the literary critics and the more populist academic pundits. Despite Mackenzie's interventions, which all the more telling coming as they do from the pen of an avowedly left-wing historian, there seems little doubt that many environmental historians, this editor included, have tended to fall into a veritable elephant trap of simplistic polarities when they deal, as they increasingly are doing, with the unwieldy but vital subject of the colonial impact on the tropical environment and its people. We counterpoise Europe and the colonised other, black and white, man and woman, colonial science versus indigenous knowledge, Third World versus First World. But the terminology of opposites and of 'orientalism' can come very badly unstuck when it comes to the realities of historical explanation in environmental history. We need more sophisticated paradigms to understand the complexities of power relations in the subject. Nigel Leask has proposed that instead of simply thinking about 'this' and the 'other' we should rather start thinking about 'this', 'that' and the 'other'.²

This problem came to a head at a recent landmark conference held at Australia House in London in September 1996 where an admittedly largely white group of scholars presented papers on 'Ecology and Empire'.³ The development of colonial perceptions of the environment, it was pointed out, owed a great deal to the contribution of Scottish settlers and scientists, especially during the nineteenth century. But Scotland had itself long been a 'colony' of imperial England, it was asserted, subject to many of the same oppressions and ecological transitions as more distant and tropical colonies. Quite logically, therefore, it followed that Scottish settlers and experts might take a quite distinctly different view of the colonised world and its processes from those of their English colleagues. And indeed this seems to have been the case.

Subversive, innovative and rebellious ideas about colonialism and ecology flowed quickly from the pens and papers of the Scottish scientists who were so numerous in the employ of the British empire. Of course not all of them were as extreme in their views as Lord Monboddo, the 'Scottish Rousseau' and early environmentalist (and pioneer nudist and vegetarian), who proposed that the extinction of humankind might be to the benefit of creation in general. But there is no question that environmentalism did take very early (if not the earliest) root in Enlightenment Scotland.

The distinctive character of the Scottish 'that' in the imperial equation seems particularly worth bearing in mind as environmental history increasingly concerns itself with the subject of empire and ecological transition. It is not a new concern, of course, but there is little question that 1996 and 1997 will come to

be seen as critical years in the development of environmental history, not least because of the increasing interest taken in the subject by other disciplines. The current issue of this journal, for example, hosts an article by Jack Goody, who along with Polly Hill, ranks as one of the few great anthropologists of Africa to have thought seriously about the place of environmental history in their discipline. Even the current compilers of the unwarrantedly criticised Oxford History of the British Empire are considering including a historiography of environmental history and empire among the essays in their forthcoming new edition. One hopes that they actually will do so, as there is little doubt that environmental history now accounts for a very high proportion of the important work in imperial history.

Besides the Australia House colloquium, recent meetings in South Africa in July on Southern African environmental history and in Leiden on South East Asian environmental history show how the action in the discipline is moving to the periphery. Oxford India are about to publish a 1200 page edited volume on the environmental history of South Asia, to be called *Nature and the Orient*, and similar developments are anticipated for Africa. Last but not least, environmental history is also now being taken account of even in the most staid of metropolitan historical redoubts, those of economic history. Both the British Economic History Society and the International Economic History Association have announced that environmental history will be the major theme of their forthcoming meetings in 1997 and 1998. This tardy recognition of the subject must nevertheless be welcomed. Some commentators have suggested that environmental history poses a real threat to the *raison d'être* of economic history. One hopes that such prophets of disciplinary doom will be proved wrong. Whatever happens to economic history, environmental historians – of empire or otherwise – will have to answer the serious challenges posed for the Saidians by their Celtic colleagues, John Mackenzie and Nigel Leask.

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¹ Mackenzie, John 1994. Edward Said and the historians. *Nineteenth Century Contexts* 18: 9-25.

² Leask, Nigel 1992. *British Romantic Writers and the East: Anxieties of Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

³ Shortly to be published by Keele University Press.