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Louis S. Warren (ed.), *American Environmental History*, Oxford and Melbourne, Blackwell Publishing, 2003; pp.359; RRP \$65.95 paperback.

'What is environmental history?' More than three decades on and the same question remains with us, being asked yet again in the opening lines to Louis Warren's edited collection *American Environmental History*. But the brief answer he provides, commencing with the by-now familiar line of 'explor[ing] the changing relations between people and nature' (pp.1-3), does nothing to suggest our colleagues in the United States share a common purpose or approach any less ambiguous than the operational definitions developed a full generation ago. And so on to the chapters, where once again we are confronted with the bewilderingly diverse: topics as varied and unrelated as the ecological consequences of a developing transatlantic livestock trade, to a shameless attempt by the Nixon administration to capitalise on rising environmental concern in the

lead-up to 'Earth Day' in April 1970.

Fourteen chapters make up this book, all but two of which contain full-length articles selected as examples of 'cutting edge' scholarship from various other publications. These articles are complemented by a short headnote from the editor and a number of supporting primary documents, a format that reflects the text's design as a supplement to undergraduate courses in American environmental history. Attention is turned first to the environment encountered by those following in the wake of Columbus. In an impressively cross-disciplinary study, William Denevan outlines patterns derived from indigenous disruption of localised ecologies across sections of the two American continents. His argument that the landscapes Europeans colonised from the mid-eighteenth century were more 'pristine', or less humanised, than those explored and settled directly after 1492 is both provocative and convincing, especially when considered alongside the fate of native populations presented in the next chapter, an excerpt from Alfred Crosby's acclaimed *Ecological Imperialism* (1986). Crosby's account of the havoc wreaked by 'Old World' pathogens, smallpox in particular, points to a mass American Indian depopulation in the immediate aftermath of first contact, and serves in addition as a stark introduction to the wholesale biological destruction stemming from the creation of 'neo-Europe's' in the Americas.

Having presented this opening sketch of its field, *American Environmental History* ventures squarely onto the seemingly boundless plains of human-nature interaction stretching forth from the formation of colonial society. Through chapters on early conservation movements, disappearing bison, and water management in antebellum south-eastern states, editorial direction seeks to blaze trails beyond the farthest points reached by pioneers in the genre. Here, the cutting-edge perspectives hailed as the volumes chief attribute involves a revision of established themes, so that the hunting drives of the 'Horse Indians' are added as a prefix to the well-known tale of plunder on the Great Prairies, and aspects of class and ethnicity are highlighted as under-appreciated dynamics in the beginnings of nature appreciation and preservation, environmental perception, and resource management.

The chapters I found reaching out to less visited horizons were those discussing subjects set within an urban context. Cholera outbreaks in 1830s New York fell firstly into this category, followed

later, and more notably, by Robert Gottlieb's effort to secure a 'broader, more inclusive' history of environmentalism cognisant of various campaigns undertaken for the benefit of urban working classes, and Ellen Stroud's analysis of the 'environmental racism' pervading residential planning for non-white minorities in the city of Portland. Together, these chapters expand disciplinary frontiers in directions that encompass some of the more common past experiences and interactions of American people with the surroundings they have lived in.

However, the opportunity available for a fitting conclusion to this good work proves to have been missed. The final two chapters, promisingly titled 'Backlash Against the Environmental Movement' and 'Legacies', turn out to contain only documents, and no articles at all. Could no writer be found to undertake an exploratory enquiry into the fortunes of an environmentalism faced with the emerging ascendancy of views, among both politicians and scientists, that directly refute the seminal predictions of a looming apocalypse so common in the sixties and seventies; was no-one prepared to review the 'changing relations with nature' detailed in the preceding twelve chapters, and from this to look at the lessons we learn from environmental history itself? To find only reproduced journalism and assorted statistics filling a section with potential for much more is a major disappointment.

I also regard the format of this book as disappointing. As a collection of tutorial readings for American undergraduates it is doubtlessly fine, but more advanced readers can easily (and less expensively) access individual articles from the source of original publication, and would not likely bother with a more than cursory glance at each document. Australian readers will also be frustrated by the narrow, nationalistic focus. Save for Denevan and the widely-read Crosby, who both provide comparisons that will assist understanding of the changes to our own continent following European invasion, only two other contributors offer more than a mere window into fresh currents within an American-centred historiography. The first is William Cronon, and his classic 1995 essay 'The Trouble with Wilderness'. Cronon's message that 'wilderness' is an inherently cultural construct in need of transcendence in the quest for a sustainable future cannot be repeated enough over here; imagine the progress that will be made when everyday Australians transfer their present concern for old growth forests or coral reefs to

the whole expanse of land and sea lying between these places and suburbia, because it is no less endangered! Next is Alan Taylor's 'Stories of American Settlement', where the unrestrained attack on nature that characterises the pioneering process is traced beyond the dictates of economic necessity, to the sufferings 'wild' landscapes impose on first settlers and the visions of success underpinning their endeavours. Reconsider the images of ring-barked forests or heaped marsupial skins familiar to us through the work of Jock Marshall and Geoffrey Bolton in light of the following passage: 'Settlers' treatment of the wild animals and plants derived from their anticipation of a future landscape deforested, depleted of wildlife, and dedicated to agriculture. Rather than seek an equilibrium with wild animal and plant populations, most settlers killed as much and as often as they could in order to claim the largest possible share in the bounty that they regarded as inevitably short-lived. Emigrating from districts already deforested and depleted of wildlife, the settlers considered the wilderness as a temporary place and condition where an unconquered nature imposed special hardships and compensated with unusual windfalls. By exploiting nature's bounty, settlers meant to transform the conditions that entailed their hardship' (p.115). A fine insight to be sure, but a rare one as well, and so Australian environmental historians keen for succinct and forward-looking overviews of recent scholarship, or a collection of studies with comparative value for their own studies—features that have made previous offerings from across the Pacific a 'must-read'—are best advised to pass on *American Environmental History* to colleagues specialising in American studies, as a text better suited as an adjunct to their own courses.