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An Environmental History of the World: Humankind's Changing Role in the Community of Life

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Most of us who have tried to write of time and place on a large scale resort to a broad framework of ideas, punctuated by an example or two from the literature or even from our own experience. As in his first edition, Donald Hughes does it differently: a series of footprints rather than a superhighway, as he puts it. He starts with a focus on some specific region or practice and then draws a general conclusion at the end of the chapter, as well as of the book. Thus the historical material starts with the 'Primal harmony' of the Serengeti, Kakadu in Australia and Hopi agriculture, This is followed by 'The great divorce of culture and nature' which homes in on urban origins in Gilgamesh, the Nile valley and the collapse of classic Maya culture. Athens, Xian and Rome then contribute 'Ideas and Impacts', and we go on through the Middle Ages, the transformation of the biosphere, exploitation and conservation, modern environmental problems, to 'Present and future' seen through the lenses of the Amazon, New Orleans, UNEP and global warming. There is then a general conclusion, and suggestions for further reading. The second edition is about forty pages longer than the first, with recent times getting the largest share of the extra space – an account of the impact of hurricane Katrina and expanded material on climatic change being important elements of the updating. There is a North American slant to the choice of examples but Hughes goes to some length to avoid the USA-centric view of the world which is not unknown in the output of some writers who work there.

The book's periodization roughly follows that of many other long-period (i.e. about 10,000 years) environmental histories but there is the noticeable difference, detectable from the chapter titles, that the approach is not simply confined to the material. The whole interplay of the material ecology and the cultural framework is taken to account. This, to my mind, gives the book one of its greatest strengths, in a feel for the

combination of land and people through time that makes for both harmonious and (probably) 'sustainable' relationships and for the other about which we most often read, the polluting and the degradational. The term 'a feel' is reasonable for most of the examples which form the core of the writing derive from Hughes' own experience; he has been there: he has heard about the cane toads from a tribal elder in Kakadu rather than a disembodied voice-over on TV. So quite often, the text reads 'I saw …, I visited' (and even 'I flew in a small aircraft') and that gives the body of material an immediacy which few writers in this field dare try, for most of us strive (usually unsuccessfully) to pretend that we are objective observers until the last chapter when we come out on the side of the good guys. The text is central to the book: there are no maps or tables of data (for which there is now little need anyway since up to date numbers can always be found on the web) but there are photographs of the author's own to reinforce the personal nature of the examples chosen. At one or two points, the photographs are really not very helpful though he has thankfully dated all of them; the publishers might have done the decent thing by supplying better images of the Acropolis or Aswan. There is though a compensation in the form of a useful narrative guide to further reading, in which I must declare an interest since I am mentioned. Each chapter has its own set of endnotes which testify to a lot of reading alongside his travels.

This ability to weave scientific and cultural scholarship with the personal makes the book different, for many works in this field are firmly based in science, with a nod in the direction of economics and perhaps politics ('if only you people would do as we scientists tell you') or else are very firmly based in historical sources without much understanding of the dynamism of ecological communities and the assumption that old-growth forests (for example) have been like that for the last 8000 years. Here, we get away from that and look at wholes; occasionally the sheer scale of doing so is too much for the format: I think that the whole impact of the development of fossil fuels and the way in which they underlie the whole economy of the planet (including its atmosphere) is scattered too much through different parts: the account of 19th-century London has too much emphasis, to my mind, on the 'ghost acreage' of the Empire and too little on the way in which its form and function was shaped by technologies like the railways, steamships and the telegraph. It is true that this theme emerges at the end as one of the dominant ideas of the narrative, it is just that for my money this could have been signalled centrally and earlier. As someone who once worked on the environmental relations of hunter-gatherers, I was wanting to question the idea that any of them lived in a state of 'primal harmony' for once the control of fire at landscape scale was achieved then the scene is set for human remaking of nature in a cultural framework. Does the harmony in fact derive from the fact that there were so few of them? But Hughes makes his case in a way which admits that not every place is the same: both at this time and until the early modern period, most ways of life were contained within isolated systems.

The core of the book is in the chapters mentioned above and perhaps the greatest challenge to the author's skill comes in balancing the general and the specific. Each of them has a general introduction which sets out a chronology, a *précis* of technological developments and a selection of the ideas (and their originators) which characterise that era in the history of human-environment relations. The detailed material then occupies most of the space and is terminated by a short general conclusion. This enables Hughes to highlight what he sees are fundamental shifts in the human stance towards nature and point towards his overall conclusions where they are brought together. Thus one of the features of his chapter on the divorce of culture and nature (which takes Uruk, the ancient Egyptian Nile and the Maya collapse as main examples) is the question of the role of population growth both in the flourishing of these communities and in their eventual breakdown. This theme surfaces again, not only in attention to the figure of Thomas Malthus, but in for example the great population expansion of the 19th century (whose consequences we have inherited today) and the underlying shifts in nutrition that made it possible. For it is of course the development of fossil fuels which, to use John McNeill's memorable adaptation, was the 'something new under the sun' which makes possible today's world, with all its wonderful things such as the machine on which I write this review and the less than wonderful like the oil spill which eclipses even the politics of the UK's 2010 general election should I switch to a news website. The examples chosen for material on today's conditions are very interesting: the logging disputes in a US National Forest in Oregon, Bali, Chernobyl, and the city of Denver in Colorado. They all illustrate very well the nexus of technology, material consumption and clash of ideas that are the fare of anyone with an interest in 'the environment'. The forest was the scene of a fierce 'owls or

jobs' controversy, Bali rediscovered the utility of its temple-based water distribution system, Chernobyl is seen as the result of a political system based only on social relations, and Denver raises the questions of how a large modern city should relate to its surroundings, assuming any meaningful boundaries can be drawn: back to ghost acreages in several ways. The chapter lacks only an example from Africa, which seems to be the continent which above all the others is in a spiral of population growth and environmental tension: is it possible for instance to have democratic government in places where there are shortages of resources? Is autocracy the only way to organise the distribution of scarce materials? There is a task for a historian here: to investigate resource-population tensions in the past and relate them to forms of governance and to take forward Joseph Tainter's idea that the collapse of Rome, for example, was due less to environmental factors or external pressures but more to the proportion of resources that had to be devoted to feedback loops to keep the ship of state more or less upright. Advocates of 'less government' might read such work with interest.

Hughes leaves us in no doubt that the world of which he writes is now driven by population growth and energy availability: his story is ineluctably ecological rather than dominantly social, though given his knowledge of classical times (the theme of one of his earlier books) and his interest in sacred space, for example, I kept wishing he had found room for some of the 'softer' ideas about environment. The way in which, for instance, the energy debates in the West are underlain by a kind of mythology of a Promethean kind in which human dominance via technology is still the key. How many politically prominent people will tell us the truth of what a low-carbon world might actually be like, when they can promise wealth and jobs on the basis of carbon capture or mirrors in space? Is it not interesting that the once-radical ideas of James Lovelock have gained traction because their 'Gaia hypothesis' label harked back to the mythology of classical Greece? (I want also to read a book on how most people come to know about 'the environment' which analyses the role of the small screen in both wildlife programmes on a grand scale as well as peering intrusively into the various burrows in which they sleep and breed.) Yet all authors have to struggle with what to leave out and it would be unfair to make this a central criticism: more perhaps a plea for Hughes to develop this type of approach in another volume.

There are many challenges in telling the story of thousands of years for the whole world but none exceed that of rounding off such a narrative. Hughes offers us a three-page 'general conclusion' There are examples in history of both sustainable and destructive human-environmental relationships but the latter currently prevail. The short-term is dominant and threatens the future of both our own species and many others. The necessary feedback mechanism consists of 'the growth in scientific knowledge, the existence of a subtle technology, the availability of a body of ethical considerations, and the certainty of threats to human survival …', which is a formidable list even if applied one at a time instead of the messy and partial travail which is more likely. (Isaiah Berlin's thoughts on fudge and error come to mind here.) So, we are part of the whole and we depend on the whole. Yet: what sort of scientific knowledge, whose ethics, which bits of technology? Is the past any sort of real guide to the future? The hunter-gatherers of 10,000 BC if polled would have been sure they were going on for ever with their annual cosmogony; in AD 1700 solar-based agriculturalists asked by YouGov would have declared that, give or take the odd famine and epidemic, they were there for the long haul. Nevertheless if we ought to know about environmental history, then Hughes' volume is certainly worth a second edition and given the pace of events should extend to a third at least. It is humane, thoughtful and a book you can actually read.

Links
[1] http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/4825