

Exploring Environmental History: Selected Essays

Review Number:

966

Publish date:

Wednesday, 1 September, 2010

Author:

Christopher Smout

ISBN:

9780748635139

Date of Publication:

2009

Price:

£60.00

Pages:

208pp.

Publisher:

Edinburgh University Press

Place of Publication:

Edinburgh

Reviewer:

Frederick Milton

Originally seeing the light of day as conference papers or seminar presentations, this collection of environmental history essays brings together a very personalised, and at times highly impassioned journey by Professor Christopher Smout reflecting how he turned his attention to this relatively new field of historical enquiry in the 1980s, a decade after the 'great efflorescence of environmental history that occurred in America' (p. 15). Despite being an apparent latecomer to the field, Smout quickly made his mark by founding the Institute for Environmental History at St Andrews in 1992, and is therefore rightly regarded as one of environmental history's foremost scholars having also published widely on the topic. In addition, with a long career devoted to the economic and social history of Scotland, Prof. Smout is Emeritus Professor of Scottish History at the University of St Andrews and Historiographer Royal for Scotland.

Structured over 13 chapters that deal mainly with Britain, and especially Scotland, in the period after 1600, this volume opens with an introduction explaining the discipline of environmental history, which Smout defines as 'the relationship between people and environment' (p. 1). This might seem a fair description. But as demonstrated by chapter one's historiographical survey that introduces us to Victorian scholars engaged with species history rather than simply assessing works that have emerged under the banner of 'environmental history', Smout wrestles with definitions of his discipline. Partly this is because explanations of environmental history can easily be applied to aspects of agrarian history, rural studies or urban history, which were already well established when the new discipline arrived. Indeed, the author concedes that studies being carried out under the umbrella of environmental history might easily be construed as surveys in urban or social history. One is certain, for instance, that Keith Thomas did not set out to produce an environmental history work when he conceived his celebrated survey of early modern man's changing attitudes towards plants and animals.⁽¹⁾ To further cloud the issue, Smout sees environmental history as a

close relation to economic or historical geography, a linkage evident in this volume's short, but very useful bibliography. Scrutiny of the extensive footnotes supporting chapter one also demonstrates that environmental history borrows much from the natural and physical sciences to the point where documentary evidence is sometimes dispensed with completely in favour of scientific methodology encompassing carbon analysis and fossils. This point is demonstrated very well by Smout as he recollects the nature of material presented at a 1996 environmental history conference. We are left in doubt that this is then a highly interdisciplinary subject. Instead of becoming anxious about positioning its boundaries, we should celebrate environmental history's unique willingness to embrace and blend with very different but broad strands of academic enquiry as we seek, as Smout explains, to 'place man in the context of his environment, not as a master with dominion over nature but as part of nature and subject to its own laws, and further to show how his actions have impacted on nature' (p. 2).

Arriving in the wake of two new editions of seminal environmental history writing by J. Donald Hughes and Clive Ponting which offer a global perspective this rather slim work by Smout is refreshing for its tighter focus.⁽²⁾ Whereas Hughes and Ponting include overlapping case studies, such as the familiar account of the over-exploitation of Easter Island, Smout seeks to appraise rather niche evidence that it would be difficult to trace in grander sweeps of environmental history. From chapter one's timely review of British environmental history, which should be read by anyone with even a passing interest in the discipline, the remainder of the book is best summarised as bite-sized chunks of historical interpretation. Chapters two through nine deal largely with Scottish issues, in particular the management and exploitation of woodland and landscape. The remainder of the book then explores broader issues concluding with an examination of how individuals reach 'environmental consciousness'. These final chapters also denote a change in approach by the author, as he delivers a highly personalised perspective, raising some awkward and speculative questions for policy makers and conservationists alike. Smout admits this deliberate style was born out of a deep concern for man's misuse of his environment. Such challenges, sometimes contentious, might not be to everyone's taste; therefore readers may prefer a 'dipping in' approach, especially when reaching the final four chapters. That said, Smout's thought provoking and elegant prose make tackling this volume in one sitting just as rewarding, for many of these stand-alone papers have strong parallels, especially those dealing with woodland history.

Prefacing each chapter is an appropriate illustration or photograph with an explanatory title. For instance, beginning chapter seven's discussion of energy resources is a photograph of an *Orcadian* pony alongside a drying peat stack. Dated 1889, this visibly demonstrates the annual fuel requirements of the family. A discussion of the manpower hours required to dig this stack then duly follows (p. 112). That said, other illustrations deserve further comment. The illustration of Locdhu Lodge in the Caithness Flow Country perfectly captures both the unique bog habitat of this northernmost area of the Scottish mainland and the isolating nature of the landscape on the building, but the rationale for building the hunting lodge needs further explaining. Game shooting, as Smout shows, had a devastating effect in clearing the Highlands of so-called 'vermin' by zealous keepers, but the infrastructure to support this mainly upper-class sport that involved the construction of such lodges, and then the access roads and railways, such as that connecting the tiny hamlet of Forsinard, would also have had an environmental impact, as would the attendant workforce of servants and land managers.

Smout's frustration with government policy and agencies is clearly tangible. For instance, his search for 'green consciousness' within the Scottish Highlands illustrates that 'all our attitudes towards the land and nature have a history' but this can be 'twisted and directed' (p. 47), as shown by the tentative steps towards Scottish environmental protection, such as National Parks' legislation that have, for one reason or another, persistently lagged behind English attempts. Political interference has, more often or not, stymied advances in conservation and ignored valid local objections. Even when there is progress, Smout is concerned that this is being orchestrated by 'outsiders' who then merely trample upon Scottish sensibilities by not considering the Highlands to be part of a 'wider British society', a fact that seems so blindingly apparent to Scots themselves. This theme of detachment, especially with regard to policy-making or 'experts' offering their opinions, is one that Smout frequently revisits, leading to some arguments and evidence overlapping across

the chapters, a trait that the author admits he has tried to minimise when collating and updating these previously disparate essays. However, when blended with Smout's gentle humour such repetitions are easily forgiven and at times commensurately enhance the text. For instance, during the fight to preserve the Flow Country the chairman of the Nature Conservancy Council notably opined at a press conference that this exceptional habitat should be regarded as 'the natural heritage equivalent to the Taj Mahal'. Smout wryly observes that local opinion had it that 'the only Taj Mahal known in Sutherland and Caithness was an Indian restaurant in Thurso' (p. 107).

Three successive essays deal with one of Smout's specialisms, woodland history. The exploitation of Scottish woodlands is variously seen through a wide lens that variously focuses on semi-natural, pine and oak woodlands. A further chapter then assesses selected historical linkages made with various individual trees or woodlands within the Scottish landscapes. However, as this does not immediately follow the preceding three woodland-themed chapters there is a somewhat disjointed sense to the discussion. This is a shame, as this chapter nicely concludes the issues raised in the earlier ones. It strongly argues the case for the study of environmental history, not just for scholars, but also for those wielding financial and policymaking power. For example, Smout debunks the notion of the 'Great Wood of Caledon' as a romantic 19th-century myth, like those of the numerous 'Wallace Oaks'. Myths though endure, and such 'bad history', as Smout puts it, is not only notoriously difficult to dispel, but can lead to costly and ill-informed policy-making, such as the millions spent by the Heritage Lottery Fund in attempting to replant swathes of the supposed 'Caledonia Silva'. Historical research of man's history with the landscape and its biota, as Smout underlines later when discussing approaches to nature conservation strategies, is fundamental from not just a financial point of view, but also if we wish to protect and enhance biodiversity (p. 210).

Sandwiched between these analyses of woodland history, Smout turns his attention to another feature one might identify as being particularly characteristic of the Scottish landscape. Totalling 1.6 million hectares in the United Kingdom, peat bogs have continually attracted man's attention, to the extent that just 11 per cent of the total UK mires can be considered in a pristine state. Contributing to this decline has been large-scale drainage for agricultural purposes, forestry planting schemes, and of course peat extraction for both horticultural purposes and for burning, the staple heating fuel for many Highland communities until recently. Smout shows how opinions of peat bogs have shifted from regarding them as wasteland ripe only for exploitation, such as the ill-advised and tax-concessionary schemes of Flow Country forestry, to recognition that these are fragile habitats deserving of special protection and restoration. Chapter seven continues this assessment of Scottish peat use within a broader survey of Scottish natural energy resources, which also makes some fascinating comparisons with those of Ireland and Iceland. The peat resources of the latter, we learn was too poor to be an efficient fuel and Icelanders basically shivered in compressed living spaces to conserve the only heat generated by their own bodies and that of their domestic animals, that was at least conserved by 'the most energy-efficient houses in Europe' (p. 123). In comparison, both the Irish and Scots gained access to increasingly cheap coal which, by the 18th century, had become the fuel of choice for well-healed urbanites. Here, high windows and open hearths were, as Smout puts it, 'monuments to conspicuous fuel consumption' (p. 125). Squaring this suggestion of visible profligacy in the emergent consumption society of the 18th century is evidence of 'hidden' frugality. This included repeated clothes mending and attempts to mask repair of personal and household effects, and as Smout shows, rare incidences of household insulation (in this case sphagnum moss in some Dublin houses) as a means of reducing fuel costs. It is striking that such obvious measures for conserving heat and, of course, reducing costs were not more widespread, and it leaves open the question as to whether those with far more to gain from heat and cost savings, such as the working classes, similarly adopted some form of lagging where possible for their housing. After all, insulating mosses, especially for rural communities, would have been freely available. Given the current drive for energy efficiency, and the lack of effective fuel conservation measures in even comparatively modern housing, this topic offers a tantalising subject for future investigation by environmental historians.

At chapter ten, the author switches tack and shares with us his very palpable concern for avifauna by examining two very thorny and controversial subjects for modern nature conservationists, namely the

'problem' of 'alien species' and then the negative impact of modern agriculture on biodiversity. On the former, Smout is concerned with conundrum often faced conservationists as to the actual terminology 'alien' and what species might be thus classed as such, and then what appropriate action, if any, should be taken against such animals or plants introduced, deliberately or otherwise, by man. Is it legitimate on ethical and economic grounds, for instance, to exterminate the ruddy duck at a cost of millions, whilst protecting the little owl, when both species were deliberately introduced to Britain? Again, all salient food for thought, that Smout leaves us to ponder.

From an essay dealing with very deliberate increases in biota, we then move to a depressing report on the decline of farmland biodiversity, which the author explains has been under continuous attack from habitat degradation, pesticides, and intensive farming techniques all with the acquiescence of a political system geared to maximising production via subsidies. Not surprisingly this has had a catastrophic effect on biota, including extinctions of species of butterflies and bumblebees, sharp declines in plant varieties, and the well studied plummeting populations of farmland birds, such as the tree sparrow, which according to the British Trust for Ornithology, underwent a 97 per cent decline in numbers in period from 1967 to 2007.⁽³⁾ Apart from the handful of successful species reintroduction programmes and the 1960s bans on organochlorine pesticides, there are few good news aspects to this story. Even some arrests in the declining populations of selected bird species that was credited to set-aside (an EU subsidised scheme devised to take land out of agricultural production) was temporary as this farming method has recently been abandoned, a point Smout could have included. Given the scientific data informing this chapter and his dismissal of subsidies, it is disappointing that Smout also chooses not to discuss the 'new agri-environment schemes' within this chapter. He is certainly aware of these, for in a subsequent chapter the author regards these enterprises as being 'ill-considered' (pp. 202, 208), in this case for replacing weedy field margins with planted woodland. The overarching objectives of the many levels of subsidised stewardship programmes were to specifically address the species loss issues that Smout highlights. Such schemes have encompassed woodland and hedgerow planting, managed field margins and the creation of wetland habitat, by amenable and enlightened agriculturalists. Although mistakes have been made, data suggests that these schemes have been proven tools for increasing farmland biodiversity.⁽⁴⁾

With this apparent disregard for sympathetic management of their landholdings, farmers make simple targets. It is easy, with hindsight to suggest, as Smout does, that the impact of level of biodiversity loss might have been lessened if British agriculture had sought to avoid the lure of subsidy and 'European protection and manipulation' as 'wise' farmers instead sought mixed agriculture as a protective measure against uncertain markets (p. 196). However, we need to remember that agriculture is first and foremost a business, and it is difficult to uncover the same level of animosity levelled at businesses or housing developments occupying former brownfield sites that can support greater levels of biodiversity than are to be found on the more aesthetically-pleasing, but often bereft 'green deserts'. Instead of taking such an adversarial stance towards agriculturalists, we would do well to remember that many farmers have become all too aware of declining levels of biodiversity, birdlife in particular, and many actively work with agencies, such as the RSPB, to support practical habitat improvement schemes. Conservationists also are charged with land management. Unlike farmers, nature is given primacy, but this job can be fraught with problems and with competing approaches. As Smout shows, 're-wilders' attempt to remodel land back to 'original-natural state', whilst 'gardeners' tend to actively manage small-scale sites to prevent any large-scale ecological change (p. 203). Such different approaches raises controversy; re-wilding is difficult in a small and densely populated country such as Britain, and these attempts are underscored by poor historical knowledge, whereas the gardeners attempting to maintain a status-quo face problems with invasive native species. These issues reprise some of the arguments Smout already makes when he considered the issue of alien species and the ethical parameters conservationists work within. Was English Nature correct when it made the decision to destroy the rats living and feeding off Lundy's puffin colonies?

These complex issues also question to what extent we remain wedded to 'ordering' of nature by continually labelling its species with positive and negative values. This perception of nature links well with the concluding chapter that seeks to understand how environmental consciousness develops within individuals.

Here, the author issues a plea that we would all do well to understand and follow. According to Smout, man must see himself as part of the ‘countless twigs’ rather than the upmost leaf, else ‘the future of this spinning earth may be a silence to match that of her sister planets’ (p. 232). It is this interconnected role of man and his environment that thus forms the constant theme of the book, which then lays bare the prophetic dangers of not appreciating this concept.

It is probable that many scholars will have already read many of Smout’s thought provoking essays in their own right, but this familiarity should not deter anyone from revisiting these articles again, many of which, such as those dealing with woodland history, benefit considerably, context-wise, from being in the same volume and also updated. With regard to the revisions, there is no evidence of new source material simply being tacked on; instead the subsequent amendments by Smout have carefully integrated significant new works. For instance, when assessing species exterminated by man such as the wolf or those that vanished because of habitat change, for example the great bustard, Smout reaches for Roger Lovegrove’s thorough research of church warden’s accounts that tally the bounties paid out for ‘vermin’.⁽⁵⁾ Despite being a revised text there are some unsatisfactory proofreading errors that should certainly have been weeded out before publication. For instance, Nicholas Ridley, the controversial Minister of the Environment from 1987 to 1989, is erroneously named as Norman Ridley (p. 107). However, such minor quibbles should not detract from an entertaining and engaging work that augments the growing interest in environmental history. This volume of essays by one of the leading scholars in the field should be a vital addition to the shelves of everyone conducting environmental research, whether in the humanities or sciences. Given its wide remit and searching questions, *Exploring Environmental History* should also be compulsory reading for all those engaged, at whatever level, with environmental policymaking and practical nature conservation work.

Notes

1. Keith Vivien Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500–1800* (London, 1984).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. J. Donald Hughes, *An Environmental History of the World: Humankind’s Changing Role in the Community of Life* (Abingdon, 2009); Clive Ponting, *A New Green History of the World: The Environment and the Collapse of Great Civilisations* (London, 2007).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. S. R. Baillie *et al.*, ‘Breeding Birds in the Wider Countryside: Their Conservation Status 2009’, *BTO Research Report No. 541* (Thetford, 2010) <<http://www.bto.org/birdtrends> [2]> [accessed 1 June 2010].[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. See, for example, the studies analysing birds and animals utilising new farm woodlands. N. P. Moore, N. Askew & J. D. Bishop, ‘Small mammals in new farm woodlands’, *Mammal Review*, 33 (2003), 101–4; D. Vanhinsbergh, S. Gough, R.J Fuller & E.D.R. Brierley, ‘Summer and winter bird communities in recently established farm woodlands in lowland England’, *Agriculture, Ecosystems and Environment*, 92 (2002), 123–36.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Roger Lovegrove, *Silent Fields: the Long Decline of a Nation’s Wildlife* (Oxford, 2007).[Back to \(5\)](#)

Other reviews:

[3]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/966#comment-0>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/5009>

[2] <http://www.bto.org/birdtrends>

[3] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>