



AUSTRALIAN Forest History SOCIETY

Newsletter no. 14

December 1996

'... to advance historical understanding of human interactions with Australian forest and woodland environments.'

OUR THIRD MILESTONE

Our third conference, *Australia's ever-changing forests III*, which was held at the end of November, proved beyond doubt that forest history is alive and well in Australia. Fifty two people made the journey to Jervis Bay from all States (except SA this time) and from Britain, New Zealand and the United States of America. Twenty four papers were read and several shorter presentations were made, including a bracket of four on different state forests in New South Wales. The first part of the conference was devoted to papers on the theme of 'concepts of forest age'. These will be published very early in the new year by the Australian Heritage Commission. Somewhat later in the year, all the papers will be published as the proceedings of the conference. The conference included several trips to forests in the area, the National Botanic Gardens, Beecroft Peninsular and the Bay to watch the dolphins. Sue Feary had to miss leading the trip on the last day in order to organise the care of a dolphin badly injured in a fish trap. Delegates will be sad to hear that in spite of all her work, the dolphin died the next day. This apart, the conference was fruitful and enjoyable.

The sense of what forest history is was strengthened by the conference and by an earlier seminar on environmental history generally given in Canberra. Two key speakers at the conference, Professor Donald Hughes from the University of Denver and Dr Oliver Rackham from Corpus Christi College in Cambridge, gave the seminar. Each emphasised the importance of treating the environment as an actor in history, rather than as the backdrop to it. The diversity of disciplines drawn in to the field was very evident at the conference. Donald Hughes' talk appears later in this Newsletter.

The Society decided that it should be structured more formally and appointed a sub-committee to advance the matter, as described later. An attractive offer to hold the next conference in Gympie in Queensland in 3-4 years time was accepted. In view of all the work in progress, it too should be a rewarding conference.

✻ ✻ *With Season's Greetings to all our readers* ✻ ✻

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What is Environmental History?

J. Donald Hughes

John Evans (University) Professor of History, University of Denver
A seminar paper given in the Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies,
The Australian National University, 21 November 1996

A rapidly growing field of history.

The question, 'What is environmental history?', is the prevailing question I used to get whenever I told anyone I was an environmental historian. It can be answered in two ways. It is an inquiry, and it is an academic field. I want to begin by saying something about the second of these. Less than fifteen years ago, when I became the editor of the American journal in the field, we had about 250 subscribers, and almost half of these were libraries. The most recent ASEH meeting in Las Vegas had about 250 presenters. There would have been more, but the program chairs had a problem not all such chairs do; they had to be selective because so many proposals were made. 'Environmental History' is appearing as a desired subfield in many academic job announcements in America, and the number of young scholars interested in graduate work in the subject has expanded remarkably. Other historical societies are having whole meetings on the subject, as the World History Association did in October, 1994. Talks on the subject are gathering large audiences in American universities.

It is not just an American phenomenon, however. Europe has an Association and a journal, *Environment and History*, edited by Richard Grove, who spends some of his time here. There have been conferences in Finland, Germany, India, Hong Kong, and elsewhere. The number of books in the field is, of course, expanding exponentially everywhere. I see this meeting as a positive sign, and will ask you to fill me in on how all this is going in Australia.

Something not only historians do

But environmental history is not limited to historians. To a degree not common for most other historical subjects, books on environmental history are written by authors from other disciplines: geographers like Ian Simmons, anthropologists like Kay Milton, and biologists like Robert McIntosh. This may be the result of the interdisciplinary nature of the subject itself, since to do environmental history properly requires familiarity with ecology and other sciences, the history of science and technology, and geography and other branches of the social sciences and humanities. There

are several historical fields so closely allied to environmental history that a rigid line of separation cannot always be drawn. These include but are not limited to forest history, agricultural history, historical climatology, and the history of epidemics. Further, as Stephen Dovers remarked, 'It is hard to define the boundary between historical geography and environmental history' (Dovers 1994, 7).

A useful inquiry

As an inquiry in close relation to others, environmental history can sometimes offer useful practical insights. If we want to deal with environmental problems, it can be a great help to know how they came about in the past. For example, David Neufeld, a Yukon and western Arctic environmental historian reports that in the early 1990s the Canadian Department of Environment was studying Turbot livers in Lake LeBarge (yes, the one made famous in the Robert Service poem, *The Cremation of Sam McGee*) north of Whitehorse. They found disturbingly high levels of toxins and explored the lake to find the cause. Sediment cores from the lake bottom showed a black sludge of unknown origin. Seeking historical background, they passed the question to Neufeld.

The Yukon River system, of which Lake LeBarge is part, was a major transportation route Neufeld discovered that in the mid-1920s, a large silver-lead deposit was exploited in the central Yukon. Access was by paddle-wheel river steamers. The most serious obstacle in the spring was the delayed thawing on thirty-mile-wide Lake Le Barge. The British Yukon Navigation Company, the sole operator, devised a strategy to meet the increased demand by lengthening the shipping season rather than investing in new ships. They used a truck to spray a mixture of lampblack, old crankcase oil, and diesel oil (in fact, one informant noted, anything dark and liquid was dumped into the tank), in a lane on the ice across the lake to speed the 'rotting' of the ice. Company records showed that this was an annual practice into the mid-1940s. Steamboats would follow the track through the ice and break it up. The paddlewheel would churn up the lampblack, which settled to the bottom, where it remains to poison

turbots today. The nature of the problem was thus revealed.

Related to other social sciences.

For a moment, though, I'd like to return to the first of the two ways in which environmental history can be defined; that is, as an inquiry. As a subject, environmental history is the study of how human beings and human societies have related to the natural world through time. As a method, it is the use of ecological analysis as a means of understanding human history. Environmental historians recognize the ways in which the living and non-living systems of the Earth have influenced the course of human affairs. They also evaluate the impacts of changes caused by human agency in the natural environment.

William Green included a valuable chapter on environmental history in his *History, Historians, and the Dynamics of Change*. Green observes that no approach to history is more perceptive of human interconnections in the world community, or of the interdependence of humans and other living beings on the planet. Environmental history, he adds, supplements traditional economic, social, and political forms of historical analysis. The environment can no longer be seen as the stage setting on which human history is enacted. It is an actor; indeed, it comprises a major portion of the cast.

On the one hand, a fully developed environmental historical narrative, properly speaking, should be an account of changes in human society as they relate to changes in the natural environment. In this way, its approach is close to those of the other social sciences. One good example of this would be Alfred Crosby's *The Columbian Exchange*, which showed how the European conquest of the Americas was more than a military, political, and religious process, since it involved invasion by European organisms including domestic species and opportunistic animals such as rats. European plants, whether cultivated ones or weeds, replaced native ones, and the impact of European microorganisms on the indigenous population was even more devastating than warfare.

Related to other humanistic inquiries.

Like history itself, on the other hand, environmental history is also a humanistic inquiry. We environmental historians are interested in what people think about the natural environment, and how they have expressed their ideas of nature in literature and art. That is, at least in one of its aspects, environmental history can be a subfield of intellectual history. We should never stray too far from the question of how attitudes and

concepts affect human actions in regard to natural phenomena, of course. But it is a perfectly valid part of the environmental historical enterprise to establish what the significant views were on the part of individuals and societies. One of the finest achievements in this area was Clarence Glacken's *Traces on the Rhodian Shore*, which examined three major environmental ideas in western literature from ancient times to the eighteenth century. Those ideas were that the cosmos is designed, that the environment shapes human beings, and that humans alter the environments in which they live, whether for good or ill.

In a dialogue with community ecology.

The final point I want to make is that environmental history derived in part from a recognition of some of the implications of ecological science on the understanding of the history of the human species. Paul Shepard called ecology 'the subversive science,' and it has certainly subverted the accepted view of world history as it was up to the mid-twentieth century. Even environmental historians, however, have not always come to grips fully with the implications of ecology, particularly community ecology.

One of these implications is that the human species is part of a community of life. It evolved within that community by competing against, cooperating with, imitating, using and being used by other species. Humankind's continuing survival depends upon the survival of the community of life, and upon achieving a sustainable place within it. History's job includes examining the record of the changing roles our species has enacted within the biotic community, some of them more successful than others, and some more destructive than others.

What needs emphasis is that all human societies, everywhere, throughout history, have existed within and depended upon biotic communities. This is true of huge cities as well as small farming villages and hunter clans. The connectedness of life is a fact. Humans never existed in isolation from the rest of life, and could not exist alone, because they are only one part of the complex and intimate associations that make life possible. The task of environmental history is the study of human relationships, through time and subject to frequent and often unexpected changes, with the natural communities of which they are part.

The idea of environment as something separate from the human, and offering merely a setting for human history, is misleading. The living connections of humans to the communities of which they are part must be integral components of the historical account.

Whatever humans have done to the rest of the community has inevitably affected themselves. To a very large extent, ecosystems have influenced the patterns of human events. We have, in turn, have to an impressive degree made them what they are today. That is, humans and the rest of the community of life have been engaged in a process of co-evolution that did not end with the origin of the human species, but has continued to the present day. Historical writing should not ignore the importance and complexity of that process.

The narrative of history must place human events within the context of regional ecosystems, and world history must in addition place them within the ecosphere. Granted this, the often-used metaphor of 'environment' is also inadequate, implying as it does a separation between the human species and the rest of the natural world. One might, therefore, have preferred another term for 'environmental history.' Other designations such as 'ecological history,' 'historical ecology,' 'ecohistory,' etc., have been suggested, but all of these also present semantic difficulties, and 'environmental history' has the advantage of current acceptance among historians, so I use it here in an inclusive sense, with no intent to imply that humans are exempt from the ecological principles that govern all species. History operates *within* the principles of ecology.

As Aldo Leopold wrote, 'One of the anomalies of modern ecolog[ical thought] is that it is the creation of two groups, each of which seems barely aware of the existence of the other. The one studies the *human community*, almost as if it were a separate entity, and calls its findings sociology, economics, and history. The other studies the *plant and animal community* and comfortably relegates the hodgepodge of politics to 'the liberal arts.' The inevitable *fusion* of these two lines of thought will, perhaps, constitute the outstanding advance of the present century.' I believe environmental history is an active part of that fusion.

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New Zealand forestry history

In 1995 a small group of New Zealand foresters became concerned at the increasing risk of losing important historical sources and data. A bunch of pioneering 'old-timers' were clearly not going to be with us for ever, and also the revolutionary changes in New Zealand forestry, in which the state indigenous protection forests passed from the Forest Service to the Department of Conservation and the state exotic production forests were privatised, provided all sorts of opportunities for records to be lost. A range of selected members of the New Zealand Institute of Foresters were circualised to see if they were interested in, or had any views about the formation of a New Zealand Forest History Society. There was a good, generally supportive response and many important views emerged, although there was not unanimous approval of a formal society. There was however gen-

eral agreement on the importance of collecting and safely storing historical data before some of it is lost.

There was clearly enough interest to take the whole matter further and a small informal steering group of four was formed to analyse the responses in detail and to give a lead. The group first met in June 1996 and concentrated on a few pivotal issues. The first involved the nature of the subject and it was decided that 'forestry history' is more apt than 'forest history' because the former term covers more than the forest. It was decided also that most pre-history was out, but that anything to do with the impact of man was in.

The most substantial item tackled was whether or not a formal forestry history society should be launched at this stage. In the end caution prevailed and it was decided that one was not essential at the present time. In mind was the tendency to proliferation of New Zealand forestry societies, with the danger of diffusing support, and the unavoidable bureaucracy which follows the setting up of any formal organisation. Instead, it was recommended successfully that the School of Forestry should take the initiative and, in collaboration with the Departments of History and Geography at Canterbury, introduce forest history studies at the post-graduate level. It is hoped that other universities will take an interest in the subject.

Another achievement of the steering group was the establishment in the University of Canterbury library of a forestry archive which, in addition to records which are already starting to accumulate, will contain a register of all historically important forestry material in the country. Also the steering group reports regularly in the two main forestry journals to keep up the momentum of interest in the subject. The group continues to feel its way; it may in time end up as a forestry history society.

Peter McKelvey, 9 Saint Clio St., Christchurch 4, NZ

Position vacant

Volunteer Wanted - duties as co-editor, text editor, proof reader, reviews editor, item solicitor, illustrator, etc.. for the Newsletter. Hours varied, pay zero, sense of humour essential, spelling ability an advantage!

Errata for Newsletter 13:

'Ateoroa' should have been 'Aotearoa', and we held our conference in November and not December.

Book reviews

Alex Graeme-Evans. 1996. *Against The Odds: Risby's: Tasmanian Timber Pioneers 1826-1995*. Hobart: Tasbook. 421pp. \$ 32.95.

Review by Jenny Mills.

In some ways this is an important work in an era of changing environmental perceptions. It shows the increasing dilemma facing today's Australian timber industry. In simple personal prose the author relates the rise and decline of Risby's, a respected family timber company established in Tasmania. The decline is brought about by the instability and uncertainty caused by intense Green lobbying at State and Federal political levels for massive changes to Tasmanian and Australian forest policy. In the end it is easier for the family to leave the battles to the larger corporate companies. By December 1994 Risby shareholders voted to wind up the company.

The company history begins in the early settler society of Hobart, Tasmania. It tells of courageous adaptation to what was an isolated wilderness, an island dependent on sail for communication and economic survival, with its native forests a major commodity to an empire hungry for wood to fuel industrialisation and later railway expansion. Risby's founding father, Edward was a convict transported to Australia with the first fleet in 1788. Later as a free-man he took up farming land on Norfolk Island and married. In 1808 the Norfolk Island community was relocated to Hobart.

Edward's sons married well and moved into the boatbuilding and timber trade. They built Tasmania's first steam driven sawmill in 1844. The goldrush in Victoria and consequent building boom in Melbourne brought strong demands for construction timbers from Tasmania. Risbys prospered making their name as builders of whaleboats and later as owners of a large fleet of magnificent sailing boats and barges busy plying the timber trade. Intrepid skippers piloted their schooners into the rivers of the notoriously difficult west coast to collect Huon pine and other timbers for the company's Hobart sawmill. Shipwrecks seemed almost routine with Risby family members survivors on at least two occasions. The book has the smell of salt in its pages and its outstanding photographs of sailing ships and the forest illustrate every aspect of the period from working routine to elegant regattas.

Risby's heroic pioneering days were over by the 1930's with the arrival of several big pulp and paper manufacturers in Tasmania. These companies were

granted large timber concessions especially ANM (Australian Newsprint Mills) in the Florentine Valley. From then on the resource was somewhat harder for the local sawmillers to access. Risby's followed the pattern of most other family timber companies in Australia with vertical integration from the bush to the main production centre, updating mills and manufacturing plant, entering the hardware trade and lobbying for better deals from government especially through the local timber association.

It is a shame that the last difficult and interesting era in Graeme-Evan's history is confused. The reader watches with interest as the Tasmanian sawmillers struggle for log intake but not daunted, continue to modernise their production centres into some of the best in the southern hemisphere. Australian Timber Journal owner and editor Con Lembke persuades C.A. Risby and other timbermen to combine as Tasmanian Pulp and Forest Holdings to apply for a large much needed east coast concession. This is approved in 1968 and the company enters the first Tasmanian integrated sawlog woodchip venture with the Japanese at Triabunna in 1971. Someone should write Lembke's biography. His influence on the Australian timber industry is enormous.

The advent of woodchipping and the Franklin River/ Lake Pedder controversies change the Australian public's awareness of forest policy and land use. The author explains at length the various green pressures, including Federal intervention, for the reservation of more and more crown land, once part of a sustainable forest. Finally the State Green Labor Accord of 1989 stops the opening of the Risby joint venture Huon Forest Products which would have employed 1500 people. In the end this reviewer turned for a clearer more objective view of this era to John Dargavel's admirable *Fashioning Australia's Forests*. One realises then that conservation policies must be shaped in a wider rational context recognising that pioneer families such as the Risbys have earned a legitimate pride in their business and are themselves part of the Tasmanian heritage.

Ann R.M. Young 1996. *Environmental change in Australia since 1788*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press.

Review by Ruth Lane

Environmental change in Australia since 1788 provides a clear and succinct summary of the wide range of factors contributing to environmental change. For the non-expert, it outlines key aspects of environ-

mental change and conveys a perspective on the time frame and scales involved. Although the book makes reference to social and economic factors which underlie environmental changes, it concentrates more on the physical processes of change which is clearly where the author's strengths lie.

The first two chapters set the scene with an outline of changing attitudes towards the Australian environment from the first European settlements to the more recent debates about nature conservation, followed by a summary of the challenges in identifying and monitoring the changes associated with the European pattern of land use. The next three chapters deal with the history and environmental impacts of specific industries - agriculture, forestry and mining. The effects of urbanisation are then examined and the book concludes with a chapter on conservation and sustainability.

The chapter on forestry begins with broad perspectives on the biophysical characteristics that determine where forests can grow, and follows with speculations about the impact of Aboriginal burning practices and the scale of land clearing by European settlers. The historical analysis of commercial forestry and government regulations relies heavily on Carron's analysis and is limited to three pages, intended only as a broad background to the overview of the changes to Australian forests. The remainder of the chapter deals with more recent debates about the values of forest to different interest groups, drawing on case studies of conflicts over forests in northern NSW and woodchips in Tasmania. In dealing with issues of wildlife conservation and old growth forests, Young outlines relevant research and draws material expediently from the Resource Assessment Commission's 1992 report.

Overall, the book provides a useful summary of key issues in the management of natural resources and highlights some of the research which addresses them. As a teaching text it seems well suited to the needs of first year university students.

Garry Kerr 1995. *Of sawyers and sawmills: a history of the timber industry in Victoria's far south-west*. Published by the author, PO Box 316, Portland, Vic. 3305. pp.118. \$25 +\$3 postage.

Review by John Dargavel

The small bush mills which dotted the forests of south-west Victoria have all but disappeared, so too have most of the timber workers who felled, cut, hewed and split the timber before the era of extensive mechanisation. Conscious that so much of their his-

tory was being lost, Garry King set out to capture as much as he could by interviewing eight people who had worked in the industry. He searched the *Portland Guardian* for insights on the industry during the nineteenth century. It is one of Victoria's oldest papers with references to the industry from 1843. He was also able to draw on a map prepared in the 1970s of mill sites in the region. Mill sites near Dartmoor, Heywood and Portland are shown on maps and short notes on many of them are given.

The book starts with four short chapters describing the timber industry, its economic and social aspects, forest conservation and the wattle bark industry which was an important one from the 1840s until the last bark mill closed in 1935. After these chapters, the interviews are presented, followed by the older newspaper references and details of the sawmills and their owners.

I found the most valuable part of the book to be the detailed descriptions of how various tasks were actually done — preparing bark for building a bark hut, for example — or the pattern of daily life for people living and working in the bush. Descriptions such as these probably apply more widely and help us understand not only how the forest was fashioned, but also how lives were shaped by it. *Of sawyers and sawmills* does not pretend to be 'complete history of the timber industry in the area', but it will be an invaluable reference for whoever writes one.

Publications noted

Caroline Bird. 1994. *Places of the pioneers: life and work in Tasmania's forests*. Forestry Tasmania/AGPS. 72 pp.

Forestry Tasmania decided to produce this general illustrated publication on the history of settlement and use of the forests since 1804 in order to make three large regional heritage studies accessible to the public.

Simon Cubit. 1996. *Recollections from the forest: 75 years of forest service in Tasmania*. Hobart: Forestry Tasmania.

Forestry Tasmania began an oral history project in 1989 designed to capture the recollections of people who had worked for it, or its predecessor, the Forestry Commission. Simon Cubit has drawn some forty interviews together with other material in order to tell a fascinating story of working lives in the forest. We hope to review this in the next issue.

Light Railways Research Society of Australia Inc.

The Light Railway Research Society of Australia must be the most remarkable, energetic and well organised bodies of all those interested in our forests. Its brief to consider all aspects of light railways and tramways takes often takes it into the forests to survey the great network of sawmill tramways which brought in the logs and took out the sawntimber before the age of bulldozers, plentiful forest roads and log trucks. The Society has a highly successful publishing programme consisting of research monographs, a journal, *Light Railways*, a newsletter, *Light Railway News*, maps of forest areas, and numerous scale drawings and booklets.

The research monographs are the result of exhaustive archeological work in reconstructing the past life and layout of sawmilling settlements. They are produced to a very high standard with copious illustrations. The most recent is Peter Evans' *Rails to Rubicon* which provides a history of the tramways, sawmills, power station and the people who worked in them in the Alexandria, Thornton and Rubicon area between 1906 and 1950.

We have arranged to exchange newsletters with the Light Railways Society so that we may be better informed of each others' activities and publications.

Recent journals

Environment and History vol.(2) (published in UK) is a special issue devoted to south Asia. An article on early German foresters in India is of most interest in Australia.

Environmental History vol. 1(4) (published in USA) contains reviews of eighteen books as well as four articles of which the first considers the relationship between social and environmental histories.

Light Railways No. 134 (Australian) contains an article on the Grafton Copper Company's firewood tramway at Change in New South Wales.

Tramping on the corduroy highway

Environmental history discussion group. The National Museum of Australia is planning to set up an electronic email discussion group on Australian environmental history in the new year. Tom Heinsohn (t.heinsohn@nma.gov.au) would like to hear from everyone interested. The issue of access was discussed at the conference. It seems that as many as three-quarters of AFHS members may already have email connections and that many public libraries provide

connections. The Newsletter will report developments and would be glad to hear member's views.

Humour on H-ASEH

There once was a Scotsman named Muir,
Who complained that our forests grew fewer;
He said, "I'm sure God
Is finding it odd
That his Eden is felled by the hewer!"
G. Pinchot, forest chief of the nation,
Replied, "I have one observation:
What's all the fuss?
God gave us trees
To use through good conservation!"

From Mark Stoll

Australian Archives. The Australian Archives has a home page at: www.aa.gov.au It has a search facility which enables you to see the holdings by the function of the depositing agency. As mentioned in an earlier Newsletter, the Australian Science Archives project has a home page at: www.asap.unimelb.edu.au

Australian pictorial collection The National Library of Australia has put some 13,000 Australian historical images on to the web. It is a great way to see what they have and to order prints of things you want. Access: www.nla.gov.au/images1/

Membership subscription for 1997

The Society is open to all who support its objective which is '... to advance historical understanding of human interactions with Australian forest and woodland environments.'

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