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REVIEW ESSAY

Putting the Intellectual Back in Environmental History

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Keith Woodhouse, *The Ecocentrists: A History of Radical Environmentalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018)

Paul Warde, Libby Robin, and Sverker Sörlin, *The Environment: A History of the Idea* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018)

At its birth, American environmental history had strong connections with intellectual history. Books such as Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind* and Donald Worster's *Nature's Economy* made the rise of preservationist and ecological thinking central to the field's early identity. But during the last several decades, as intellectual historians have engaged in their own soul-searching, American environmental historians retreated from engagement with intellectual history in favor of a "cultural turn." In some ways, this retreat was surprising, because environmental historians became more circumspect about the very approaches that intellectual historians were questioning in their own scholarly practices: whether we could generalize from elite sources, disengage ideas from their social or cultural contexts, separate out a distinct intellectual realm and its exemplary intellects from histories of popular knowledge, or locate such a thing as an "American mind."[1] The second generation of American environmental historians continued to study environmental ideas, of course, but with less willingness to venerate canonical environmental thinkers and more interest in how American ideas of nature were socially and culturally constructed. As environmental historians became more critical of environmental*ist* ideas—finding in them signs of class position, racial formation, consumer status, and uncritical borrowings from science—we tended to become suspicious of the realm of ideas in general. Despite these parallels within our fields, the moment compelled environmental historians to turn away from intellectual history. One sad result is that environmental historians do not seem to have stayed abreast of

[1]Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven, 1967); Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy: The Roots of Ecology* (San Francisco, 1977). When Cambridge University Press later published a second edition of *Nature's Economy*, the subtitle changed to *A History of Ecological Ideas*. On the cultural turn see Woodhouse (vii); Richard White, "From Wilderness to Hybrid Landscapes: The Cultural Turn in Environmental History," *The Historian* 66/3 (2004), 557–64; Paul S. Sutter, "The World with Us: The State of American Environmental History," *Journal of American History* 100/1 (2013), 94–119.

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intellectual historiography. Another, if my cursory review of this journal's recent tables of contents is any indication, is that environmental topics seem peripheral to the field of intellectual history. For the sake of both fields, it's time to restore the fragmented habitats that have isolated our subdisciplines.

The two books under review—Keith Woodhouse's *The Ecocentrists: A History of Radical Environmentalism* and *The Environment: A History of the Idea*, by Paul Warde, Libby Robin, and Sverker Sörlin—both make attempts in that direction, though their subjects are quite different and their historiographic engagements with the field of intellectual history are limited. Woodhouse offers us a new history of a brand of radical environmentalism that emerged in the 1980s and the "wilderness" thinking that sat at its center. In doing so, he insists that environmental historians have not given these radical environmentalists their due as thinkers. Meanwhile Warde, Robin, and Sörlin take on the history of "the environment," an idea transformed in the postwar years to provide a new conceptual framework for understanding a suite of global problems, from population growth to climate change. Where Woodhouse gives us a movement history with ideas at its center, Warde, Robin, and Sörlin give us a history of a concept that reorganized how we understand our world.

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A central challenge that Keith Woodhouse faces in *The Econcentrists* is that his title characters "have more often been objects of derision than subjects of serious study" (5). Indeed, Woodhouse has to swim against currents set in motion by his own doctoral adviser, William Cronon, whose essay "The Trouble with Wilderness" helped to define environmental history's cultural turn in the 1990s. In that seminal essay, Cronon used Earth First! activists as extreme exemplars of a broader American mind-set, developed across the late nineteenth century and the twentieth, which viewed wilderness as the only nature worth saving. The trouble with wilderness, Cronon wrote, was that its adherents often failed to recognize how historically and culturally constructed it was, both as an idea and as a physical space. Moreover, a singular focus on saving wilderness as a distant, pure nature kept environmentalists from grappling with the social and environmental complexities of the rest of the landscape. When it came to contending with the full scope of the nation's environmental challenges, Cronon suggested, wilderness advocates were shoddy thinkers. Woodhouse certainly shares Cronon's concerns about the tendencies of ecocentric thinking and its attachment to wilderness; his is a sympathetic but critical portrait. Still, taking ecocentrists seriously as thinkers allows him to portray them in richer and more satisfying ways.[2]

The ecocentrists at the core of Woodhouse's book were mostly activists who founded the radical environmental organization Earth First! in the early 1980s. Their central intellectual achievement was to radically challenge the special moral place of humans in the world, and to give equal moral standing to nonhuman nature. Theirs was also an ethical position squarely aimed at how mainstream

[2]William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York, 1995), 69–90.

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environmentalists had, by the 1980s, settled into patterns of negotiated political compromise and "sober gradualism" (95). They were pessimists and misanthropists, and they were often controversial in their pronouncements, but they offered, Woodhouse argues, a profound challenge to the ideas and powers that drove modern industrial civilization.

One of the most important achievements of *The Ecocentrists* is Woodhouse's explication of the relationship between environmentalism and postwar liberalism. Historians have assumed, he suggests, that the environmental movement of the 1960s and 1970s was of a piece with that era's liberal politics. By contrast, Woodhouse argues that environmentalism in general, and ecocentrism as a distinct subspecies, emerged in profound tension with fundamental tenets of liberalism. Most importantly, ecocentrists were critical of liberalism's rights-based humanism and of its treatment of nonhuman life as existing on a lower moral plane. For them, nonhuman nature was not just important; it was *just as* important as humankind. As such, they tended to think within a stark nature–culture binary, and to engage in species thinking that blamed a disaggregated humankind for the destruction of nature—an intellectual tendency that sometimes made it difficult for ecocentrists to recognize the importance of human inequalities and power relations to the problems they were trying to solve. Ecocentrists also challenged the American commitments to individual freedom and material progress, both shibboleths of postwar liberalism. Ecocentrism should not be seen as "an ideological extension of postwar liberalism or as a pragmatic consequence of postwar affluence," Woodhouse concludes (5). It was, in his understanding, a radical challenge to both.

Woodhouse also gives us a richer mapping of postwar environmentalism as variegated and contested territory. Ecocentrism came primarily in reaction to the trajectory of the environmental mainstream, but it was also distinct from the "crisis environmentalism" that grew from population and resource concerns and the "social-ecology" movement that tried to square environmental commitments with questions of social justice. The ecocentrists, Woodhouse shows, were actively defining their moral positions in tense conversations with other strains of the movement. Such a move disarms those who might see the ecocentrists as merely an extreme expression of mainstream environmentalism—and thus as a convenient punching bag for the movement's weaknesses as a whole. Ecocentrist thinking was not without its inconsistencies and blind spots, Woodhouse admits, but its adherents embraced it with full knowledge of the objections of others.

Woodhouse begins his story with the Sierra Club, arguably the most important of a handful of postwar conservation organizations that would be the seedbeds for ecocentric activism. On the one hand, ecocentrism was a product of the Sierra Club's move into political advocacy in the early 1950s and the increasing influence of ecology on their advocacy over the next two decades. At the same time, Woodhouse shows that by the late 1960s there were considerable tensions between what was then known as the "ecology movement"—the term "environmentalism" would not come into common usage until the early 1970s—and the New Left. Indeed, the New Left developed an early and cogent critique of nascent environmentalism of the sort practiced by Sierra Clubbers as insufficiently attentive to social and economic inequalities. "A fundamentally humanist movement," Woodhouse notes, "the New Left tended to regard an emerging interest in the

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nonhuman environment with skepticism and even hostility" (29). For those who may have assumed that New Left and environmentalist critiques were largely complementary, this is an important argument, one that Woodhouse supports with copious research into New Left periodicals. But as importantly, and through an illuminating case study of the battle over People's Park in Berkeley, California, Woodhouse shows that environmental and New Left activists discovered, and began to theorize, common ground in the early 1970s, particularly through the work of an organization called Ecology Action. This too would be an unlikely seedbed for ecocentrism.

During the 1970s, several additional developments within the environmental movement set the stage for the florescence of ecocentrism. The first would be the emergence of the environmental regulatory state. As Woodhouse nicely puts it, the Nixon administration, as a result of its support for a flurry of environmental legislation, practically "invited the environmental movement to Washington, D.C." (59). For mainstream environmental groups, environmental protection increasingly relied on the power of the state, and on legislating, lobbying, and litigating. In the process, the mainstream environmental movement professionalized; it mastered "the methods of liberal democratic politics and accepted the premises behind those methods" (61). The ecocentrists would chafe under this new regime. Second, crisis environmentalism rose to the fore, beginning with Paul and Anne Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* in 1968 and culminating in the 1972 publication of *The Limits to Growth*. Woodhouse examines the rise of crisis environmentalism through an organization called Zero Population Growth (ZPG), as well as through the work of theorists such as E. F. Schumacher, Herman Daly, and Garrett Hardin. He also examines the immigration debates that deeply divided the Sierra Club, and particularly the work of a Sierra Club dissident named John Tanton (who went on to help found such groups as Numbers USA and the Center for Immigration Studies, both of which are now at the center of right-wing anti-immigration politics). For Woodhouse, crisis environmentalism departed from the mainstream in several ways: it put little faith in conventional liberal politics at a moment when the environmental mainstream embraced it; its rhetoric was strident and driven by a sense that human survival hung in the balance; it argued that economic growth faced impending and potentially catastrophic limits; and it questioned whether democratic governance, with its attachment to individual liberty, was sufficient to meeting the crisis. Crisis environmentalists were essential influences for ecocentrists, particularly in their suspicion of politics as usual, their critique of growth liberalism, and their sense of impending doom, but crisis environmentalism was humanistic in orientation, focused on natural resources and human survival. As Woodhouse notes, "Crisis environmentalists rarely subscribed to ecocentric values, but nearly all ecocentric activists thought in terms of crisis" (100).

The ecocentrists' intellectual break was partly conditioned by a philosophical tradition known as deep ecology, pioneered by the Norwegian Arne Naess and given American voice by Bill Devall and George Sessions in their book *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered*. But it was also a product of a set of political circumstances that Woodhouse expertly explains. The Wilderness Act of 1964 required the US Forest Service to conduct inventories of roadless areas on their holdings for potential inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System.

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That process was known as Roadless Area Review and Evaluation, or RARE for short. The initial RARE process (RARE I) produced such an anemic recommendation that the Sierra Club sued for and won a second inventory, known as RARE II. Many of the activists on the front lines of the RARE II process, who identified potential wilderness areas and organized local supporters to attend Forest Service hearings, worked out of the western regional offices of national groups such as the Sierra Club, the Wilderness Society, and Friends of the Earth, on the front lines of wilderness protection and far from the professionalizing politics of Washington, DC. As RARE II was coming to a head, the Wilderness Society decided to close several of its western offices and consolidate operations in Washington. Regional activists saw this as a huge tactical mistake. Then, when the Forest Service released its RARE II recommendations in 1979, which were only marginally stronger than its RARE I recommendations, the mainstream groups expressed disappointment but ultimately decided not to file suit. A number of western regional activists—Dave Foreman and Bart Koehler from the Wilderness Society, Ron Kezar from the Sierra Club, and Howie Wolke from Friends of the Earth—were apoplectic and railed against their mainstream employers as weak and too willing to compromise. In response, they decided to form Earth First!, a group dedicated to protecting as much of the nation's remaining wilderness as possible, mostly through direct-action protest. "The radical break that cleaved Earth First! from the mainstream environmental movement," Woodhouse smartly concludes, "was a political one that quickly became philosophical and tactical too" (141).

Inspired by anarchism, Earth First! was loosely organized at best, with no official office or hierarchy, but it gave organizational form to ecocentrism. The ideas and rhetoric of Earth First! were often extreme, but their politics were more pragmatic and ideologically promiscuous than one might assume. While ecocentrists got the most press for theatrical protests, ecotage, and inflammatory rhetoric, they also became masters at using administrative appeals and lawsuits—the tools of the very mainstream movement they were deriding—to pursue their goals. As Woodhouse demonstrates, they "shifted nimbly between conventional methods and anarchist-inspired resistance, often during the same campaign" (164). More surprisingly, they often embraced the logic of free-market environmentalism, a historically right-leaning ideology, to critique the federal subsidies enjoyed by those who were cutting timber and grazing livestock on federal lands. Woodhouse, in short, challenges caricatures of ecocentrists as unyielding purists; their praxis usually belied their public personas and was often a better indicator of their environmental thinking.

Like the environmental movement as a whole, Earth First! was riven with fault lines and riddled with conflict. Ecofeminist activists challenged Earth First!'s macho culture and insisted that the destruction of nature was inseparable from patriarchy. Judi Bari and other activists made impassioned arguments about the need to build bridges with timber workers and to think in sophisticated ways about class politics. Social ecologists became antagonists of the ecocentrists, challenging Earth First! to see the importance of environmental-justice issues—particularly after some of its prominent members made incendiary remarks about AIDS and immigration. All of these dissident voices challenged ecocentrism's holistic tendencies, and they urged ecocentrists to consider how the environmental destruction that so concerned them was often rooted in social inequalities and injustices. These were all

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valid critiques, Woodhouse suggests, and they mirrored the later academic critique that came with the cultural turn. But, importantly, many of these dissident voices came from within Earth First! The caricatures of ecocentrists, in other words, have too often accentuated fringe tendencies within a more sophisticated and fractious intellectual community.

Earth First!'s time in the environmental spotlight was short-lived, and it has been easy to assume that the group was consumed in the fires of its own extremism (an assumption given literary form in Richard Powers' recent Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Overstory*). But Woodhouse offers a revisionist post-mortem. First, he argues that ecocentrists shaped the mainstream movement, which came to recognize the power of their grassroots activism. Groups like the Sierra Club, inspired by econcentrism, took stronger stances on wildlands protection in the 1990s (Dave Foreman himself joined the Sierra Club board in 1995), while the Wilderness Society came to increasingly rely on regional wilderness activism to shape its national agenda. At the same time, the rise of conservation biology as a form of activist science reshaped the policies of public-land management agencies, with a necessary push from ecocentric activists. "The increased prominence of biological science in land management policymaking," Woodhouse concludes, "constituted one of the great environmental victories of the 1980s" (246). Conservation biology also redirected the ecocentrists' passions into the Wildlands Project, which was dedicated to ambitious visions of rewilding North America. Even as academics such as William Cronon were beginning to argue that the wilderness idea was, in Woodhouse's words, "not only essentialist but also exclusionary and ahistorical," ecocentrists, who had assailed the environmental mainstream for several decades, were returning to and strengthening the fold. In the end, Woodhouse argues that ecocentrists, despite their many flaws and excesses, were not the facile and insensitive antihumanists that many have made them out to be. "The most essential message of ecocentric environmentalism," Woodhouse concludes, "was always a call for humility, precaution, and the inclusion of nonhuman interests in human decision-making" (288).

Much of the story that *The Ecocentrists* tells will be familiar to environmental historians, but it puts together an overarching interpretation that is valuable for its intellectual and political complexity. *The Ecocentrists* is a revised version of Woodhouse's Nevins Prize-winning dissertation, and, true to that award's criteria, the book is a joy to read, though Woodhouse builds his arguments inductively and sometimes one has to work a bit too hard to find them. For a book that is fundamentally about ideas, it might have profited from greater engagement with intellectual historiography, and from greater attention to how ecocentrism fit into the larger intellectual landscape of the late twentieth century. His story seems of a piece, for instance, with the one that Daniel Rodgers tells in *Age of Fracture*, and Woodhouse could have made a compelling case to that effect. Still, by portraying the ecocentrists as serious thinkers, Woodhouse has given them the rehabilitation they deserve. More than that, he has joined a growing group of scholars who are giving us complex portraits of environmental activists as sophisticated thinkers who shaped as well as reflected their political, social, and cultural milieus.

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One of the abiding mysteries of the cultural turn in environmental history, which put the field's guiding ideals under close scrutiny, is how "environment" escaped unscathed. Given how thoroughly terms like "wilderness" and "nature" have been examined, and sometimes even autopsied, the absence of scholarly attention to "environment" borders on neglect. *The Environment: A History of the Idea* is, for that reason alone, a welcome addition to the environmental history literature. As the authors explain in their acknowledgments, the book had its origins at the first World Congress of Environmental History in Copenhagen in 2009, and true to that moment, theirs is a history of the environment as a global, and a globalizing, concept. The authors are distinguished scholars and leading figures in the international development of the field, and as such they bring a welcome non-US sensibility to their work (Warde is British, Sörlin Swedish, and Robin Australian). Their teamwork on this project also highlights another major contribution of the book: their portrayal of how the "environment," as both an object and an organizing concept, was pieced together by an international community of scientists and other experts. As the authors put it, "The environment was nobody's intention. It entered the writings of 1948 almost as a virus, percolating into minutes, agreements, plans, and pamphlets" (24).

The word "environment" was not entirely new to the postwar years, but its meaning shifted substantially after the war. Thomas Carlyle first used the word in English (borrowed from the French) in 1827, and for the next century or more it came to mean the extrinsic background of an object or subject of study, something that affects but is not affected. Use of the term grew in the early twentieth century, and in new realms such as the science of ecology, but it still mostly connoted background or external influence. That changed after World War II, particularly in the work of writers such as William Vogt and Fairfield Osborn, whose 1948 books about human population growth and global resource concerns, *The Road to Survival* and *Our Plundered Planet*, helped to transform the "environment" into an object of study itself, something that humankind was acting upon in troubling ways and in which we were entangled and implicated. Environment's quality as a unified object distinguished it from conservation and preservation, concepts which tended to focus on discrete resources, species, or landscapes, and its inclusion of the human separated it from "nature," which connoted the world absent humans and their artifice. In a sense, the term's polarity reversed after World War II.

When, in 1962, Rachel Carson invoked what she called "man's total environment" in *Silent Spring*, she was building on more than a decade of rethinking the concept. Indeed, one of the signature achievements of *The Environment* is its explication of how the concept emerged in the period between the late 1940s and early 1970s—the quarter-century before the emergence of a self-described "environmental" movement—to organize global concerns about, well, the environment. As the authors put it, "the collection and processing of quantitative data as a means of rendering the environment legible was fundamentally conceptualized between (roughly) 1948 and 1972, that is, rather earlier than the activist response and rise of environmentalism as a mass political force" (171). In this way, they try to separate out the history of the idea of the environment from the context most people associate with its emergence: environmentalism.

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Warde, Robin, and Sörlin suggest that there are four qualities that define the environment's postwar ideational career. First, it was and is fundamentally a future-oriented concept. Its postwar definition centered on degradation and the steps necessary to reverse it. Second, it was developed by teams of experts who, needing to understand large systems and process data on a massive scale, found "environment" to be a usefully aggregating concept. Third, it is a data-driven concept and thus reliant upon the capacities of scientists, and the increasingly powerful computers with which they worked, to crunch numbers to produce a collective portrait of the environment. Here the authors borrow Theodore Porter's notion of "trust in numbers" to communicate the centrality of numeracy to limning the global environment.[3] Finally, "environment" is a scalable concept, one that linked the local with the regional and the global—though the global or earth system scale seems most important to the authors. By the early 1970s, the environment as "an object of imagination and measurement" (2) was fully operative, even as it was still pulling other concerns and inquiries into its gravitational field.

As a work of intellectual history, *The Environment* is notable for its model of how the concept developed among communities of experts, and here the authors seem most beholden to the history and sociology of science. They emphasize that "environment" emerged not just as a product of abstract thinking, but also as a result of new technologies, techniques, infrastructures, and what intellectual historians would call communities of discourse. They emphasize conferences, such as the foundational Man's Role in Changing the Face of the Earth gathering at Princeton in 1955, and big scientific projects such as the International Geophysical Year in 1957, which led one of its organizers, Solly Zuckerman, to coin the phrase "environmental science" in 1959. These big-science programs and international conferences in turn led to the move of "environment" not only into national policy arenas but also into international diplomacy, a process that culminated in the early 1970s with concerns for sustainability (itself then a new word) in venues like the Stockholm Conference of 1972 (aka the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment) and the United Nations Environment Programme that resulted from it. This moment also saw the Club of Rome's famous *Limits to Growth* report, which used then-powerful computers to model global population growth and resource-use trends. All of this would culminate in a growing sense of climate crisis by the 1980s and 1990s; the development of complex Earth system science to help make sense of human impact on a truly global scale; and the inauguration, in 1988, of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), "the most influential and certainly the best known of such integrated networks" (139). "If the concept of the 'environment'," the authors conclude, "was about the discovery that humans were changing nature in profound, lasting, and disturbing ways—a radical idea in 1948 even if having many precursors—Earth system science was about making the environment on the largest scale *governable*, that is, the object of policy, measures, legislation, and incentive schemes in order to achieve long-term sustainability" (160). In many ways, the concept of the Anthropocene—the idea that we now live in a geological epoch defined by

[3]Theodore M. Porter, *Trust in Numbers: The Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life* (Princeton, 1995)

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human impacts so pervasive that they will appear in the distant future as a clear marker in the geological record—is the culmination of the intellectual trajectory the authors trace, and of the ways of knowing the Earth and its systems that were themselves products of this era.

The Environment is a vitally important intervention in the history of environmental thinking, in large part because Warde, Robin, and Sörlin so thoroughly and successfully historicize the postwar career of the concept in international scientific, diplomatic, and policy-making circles. This is a major achievement, and it helps us to make sense of our current predicament. But the authors are so intent on seeing "environment" as a globalizing concept, and as the product of scientists and other elite global actors, that they leave out critical parts of the story. They have, to quote their subtitle, given us "*a* history of the idea," but they have not told us the whole story. Some of the problem comes in their decision not to spend much time on environmental movements and the ways in which the concept of "the environment" functioned in those contexts. "The focus of this book has been the environment rather than environmentalism or its associated activist social movements," the authors note toward the end of their study (171). Fair enough, but I would contend that the neglect of those very social movements is actually a dismissal of one of the primary arenas in which this concept was forged and came to have meaning, and that movement notions of environment did not always map perfectly onto the integrating and globalizing scientific concept that is their subject of study.

There are key aspects of the environmental movement that I know best—the US environmental movement—that their framework may not be able to account for. US environmental historians have long fallen back on Samuel Hays's venerable argument about how we moved from "conservation to environment," from a conservation politics rooted in producerism, a focus on natural resources, and a commitment to expert management to an environmental politics rooted in consumerist ideas about nature and the values revolution they produced among the mass of Americans—a revolution that undergirded the environmental movement. For Hays, the concept emerged as an imaginary of affluent, white suburbanites who saw the "environment" as an amenity to be protected.[4] His is thus a very different history of the construction of the term than the one that Warde, Robin, and Sörlin give us, more political and cultural than scientific. Moreover, while the authors recognize the importance of Rachel Carson, they only briefly mention her powerful conception of the environment, one that linked ecology and human health. Carson's environmental synthesis wedded older conservationist and preservationist concerns about protecting nature with anxieties about the human health effects of a new generation of toxic pollutants that moved between bodies and external ecologies in cryptic and troubling ways. Where Vogt and Osborn were indeed the founding figures in the postwar history of conceptualizing the global environment, Carson's book ushered in a concept of the environment that gave people a way of

[4]Samuel P. Hays, "From Conservation to Environment: Environmental Politics in the United States since World War Two," *Environmental Review* 6/2 (1982). 14–41. In many ways, this article bridged the arguments of Hays's two most famous histories of environmental politics, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation Movement, 1890–1920* (Cambridge, MA, 1959) and (in collaboration with Barbara D. Hays) *Beauty, Health, and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the United States, 1955–1985* (New York, 1987).

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understanding that the postwar problems in the natural world cycled through their own bodies. That sense that the personal is environmental was a powerful motivating force in the rise of the postwar environmental movement, and it seems essential to any history of the environment as a concept. In short, the logic that organizes the history that Warde, Robin, and Sörlin give us can verge on the tautological: *The Environment* is a history of the international framing of the idea of the environment that insists that the idea of the environment was internationally framed. As a history of the environment as a global idea "fostered by a universal science" (vii), the book is superb; as a history of the ways in which "environment" as a concept emerged outside such an international framing, and particularly in the realms of movement politics and culture, it is less satisfying.

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Where Keith Woodhouse has written a movement history of US ecocentrists and their attachment to wilderness that comes in response to the cultural turn's thorough problematization of the wilderness concept as a pillar of American environmental culture, Paul Warde, Libby Robin, and Sverker Sörlin have written an international history of the concept of the environment as forged by teams of scientists, diplomats, and policy makers, a history that seems to skip over the cultural turn entirely. Even in their differences, though, each makes a strong case that we environmental historians need to reengage with intellectual historiography, and I hope they convince intellectual historians that green ideas matter.

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