



Michael Williams. *Deforesting the Earth: From Prehistory to Global Crisis, An Abridgment*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006. xviii + 543 pp. \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-89947-3.

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Global Deforestation: Historical Roots and Dynamics of the Crisis

Michael Williams's *Deforesting the Earth* is a majestic work both in depth and dimension. Divided into three chronological parts, it puts together the history of world deforestation in the last seven millennia with fitting illustrations, maps, and graphs, plus twenty-three pages of bibliographic notes and essay. A recurrent theme of the book relates to causation and agency. In part 1, which covers developments from the post-ice age until the end of the medieval world, Williams persistently criticizes the constructivist argument that human actions largely did not affect the pre-industrial forest. Williams traces the causes of deforestation to the use of fire, mobility of foragers, and extension of cultivation by primitive farmers. Contesting the notion of the prehistoric pristine state of nature, through the example of fire, Williams claims that Pleistocene "overkill" was more likely to have been Pleistocene "overburn" (p. 21). Postpredation agricultural production was combined with cultivators' tendency to use axe technology and to cultivate in rain-fed forests, such as on the highland of Mexico and among the Maya, resulting in significant deforestation. In the classical world, Williams argues, Greek expansion to the eastern Mediterranean and Roman expansion westward led to remarkable deforestation; the consequent soil degradation was a major factor in the decline of the classical world. For the medieval period during which a "chain from theology to manuring" existed, in contradiction to the notion of ascetic indifference to material progress, Williams documents the ways in which remarkable increases in population, medieval technology of plows and horsepower, cottage industry, shipbuilding, and crusades led to large-scale deforestation. Williams is equally concerned about developments in the non-European world, although to a limited extent, such as China where demographic pressure more than anything else led to deforestation.

In part 2, which roughly covers 1500 to the end of the First World War, Williams considers the long-term im-

plications of the European discovery of the New World and colonial expansions as well as developments within Europe itself. Williams observes that America was probably more forested in the mid-eighteenth century than in 1492, but it was an indirect impact of disease and death that Europeans carried with them to the new land. The impact of material and civilizational developments on the forest was soon felt, however. For instance, in Ohio alone, the railway tract consumed 3.1 billion cubic feet of wood (along with a similar amount for maintenance). Within seven years following the Victoria gold rush, "there was not enough millable wood for housing and general construction," because it was used for smelting, making fencing and railways, and burning as fuel (p.317).

In addition to dealing with deforestation in the temperate world, Williams extensively discusses tropical regions. He describes the varied ways in which over 222 million trees disappeared from the tropical world, particularly in southern and southeastern Asia from 1750 to 1920. To make this argument, he analyzes the impact of indigenous uses of forests, including shifting and permanent agriculture, grazing, and burning, as well as capitalist penetration and colonial consolidation that led to the use of tick forests, railways, plantation, and commercial farming. In terms of India, deforestation issues take on a diverse socioeconomic dimension. Williams discusses in some detail the relationship between clearing and rainfall, famine, and health in India along with famine policy in response to shortages. Brazil receives considerable focus, but developments in mainland and insular Southeast Asia receive less attention although clearing took place to a considerable extent there as well.

Part 3 narrates developments in the twentieth century. The devotion of an entire part of Williams's book for only one century speaks of the scale of deforestation during this period. The first half of the twentieth century saw deforestation to a colossal extent due to the

rise of industrialization and the feeding of war machines during and in the wake of the two world wars. But, as Williams observes, the scale of devastation in the first half of the century “was to be nothing” compared to what happened later (p. 356). Currently, forty-four thousand square kilometers of tropical forest is logged annually and largely destroyed in the context of poverty, industrialization, technological development, demographic pressure, and commercial activities.

Besides digging into numerous causes of deforestation, Williams engages two broader issues: intellectual perceptions of the forest and the political economy of global forest resources in a given relationship of power and dependency. Examining intellectual perceptions of the forest in different phases of history, Williams notes that from the classical world to the early nineteenth century the mainstream intellectual current generally was biased against the forest. The anthropocentric materialism of Theophrastus and Marcus Tullius Cicero in classical times and the sixteenth-century idea of the human being as God’s viceroy, implying man’s supremacy over God’s creation, remained tied to the idea of progress and civilization as coincidental to deforestation. Even Francis Bacon and Rene Descartes, believers in science and technology, believed in the superiority of man over nature. Throughout the nineteenth century, at a time when industrialization-induced large-scale deforestation took place, the idea of human entitlement to dominate nature continued unabated, although warnings by Thomas Robert Malthus, John Lorain, George P. Marsh (who insisted on the total forest ecosystem), Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson (who advanced the idea of love of wood) helped turn attention to preservation to some extent. But it was not until the early twentieth century, particularly the second half of the century at a time when the impact of climatic changes brought home the idea that the existence of the human race was at stake, that issues of deforestation and conservation were given significant attention in environmental discourses. The back was against the wall everywhere, and this sense of collective vulnerability, which was greatly linked to deforestation, resulted in conservation discourses that turned increasingly global rather than local or national.

But, why does deforestation continue even though the world apparently has reached a consensus about its threat to human existence in many direct and indirect ways? The answer can be found in Williams’s reference to the unequal scope and speed of deforestation in developed and developing tropical countries. The dependency that started with a worldwide domination by Europe had its climax in the development of a wealthy West and a

needy non-West that lost not only its independence but also its rich forest regimes. Such unequal shares in deforestation has continued in the postcolonial era because of this dependent relationship, which allows wealthy developed countries to buy up the stock of forests of developing countries while preserving their own. The problem of global ecological dependency in poorer tropical countries has been compounded by a variety of internal pressures: political and economic (investment in plantations, local elite of traders, etc.), technological (e.g., a chain saw that would enable one or two individuals to cut an entire forest), and demographic.

Although Williams covers a wide scope of the history of deforestation, he tends to ignore anthropological variations in different regions that are important in understanding forest history. In Western traditions, the forest has often been considered the hostile “other” of civilization, but this was not the case everywhere and at every historical stage. In the Hindu pantheon, for instance, the forest has a “character”; there have been numerous forest deities who keep the kingdom of the forest alive, and in the forest live the sages who cater to the spiritual and social needs of the people. Moreover, forests were a place to retire in later life of the Brahmin. Material forces of deforestation do not neutralize such popular perceptions of the forest as a pristine provider of both material and immaterial well-being. In fact, the idea of deforestation rather than the forest itself was alien to many communities in the tropical world.

Deforesting the Earth also overlooks any intellectual tradition regarding the forest in the non-Western world. This oversight has graver implications than is apparent. It gives an impression that the tropical world lacks intellectual focus on forestry or conservation, and such notions pave the way for an uncritical endorsement of the recently emerging idea that conservation started for the first time in the colonial period. Such historiography disassociates the tropical world from its intellectual and political-ecological thoughts and practices regarding the forest. For instance, if the idea of and importance given to the forest was lacking in the non-Western world before the coming of colonial foresters, how do we explain the urgency attached to the plantation and protection of trees during the time of emperor Ashoka more than two millennia ago or in Manchuria during the Qing dynasty in the seventeenth century? Perhaps this urgency was not “scientific” forestry, but was conservation.

Williams is interested minimally in measuring civilizational developments against deforestation. Exactly what point in history and what degree of deforestation

are tantamount to a natural imbalance or are formative of human societies? If the relationship between deforestation and human civilization is by default inimical, as in the case of the decline of the classical world, then why did other civilizations emerge at regular intervals even though deforestation, according to Williams, continued ceaselessly all over the world? Perhaps, the tension between nature and society cannot be mitigated by considering deforestation as quintessentially harmful in the deep past. Ecological regimes have ranges of spaces that allow and sustain intervention into them, but the extent of danger and damage is determined by the perception of the community living in a particular ecological regime. The idea that ecology is alive occurs only when the question of human involvement becomes prominent. Therefore, the conservation ethos, as employed in the bulk of ecological studies, does not, other than appreciating the deterioration of the biosphere and biotic community, fully incorporate the element of social dynamics. This debate between “deep ecology” and an anthropocentric

approach is old, but is good for environmental history. The relationship between the fate of the forest and human achievement or failure must be critically dialectical rather than purely conflicting in a specific time and space.

These issues are related to the particular approach, which is quite valid, that Williams takes, and these are negligible points compared to what he has achieved in *Deforesting the Earth*. One of the most diligent environmental historians of our time, Williams offers the first significant attempt to write a global history of deforestation, and he has achieved it in lucid narratives, elegantly placed analysis, and technical sophistication. Useful sub-headings do not allow the reader to get lost in the myriad of narratives. Although over five hundred pages, this book has never made me bored. It is an enormous contribution to the field of forest and environmental history in particular and history of human relationships with nature in general. Richard Tucker has rightly termed it a magnum opus.

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