A First-Furrow, One-Stop Environmental Reference Guide

On the strength of such influential books as Death of Nature (1980), Ecological Revolutions (1989), Earthcare (1996), and others, and as past president of the American Society for Environmental History, Carolyn Merchant is rightfully recognized as one of the pre-eminent environmental historians in the United States.[1] Furthermore, Merchant has been exceptionally committed to educating students and non-academics in environmental history. For example, by compiling and editing the articles and documents found in Major Problems in American Environmental History (1993) and Green Versus Gold she showed her commitment to undergraduate teaching in the field.[2] The Columbia Guide to American Environmental History fits in the same category. It is designed to be “a concise ‘first-stop’ reference book on the history of the North American environment for high school and college students, teachers, researchers, and readers” (p. xviii).[3] Unfortunately, the book does not realize its full potential.

This book consists of five parts, although parts 1 and 4, which constitute over 70 percent of the book, are at its core. Part 1 is an historical overview which was written “to offer a framework within which further reading and research can be interpreted, elaborated, or contested” (p. xvii). Part 4 is a resource guide, which provides an annotated list of films and videos, electronic resources, and books related to environmental history. Part 2 is an alphabetical compendium which briefly defines and describes agencies, concepts, laws, and people important in the environmental history of the United States. Part 3 offers a short chronology of American environmental history.

Had Merchant, in her historical overview, offered readers her version of the major turning points, trends, events, and processes in North American environmental history, or if she had offered her appraisal of the literature in this field, this section of the book would almost certainly have given scholars as well as non-specialists a lot to think about. Instead, the historical overview is more like a series of synopses of most of the same literature featured in Major Problems in American Environmental History, with some connecting passages. Merchant describes the historiography, including her own work, in a detached way. We get little of her evaluation of the literature. Thus, Merchant’s historical overview has somewhat more coherence than her anthology, but it is not really a narrative history. Moreover, readers do not see the primary evidence and the arguments as presented by various scholars, in their own words, as they do in Major Problems. The Columbia Guide also lacks the primary documents that are found in that collection. Finally, the Columbia Guide includes no maps or illustrations. Many readers (especially the general readers) are likely to find this frustrating. For example, in section 4 of the overview, Merchant writes at quite some length and detail about the Hudson River School of Painters, but none of their paintings are reproduced in the volume.
The sections of the historical overview are uneven. Despite the fact that the overview does not have a clear interpretive focus, some of the sections provide useful brief and coherent summaries. For example, section 6 sums up some of the best literature on urban environmental history. Sections 7, 9, and 10 may provide the best brief summaries of the fine histories of the environmental movements and the science of ecology. Merchant is at her best when she describes the literature in her fields of specialization, although it is particularly in those sections that Merchant’s reluctance to offer critical comments will disappoint many of her readers. Other sections are weak, even as summaries. In the first section, which deals with the environmental significance of early Native-newcomer interaction, Merchant devotes considerable space to the arguments of Calvin Martin, as put forward in the 1970s, without hinting on the reception that work has been given. While Martin’s arguments have displayed remarkable staying power with non-specialists, they have been thoroughly discredited among historians of the fur trade for over twenty years. It would have been better if Merchant had featured more sophisticated recent literature in that field. Section 8 summarizes U.S. Indian Land Policy from 1800 to 1990. Much of this section is based upon literature that does not have a particularly environmental emphasis, although the recent literature on Indians and National Parks is summarized. One might have expected Merchant to cover some of the literature that deals specifically with how aboriginal relationships with their environment changed during that period. In section 2, centered on New England between 1600 and 1850, Merchant first brings up William Cronon’s “Trouble with Wilderness,” but she never really critiques it or conveys a sense of the controversy it unleashed. In her introduction Merchant rightly argues that “how wilderness is defined lies at the core of development policies” (p. xv). Unfortunately, she never really seizes the opportunity to help her non-specialist audience understand how that is true. Section 5 looks at the settlement of the western plains and California. In that section, Merchant uses the term “Canada” anachronistically (p. 91). Since this is done frequently by many scholars, it is worth reminding historians that “Canada” did not emerge from under the ice thousands of years ago. Referring to the plains north of the 49th parallel as “Canada” before 1870 is as inappropriate as referring to New Mexico or Texas as “the United States” before 1845.

In sum, part 1 of this book provides uneven but generally adequate surveys of the literature in various fields of environmental history, but it lacks an interpretive focus or a clear narrative thread. It hovers somewhere between a history and a historiography without ever being either. Readers would have been better served if they were offered an updated selection of representative articles and primary sources, Carolyn Merchant’s synthesis of the literature, or her evaluation of the literature. There is reason to doubt that it will achieve its goal of stimulating new research in the field.

The other core part of this book is the resource guide. This resource guide, which takes up about a third of the book, provides an annotated guide to films and videos (an excellent resource for educators), a partially annotated list of web resources, a short bibliographical essay, and a very extensive topical bibliography. This resource guide is very useful, although it duplicates much of what Carolyn Merchant has already made available on her fine website, http://www.cnr.berkeley.edu/departments/espm/env-hist/. The problem, of course will be the guide to web resources. How useful will this portion of the guide be in a year or two? Already some of the URLs have changed or expired.

Parts 2 and 3 (the compendium and the chronology) are short and minor parts of this book. Some of the compendium entries repeat information that is also given in a single place elsewhere in the book (“Jane Addams” repeats what is found on pages 104-105, and “Deep Ecology” repeats information on page 206), and could be easily found using the index. Other entries, such as “Sierra Club,” summarize information that would otherwise have to be gathered from several pages throughout the book. Some, like “Earth First!” provide valuable information not available elsewhere in the book. On the other hand, there is no entry for Greenpeace. There is no entry for “Hetch Hetchy” although the index entry will direct readers to various places including the compendium entry for the “Raker Act.” People using the compendium for information about specific U.S. legislation will find it useful. The chronology is very brief (there is but one entry for the period before 1492, and the fifth entry already takes one to the establishment of Jamestown, Virginia). It is useful in dating discrete events and legislation but not in tracing changing patterns of human interaction with the environment. Neither does it suggest a periodization unique to environmental history. Many entries—“American Revolution,” “Declaration of Independence,” “Civil War,” “World War I,” “Great Depression and the New Deal” (there is no entry for “Dust Bowl”), “World War II”—would fit in any chronology. Indeed, the descriptions under some of these entries do not particularly em-
phesize the environmental dimensions of those events.

In the end, *The Columbia Guide to American Environmental History* is a useful reference book for high school or college libraries. The paper and binding will endure the hard use reference books can be subject to. But the book was envisioned as more than just a reference book. Merchant hoped that after reading parts 1 and 4 “readers may become environmental historians on their own” (p. xvii). Merchant would have attained that goal more successfully if she had given freer rein to her interpretive flair, if she had confronted readers with more primary evidence, if she had given them a keener sense of the controversies in the field, and if she had more convincingly presented the real-world significance of research in environmental history.

It would have been a good idea to write a reference guide for North American environmental history, as the title of this book implies Merchant’s book is. But it was also a good idea to write a reference guide to United States environmental history, which the *Columbia Guide* actually is. Thus, though I quibble with the title of the book, I am not suggesting that Merchant’s focus on the United States is inappropriate. If readers will permit an aside, I would like to suggest that there is much potential for comparative and cross-national studies in environmental history. For example, one of the debates featured in Merchant’s book is the debate surrounding whether or not southern farmers before the Civil War were “soil miners” or not, and if they were, why they were. That debate has an interesting parallel with the debate over the farming methods of French Canadian farmers after the conquest of New France. Historians of Lower Canada have debated whether poor farming methods in Lower Canada led to an agricultural crisis by the early nineteenth century, and whether such a crisis may have led to the social and political unrest of the 1830s.[4] Perhaps American environmental historians will be even more intrigued by the possibility that comparative study might shed light on the wilderness debate. In Canada, as in the United States, aboriginal people were removed from national parks, but Canada never had a wilderness movement or a wilderness act comparable to the United States. Even today, the word “wilderness” does not resonate in Canada the way it does in the United States. This raises the question as to whether the removal of aboriginal people from national parks in Canada (and the United States) might be more closely connected to the conservation movement than the wilderness movement or preservation movement. Only further research can answer that question. Also related to the history of national parks and environmental awareness are the interesting parallels between the Hetch Hetchy controversy in the United States and the Spray Lakes controversy in Canada’s first national park during the 1920s.[5] Even historians interested in the environmental history of only one North American country might want to undertake comparative study with another country simply to understand their own country better. Adjacent as they were, with communication between the two countries unencumbered with significant language or cultural differences, and the border between the two countries having been permeable, the potential for comparative and cross-national environmental history is tremendous.

It is not surprising that Carolyn Merchant was the first to attempt a reference guide such as this one. Her commitment to public education is already well known. The first furrow is always the most difficult to plow. I hope that Merchant and the publisher contemplate future editions. If so, I would encourage them to unfet-ter Merchant’s skill and make an illustrated, interpretive, and narrative history the center point of the book. If that narrative history could deal with North America rather than only the United States, the potential value of the volume would be that much greater.

**Notes**


[3]. Despite the assertion that this book is a source-book for the “history of the North American environment,” readers should expect only rare glimpses of environmental history outside the United States.

has been challenged in Allan Greer, *Peasant, Lord, and Merchant: Rural Society in Three Quebec Parishes, 1740-1840* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), and in Gilles Paquet and Jean-Pierre Wallot, *Lower Canada at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century: Restructuring and Modernization* (Ottawa: The Canadian Historical Association, 1988).


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