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## *Editorial Introduction*

### Colonial Environments

Martin Farr

Of all the legacies of Britain in the world, one in particular has been historiographically the most settled: that empire was, as Richard Tucker has described it, 'a system of resource management and exploitation'.<sup>1</sup> This is one reason the history of colonial activity has attracted the attentions of the growing field of environmental historians. The widening disciplinary inclination 'to regard the environment as a document',<sup>2</sup> has married academic and popular interests since the 1960s.<sup>3</sup> The effect of empire on ecosystems and biodiversity became particularly compelling when it complemented contemporary concerns as the twentieth century drew to a close about the effect of human activity on the planet, and the planet's sustainability.<sup>4</sup> The effect on both the history of imperialism and the history of the environment was therefore further to reinforce the accepted version of empire as destructive, rapacious, and hegemonic; that the entire enterprise could be defined by 'loss'. These were, in Richard White's words, 'stories of environmental sin and expulsion from an original Eden'.<sup>5</sup> Environmental historians looking at imperialism were thus fixed on what Richard Grove has called the 'drastic ecological consequences

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1 Richard P. Tucker, 'The Depletion of India's Forests under British Imperialism', in *The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History*, ed. Donald Worster (Cambridge, 1989), p. 120.

2 Roderick Nash, 'The State of Environmental History', in *The State of American History*, ed. Herbert Bass (Chicago, 1970), pp. 249-260, esp. p. 251.

3 Richard White, 'Environmental History: Watching a Historical Field Mature', *Pacific Historical Review* 70, no. 1 (2001): pp. 103-111, esp. pp. 104-5; J. Donald Hughes, 'Three Dimensions of Environmental History', *Environment and History* 14, no. 3 (2008): pp. 319-330. cf. Nash, 'The State of Environmental History'.

4 Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 4th ed. (New Haven, 2001), preface and p. xi.

5 White, 'Environmental History', p. 105.

of colonial rule and capitalist penetration'.<sup>6</sup>

Yet by its very nature environmental history should be revisionist: as Donald Worster has written, it 'rejects the conventional assumption that human experience has been exempt from natural constraints'.<sup>7</sup> There has duly been a reconsideration over the last decade, of which these three themed articles by five international historians in this final edition of *British Scholar* are part. Though each are in their way specific, all are part of this broader revisionist trend towards hybridity: part of what John MacKenzie has described as the 'complex diversity of the imperial impact'.<sup>8</sup> Just as consideration of environments has added a dimension to imperial history, so imperialism has afforded insights into the relationship between humans and the natural world, and not least in terms of its conservation. This goes beyond the study of the past. Indeed, for Richard Grove, 'the colonial botanical garden provided the basis for the institutional emergence of environmentalist ideas'.<sup>9</sup> These articles cover in time over a century, and in space range from the vastness of the Asian subcontinent, to the remoteness of two southern oceanic archipelagos (each a proxy for much wider issues). They are nuanced, and assimilate both the perspectives of the 'apprehensive imperialist' and the hegemonist. They are, in short, environmental history properly conceived of, as John McNeill put it, 'the history of the mutual relations between humankind and the rest of nature'.<sup>10</sup>

No part of the British Empire offers so singular an experience as that which was only relatively recently settled: simultaneously by dogs, rats, and humans. New Zealand benefits for the purposes of environmental history through being an example of both a national unit and an ecological zone, and one where James Belich has established the nationalism in environmentalism.<sup>11</sup> In their article, James Beattie and Paul Star consider New Zealand less as a laboratory than as 'ancillary focus' for global issues, in particular 'empire forestry'.<sup>12</sup> Parliamentary debates

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6 Richard Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600-1860* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 474.

7 Donald Worster, 'Appendix: Doing Environmental History', in Worster, *Ends of the Earth*, p. 290.

8 John M. MacKenzie, 'Empire and the Ecological Apocalypse: the Historiography of the Imperial Environment', in *Ecology and Empire: Environmental History of Settler Societies*, eds. Tom Griffiths and Libby Robin (Edinburgh, 1997), p. 223.

9 Grove, *Green Imperialism*, p. 475.

10 J. R. McNeill, 'Observations on the Nature and Culture of Environmental History', *History and Theory* 42 (2003): pp. 5-43, 6.

11 James Belich, *Paradise Reforged: A History of the New Zealanders from the 1880s to the Year 2000* (Honolulu, 2001), pp. 530-1. A *British Scholar* 'Featured Scholar': <http://www.britishscholar.org/scholarofthemonthsept2009.html>.

12 Gregory A. Barton, *Empire Forestry and the Origins of Environmentalism* (Cambridge, 2002).

from the 1870s considered issues related to forestry, and by extension, the colonial experience more generally. The British, occupied as they had been on a crowded island with agricultural and then industrial revolutions, rather regarded forests as obstructions, and this was an attitude that was exported to even uncrowded islands. Yet the utilitarian dimension of 'timber supply' came to be complemented when its natural appearance came to be seen as economically advantageous in itself. The potential for tourism was appreciated in the nineteenth century, and by the twenty-first the symmetry was realised when tourism had long replaced timber as an export earner. Yet the utilitarian and the romantic both necessitated conservation; conservation, here, as self-interest. Situating themselves between Richard Grove's trans-imperial practises of forestry, and Greg Barton's Indian models, Beattie and Star place New Zealand forest history in a global framework, but emphasise the 'constant interplay of influences'; here, the global on the local.

At around the same time as the idea of forestry was being debated in Auckland, in New Delhi the Indian Forest Service was being established. As is clear from Greg Barton's and Brett Bennett's article, compared to New Zealand, India was 'just' a national unit; generalisation thereafter was and remains 'unwise', but one was consistent: 'the steady expansion of land under the plow, at the expense of forest and grassland', as Richard Tucker put it; domestication 'under the most complex system of resource extraction which any European empire ever established in the developing world'.<sup>13</sup> And yet forests should be seen, as William Beinart and Lotte Hughes have, as 'contested places'.<sup>14</sup> Thus the growth of the idea of conservation – a sense almost of 'tree worship' – connects Beattie and Star with Barton and Bennett, who do note the conventional narrative of loss – of 'rupturing a pre-colonial ecological balance' – but seek to rebalance the notion that the foresters were passive through applying the 'cultural turn' to a part of empire where 'higher motive of ecological and romantic considerations' had been dismissed. Nowhere in the world could the sacred be more intrinsic to society, and no imperial power has been so riven with issues of class and culture. The 'loss' here is the 'personal loss, a loss of identity' after Indian independence and the abandonment of conservation: the effect of nation on environment.

Beattie and Star demonstrate how 'art visualised nationalist sentiment', and Barton and Bennett consider elites and cultural transmission; in his article Adrian Howkins invokes each as well as introducing notions of informal empire to those of environmental history. The approach of environmental history brings a great deal to the established notion of informal imperialism, not least the idea that informal

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13 Tucker, 'Depletion', pp. 119, 140.

14 William Beinart and Lotte Hughes, *Environment and Empire* (Oxford, 2007), p. 112; chapter seven: 'India and Forestry'.

empire may have exerted greater environmental authority than did the formal. Unlike in New Zealand or India, it was not possible to impose environmental conservation on Argentina; moreover, the need for agricultural exports required dominion over the land. Howkins looks at how environmental nationalism clashed with 'environmental authority' of asserting control over nature; of 'civilization over barbarism'. For the British in Argentina, forests were less prominent than railways, and Howkins utilises the Robinson and Gallagher framework that relations between the two countries were more than merely those of free trade, but at the same time were much less than formal control.<sup>15</sup> The growing estrangement of Argentines and the British, as the progressively strident nationalism of the former was brought to bear on the increasingly informal imperialism of the latter, demonstrate that the violent conflict of 1982, far from being aberrational, was a clear consequence of general distrust and suspicion centred on a specific: here a classic locus of formal empire, the Falkland Islands/*Islas Malvinas*. Argentina has long been neglected as a subject for historians of the British Empire, but 'the overlap of formal and informal empire created a unique situation'.<sup>16</sup> Some British officials could see that 'the defence of Britain's formal empire was starting to weaken Britain's informal connections', brought to a head by economic and environmental nationalism.

These articles, then, address the general through the particular, and the interconnexions between environmentalism and nationalism, and in so doing contribute to recent trends in environmental history. Whilst the 'declensionist' inclination has been repudiated, so has the whiggish. These accounts require and display nuance; environmental history's own cultural turn, which is required to explain such 'hybrid colonial societies'.<sup>17</sup> These essays are united in pointing to the continuities between the imperial and the modern world; as to change, a minor one is that this is the last edition of *British Scholar* before its transmutation into *Britain and the World*.

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15 John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, 'The Imperialism of Free Trade', *The Economic History Review* 6, no. 1 (1953): pp. 1-15.

16 Although see H. S. Ferns, 'Argentina: Part of an Informal Empire?', in *The Land that England Lost: Argentina, Britain, a Special Relationship*, eds. Alistair Hennessy and John King (1992), pp. 49-62.

17 Beinart and Hughes, *Environment and Empire*, p. 4.