

Graeme Wynn, Historical Geography, and Environmental History

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Graeme is a historical geographer and environmental historian, but marking where the historical geographer ends and the environmental historian begins is a tricky task. Graeme is a leading scholar in both fields, and over the past forty years historical geography and environmental history have cross-pollinated in so many ways that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish each from one another.

Given the trajectory of Graeme's career, these overlapping interests are not surprising. Graeme earned his PhD in 1974, just a year before a group of historians founded the American Society of Environmental History (ASEH). While remaining a geographer over the years, Graeme would find many kindred spirits among environmental historians, join their intellectual community, and eventually come to be one of the field's leaders. Graeme did more than just attend environmental history conferences. By the 1990s, he was playing a pivotal role in nurturing the field of environmental history in Canada, which at that time was still in its infancy.

There are two ways to measure Graeme's contributions to historical geography and environmental history. One is through scholarship and the other is through service—his role as a mentor, editor, and administrator. Through both, Graeme served to deepen the connections between historical geography and environmental history and sculpt them in important ways.

While today the connections between historical geography and environmental history are clear and strong, they were not always that way. When Graeme completed his PhD in the mid-1970s, neither the discipline of geography nor the field of historical geography in particular seemed very receptive to historical scholarship on the relationships between society and the environment.¹ Geography was still enthralled with spatial science—although with the emergence of Marxist and humanist geography this began to change—and largely uninterested in environmental matters. Those geographers who were drawn to environmental issues, such as cultural ecologists, worked mostly on Latin American topics, not ones in Canada or the United States. As Graeme himself has argued, historical geographers at the time, especially in Canada, were deeply influenced by the methods and topics promoted by Andrew Hill Clark.² Given this state of affairs, Graeme's dissertation and book *Timber Colony* was an important contribution in reorienting historical geography toward more sustained attention to environmental matters.³

Graeme forged some of his initial connections with environmental history not through ASEH, which was still quite young, but through the Forest History Society (FHS). *Timber Colony* served as an entryway into the FHS, a group that Graeme became closely involved with during the 1980s and early 1990s. The FHS deepened its connection with the field of environmental history, and in 1996 the FHS's journal *Forest and Conservation History* merged with *Environmental History Review* to create a new journal, *Environmental History*. In this way, Graeme's growing connection with environmental history can be seen as part of the larger trend of environmental history and forest history forging a tighter relationship.⁴

By the late 1980s and early 1990s, social theory was having a profound effect on human geography. In an influential 1991 article, the historical geographer Cole Harris urged historical

geographers to creatively employ the ideas of Jurgen Habermas, Anthony Giddens, and Michel Foucault. In coming years, poststructural, postcolonial, and feminist theory increasingly informed the work of historical geographers, and other theorists were ascendant: Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Judith Butler, Donna Haraway, and Bruno Latour. Such theorists increasingly influenced the work of historical geographers. But that's a bit misleading, for many of the geographers working on historical topics eschewed the "historical geography" label entirely and instead saw themselves as part of cultural geography.⁵

Graeme was skeptical of human geography's wholehearted embrace of social theory. In an important 1999 article, "A Fine Balance: Geography at the Millennium," Graeme voiced his concerns.⁶ While sincerely acknowledging the many benefits of geography's newfound interest in social theory, Graeme was also deeply critical of what he saw as postmodernism proponents' tendency to overstate their case, to focus on representation, and to reject the Enlightenment Project.⁷ He was particularly concerned that such an un-nuanced critique further drove physical and human geography apart. This is key because environmental historical geography relied, to some extent, on the natural sciences—not because they offered an objective view of nature, but because they enabled geographers to write richer accounts of the interplay of society and environment in the past.

What does all this have to do with Graeme's role in historical geography and environmental history? Quite a bit, for most environmental historians shared his concerns about postmodernism and never embraced social theory as much as many human geographers did. And when they did employ social theory, it was modest and the direct effect on the text was often muted or relegated to brief discussions in the endnotes. Indeed, the world environmental historian John McNeill has gone so far as to say most environmental historians are "refugees from . . . theory."⁸

It should come as no surprise, then, that Graeme found a community of likeminded scholars in environmental history. They valued many of the same sorts of scholarship he did: work with a focus on the physical landscape, a materialist orientation, and an embrace of interdisciplinary perspectives. While regional historical geography went out of fashion in geography, environmental historians produced environmental histories of states, nations, and ecological regions. In short, the sort of historical geography Graeme valued continued, mostly not in the discipline of geography but, ironically, in environmental history.

As important as Graeme's scholarly contributions have been where historical geography and environmental history intersect, his role as an advisor, editor, and administrator is perhaps even greater. Graeme has advised nineteen MA students and eleven PhD candidates, most of whom wrote theses and dissertations on environmental topics. He also founded and continues to edit the UBC Press "Nature | History | Society" series. Established in 2007, the series has become the leading environmental history monograph series in Canada and one of the more important series for society and environment scholarship in the world, and it includes monographs by geographers and historians. Series such as this with leading academic presses have done much to raise the prominence of environmental history.

More recently, the American Society of Environmental History recognized his contribution to environmental history scholarship and his key institutional role by selecting him as the next president of the ASEH. He will be the first geographer and Canadian to hold this position, and few scholars are better suited to run this organization.⁹ He will bring not only his deep knowledge of and engagement with Canadian environmental history and historical geography, but also his expertise in global environmental history. Long before it was fashionable, Graeme encouraged environment and society scholars to situate their work in a transnational and comparative framework.

Graeme's many articles and books, such as *Timber Colony* and *Canada and North America: An Environmental History*, will define his place as a scholar of historical geography and environmental history.¹⁰ But he has helped build and sustain both fields through his tireless service work. His influence will endure through his scholarship, but even more so through the many students he mentored, writings he edited, book series he founded, and institutions he shaped. It is quite a legacy, and we should all be so lucky to have careers half as rich and as influential as Graeme's.

NOTES

- 1 Craig E. Colten and Lary M. Dilsaver, "Historical Geography of the Environment: A Preliminary Literature Review," in *The American Environment: Interpretations of Past Geographies*, eds. Larry M. Dilsaver and Craig E. Colten (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1992), 1-18. See also Graeme Wynn, "'Shall We Linger Along Ambitionless?': Environmental Perspectives on British Columbia," *BC Studies* 142/143 (2004), 31-35.
- 2 Graeme Wynn, Craig Colten, Robert M. Wilson, Martin V. Melosi, Mark Fiege, and Diana K. Davis, "Reflections on the American Environment," *Journal of Historical Geography* 3 (2013): 152-68.
- 3 Graeme Wynn, *Timber Colony: A Historical Geography of Early Nineteenth-Century New Brunswick* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980).
- 4 Thomas R. Cox, "A Tale of Two Journals: Fifty Years of Environmental History – And Its Predecessors," *Environmental History* 13, no. 1 (2008): 9-40.
- 5 On trends in cultural geography during this period, see Don Mitchell, *Cultural Geography: A Critical Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000).
- 6 Graeme Wynn, "A Fine Balance? Geography at the Millennium," *The Canadian Geographer* 43, no. 3 (1999): 220-243.
- 7 Ironically, in a 2004 article social theorist Bruno Latour echoed these sorts of concerns: Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Winter 2004): 225-48.
- 8 John McNeill, "Observations on the Nature and Culture of Environmental History," *History and Theory* 42, no. 4 (2003): 36.
- 9 Graeme was also program chair for the 2014 2nd World Congress in Environmental History.
- 10 Wynn, *Timber Colony*; Graeme Wynn, *Canada and Arctic North America: An Environmental History*, (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-Clio, 2007); Matthew Evenden and Graeme Wynn, "'54:40 or Fight': Writing Within and Across Boundaries in North American Environmental History," in *Nature's End: History and the Environment*, eds. Paul Warde and Sverker Sorlin (London: Palgrave, 2009), 215-246; and Graeme Wynn, "'Tracing One Warm Line Through a Land so Wide and Savage': Fifty Years of Historical Geography in Canada," *Historical Geography* 40 (2012): 5-32.