

Student B:

I found "Something New Under the Sun" entertaining, informative, and admirably scholarly given its subject matter. Overall, I thought McNeill presented a relatively balanced view. Although his prose clearly has a pro-environment bent, his arguments against commonly accepted environmental truths ("the exhaustion of fossil fuels on the global scale is not imminent" (16)) seemed as compelling as his environmentally-minded warnings ("if we can all consume more than we used to, and expect to consume still more in the years to come, it is far easier to accept the anxieties of constant change and the inequalities of the moment" (17)). Writing an "environmental history of the twentieth century" is a doubly bold task, since anyone writing on the environment at the green beginning of the twenty-first century will inevitably take some stance on environmental issues and recent historical developments simply by putting pen to paper. When pointing out an environmentally imprudent act McNeill seems like an activist, and when refuting commonly believed causes for environmental problems he seems like a reactionary, but I think these perceptions are mostly due to the circumstances of the book's writing. If this were an environmental history of the 16th century world, I'm not sure I'd have such perceptions. The real tests of the book's objectivity will be what readers a century from now will think, unless they still feel an intimate connection with the history McNeill describes.

Writing any sort of history of the twentieth century world is a huge task that is bound to come up against the problems of other macro-scope works we've read. Though his conclusions often seemed solid (to me), McNeill reaches them through use of statistics and argumentation at many levels of abstraction, letting the questions he asks determine what material is available to use rather than the other way around. He thus sometimes must "interpolate unabashedly", calculates trends that hide huge fluctuations, and generally only notes smaller-scale trends in passing, as qualifying statements. As with *The Great Divergence*, *One Quarter of Humanity*, and *The Mediterranean*, one (or at least this reader) is left with a vague sense of disbelief. I also found that when examining what caused environmental change, though McNeill's views provide a good corrective to some who apparently vaguely blame macro forces like "skyrocketing population", his presentation is somewhat misleading. McNeill explicitly discards "population pressure" and "religion" as causal in favor of the general effects of massive oil use, political systems, and economic growth in the 20th century. Yet feedback between these sets of causes is abundant -- rising populations use more oil, population pressures can help give rise to new political systems, and the way humans act in general can be slanted by a religion's cultural influence without all humans being devoutly religious (essentially McNeill's reason why religion doesn't matter here). It seemed like McNeill was oversimplifying to get a clean set of causes and non-causes for 20th century environmental change, weakening his argument.

An interesting part of McNeill's approach that we haven't seen before is some focus on the future consequences of the objects of his study (environmental changes). He both notes the future environmental impact of certain 20th century events (Chernobyl, nuclear testing, ozone depletion) and offers suggestions for the best way for humanity to achieve a sustainable balance with nature (achieve a cleaner energy

regime and get through the demographic transition by lowering fertility rates). While a focus on the future doesn't seem like history, it seems natural given the text's readership. And I wonder how different McNeill's advice and predictions for the future, believable because of his command of the 20th-century environmental record, are from any historian's generalizations given their command of their subject matter. Any generalization is to some extent a prediction about the future -- McNeill's prediction probably doesn't feel like a historical generalization because it is rooted only in the very recent past.

I was most struck by McNeill's ingenious treatment of the environment and environmental issues as historical objects. (Unfortunately?) My initial reaction to my first environmental history book was to see how close it came to an Annales-style focus on geography as a 'structure'. Geography as a static, long-term factor around which history happens is present here (the Athenian and Los Angelean basins that lock in smog, for example). However, I thought that McNeill's most interesting methodological move was to see geography and the environment as a dynamic factor that interacts with, determines, and is determined by human agency, something like a conjuncture. The twentieth century would then be the period over which the environment became much more a conjuncture than a structure in human history, as humans came to pull enough weight on Earth to influence their environment. This shift reminds one that structures and conjunctures (and events) are defined relative to humans, since history is the story of humankind. Accordingly, one must carefully pull out factors of 'environment' that are relevant to human experience ("land, air, water, and life, not biogeochemical cycles" (20)), just as economic historians dissect 'the economy' into unemployment rates, GDP, and (roughly) things that people care about. Similarly, questions of scale become important -- humans (roughly) only care about environmental changes that happen on human timescales. Accordingly, McNeill spends many pages on erosion and one sentence on the eventual demise of the sun, to give an extreme comparison. It was also interesting to see environmental concepts like 'energy' dissected into analyzable pieces (mechanical, electrical, heat, kinetic) roughly as a concept like 'labor' is broken up into 'slave labor', 'wage labor', etc. for analysis. McNeill was rather explicit in treating the environment as a historical object, repeatedly noting its interactions with political systems (for effective public health programs), economic conditions (for sustainable industrialization practices), etc., as well as the importance of environmental events like the "Green Revolution" relative to more commonly acknowledged historical events (like the French Revolution). All in all, I thought McNeill cleverly treated the environment as a legitimate historical object rather than a static structure. I haven't read any other serious works of environmental history, so I don't know to what extent this is his innovation.