

Student A:

John McNeill's *Something New Under the Sun* is a useful overview of the changes wrought on the natural environment by humans during the 20th century, but it falls short of--or maybe (to be less judgmental) it simply falls differently than--the kind of environmental histories I value most. Those histories, such as William Cronon's *Changes in the Land* or Richard White's *The Organic Machine*, are fine-grained studies of how humans have changed and been changed by the natural environment. Even though Cronon's and White's books span whole geographical regions (New England and the Columbia River watershed, respectively) and hundreds of years, and even though both are short, clocking in at under 200 pages, they manage to provide detailed, vivid portraits of the symbiosis between humans and the ecosystems they both shape and are part of.

In *Changes in the Land*, for instance, Cronon depicts a New England split by climatic differences into a densely populated and agriculture-friendly south and a sparsely populated and heavily forested north. These environmental differences contribute to significant regional disparities in the human impact on the land both before and after European invasion. In contrast to McNeill's largely unidirectional account of how humans changed the environment, Cronon's book tells a bidirectional story of how humans and the environment changed each other. (I think Nick made a similar point in his response.) Similarly, White shows how the geography of energy on the Columbia River and the geographies of human labor and social relations that were built around it mutually shaped each other, sometime in very literal ways--such as the construction of dams to control the Columbia's energy, which helped produce certain social structures, which demanded further manipulations of the river, which responded in unpredictable ways, and so on. McNeill does show how certain environments made certain human actions desirable or possible, and how those actions sometimes led to changes in the environment (e.g., salinization of agricultural fields, urban smoke and smog), which, in turn, evoked human reactions. But the global reach of McNeill's narrative partly effaces the kinds of local interactions that make environmental history in the style of Cronon or White so illuminating.

By dividing the book into various geophysical and biological "spheres," McNeill also divorces the changes he narrates from their location in a particular cultural context. What would the book have looked like if he had instead divided it by regions of the world? Or if he had focused on a few case studies, such as the environmental history of the American Midwest, Tokyo, or the Australian outback? Some things would have been lost, including perhaps the main virtue of the book, its attempt to provide a global history of the environment. But by focusing on all the environmental changes that have taken place within a single region, rather than on the environmental changes that have taken place within each sphere, McNeill would have been able to tell a much richer story of how the total environment--lithosphere, pedosphere, atmosphere, hydrosphere, and biosphere--interacts with a particular social-cultural-economic context to produce historical change. Instead he jumps from place to place, pulling stories out of context and separating a single human community's response to one sphere (e.g., air pollution) from its responses to the others (e.g., water pollution, agriculture, disease). His strategy is quite successful in its production of a readable, persuasive text (as I think Kieran pointed out) and its collage-like construction of a global environmental portrait, but it fails to give us a sense of how any particular society changed and was changed by the environment. This rejection of localism seems atypical in environmental history.

After breaking the world into noninteracting spheres in Part One, McNeill tries to put it back together again in Part Two. This effort seems partly successful. On the one hand, McNeill's focus on population growth, urbanization, energy production, technology, ideology, war, and politics provides a number of useful insights into the drivers of environmental change, as well as some surprising conclusions, such as the relative unimportance of population growth (more accurately, its importance only under certain conditions, e.g., in automobile-dependent societies). Each of these themes cuts across the spheres described in Part One and partly restores a sense that people in any given time and place are interacting with a total environment, not just with one of its parts. In his discussion of "big ideas," for instance, he describes how nationalism influenced policies on population growth, re- and de-forestation, water policy, and agricultural back-to-the-

land movements. On the other hand, Part Two is far too short. Much more remains to be explained, for instance, about the relationship between environmental policy and “imperialism, decolonization, and democratization” (347-349, of which half a page is a photograph), and the same could be said about most of the other issues McNeill raises. Like Pomeranz (*The Great Divergence*) and Lee and Feng (*One Quarter of Humanity*), McNeill takes a quantitative approach to understanding incredibly large-scale processes; the result is a broad-brush portrait that is just as remarkable for what it leaves out as for what it accomplishes.