



**Alan H. R. Baker.** *Geography and History: Bridging the Divide*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 296 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-24683-5; \$28.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-28885-9.

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## Re-Reading Historical Geography

What is historical geography and how does it correspond to environmental history? These seemingly simple questions produce a range of answers. In a recent global review of environmental historiography, John McNeill suggests that historical geography and environmental history pursue similar questions with many of the same methodologies.[1] Craig Colten, an historical geographer, comments that the two fields are closely aligned.[2] Recent anecdotal evidence suggests that these views are basically right: doesn't William Cronon hold a chair in history, geography and environmental studies? Haven't geographers contributed to recent issues of *Environmental History*, and environmental historians to recent issues of the *Journal of Historical Geography*? Environmental history, McNeill claims, is "about as interdisciplinary as intellectual pursuits can get." [3] So why should disciplinary labels concern us?

Perhaps they should not, but this is not a universal view. Over the past two decades, environmental historiography has been discussed in a range of geography journals and conferences. Sometimes this discussion has sought to link ideas across disciplinary boundaries; sometimes it has focused on shared research problems, theoretical work, or methodologies.[4] Other times, it has struck a more critical note, identifying weaknesses in core concepts, narrative styles and environmental historians' geographical knowledge.[5] Much of this discussion, published almost exclusively in geography journals, has gone largely unnoticed amongst environmental historians. Or at least, it has yet to receive a coherent re-

sponse. Historical geographers seem to write much more about environmental history than environmental historians about historical geography.

It is entirely possible that environmental historians have had little to say about historical geography because it is difficult to encompass the field's diversity in subject matter, theoretical inspiration, and methodology. With the publication of Alan Baker's *Geography and History: Bridging the Divide*, this difficulty may be more easily overcome, for here is a book that promises to speak to the relationship between geography and history, and offers one chapter specifically on "Environmental Histories and Geographies."

Readers of H-Environment will find this book to be an enormously useful introduction to a sub-discipline and body of literature that should be of concern to their work. Baker has written not a history of historical geography, nor a comprehensive portrait of a field in dialogue with another, but a series of elegant essays treating central themes and problems in historical geography that intersect in numerous ways with the work of historians. The book is more and less than its title promises: it is an invitation to interdisciplinary thought, which turns primarily upon the pivot of one sub-discipline.

Baker is well placed to speak to the evolving patterns of scholarship in historical geography. As a recently retired university lecturer in geography at Cambridge, a founding editor of the field's flagship *Journal of Historical Geography*, and a founding and current editor of the

Cambridge Studies in Historical Geography series, he has had a good view of the sub-discipline for decades and has been one of its prominent historiographers. His own research focus is nineteenth-century rural France and aspects of fraternal organization and sociability, though his reading encompasses a much broader field than this. This book is studded with references to the French and Anglo-American literature and much else beyond.

The definition of historical geography as a distinct field of study has long been disputed. Is it properly a sub-discipline, a distinct body of knowledge, or an outlier of the discipline of geography because of its concern with time (the province of history) rather than primarily space (geography's focus)? Baker reviews these debates and offers a sensible working definition: historical geography comprises a geographical analysis of the past. Its methods of inquiry are shared with the discipline of history, and its problems with the discipline of geography. Its questions and subjects have changed over time and will change again, but several long-standing research areas or themes (Baker calls them discourses) help to give the field coherence. These themes include location, environment, landscape, and region, and variously overlap with one another and neighboring disciplinary discussions.

The four essays at the center of this book offer extended reviews of literature and meditations upon shifting patterns of scholarship and interest. Although each essay follows a distinctive trajectory and design, they all succeed in introducing concepts, explaining the shifting emphases of research and debate, and illustrating arguments with numerous references to the literature. The essay on location, for example, not only sets out the rationale for studying problems of location and space, but also illustrates how historical geographers have mapped phenomena, analyzed spatial relations, and charted the changing distributions and diffusions of phenomena over time. Baker's essay on landscape similarly provides the reader with a review of the ways in which historical geographers have used the term—from Carl Sauer's "cultural landscape" to more recent studies of landscape as ideology—and considers subjects that have provided a focus for inquiry. In the course of these discussions, Baker manages to provide a fair hearing for contending positions with which he clearly disagrees or finds problematic, though he comes rather close to dismissing some such as Carville Earle's or Chris Philo's arguments in favor of geographical history. The links among these different research areas are sometimes more implicit than stated, though the essay on region encompasses an approach that Baker believes relies upon the diverse tool kit

of historical geographers. A Venn diagram, provided in the opening chapter, situates region as the point of overlap among studies of location, environment, and landscape.

Baker's stated concern to connect the work of historical geographers to that of scholars in other disciplines succeeds only to a point. Baker works out from historical geography and so the connections he strikes are generally self-referential. Readers learn how historians have sought to work with spatial concepts to understand the diffusion of ideas in science and letters, or of the misapplication of the word "space" in self-described spatial histories, or of the diverse understandings of landscape among scholars in architecture, history, and anthropology. These connections are useful and interesting. They suggest how ideas travel across disciplinary boundaries and sometimes how they do not. By contrast, some more important, basic shifts in the humanities and social sciences and their influence on historical geography are only referred to in passing, as if they are so obvious as not to require sustained explanation. If we ask questions like how did the new social history influence historical geography or why did concepts of post-structuralism develop rapidly in some areas of historical geography and not others, then we are left without clear direction from Baker. This shortcoming is probably the outcome of a thematic organization that seeks to emphasize continuity of ideas over time rather than to explore sharp breaks or departures.

Baker's discussion of the connections between environmental history and historical geography does not depart radically from those of McNeill or Colten, both mentioned at the outset. He does seek to remind his readers that geographers have long been concerned with problems of human-environment relations and that the new directions charted by historical ecologists or environmental historians may not be as new as they think. Having said that, he proceeds to explain the separate development trajectories of these fields and does so in a fair and balanced manner. In general, however, Baker is disappointed that environmental historians have not paid greater attention to the work of historical geographers. When environmental historians have cited the influence of geographers, he claims, they have not done so enough. Here Baker's disciplinary concerns seem to overwhelm his stated interdisciplinary agenda. Nevertheless, the concluding portion of the chapter offers a useful exploration of the recent environmental work of historical geographers relevant to interdisciplinary discussions in environmental history and other environmental studies.

Baker reviews research on reconstructing environments and environmental change conducted by physical geographers, studies of human modifications of environments and cultural analyses of environmental perception. Environmental historians will come across a host of helpful references here from journals that they might not normally encounter and from monographs that are not well known in the historical literature.

As with the other chapters, however, Baker has worked outwards, seeking to relate other bodies of work to historical geography. While explaining the value of environmental historical geographies to environmental historians, he has not considered at length what historical geographers might learn from environmental histories. He does suggest the importance and influence of William Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis* (1991) within geography, but he leaves matters there. In general, he neglects to consider how environmental historians have engaged with core geographical concepts of space and place, region or landscape, nor has he investigated the use of geographical techniques in environmental historiography. Arguably, a very fruitful discussion could occur between environmental historians and historical geographers about how, for example, Richard White deploys ideas of space in *The Organic Machine* (1995), or how Brian Donahue has integrated GIS into a fine-grained study of settlement and agricultural history in Concord, Massachusetts.[6] I think it is probably these kinds of connections that have blurred the boundaries between environmental history and historical geography and have led scholars like McNeill and Colten to emphasize overlapping questions and concerns over distinctions and differences. However, while Baker's compartmentalization of environmental approaches may limit the discussion, it also reminds us that historical geographers pursue a wide variety of topics and themes that fit uneasily alongside environmental history and much more easily alongside social history, urban history, or

economic history. Environmental concerns matter in historical geography but they certainly do not dominate discussion, nor perhaps should they.

For its bibliography alone (which runs to over forty pages), this book will have enduring value. Its broader importance is in situating and explaining the main currents of thought in historical geography from the perspective of an important practitioner of that field. The book does build bridges, though they may not be as wide or as full of traffic as some would wish. This should not detract from Baker's accomplishment, which is considerable.

#### Notes

[1]. J. R. McNeill, "Observations on the Nature and Culture of Environmental History," *History and Theory* 42 (2003): p. 9.

[2]. Craig E. Colten, "Historical Geography and Environmental History," *Geographical Review* 88 (1998): pp. iii-iv.

[3]. McNeill, p. 9.

[4]. See, for example, Michael Williams, "The Relations of Environmental History and Historical Geography," *Journal of Historical Geography* 20 (1994): pp. 3-21.

[5]. See, for example, David Demeritt, "Ecology, Objectivity and Critique in *Writings on Nature and Human Societies*," *Journal of Historical Geography* 20 (1994): pp. 22-37; *Antipode*, Symposium on *Nature's Metropolis* 26 (1994); and Joseph Powell, "Historical Geography and Environmental History: An Australian Interface," *Journal of Historical Geography* 22 (1996): pp. 253-273.

[6]. Richard White, *The Organic Machine* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995); and Brian Donahue, *The Great Meadow: Farmers and the Land in Colonial Concord* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

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