



**J. Donald Hughes.** *An Environmental History of the World: Humankind's Changing Role in the Community of Life.* New York: Routledge, 2001. xiv + 264 pp. \$53.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-13619-8; \$200.00 (library), ISBN 978-0-415-13618-1.



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## Clio's Pond Revisited

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Professor Hughes's serialized "Ripples in Clio's Pond" segments in the journal *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism* have been one of the great treats of my subscription to that journal over the past few years. In beautiful prose, "Ripples in Clio's Pond" consistently drew the reader into brief environmental case studies that spanned human history and covered the globe. Inspired by Professor Hughes's own travels, these entries demonstrated the mystery and the wonder of the human relationship with the environment over time and offered its readers unique perspectives on the human role in the community of life. On their simplest level, the entries presented snapshots of environments from different places and times; on a deeper level, they posed probing questions about our past and contemporary practices of environmental stewardship and sustainability. Many of these short essays serve as the cornerstone for Professor Hughes's *An Environmental History of the World: Humankind's Changing Role in the Community of Life*. In spite of admiring "Ripples in Clio's Pond," and much of Professor Hughes's other work, I found myself skeptical before reading the book

that anyone could satisfactorily condense the environmental history of the world into roughly 250 pages without leaving gaping holes. Skeptics be warned: Professor Hughes delivers in grand form.

Let's cut to the chase. This is a wonderfully written book that will appeal to all environmental historians and, maybe more importantly, attract interested academic and lay readers to our field. Whereas many previous attempts to write world environmental history have resulted in solid, but somewhat prosaic tracts of almost encyclopedial information, Hughes sacrifices diverse and detailed minutiae for well-chosen regional examples of world-scale changes and a more lyrical style. *An Environmental History of the World* is a pleasure to read, and Professor Hughes's storytelling abilities should be an inspiration to us all. But beyond that, I wonder a little about the book's intended audience. Its topic lends itself to classroom use, but in spite of its brevity, I wonder how successful it would be in introductory or advanced classes in global environmental history at the undergraduate level. This is not a textbook in the traditional sense, but its scope would appear to make it difficult to use it as a

classroom complement to other works in this genre. Not that this should detract from instructors reading *An Environmental History of the World*. Far from it. This book is intelligent and innovative in its interpretations of world and environmental histories and it makes a valuable contribution to the growing literature in this vein.

The real success here is the manner in which Professor Hughes makes clear connections across millennia that instruct and inform the reader while demonstrating the human place in the natural world. He manages an effective balance between large-scale changes and case studies to demonstrate their local or regional impacts. He is successful, as the specific examples—three to each chapter—illustrate the bigger world systems without the study suffering from being too greatly reduced to anecdotal evidence. Similarly, the inclusion of the regional case studies—and Hughes has visited all but one of these places, lending the case studies an attractive personal quality—prevents the macro-history themes from becoming too theoretical and broad to be engaging and informative.

Hughes begins by introducing the context for his study, that “the narrative of world history must have ecological process as a major theme” (p. 7). How humans have affected their environments and been affected by them is environmental history’s predominant theme, and naturally should appear here, but Hughes is particularly convincing in establishing this premise, when he introduces “the community of life.” While many studies tend to emphasize either human impacts on the environment, or environmental influences on social behavior, Hughes draws a tidy interrelationship between the two. His second chapter, “Primal Harmony,” is one of the strongest articulations of the natural origins of the human species and of human civilization I have seen. Hughes describes the early human experience in the Serengeti in Africa, Kakadu in Australia, and the American Southwest, demonstrating human similarities to other animal species in those regions, and humans adapting to their environments, and shaping their environments.

The third chapter raises the cultural divorce from nature that coincided with the rise of civilization. The city prompts the conceptual divorce of culture from nature, and Hughes uses the symbolic value of the wall to good effect. The human-made barrier between the human domain and nature is a fallacy as Hughes effectively points out how humans are still wholly dependent on their environment for food, shelter, and clothing. In the three case studies in this chapter, Hughes introduces the Epic of Gil-

gamesh to explore early examples of environmental destruction and the advent of wilderness or untamed nature as the enemy of human progress. The city of Uruk serves as the basis for his discussion of the rise of the city and the setting of structured human demands on the landscape. Alluding to Donald Worster’s provocative work on chaos and order in nature, Hughes notes the incompatibility of human-imposed order over nature. Hughes turns next to Egypt and the Nile to expand upon human control over the riverine system for navigation and irrigation, before examining the collapse of Tikal in Guatemala as a case of human civilization exceeding the carry capacity of its environment. While the fall of the Mayan civilization remains something of a mystery, a general consensus is beginning to accept that overpopulation and the subsequent intensification of agriculture to feed that growing populace resulted in drastic deforestation and soil erosion.

Moving from ecological degradation in practice to the mind, Hughes turns to the ancient world to make sense of human perceptions of nature and our general understanding of the cosmos and our place in it. The Ancient World is often associated with a major revolution in human thought, and philosophy concerning the natural world was no different. Hughes argues that there are several systems that shaped human ideas about the natural world in the few centuries preceding and proceeding the dawn of the Common Era, but that they can be organized into three categories: “(1) traditional, evolving systems that included earlier ideas along with new ones; (2) systems created by reformers who taught the oneness of life including humans and nature; and (3) monotheistic religions that made humans God’s stewards with dominion over and responsibility for the rest of creation” (p. 53). The first category offers an opportunity to address Hinduism and Shinto, while the second category brings together the Greeks, Buddhists, Taoists, and Jainists. The third category incorporates Zoroastrianism and the “Abrahamic” religions (p. 56). In discussing the Greeks in the second category, Hughes raises some particularly intriguing issues relating to the term “ecology,” which we have typically referred to as planetary housekeeping. He notes that in spite of the word’s Greek origins, he found no Ancient Greek reference to *oikologia*, and wonders if the origins stem not from *oikos* (house) as traditionally assumed, but rather from *oikeios* (appropriate). Environmentalists and other advocates of “planetary housekeeping” might almost prefer the kinds of interpretation *oikeios* offers to our notions of ecological sustainability and the forms of rhetoric it has employed

in more recent centuries.

Perhaps the richest chapter is Hughes's sixth chapter, entitled "The Transformation of the Biosphere," in which he manages to combine the European age of navigation, which moved plants, animals, and peoples all over the world, the Industrial Revolution, the Age of Imperialism, and the impact of Darwin's vision of evolution. This is impressive work and indicative of how Hughes ensured that his manuscript remained a manageable and digestible size. Hughes covers a lot of ground, but at no time here does one feel as though he has done rough justice to his subject matter. Sketches of Tenochtitlan, London, and the Galapagos Islands show a world in great flux as colonialism and industrialization shake the foundations of how humans interact with their environments and with each other.

Given the seemingly endless list of environmental problems that plague contemporary human societies, Hughes does an admirable job managing the last chapters, though I would have liked to see more discussion of globalization and biotechnology. I appreciate that it

is unfair to ask an author to write a book differently, but it strikes me that environmental historians have critically downplayed the relationship between technology and global economies, and world environmental histories such as this would seem to be the perfect venue for that discussion. With so much intelligent discussion of food and food production throughout *An Environmental History of the World*, it seems a shame not to conclude with a careful discussion of genetically modified crops and the multi-billion dollar industry that is on the verge of revolutionizing our economies, our consumption patterns, and our environments. And while a study of world environments in the past might be excused for not spending much time analyzing alternative energy use, Hughes does voluntarily hazard a brief look into the future. Greater consideration of our continuing reliance on fossil fuels and future alternatives might have been in order. But these are just the simple quibblings of an enthusiastic student of environmental history who is somewhat regretful that *An Environmental History of the World* had to end at all. It is a wise book: engaging, informative, and highly readable.

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