

Ch. 9 Great Plains Grasslands Exploited: These documents clearly address those three elements of environmental history that I emphasized at the outset: natural processes, human modes of production, and the ideas about nature that shape our interactions. We should be aware of two dimensions of change, first natural as we move westward into areas of less rain, and second historical, as American civilization destroys and supplants the Native American way of life. The documents reflect different perspectives, different audiences, different times, and different uses of the grasslands. Merchant asked what stories these documents suggest to us.

Women Homesteaders Portray the Plains Environment, 1857-1893: Intrepid Women Find Freedom and Opportunity on the Frontier, While Recreating Culture: We often think of women as reluctant pioneers, and they did encounter many hardships, but these documents suggest that many women found opportunity, even liberation on the frontier. Mollie Sanford welcomed the opportunity to abandon restraints and the dictates of style. Mary O’Keiffe, herding cattle in the hot sun so her children could enjoy the 4th of July then giving birth the next morning, later found she could get along quite well without her worthless husband. Clarissa Griswold heard glowing stories about the Dakota territory. Despite finding the arid prairie quite different from the hills and woods of her home along the Mississippi River, she adjusted and secured land and society. Sarah Wisdom must have been an extraordinary woman, securing title to a large farm even while teaching school. Elinore Stewart left few prospects behind in the east and loved the trip west and later married a neighbor. Jane Aldrich recalled the hardships, walking a mile for a meager water supply, but also suggests the strong desire to recreate something of the culture of the east out west (the books and newspapers). Laura Crews competed successfully with men in the Cherokee land race and secured a bottom-land farm.

The Homestead Act, 1862: When Securing the Dream of a Free Labor Garden, Always Check the Rainfall Levels: With the southern states out of Congress during the Civil War, the Republican party acted on its long-stated aim of filling the western territories with free labor farmers. Almost anyone, other than rebels or speculators, could secure a farm, a quarter section of 160 acres, as long as they cultivated and resided on the land for five years. After five years, two credible witnesses would enable a squatter to secure title to the land they claimed. But would an 160-acre farm make equal sense west of the 100th meridian as east of that line?

McCoy on the Chisholm Trail and Abilene Stockyards, 1874: The Romance, Challenges, and Economics of the Cowboy: Cattle roamed free during the Civil War years and huge herds of longhorns built up. After the war, the prospect of significant profits selling beef in the cities to the east encouraged cattle men to drive herds to the nearest railhead in Kansas where the cattle could be shipped to the stockyards of Chicago. This was the Chisholm Trail, memorably captured in *Red River* (1948), starring John Wayne. It took roughly a month and the cattle lost considerable weight, creating tough decisions when the drover reached the railhead – sell low weight cattle or try to fatten them up first. These were the first cowboys, living in the saddle, enjoying the outdoors, but also having to risk death and destruction when storms or threat of

storms caused the cattle to stampede. A good cowboy was a skilled worker, calming the herds with soft singing and turning a stampede in tighter and tighter circles to bring them to a halt.

Frederick Jackson Turner on the Significance of the Frontier: An Early Environmental Historian on violence, individualism, and democracy: With Turner, the modern discipline of American history might be said to start with an environmental thesis. Turner explained American development not in terms of institutions or ideas, but in environmental terms, the existence of free land and the process of winning successive frontiers. At “the frontier,” he wrote, “the environment is at first too strong for the man. He must accept the conditions which it furnishes, or perish....” He described the winning of these frontiers in frank terms, acknowledging violence (Indian wars) and exploitation (the “exploitation of the beasts took hunter and trader to the west, the exploitation of the grasses took the rancher west, and the exploitation of the virgin soil... attracted the farmer” (294). He also acknowledged the frontier as a source of our carelessness about public affairs (think Sumner and George here). But he also saw the frontier as the crucible of democracy and equality: “So long as free land exists, the opportunity for a competency exists, and economic power secures political power.”

Turner argued that the distinctive qualities of American civilization and the American character (individualism, democracy, and nationalism, our sense of being a special, distinct, and united nation) all came out of the frontier experience. With the closing of the frontier, the disappearance of free land, the first phase of American history closed. His paper, read in 1893 at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, speculated about how American civilization and the American character might now change.

John Steinbeck Depicts the Dust Bowl, 1939: Growing Corn on Less than 20 inches of Rain a Year: Steinbeck wrote, whether he knew it or not, about the consequences of applying environmental assumptions born of the rainy eastern half of the continent to the arid interior of the continent. As Turner suggested, the “stubborn American environment is there with its imperious summons to accept its conditions,” but the “inherited ways of doing things are also there.” Perennial grasses maintained a much greater percentage of biomass under the soil and so were able to better weather periods of drought. Annual grains required much wetter climates. The spread of the grain farmer across the western plains turned a natural disaster into a human disaster as the drought and the dust ruined farms and broke men and women.

Plenty-Coups Mourns the Vanishing Buffalo - from 1950: A Nostalgic Recollection of a Defeated and Now Harmless Enemy? The Crow had trouble defending their lands even before American settlers came. The richness of their land attracted other tribes which they tried to placate by allowing usufruct rights (the right to use and exploit a resource but not “own” it or exclude others from using it), but that did not prevent constant warfare. When American settlers came, other tribes had better access to trade goods, especially guns, and so put the Crow at a greater disadvantage. The Crow tradition of “coup,” of touching an enemy before killing him, as

a mark of great bravery, did not well prepare them for warfare that included long range rifles. And those settlers and those rifles dealt the Crow a much deeper blow when they exterminated the buffalo, upon which the Crow way of life depended. The recorder of this recollection appeared to have considerable sympathy with the Crow and assumed an interest on the part of the audience as well – but perhaps only a nostalgic recollection of a defeated and now irrelevant enemy.

An Editor Bids Good Riddance to Buffalo, 1979: Worthless Beasts Make Way for Beefsteak and Progress:

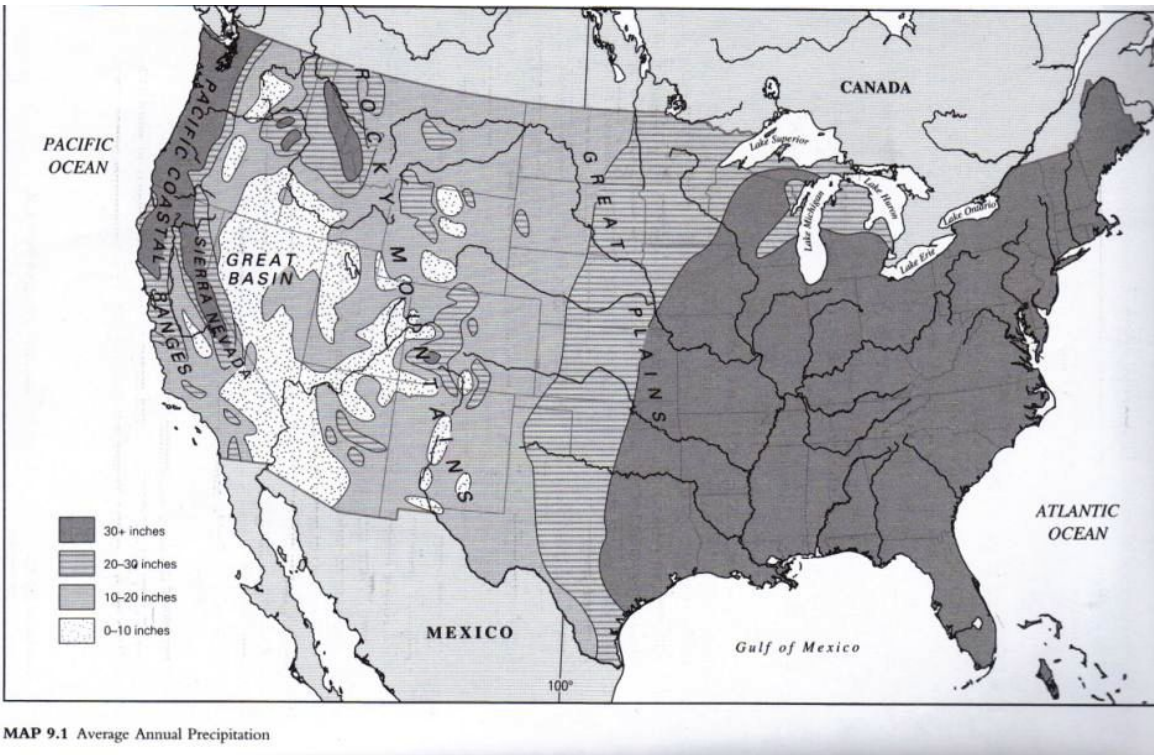
This editorial celebrates the extermination of a commercially-worthless wild animal which made way for progress and beefsteak. Pointing out that “human progress requires environmental alterations” (from mining and farming to building factories and killing animals), the author has little doubt that the natural world exists solely for human exploitation. “The beasts existed for private enterprise to consume,” he writes, “to clear the land for superior breeds, crops, cities, human growth, and progress” (299). These beasts just seem to be constantly trampling things, from hikers to housewives. They gave way to the creation of the richest agricultural area in the world, supplying food and fiber for millions. They are now kept in smaller numbers as a tourist attraction. Does the editorial make it clear why the civilization that replaced the buffalo is superior or is that just assumed? What, exactly, is this progress thing?

Here was my “story”:

The significance of free land/
arid environment
Inherited attitudes shape
practices
Violence: recognizing/
repairing costs
Progress reasserted

Essays: The essays present progressive, upward and declining, downward narratives and a reflection on narrative itself. Is there another way to accumulate and convey knowledge other than storytelling? What epistemological questions and dangers does storytelling raise?





Webb, “Great Plains Ecology”

Ideological, Institutional, and Cultural Change as Adaptation to an Environment: Beyond the 98th meridian, Americans encountered a new region of level surfaces, treeless land, and limited rainfall. Although all three characteristics applied simultaneously to only a small part of the Great Plains (the High Plains), they nevertheless precipitated a crisis and breakdown in old ways of pioneering. Of the three legs of civilization east of the Mississippi (land, water, timber), two of the three (water, timber) could not be counted on west of the 98th meridian. An institutional fault line required the transformation of every aspect of pioneer culture - from plows and weapons to laws and modes of travel.

“But with man the ascending line [of evolution] stops,” Henry George wrote in 1883. “Animal life assumes no higher form; nor can we affirm that, in all his generations, man, as an animal, has a whit improved. But progress in another line begins. Where the development of species ends, social development commences, and that advance of society that we call civilization so increases human powers, that between savage and civilized man there is a gulf so vast as to suggest the gulf between the highly organized animal and the oyster glued to the rocks” (Social Problems, 3). Strip out the self-congratulatory progressive elements in this quotation and you have the pragmatists’ insights. Human institutions and ideas are not the working out of some divine plan,

Natural and Human Obstacles: Three divisions existed, the tall grass (prairie, at the center of which is the corn belt), short grass (plains), and desert. Plains animals had specific characteristics, especially a limited need for water, the use of speed and open spaces for defense, and a shyness that made them difficult to hunt. The stupidest of these, by all accounts, was the buffalo around which humans organized their cultures. Huge and gathered in groups, the buffalo were slow, clumsy, with poor eyesight and little fear of sound. Only smell would alert them, hence they were approached by hunters from downwind.

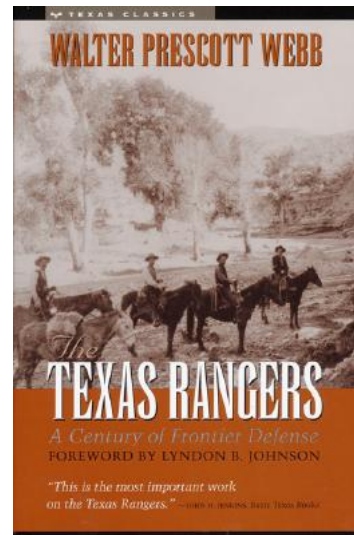


The Plains Indians defied European conquest for a long period. Nomadic, nonagricultural tribes that used dogs as beasts of burden, the Plains Indians embraced the wild horses lost by the Spanish which revolutionized their societies, providing time for the flowering of culture. Exceptional horsemen, the Plains Indians excelled at both

hunting



and warfare. Aside from the cavalry of the U.S. Army, most Americans came into the area unequipped and unprepared for plains-style warfare that depended upon speed and horsemanship. So the pioneers confronted both natural and human obstacles.



A “gigantic human experiment with the environment”: ranchers and farmers (305): The six-shooter adapted to mounted combat was the first great innovation this experiment produced, providing pioneers and the Texas Rangers a weapon adapted to battle on horseback. Before the pioneers could find the other needed innovations, the cattle men had their day. Beginning shortly after the Civil War and



lasting into the 1880s, the cattle industry capitalized on free range grasslands.



But by the middle of the 1880s, the railroad and town-building booms, the ready capital for investment, expanding populations in the east, and, crucially, the invention and spread of barbed-wire were all making room for the pioneers. Cattlemen overexploited the remaining open range areas and the industry collapsed. Meanwhile, unusually wet years enticed farmers into the short grass areas - later a center of Populism -while the windmill allowed some to survive the dry years.

Worster, “Cowboy Ecology”:

The Cowboy in Popular Culture and History: Heroic Individualist, Exploited Proletarian, or Modern Pastoralist? Historians have downplayed the cowboy while popular culture has made him a national icon of heroic individualism. Worster thinks historians should not ignore the cowboy. Why is the plantation so central to our history while the cattle range (both called forth by capitalist revolution in agriculture) is ignored. The

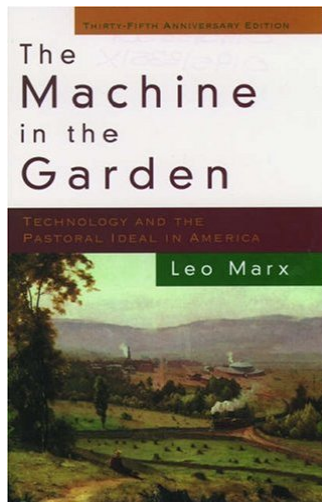


ugly exploitation involved in slavery, and the legacy in race relations, makes the plantation a crucial subject. And labor exploitation has never worked as an organizing theme for western history. With big horses and big guns crossing a big space,

The history of the cowboy might help us with the question of “how we are to get a living from a fragile, vulnerable earth without destroying it – or put otherwise, how we are to lead a sustainable life that does not deplete the natural environment or ourselves.”
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cowboys never seemed like a proletariat. But what we have neglected in the cowboy saga is the environmental story, one of particular relevance to an overpopulated world increasingly forced to rely on marginal lands. The west resisted both agricultural and urban development for quite some time – awaiting irrigation and air conditioning technology to densely settle what is essentially semi-desert with a desert in the middle of it. A careful and comparative treatment of the ecology of the semi-arid west could reveal insight into what forms of property management will best secure a sustainable future.

Modern and Historical Pastoralism: Management styles: Ranching is a version of the pastoral (to echo Leo Marx) and Worster traces it to the pressure on agricultural land that forced



some people out of fertile river valleys and forced them to rely on marginal lands and a limited range of four-legged food. (This, incidentally, suggests an environmental reading of Virgil's *Ecolgues* – the shepherd who avoided dispossession settled on marginal land.) Historically, pastoral societies have either been nomadic or settled.

How did they alter and sustain the environment as in Africa for 10,000 years? Nomads, who seem first to have appeared in the Middle East, knew a great deal about their environment (when and how much grass might be



available where) but took little care in resource conservation, moving on to fresh lands in a cyclical fashion, gaining access by either diplomacy or force. Sustainability came only from limitations on the number of humans and animals. Management might be said to be competitive (if not quite individualistic). Settled pastoralists practiced a more limited, vertical movement, as in the Alps from winter to summer, regulated by written rules that produced a more communal (if not bureaucratic) management (310). The American cowboy can be usefully compared to these - but he is unmistakably part of a post-Civil War capitalism.



Cowboys and Capitalism: New Forms, Old Questions: Cowboys practiced an ancient craft but did so in a modern capitalist system, producing for distant markets and generating profits (from cattle and, even more fundamentally, grass). But cowboys faced old questions about their relation to the land and



Cronon, “Telling Stories About Ecology”

Lists, Rises, and Falls: Can/Should Environmental History Have a Narrative? In 1979, two books of almost identical titles, agreeing on the facts of the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, arrived at fundamentally different conclusions about its meaning. Bonnifield’s The Dust Bowl described it as a natural disaster in which people of fortitude and courage preserved and built for the future while Worster’s Dust Bowl described a human (and capitalist) failure to accommodate ourselves to nature. Not just the conclusions but the stories are fundamentally different. The stories prefigure the conclusions and give power to the historical analysis. Environmental historians, who believe that plants, animals, soils, climates, and other nonhuman environmental factors have shaped history, have to ask where these narratives come from? The postmodern assault on narrative, as a totalizing system that excludes or marginalizes the less powerful, deepens the

environmental historians’ anxiety about narrative. Yet, on the other hand, environmental historians remain dependent on narrative, to turn chaos into a causal sequence with meaning. Yet doesn’t this move us beyond nature into the cultural realm of human value? So should we just list events and conclude that it “will be interesting to see what happens



next” (315)? And if we appeal to narrative, will we inevitably fall into those well-worn patterns (tropes) of progressive rise or disastrous decline?

To illustrate Cronon’s argument about narrative endings imposing specific meanings on events, consider these two film clips (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6RQbcUP8PO0> + http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8t_qToyqiOU). These links will take you to the trailer and the very last part of the blockbuster How the West Was Won from 1962. I still remember seeing the film in a big Chicago theater, in wide angle “Cinemascope,” and it blew my little six-year old mind. Watching it again, decades later, the ending blew my mind all over again, though it a rather different way this time.

What the Progressive Saga Leaves Out: Indians and Environments as Scenery: Turner’s account of the frontier experience is a classic case of the progressive rise. The heroic encounter between pioneers and savages in the struggle over “free” land erases its true subject – the “conquest that traded one people’s freedom for another’s” (316). Yet the progressive saga is everywhere we look, in Bishop Hare’s prophesy and Josephine Middlekauf’s recollection. These linear narratives achieve their happy endings by turning the “relatively responsive environment”

into a foil for heroic triumph and by keeping the time frame short; each of these choices minimizes the role of nature. What makes such narratives misleading is the way in which “scenes” (317) are employed to advance the narrative. For environmental historians, these “scenes” (nature past and present) are primary elements, not props. For the progressive saga, the opening scene must “deserve” to be transformed, just as Turner’s Indians deserved to be conquered. Hence the scenes of “uninhabited wilderness,” “waste,” and “raw materials” that begin so many progressive stories.

The Great Plains Twist: A Resistant

Environment and Political Lessons: In the history of the Great Plains, the story has always been more complicated, filled with obstacles and failures, even collapses, as a resistant environment challenges humans to innovate. So Webb’s “scene” must be shown as a worthy antagonist to the pioneers, making their triumph

If I can briefly turn your attention back to The Metaphysical Club), these pro- and anti-New Deal narratives come less from any understanding of nature than from politics (from Agassiz’s concepts and preferences). This is precisely Cronon’s concern when he asks “where do these narratives come from” (314).

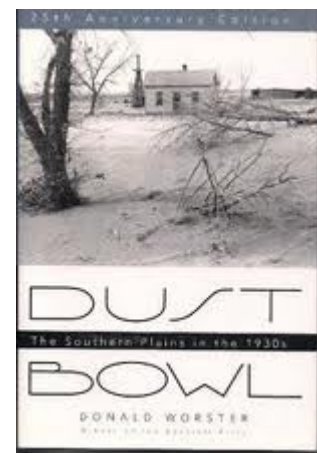
American nation, the rise of Western civilization, the ascent of man. The declensionist accounts of Plains history also hinge on a resistant environment. In the New Deal account of the dust bowl, a resistant environment fooled humans, played to their self-deluding hubris, and only gave way to a strong and scientific government program. The anti-New Deal account of Malin also embraces resistant nature, but only to make the eventual human and individualist triumph (in defiance of federal bureaucrats) all the more admirable. Bonnifield’s book borrowed this logic, just as President Carter gave way to the Reagan Revolution. Worster then returned to the New Deal narrative, deepening the tragedy. Linear-minded Americans, in ignorant defiance of the cyclical constraints of the environment, enacted the capitalist disaster just waiting to

happen (then in miniature and soon to come in more dramatic, all-encompassing form). Indeed the New Dealers, in Worster’s narrative, cannot rescue the day for they share the same faith in technological control that makes capitalism so destructive. But



Alexandre Hogue, “Drouth Survivors” (1936). Oil on canvas, 30 × 48. The one they wanted to burn.

all the more heroic. Malin’s study is a bit less story-like but only because grander, more abstract; it depicts an essentially Darwinian narrative of the building of the



Worster himself shares with the progressives the tendency to treat nature as a “scene” that supports his analysis. Reversing the order, Worster starts with a delicate and beautiful landscape and ends with a desolate and alienating one (the very adjectives reflecting how much these scenes are dependent on human values).

“After This Nothing Happened”: Beginnings, Middles, Ends: Worster’s declensionist narrative must end in the midst of the dust bowl, just as the progressive narratives must continue on to the postwar recovery of the region. When and where one chooses to begin and end a narrative shapes its meaning (even as nature operates on much longer time frames). Include the



Indians and the tragedy or the progress looks different. Plenty-Coups’s “after this nothing happened” suggests how narratives are different from a mere sequence of events (as with Cronon’s list of events on the great plains near the start of his essay). No narrative, then no history and no meaning. Plenty-Coups saw no need to narrate anything after the buffalo died. But can linear, narrative structures capture natural phenomena that are cyclical or random? Nature tells no stories; only humans do that.

But, yeah, You Are Still Going to Have to Write a Midterm Essay: But we can’t escape narrative. This is the point of

history after all, to make some sense of where we find ourselves (that particular “ending” that we currently inhabit). Storytelling is basic to human consciousness (a product of our caring about what happens) and (if I might add a bit of Dewey here) human experience is both in and of nature. We experience nature but our experience is also part of the natural world, not separate from it. So narrative is as much a part of natural reality as a coyote’s howl. We



EXPERIENCE AND
NATURE

JOHN DEWEY

“Experience is *of* as well as *in* nature,” Dewey wrote. “It is not experience which is experienced, but nature – stones, plants, animals, diseases, health, temperature, electricity, and so on. Things interacting in certain ways *are* experience; they are what is experienced” (Dewey quoted in Westbrook, John Dewey and American

can’t evade narrative, so we have to use it as consciously and responsibly and as self-critically as we can (which, again, brings us back to The Metaphysical Club, this time

to William James’s injunction to be as aware of our concepts and preferences as we possibly can). And so Cronon leaves us with three constraints of narrative that we must embrace. We need to tell stories that are disciplined by attention to facts including no falsehoods and avoiding no truths. Our stories have to also make ecological sense, to incorporate our best understanding of natural

processes. Finally, our stories have to be open-ended, for only engagement with a variety of perspectives can move us toward the truth.

Midterm Examination: Writing this essay is not a matter of simply summarizing one piece of information (document, essay, or lecture) but about figuring out what you think by engaging a variety of sources of information.

Answer either of the following questions in an approximately 1,500 word essay (about six double-spaced typed pages). An optional draft is due February 15th and the final version is due February 22. Whichever essay you do, you should keep in mind that environmental history is about natural processes, modes of (human) production, and human ideas about nature. Your answer should include something about each of these things.

1. In the decades after the Civil War, the people of the United States intensified their exploitation of the various ecosystems of the North American continent. In doing so, they were aided by an industrializing and increasingly corporate economy and an increasingly powerful federal government. What ecosystems did the people of the United States exploit from (roughly) the mid-nineteenth century into the early twentieth century? What tools and ideas (including such things as technology, law, and institutions) guided this exploitation? What obstacles were confronted and what conclusions did people draw about the consequences?
2. In 1859, Charles Darwin published On the Origins of the Species, in which he argued that a blind, directionless, and unpredictable process of natural selection, rather than divine intelligence, explained the development of species. How did the philosophy of pragmatism emerge out of the American response to Darwinian theory? Keeping in mind the pragmatic view of certainty and contingency, the importance of experimentation, concepts and preferences, and ideas as tools, how might a pragmatist tell the story of American environmental practice from (roughly) 1850 to 1910? You can range before and after those dates, of course, but the main focus should be on the general period.