

Book Review #1

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HIST 740: Topics in History for Educators: Creating a New Nation, 1763 – 1815

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William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*. New York: Hill and Wang. 2003.

William Cronon's 20th anniversary edition of *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* strives to analyze how the land and the people influenced each other and how those relationships shaped new England's communities. While the history of New England seems very complex, Cronon professes that his thesis is simple: "The shift from Indian to European dominance in New England entailed important changes – well known to historians – in the ways these peoples organized their lives, but it also involved fundamental reorganizations – less well known to historians – in the region's plant and animal communities" (p. xv). In fact, when explained by Cronon it does seem to make common sense that the changes people made would undoubtedly, impact ecological systems as well.

It is intriguing to consider the history of the United States not just from the Indian and colonists' perspective, but also from the perspective of the land and animals that were impacted. For example, as the Indians discovered commercialism, they hunted certain animals at a higher rate, not just for what their tribes needed. Naturally, this led to a decline in some animal populations, which in turn impacted the environment (p. 99). For a specific example, consider the beaver. Beavers have a low reproductive rate anyway and were highly desirable for trade, thus they were killed more frequently. As this happened,

beaver dams were abandoned which impacted the surrounding land and waterways (p. 100).

In the Preface, Cronon insists that this book should not be considered a history of New England Indians or on Indian-colonial relations (p. xvi). However, whether intentional or not, Cronon does include many historical facts regarding those areas of study. It's unclear how the ecological changes could be covered in fact, without some background or historical perspective on what the peoples of the time were doing (as historians understand it). His explanation of the sources used to gather ecological information are lengthy and serve to assure the reader that he used primary sources as much as possible (p. 7).

Cronon goes on to contrast precolonial ecosystems of New England with those that existed at the beginning of the nineteenth century. He compares the ecological relationships of precolonial Indians with those of the arriving Europeans, especially in how the different groups viewed property ownership. For example, precolonial Indians viewed ownership of land based strictly upon the use of the land (p. 80). Indians might have used a particular section of land for hunting and other Indians used the same land for farming. Once the use of the land changed, such as letting the land rest from farming, that group of Indians moved on and claimed land use elsewhere. He continues from that historical perspective to describe the processes of ecological change that followed the Europeans' arrival as they settled during the New England colonial period.

The writing style Cronon uses is clearly aimed toward historians and perhaps graduate students. His unnecessary jargon and snobbish word choice could turn some readers away, such as "betokened" (p. 108). While Cronon includes an extensive section of Notes and Bibliographical Notes (p. 223) the lack of visual aids is noticeable. Maps with the colonies and/or tribes shown with the subsequent ecologically impacted areas would help the reader fully appreciate the impact European settlement had on the environment.

While a dry read, it does fulfill the author's thesis, to show how the settlement of Europeans in what is now the United States had an ecological impact. Students and fellow historians can gain a better understanding of the impact upon the land that European settlers caused. This may also lead readers to consider the impact that people's actions might have for future generations. This is potentially another way to encourage people to consider the environment and how what people do today can ecologically impact our land for generations to come. In the Afterword, Cronon explains that his view of the world developed from when he was a child, asking the question "How did things get to be this way?" (p. 171). He also is clear to point out that the people of the time, the European settlers and Indians alike would not have viewed the changes in the land and animals as we do (p. 178). This is a question that all scholars, students, historians, and others would be wise to consider, especially as relates to the land and animals we currently enjoy.