

# FOREWORD

## *Environmental History Comes of Age*

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Once in a great while, perhaps every decade or two for a given field, a book comes along that changes the way one thinks about an entire subject. Sometimes this happens when a writer of unusual creativity revisits a familiar topic and somehow manages to find in it insights so fresh that it's hard to believe no one noticed them before. Sometimes it happens when a scholar of unusual range wanders across a vast historiography and ties it together in an act of synthesis that discovers unexpected connections among disparate elements that few imagined might be brought together in such a surprising way. And sometimes it happens when an intellectual of unusual generosity takes the questions and findings of a specialized subfield and so compellingly demonstrates their relevance to other fields and disciplines that the subfield suddenly feels far more mainstream than one thought.

It is rare enough for a single book to succeed at one of these tasks; it is rarer still for one book to accomplish them all. And yet that is precisely what Mark Fiege's *The Republic of Nature: An Environmental History of the United States* does. It is surely among the most important works of environmental history published since the field was founded four or more decades ago. No book before it has so compellingly demonstrated the value of applying environmental perspectives to historical events that at first glance may seem to have little to do with "nature" or "the environment." No one who cares about the American past can afford to ignore what Fiege has to say.

Having declared my enthusiasm so unabashedly, I should hasten to make sure that I don't misrepresent the volume you hold in your hands. Despite its

subtitle, this is *not* a comprehensive narrative synthesis of American environmental history. Squeezing such a vast subject between the covers of a single book is such a daunting task that few scholars have even attempted it. (The best is Ted Steinberg's *Down to Earth: Nature's Role in American History*, first published in 2002, which can now be supplemented with the superb historiographical essays gathered in Douglas Sackman's *A Companion to American Environmental History*, published in 2010.) Mark Fiege chose for himself quite a different task when he embarked on this project more than a decade ago. Fearing that an encyclopedic account might fall victim to the familiar textbook problem of too much obligatory information trading depth for breadth and thereby undermining storytelling and analysis alike, he chose instead to concentrate on a few carefully chosen but far-flung episodes. Rather than try to synthesize everything that he and his colleagues had learned over the past half century about American environmental history, his goal would be to illustrate by example the kinds of questions and interpretive insights that have become central to the field.

Fiege's real stroke of genius lay in the way he selected episodes to demonstrate the value of an environmental historical perspective for scholars, students, and other readers unfamiliar with the field. As a committed undergraduate teacher, he wanted to write a book that could be used in U.S. history survey courses, where he knew full well that most high school and college teachers must necessarily rely on a standard textbook to guide their students through the vast terrain of the American past. A parallel environmental history textbook with a similar table of contents would have little chance of being adopted in such classrooms, and might even feel repetitious if it were. At the same time, Fiege wanted to write a book that would convey to nonacademic readers the ways environmental history can alter our sense of the past by encouraging us to see familiar events from radically different points of view.

The solution he hit upon was to identify historical episodes that were so utterly familiar that every high school and college teacher was bound to include them in a U.S. history syllabus and every reader would recognize them. Then he applied a more daring and surprising criterion. He decided to seek out classic episodes in American history that are rarely if ever viewed in environmental terms so he could then reinterpret them through the lens of environmental history. Revisiting and rewriting the most familiar of histories to make them seem unexpectedly unfamiliar: this was the high bar Fiege set for himself.

If my own description of the book suddenly feels less abstractly academic

and more genuinely intriguing, then you've got a sense of why I was so excited when Mark Fiege first described this project to me. Just let your mind wander a bit: what would be on your own list of classic moments in the American past that are usually discussed as if they had no connection to the natural world? It's a fascinating question, and Fiege ranged far and wide in his efforts to answer it. As he did so, though, he began to realize that writing this book would be a good deal harder than he first thought. Much of the initial excitement that the field of environmental history generated arose from the fact that it studied topics that had been largely ignored by other historians: the impact of epidemic diseases on Amerindian populations; the unrecognized ways that native peoples had used fire to alter landscapes; the consequences of introducing non-native species to North American ecosystems; the effects on soils of cutting down forests and planting agricultural crops in their stead; the harnessing of rivers in the name of progress; the role of national parks in expressing American ideas of nature and nationhood; and so on and on. These and many other subjects were hardly central to American historical scholarship when environmental history began to emerge in the 1960s and 1970s. Few textbooks made more than a passing reference to any of them, so demonstrating their importance was a big part of what made the field feel new.

These early triumphs had helped define what environmental history was . . . and yet they were precisely the topics that Mark Fiege was choosing to downplay as he selected episodes to explore in his individual chapters. It was not that he would ignore them altogether—*The Republic of Nature* is an environmental history to its core—but by focusing his chapters on topics that had not previously been thought of mainly in environmental terms, he entered historiographical territories that were relatively unexplored by environmental historians. As a result, each new chapter required Fiege not only to read and synthesize the huge secondary scholarship that topics like these necessarily generate, but also to do original primary research to discover environmental aspects that had been previously ignored or downplayed. Each new chapter, in other words, required research and synthesis on a scale that many scholars typically bring to bear on an entire book. Although it wears its scholarship lightly, *The Republic of Nature* has a rigor, literary grace, and depth of interpretive energy that represent historical writing at its very best.

So which classic episodes did Mark Fiege select to show that environmental history has something new to say even about subjects that scholars have been writing about for generations? The Salem witch trials. The Enlightenment

invocation of “natural law” in the founding of the American republic. The rise of cotton agriculture in the slave South. The quasi-mythic biography of Abraham Lincoln. The Battle of Gettysburg. The building of the transcontinental railroads. The invention of the atomic bomb. *Brown v. Board of Education*. The oil shortages of 1973–1974.

As I name these, you may be saying to yourself: “Wait, I can think of environmental aspects to each of those events. I thought he was going to pick topics that had *nothing* to do with the environment.” But that would be impossible. There is nothing in the world—nothing in place or time or history—that is ever outside of nature or the environment. The point is that few of these topics would be top-of-mind for anyone wanting to illustrate the importance of the environment for understanding the American past. That’s what makes *The Republic of Nature* so bold and unusual. Although most readers might guess at a few of the many environmental insights that Mark Fiege shares on the pages of this book, even specialists would fail to think of all of them. That is why the book is such a joy to read, and why it is so worth savoring. Peruse it carefully, and you will make surprisingly intriguing discoveries even about events you already know well. More important, you will learn ways of asking questions and seeking answers that will likely change the way you think about history itself, perhaps even those parts of it that you yourself have lived. And finally, it may change the way you think about nature and its role in the human past. For one book to do all of that is no small achievement. ★