

CHAD MONTRIE

A People's History of Environmentalism in the United States



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THE UNITED STATES

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For John Cumbler

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Preface

This book is meant to offer a fresh look at the history of environmentalism in the United States, exploring the movement's origins and development with an emphasis on the experience and contributions of working people and their families. In that manner, *A People's History of Environmentalism* challenges the traditional, prevailing version of events, which tends to focus on the thoughts and deeds of a few elite individuals and—like looking through the wrong end of a telescope—unwittingly narrows our perspective and leads us to errors of interpretation. By examining environmental activism's ripening with the mass of common people in mind, doing history “from the bottom up,” a different and arguably more accurate rendering of the past emerges, one that not only incorporates a full range of historical actors but also addresses certain fault lines in how we tell their story.

While the new account is something that will interest professional historians and other academics, the primary audience for *A People's History* is students in undergraduate and graduate courses as well as environmentalists. Toward this end, the book relies on selected parts of primary sources, supplemented by insights from the existing secondary literature, to make various observations about key moments in time. The point is to be readable and accessible rather than dense and exhaustive, tracing the contours of a coherent revisionist narrative that will be filled in during decades to come. A number of other historians have already begun to examine long-neglected aspects of Americans' relationship with nature, however, writing detailed studies on specific topics that allow me to make particular generalizations. Readers interested in this work should refer to the Bibliographic Essay following the Conclusion.

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Because it's taken me so long to actually write this book, I've accumulated more than the usual debts and reasons for gratitude. Most importantly, *A People's History of Environmentalism in the United States* would not have been possible without the mentoring hand of John Cumbler. He has been a role model for me as a scholar and activist, and our countless hours of conversation over the years have been full of invaluable, critical guidance.

At the University of Massachusetts Lowell various people have gone to great lengths to aid my research and writing, including my department chair, Joseph Lipchitz, and the college dean, Nina Coppens. Also, Jannette Marquez and Alice DaSilva were all too ready with answers to questions about mind-warping forms and bureaucratic mazes. At the library, Rose Paton and Deborah Friedman oversaw my many odd Interlibrary Loan requests, and at the university's Center for Lowell History, Martha Mayo, Janet Pohl, and Janine Whitcomb assisted early archival work.

Lastly, there were many ordinary and extraordinary ways that various friends and family supported my engagement with the past. This time around Christoph Strobel, Sheila Kirschbaum, Maryann Zujewski, and Sandra Garcia Mangado, in particular, each had a large part in helping me figure out what I wanted to say and how to say it. And, as always, my mother, stepfather, sisters, and daughter kept me grounded. I hope the printed pages to follow show at least some measure of what that meant.

Introduction: Shaking Up What, When, and Why

On a clear, sunny day in 1841, a young woman we know only as Ella took a break from her duties as a weaver in one of the many textile mills in Lowell, Massachusetts. Writing about the moment later, she explained how she gazed through a window at the “blue vault” of sky, feeling her heart flutter “like a prisoned bird,” longing painfully “for an unchecked flight amidst the beautiful creation around me.” Shut up in the “crowded, clattering mill,” Ella studied “the still and lovely scenes” beyond, which “sent their pure and elevating influence with a thrilling sweep across the strings of the spirit-harp.” Such woeful sentiments, she well knew, were quite common among the other thousands of Lowell operatives also desperately struggling with the transition to an urban industrial landscape, and they provoked various forms of individual coping and collective resistance.¹

Sometimes the operatives sought escape from the mills in their limited free time, with a short walk to the city’s outskirts, like another young woman who wrote under the pen name V.C.N. As she strolled along the Merrimack River, V.C.N. gazed “upon the glories and beauties of the waters, the woods, the fields, and the sweet, blue heavens that with tinseled clouds and gorgeous drapery, enclosed the scene” while pondering “the Creator of them all.” A few went even farther, returning for a stretch of days, weeks, or even permanently to the pastoral homesteads where they had spent most of their early lives. “Friends,” one J.R. consoled in a letter to those she left behind, “think not while surrounded by the green fields, feasting my mind with their beauties, that I do not cast a sympathizing thought to the many shut up in the mills, constantly toiling, without time to look upon the broad face of nature, and ‘view the glorious handworks of the Creator.’”²

After migrating from farms scattered about New England’s hills and valleys, mill hands like Ella, V.C.N., and J.R. experienced a change in the manner and setting of their work, and this had profound implications for their thinking about nature. Back home, labor varied, characterized by different tasks during

a day or week or year, making direct use of the land and its resources, indoors as well as outdoors, often with opportunities for socializing with siblings, parents, and neighbors. "In the forenoon I did housework," recorded Tryphena Eli White in her diary on June 24, 1805, and while she was out "picking greens," a friend "hallo'd" to her "to come and help kill a rattlesnake."³ In this and other writing done by farm-dwelling girls and women there was little of the flowery, "literary romantic" vocabulary or style that so heavily marked the stories, poems, and correspondence of industrial operatives later. That particular turn seems to have been a product of working within the confines of brick mills, at rows of machines, under close supervision, hour after hour, day after day. Suffering those conditions, the workers began to see nature as something else, something "out there," a place to flee from labor, where they could take needed leisure and where they could be provoked to philosophical musing about God, beauty, and time.

A century after the "mill girls" first went through the wrenching impact of migration and industrialization, men and women working in the new auto plants of the upper Midwest had a strikingly similar experience. Many moved from the countryside and exchanged self-directed farmwork for regimented labor at machines (by now the assembly line had been introduced). In response, some of the men took up hunting and fishing or resumed those familiar activities but on different terms. "Of course, your first thought is to be that of downing game," wrote Carl Hubert in the *The Bowhunter*, a journal associated with one of the numerous county-level, working-class sportsmen's clubs. "However, equally as important is the God-given opportunity to get away from teeming cities and the rush of everyday living and plant your feet on the good soil of a quiet backwoods trail."⁴

In fact, the new urban industrial environment affected all the members of autoworkers' families and provoked a reaction from them too. This is eloquently portrayed by Harriet Arnow Simpson in *The Dollmaker*, which follows members of the Nevel family from their Appalachian homestead to Detroit during World War II. At one point, Gertie, the strong and reliable mother, peers from her kitchen door at the "ugly-voiced and dirty" brown sparrows taking up space on the coal-shed roof, reminding her of two red birds she had seen once back home. "If she shut out the alley," Gertie considers, "she could smell cold creek water and cedar, the cedar smell strong and clean, like on a still, misty morning."⁵

Yet this new wave of folks who moved from country to city, from farm to factory, were not content simply to seek out a haven in the woods or a natural landscape in their imagination. Sportsmen's clubs were initially concerned

with fish and game conservation, but it wasn't long before they began to tackle air and water pollution. They hosted speakers to learn more, lobbied legislators and governors, supported control legislation, and effectively put environmental issues on the public agenda by the 1940s. "Pollution was the top topic of discussion at the December [Michigan United Conservation Clubs] directors meeting in Detroit," reported *The Genesee Sportsmen* in 1949. "The directors heard Governor-elect G. Mennen Williams state that anti-pollution legislation is among 'first priority matters' of his legislative program."⁶

Autoworkers and their families also organized through their union, the United Auto Workers (UAW), which sent representatives to testify at hearings, mobilized voters, supported neighborhood groups, and aided in pickets at public meetings. This was all done toward the end of enhancing outdoor recreational opportunities, protecting area waterways, and improving air quality. The point, UAW president Walter Reuther insisted, was to work with local, state, and federal governments "to come to grips with the problems of neglect, with the problems of indifference which are destroying not only our natural resources but which are corrupting and corroding the very environmental atmosphere that we breath and live in each day of our lives."⁷ The International and locals even established their own summer camps for autoworkers' children, which combined play in "nature" with civics lessons. Or, as the UAW recreational director Olga Madar put it, to "teach them how democracy works—in the down-to-earth way that living with others in the out-of-doors can provide."⁸

Some of my own extended family attended a UAW summer camp outside Toledo, Ohio, since my grandfather worked for Dana Auto Parts and belonged to Local 12. This was lore I had in my mind years ago, when I was writing another book, *Making a Living*, and did some research at the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, on Wayne State University's Detroit campus. There, I sifted through a vast array of union memos, letters, and reports, trying to piece together the connection between people's experience with industrial work and their relationship to nature. I was and probably still am the only historian to use the Reuther archives for that purpose, however, which speaks to reasons for fundamental flaws in the current, prevailing explanation for the origins and development of environmentalism.

According to the most widely held version of events—among scholars, activists, and the engaged general public—the U.S. environmental movement was a phenomenon brought into being by publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962. The book's impact, so the story goes, was largely due to improvements in economic well-being and increased leisure time experienced by people living in suburbs after World War II. This meant they could care more about quality of

life and, as they witnessed events like a televised oil spill near Santa Barbara, California, many became members of mainstream environmental groups led by far-sighted people such as the Sierra Club's David Brower.

In the 1970s, following on the heels of the first Earth Day, a growing environmental constituency supported legislation establishing regulatory controls, pushed through Congress by certain dedicated members of the House and Senate. Those controls helped to lessen air and water pollution and to mitigate other adverse effects of the new consumer society. Then, during the late 1970s and the early 1980s, two groups of "radicals," one at Love Canal and the other in Warren County, North Carolina, also pioneered confrontational grassroots environmentalism. This started what we call the "environmental justice" movement, which began to address toxics and "environmental racism."⁹

This is, more or less, the narrative that you encounter everywhere. "Environmental values were based not on one's role as a producer of goods and services," argues the historian Samuel Hays in *Beauty, Health, and Permanence*, "but on consumption, the quality of home and leisure." Filling in the details, another historian, Ted Steinberg, explains in *Down to Earth* that "[Rachel] Carson's eloquent book combined with an extraordinary dry spell, a super-heated political climate, a series of made-for-TV ecological disasters, plus an arresting image of earth as seen from outer space all dramatized the elemental interdependence of life on the planet." These events helped reveal the ecological underpinnings of "modern consumer society," he notes, and that laid the groundwork for the environmental movement.¹⁰

Recently, in marking the fortieth anniversary of Earth Day, the *New York Times* also developed an online timeline highlighting the most significant environmental changes since World War II. First among major events was passage of the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act (1940), followed by deadly smog in Donora, Pennsylvania (1948), California's pioneering auto-emission standards (1960), publication of *Silent Spring* (1962), congressional action on air pollution and wilderness protection (1963 and 1964), the Santa Barbara oil spill (1969), and the first Earth Day (1970). With that watershed, according to the *Times*, there was more congressional action on environmental issues, besides growing concern with toxic waste after Niagara Falls (Love Canal) residents discovered toxic sludge leaking into their homes near the end of the decade.¹¹

Still, the academic accounts, as well as numerous popular books, documentary films, internet web pages, and newspapers and magazines, are generally off the mark. They repeat a mythology not borne out by my own research at the Reuther archives and similar collections or by the latest research of several other environmental historians. Dipping into the

stream of publications that draws on those efforts, it is possible to see a different interpretation taking shape, a revisionist account that acknowledges the critical role working people played in shaping the environmental movement. This new history challenges the traditional version of events in several respects, particularly in terms of when things happened, how they happened, and why they happened.

First, the revisionist account alters the standard “periodization,” the approach historians take to dividing the past into meaningful chunks (which varies depending on the field). Part of what led folks to identify *Silent Spring* as the beginning of it all, and what keeps them repeating this claim over and over, is that it serves as an all-too-easy way to understand history. Carson’s book is a good bookend. Marking the period that followed by the Santa Barbara oil spill, the first picture of Earth from space, and the first Earth Day also tidies things up. But writing workers into the story moves the origins of environmentalism back in time and requires recognition of otherwise unrecognized or underacknowledged moments and experiences as key points of change, complicating the story we tell.

As the comparison of antebellum Lowell mill girls and twentieth-century autoworkers suggests, environmental consciousness and activism predated Rachel Carson. To be sure, those workers did not call themselves environmentalists, and we should be wary of examining the past by anything other than its own terms. At the very least, however, the efforts of working-class sportsmen’s clubs and the United Auto Workers in the 1940s and 1950s compels us to throw out 1962 or any later dates as the environmental movement’s start. And they suggest that we might not have an entirely accurate chronology of the most meaningful events in subsequent decades. In the fall of 1965, for example, the United Auto Workers hosted more than one thousand participants in a “Clean Water Conference,” the largest such meeting on that issue up to that point, although not a single American environmental history textbook or course reader mentions it.

Second (and this is related to the first point), the new narrative expands the list of important historical actors to include a whole host of additional leaders. Rachel Carson, Stewart Udall, David Brower, Gaylord Nelson, and Lois Gibbs certainly should continue to figure in environmentalism’s telling. Each had a high profile that facilitated raising consciousness and turning ideas into policy. Yet any complete register of key figures should also include the likes of Massachusetts public health activist Henry Ingersoll Bowditch, Civilian Conservation Corps director Robert Fechner, and Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers union leader Tony Mazzocchi.

Similarly, broadening whom we identify as subjects in the past requires that we see the problems with a top-down version of history. To peg most if not all of the responsibility for the rise and growth and impact of the environmental movement on any one author, Sierra Club director, senator, or union official is to grossly misstate how change happened. In redrafting our narrative, we need to incorporate the millions of ordinary Americans who engaged in various activities to address health hazards in their workplaces and a range of environmental problems in their communities. Quite often, they were responsible for pushing “leaders” to act, rather than the other way around.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, the revisionist interpretation points to new factors and forces to explain what caused change over time. In place of suburbanization, the new narrative concentrates on urbanization, the demographic shift that preceded it, and industrialization, what was drawing people to cities in the first place. When the fictional Nevels moved from a rural homestead in Appalachia to a dirty, grey block in Detroit so that the father could join the ranks of assembly line workers in a nearby factory, the family played out a story actually experienced by millions of people over two centuries. This move from the country to the city and the subsequent transformation of work set the stage for a modern environmental movement.

Living in the cities and laboring in mills and factories, migrants and immigrants confronted a range of threats to their health, from disease pathogens harbored in sewage-tainted drinking water to toxic chemicals that polluted the air of workplaces and neighborhoods. They lost direct contact with nature through their labor as well, which farming and other rural occupations had allowed and required. Corralled to run looms in textile mills or to fit bolts on wheels in auto plants, the new wage workers missed the countryside they had left behind and the practical way they had engaged it. Together, the exposure to pollution and the experience of alienation (or separation) from nature are what led workers and their families to develop a new environmental sensibility, to link that sensibility to local and (eventually) national problems, and to act on that sensibility in all manner of ways.

There is, however, one very important qualification to make to this last observation. Industrialization was never entirely restricted to urban areas and environmental activism certainly happened in the countryside. In fact, as the final chapter of this book shows, some of the most militant environmental protest of the twentieth century occurred in remote Appalachian hills and hollows as well as southern California fields and orchards. In these and other rural places industrial capitalism dramatically transformed both labor and landscape, much as it did in the cities, and this transformation prompted common

people there to respond in kind. Although they did not suffer all of the drawbacks of life in the concrete jungle, they knew routinized, dangerous work and relentless corporate greed, as well as poisoned water and barren soil, and that was enough to provoke.

Before going any further to elaborate on this interpretation, I also have to note several caveats, or warnings, about perspective. These are especially directed to the academics reading over our shoulders, some of whom will undoubtedly raise objections about the approach taken here. To start with, when we search for the working-class roots of environmentalism in the United States, we are necessarily drawn to the East and Midwest as much or more than to the West, a region that, somewhat understandably, has long held a privileged place in reckonings made by environmental historians. The Industrial Revolution was initially centered in the Northeast and, generally speaking, swept westward. *A People's History of Environmentalism* reflects that fact in the content and organization of its chapters, with case studies and examples that tend to focus (though not exclusively) on the people and places within the area delimited by the Mississippi and Ohio rivers.

In addition, the book attends to class more than race and gender. This does not mean it ignores these important aspects of personal identity and social structure—both show up again and again, if only because they are inextricably entangled with class in people's real lives—but it does not treat them as the main concern. I tell the story this way for various reasons. Key among them is the analytical clarity that can come from isolating or emphasizing a particular historical factor, something I learned from my training in American women's history (in that case, focusing exclusively on women, and more recently women's gender, helps correct for the traditional male-centered view of the past). Another reason is that, within the so-called trinity, class does seem to be the central element in common people's relationship with nature over time (e.g., even much of the way racial slavery conditioned African American slaves' and their white masters' experience with the land was really about class).

Lastly, it is difficult to grasp developments in the post-World War II era simply by starting in those years and moving forward. Fully understanding the origins and ripening of the movement requires a long view that encompasses the past couple of centuries. There were many significant precedents for modern disputes over natural resource use, advocacy for pollution control, and protests against environmental injustice. Massachusetts enacted its first law to regulate waste disposal in rivers and streams as early as 1878, for example, and even that followed on the heels of decades of lawsuits and direct action by farmers and others angered by industrial use of waterways. On the other hand,

there initially was considerable popular resistance to nineteenth-century park creation as well as to fish and game laws, what Karl Jacoby calls "environmental banditry." A sound account of environmentalism also needs to explain how and why this resistance had dissipated by the 1930s and 1940s, opening the way for working people to play a central role in the environmental movement.

The first chapter of *A People's History*, "Puritan to Yankee Redux: Farming, Fishing, and Our Very Own Dark, Satanic Mills," begins with a brief survey of New England settlers' pre- and post-Revolutionary farming as well as their use of area streams and rivers for subsistence and commercial fishing and for small mills to grind grain, saw timber, and card wool. The chapter then sketches the expansion of industrial manufacturing and increased rural-to-urban migration, examines opposition by farmers and fisherman to mill dams that flooded upstream land and blocked migratory fish, links factory work in swelling cities to romantic literary expression by mill girls, and details early campaigns to advance legislation aimed at pollution control.

Following the various trends, I point out that while people succeeded in prompting New England states to establish fish commissions, giving the government responsibility for natural resources, those agencies quickly morphed into something that tended to the interests of elites. They went from protecting fish as a food source to managing fish and game for sport, then largely a leisure activity for (actual and aspiring) aristocrats. Likewise, courts increasingly ruled in favor of factories and mills in riparian disputes, claiming that industry made a better public use of waterways than farmers and others. The progressive voices demanding that something be done to control industrial waste disposal were marginalized or silenced as well, and many rivers and streams inevitably degenerated into virtual "sewer basins" during the following decades.

Chapter 2 picks up the story in the late nineteenth century. The title, "Why Game Wardens Carry Guns and Interpretive Rangers Dress like Soldiers: Class Conflict in Forests and Parks," speaks to the disenchantment of common people with conservation laws as well as state and national park management. State and federal laws regulating hunting and fishing and the wholesale prohibition of nonrecreational land use within park boundaries disregarded traditional community ethics, a "moral ecology" fashioned by locals over time, one that allowed certain uses of the natural world according to established customs and rules. They also drove many into permanent wage labor.

For a time, local people resisted, willfully but covertly violating laws and ignoring park boundaries, thwarting the ostensibly good intentions of scientists and bureaucrats. But game wardens and park rangers (assisted in some cases by the U.S. Army) ultimately imposed a new order on the land. This was a