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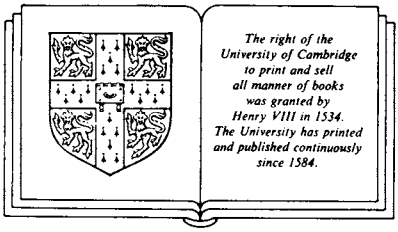

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Preface

THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK of essays is to introduce readers to the new and rapidly growing field of environmental history. Every so often comes the question with blunt, honest simplicity, "What is this field all about?" It is easy enough to respond that the field deals with all the interactions people have had with nature in past times. Or to illustrate its themes with an example or two showing how ecological transformations have shaped the course of history. Or to put the case that conventional history has been too anthropocentric in outlook, sundering the seamless unity of humankind and the rest of nature; that in contrast this new history insists humans are and always have been creatures of nature dwelling in a natural world. But, as is usual with such ready formulaic answers, they do not begin to capture the variety and complexity of the field, nor reflect the disagreements among its practitioners, nor exemplify the richness of ideas and perspectives animating the work. So, it is hoped, this book may provide a more thoroughly enlightening answer to the question "What is it?"

A few of the selections included here are reprinted from other sources, and their authors may never have thought of themselves as environmental historians. But in their own time and way they dealt with the substance of the field even before it had a name – with climate, food, resources, population, and the like – and thus deserve recognition as forerunners or predecessors. I have reintroduced a few essays of this genre that deserve to be remembered yet are rather inaccessible to the public today. The large majority of essays, however, are new to print and have been commissioned from scholars presently active in the field; their efforts may be taken as representative of the current state of the art. Included are scientists, geographers, and anthropologists as well as historians. And there are many others whose work equally deserves attention but could not be included here. The ambitious reader who wants to pursue the study further can find their names and publications listed in the Bibliography.

The chronological scope of these essays covers the modern era, that is, roughly the past five hundred years. Of course, modern history is so involved and complex a phenomenon that we cannot in any way pretend to

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be comprehensive. We are not trying to present a full-blown new synthesis covering all of the events and forces active in this era; rather, our aim is to give readers a sample of what environmental historians do that is different, as well as to demonstrate how they approach such familiar subjects as colonialism or the capitalist revolution or the rise of industrial society.

The large divisions of the book should be self-evident in content, and the individual essays are so clearly written that no summary or interpretation is required in advance. Readers can discover for themselves where they agree or disagree, succeed or fail. But I have tried in the Introduction and the Appendix to lay out, by way of an overview, some of the general, underlying themes and methods of analysis that connect these varied essays.

Environmental history has a great potential for changing the way we conceive of the past. It can help us explain more satisfactorily how we got to be what and where we are today. Like the new social history that has of late revolutionized the study of history, environmental history has both the strength of enormous ambition and the weakness of too much diffuseness. It enters, not offering a single overarching theory to which all past experience must be reduced, but organizing a constellation of interests, insights, questions, and convictions, some old, some new, about what is important and what we ought to pay attention to. Above all, it speaks to our present and future situations. Surely the most significant issue facing the human species in the late twentieth century, and beyond into the twenty-first, is our ecological predicament: How can we survive as a species without undermining or degrading the planet Earth and its fabric of life, the very means of our survival? This predicament gathers force year by year. As these essays demonstrate, historians are beginning to add their voices to its resolution.

A list identifying the contributors may be found near the end of the book. One name does not appear there and deserves acknowledgment: Frank Smith, history editor at Cambridge University Press. He has had as much as or more to do with the book's preparation than any of its authors. It was he who first suggested the idea of such a collection, and it was he who broached the idea of the Cambridge series in which the book appears, "Studies in Environment and History." We owe him warm thanks for the careful, insightful work he has done on these pages. Even more, we applaud him for his deep personal commitment to expanding the boundaries of history and enriching its discourse.

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