This is the first book to document the origins and early history of environmentalism, concentrating especially on its hitherto unexplained colonial and global aspects. It highlights the significance of Utopian, physiocratic and medical thinking in the history of environmentalist ideas. The book shows how the new critique of the colonial impact on the environment depended on the emergence of a coterie of professional scientists, especially in the Dutch, French and English maritime empires. The prime importance of the oceanic island ‘Eden’ as a vehicle for new conceptions of nature is emphasised, and the significance of colonial island environments in stimulating conservationist notions is underlined, revealing how, for the first time, the limitability of local and global resources was recognised.
Green imperialism
Green imperialism

Colonial expansion, tropical island Edens and the origins of environmentalism, 1600–1860

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For Jean and Dick
# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>List of illustrations</th>
<th>page viii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Edens, islands and early empires</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Indigenous knowledge and the significance of South-West India for Portuguese and Dutch constructions of tropical nature</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 The English and Dutch East India companies and the seventeenth-century environmental crisis in the colonies</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Stephen Hales and some Newtonian antecedents of climatic environmentalism, 1700–1763</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Protecting the climate of paradise: Pierre Poivre and the conservation of Mauritius under the ancien régime</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Climate, conservation and Carib resistance: The British and the forests of the Eastern Caribbean, 1760–1800</td>
<td>264</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 The beginnings of global environmentalism: Professional science, oceanic islands and the East India Company, 1768–1838</td>
<td>309</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Diagnosing crisis: The East India Company medical services and the emergence of state conservatism in India, 1760–1857</td>
<td>380</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion: The colonial state and the origins of western environmentalism</td>
<td>474</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Select bibliography: 487
Index: 527
Illustrations

1 Early Dutch colonists on Mauritius in 1599 page 48
2 The Huguenot image of the island of Rodriguez 49
3 A cleared landscape on Barbados at Hackelton’s Cliff, mid eighteenth century 66
4 An engraving of Cape Town made shortly after the first Dutch settlement 92
5 A location map of St Helena 97
6 St Helena in about 1570: Portuguese ships at anchor in the Jamestown roads at the time of Linschoten’s visit 99
7 A map of Mauritius in about 1670, from the ‘secret atlas’ of the Dutch East India Company 131
8 Ebony cutting on the coast of Mauritius, 1677 139
9 Late-seventeenth-century engraving of the dodo 147
10 The physiocrat Pierre Poivre (1719–86) 170
11 Mauritius in 1801, showing limited forest clearance 180
12 Mauritius in 1835 207
13 The Pacific islands of Tinian and Juan Fernandez in the 1740s 234
14 Kingstown, St Vincent, about 1815 270
15 Map of Tobago showing the forest reserves established according to the proclamation of 1764 272
16 Soame Jenyns 275
17 Chief Chatoyer and his wives 289
18 Anderson’s drawing of the Morne Garou volcano on St Vincent 307
19 Robert Kyd, superintendent of the East India Company’s botanical garden at Sibpur, Calcutta, 1780–93 333
20 William John Burchell (1782–1864) 351
Illustrations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Illustration Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21 William Roxburgh, superintendent of the Calcutta Botanic Garden, 1793–1813</td>
<td>356</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 Hugh Francis Cleghorn (1820–95)</td>
<td>452</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 The Committee of the Madras Literary and Scientific Society in about 1860</td>
<td>463</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgements

This book grew originally from an interest in tropical forest conservation which developed while I was working in Malawi, in central Africa, in 1973 and 1974. It was in 1982, while walking in the forests of Soche Hill in the company of Jim Chapman, a former Conservator of Forests of Nyasaland, that I began to realise the need for a more global approach to the history of environmentalism than was currently fashionable. By then I had already had the good fortune to meet the late Professor Clarence Glacken, the much-missed doyen of Berkeley academic geography. It was at his suggestion that I started to read the extraordinary environmentalist tracts of John Crombie Brown, the missionary and Colonial Botanist of the Cape Colony between 1862 and 1866. This allowed me in turn to appreciate the close intellectual links between the pioneer conservationists of the Cape and Natal and their scientific predecessors in India, St Helena, Mauritius and St Vincent. More generally, it led me to understand the quite disproportionate part played by radical colonial thinkers of the Scottish and French medical and physiocratic tradition in creating a western environmental awareness. My debt to Glacken is at least equalled by my debt to Dr Joan Thirsk for actively encouraging me to look beyond my studies of East Anglian agricultural innovation and Huguenot immigration and embark on an exploration of what were then unfamiliar realms of environmental history and the history of environmental ideas. In fact the change was far less radical than it might seem. We now know that the economic motives and global networks involved in the diffusion of exotic plant and crop species, particularly those of the Dutch, were vital both to the dynamics of agricultural improvement and to the evolution of a global environmental awareness. Huguenots, meanwhile, played a vital part in colonial botanical experimentation and plant species diffusion as they did in seventeenth-century Europe.

The interdisciplinary nature of tropical environmental history presents some particular challenges. Over a period of years I have thus been very fortunate in being able to consult Dr Mario di Gregorio and Dr Quentin Cronk on, respectively, the lesser-known byways of Victorian science and the intricacies of island ecological history. Similarly, Dr William Beinart has, over a whole decade, been keen to discuss and mull over many of the arguments presented in this book. Without their confident support and enthusiasm my task would have been much more arduous. Professor Barry Supple, first as
research supervisor and then as mentor and friend, acted as a perennial source of warm encouragement and tolerance far beyond the dictates of duty. Vinita Damodaran was an ever-enthusiastic and profoundly committed ally in the course of the intellectual journey which this book represents. At several stages Glynis Reynolds and Ka Kheng Tan spent many laborious hours in helping me to formalise my ideas and actually put a book together.

Many academic colleagues have assisted me with ideas and helpful criticism over the long period of gestation of the book. I am especially grateful to Polly Hill, John Mackenzie and Margaret Spufford, who read early versions of the manuscript, and also to Keith Thomas, Peter Burke, Gillian Beer, and Simon Schaffer, who all went to great trouble to read and comment on later and longer versions of the manuscript. I want to thank, too, those other scholars and friends who have given me their comments, insights and references in the course of my writing. They include Martin Abdullahi, Bridget and Raymond Allchin, David Allen, Robert Anderson, Havovi Anklesaria, Sir Harold Bailey, Philip Barnwell, Chris Bayly, Leon Blusse, Tim Bonyhady, Peter Boonmgard, Teresa Brennan, Marlene Buchy, Mary Bullock, Jane Carruthers, Jim Chapman, Dick Chorley, Father Richard Conrad O.P., James Cormack, Alfred Crosby, Selwyn Dardaine, John Dargavel, the late Colyer Dawkins, Robin Donkin, Gina Douglas, Richard Drayton, Beverley Ellis, Toyin Falola, Howard Fergus, Joan Fitzgerald, Elizabeth Flint, Adrian Fraser, Peter Gathercole, Nick Gill, Ram Guha, Polly Hill, Richard Howard, Martin Janal, Nick Jardine, the late Jane Kenrick, John Killick, Ira Klein, Are Kolawole, Shepard Kreech, Deepak Kumar, Michael Lacey, Andrew Lightman, Madeleine Ly-Tio-Fane, Helen Mackean, Roy Macleod, Julian Martin, Sir Joseph Needham, Father Patrick O’Malley, Mary Orr, Kings Phiri, Val Pinsky, Father Robert Pollock, O.P., Jacques Poucheypadass, Joseph Powell, Ravi Rajan, Mahesh Rangarajan, Terence Ranger, Jack Ravensdale, John Richards, Chris Rose, Nigel Rubbra, David Sacks, Satpal Sangwan, Jameson Seyani, John Sheail, Ajay Skaria, Ron Smith, Dee Snyman, Emma Sparry, Peter Spufford, John Stewart, Peter Stewart, Rachel Stewart, K. K. Sumedathy Sumitra, Ka Kheng Tan, Richard Tucker, Cristina Villalobos, Piers Vitebsky, Adrian Walford, Philip Ward, David Watts, Ken Wilson, Elizabeth Whitcombe, Donald Worster, Peter Wyse-Jackson and Claire Young. The Sprott family of Strathvieve, Fife, kindly allowed me to consult the family papers of their ancestor Hugh Cleg- horn and to view their pictures. Similarly, the Jenyns family of Bottisham Hall, Cambridge, generously allowed me access to their private library and to the papers and diaries of Soame and Leonard Jenyns. I am especially grateful to the Governor-General of St Vincent and the Grenadines, who volunteered to spend an arduous afternoon with me uncovering and sorting through documents in little-visited and dusty parts of the basement of Government House in Kingstown. Both Dr Vivian Child and Dr Earle Kirby went to great lengths
Acknowledgements

to introduce me to St Vincent and to accommodate me there. Mr Cyril Shallow of Stubbs Village kindly guided me around the King’s Hill Forest Reserve, told me the local names for the trees and showed me how to gather American yams in a sustainable fashion. Some of my past teachers have, unknowingly, contributed very considerably to this book. They included John Tanfield and Malcolm Macfarlane at the Perse School, Cambridge, both deeply inspiring and committed men. At a later stage Andrew Goodie and John Patten at Hertford College, Oxford, inculcated a preference for eclectic and sceptical generalism that has proved far more useful than I anticipated. My enthusiasm for conservationist concerns was further stimulated by Andrew Warren, Barry Goldsmith and my contemporaries on the remarkable conservation training course at University College, London.

It is a pleasure to record the assistance given to me by the staffs of many archives and libraries, and particularly the staffs of Cambridge University Library; the Archives of Kings College, Aberdeen; the National Archives of India, New Delhi; the Karnataka State Archives, Bangalore; the Connemara Library, Madras; the Forestry Research Institute Library, Dehra Dun, Uttar Pradesh; the National Library of India, Calcutta; the French Institute, Pondicherry; the National Archives of Mauritius, Coromandel; the Mauritius Naval Historical Museum, Mahebourg; the Mauritius Institute, Port Louis; The South African Library Archives, Cape Town; the Cape Provincial Archives, Cape Town; the Natal Provincial Archives, Pietermaritzburg; the University of Vermont Archives, Burlington, Vermont; the National Archives of St Vincent and the Grenadines, Kingstown; the Public Library, Kingstown, St Vincent; the National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago, Port of Spain; the Public Library and Archives, Plymouth, Crown Colony of Montserrat; the Carnegie Library and National Archives, Roseau, Commonwealth of Dominica; the Archives of the Royal Society of Arts; the Linnaean Society Library and Archives; the Archives of the Royal Botanic Garden, Kew, Surrey; the British Library Manuscripts Room; the National Library of Scotland; the Public Record Office; the Scottish Record Office; the Library of Congress; the Manuscripts section of the Bibliothèque Centrale du Muséum d’Histoire Naturelle, Paris; the Netherlands State Archives, The Hague; the Mitchell Library, Sydney; the Tasmanian State Archives, Hobart; the Hope Entomology Library, University Museum, Oxford; the Indian Institute Library, Oxford; the Lincoln County Archives; and the University of St Andrews Archives.

During the period I was researching and writing this book I held a research fellowship at Clare Hall and then a fellowship and college lectureship at Churchill College, Cambridge. Grants from the Department of Education and Science and the Royal Society and a post-doctoral fellowship from the British Academy provided me with the financial support necessary for the travelling and writing involved in the project. A part of the research was funded by the
xvii

Acknowledgements

Social Science Research Council of the United States. At Churchill College, Sir Hermann Bondi, Professor Alec Broers, Hywel George, and Brij Gupta have all been invaluable sources of friendship and support in recent years. The book was eventually completed during a very pleasant and stimulating one-year fellowship of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, at the Smithsonian Institution, in Washington, D.C. Frank Smith, my editor, and Jane Van Tassel, my copy-editor, have both been splendid and meticulous partners in the publishing process.

I have also been lucky to have had the company of some dear friends and relatives during my research. While not directly connected with my work in an academic sense, they were sympathetic to the spirit of it. I should thus like to thank the whole of my wonderful extended family for their support. Sadly, some of them have died long before their time. Jim, Joan and Clare Stewart, who were killed in the course of fighting for a free and just South Africa, were among them and the book is for them. It is also in memory of my great-aunts Gertie Hughes and Vera Kirkland, my grandmother Mary Clark and my cousin Bridget Spufford, who were all unusually courageous women as well as being keen students of nature.

Finally, I owe a great deal to my parents, Dick and Jean Grove. As historical climatologists and geographers with an enormous enthusiasm for field experience, they introduced me, quite unintentionally, to the writing of environmental history. They also led me to question orthodoxy. Their own field interests led me, at an early age, to close encounters with the mysteries of Scoll Head Island and Rousseau’s beloved Valaisan Alps. Later on, in Ghana, we explored together the Aburi Royal Botanic Garden and the towering forests of the Mampong escarpment. All these places left me with an enduring sense of wonder and a source of hope and inspiration which I trust that they will recognise.