

Global Environmental History

Contact Info | Required Readings | Course Breakdown

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Required Readings

Bouchier & Cruikshank, *The People & the Bay*
Bonnell, *Reclaiming the Don*
Van Horssen, *A Town Called Asbestos*
Zhang, *The River, the Plain, & the State*
Matteson, *Forests in Revolutionary France*
Kiechle, *Smell Detectives*
Davis, *The Arid Lands*
Bohme, *Toxic Injustice*
Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*

Grade Breakdown

MA	
<i>Attendance & Participation:</i>	30%
<i>Historiographic Discussion:</i>	10%
<i>Review Essay 1:</i>	20%
<i>Review Essay 2:</i>	20%
<i>Review Essay 3:</i>	20%
PhD	
<i>Attendance & Participation:</i>	20%
<i>Historiographic Discussion:</i>	10%
<i>Review Essay 1:</i>	15%
<i>Review Essay 2:</i>	15%
<i>Review Essay 3:</i>	15%
<i>Historiographic Review:</i>	15%
<i>Final Exam:</i>	10%

WHAT IS ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY?

According to J. Donald Hughes, “the task of environmental history is the study of human relationships through time with the natural communities of which they are a part, in order to explain the processes of change that affect that relationship.” Easier said than done, perhaps, but environmental history—quite likely better than any other subdiscipline or approach to history—is more perceptive of human interconnections in the world community, or of the interdependence of humans and other living beings on the planet; indeed, environmental history typically supplements and complicates traditional economic, social, and political forms of historical analysis.

This course aims to introduce environmental history in its global perspective, noting that nature transcends human borders and boundaries and thereby offers new regional and conceptual spaces for historical study. In this capacity, environmental history makes an important contribution to historical praxis. Donald Worster once remarked that environmental history was “part of a revisionist effort to make the discipline far more inclusive in its narratives than it has traditionally been.” Throughout our readings and discussions, we will be pressed into inquiring about the role of non-human actors in history and how we might engage with their agency, rather than relegating them to the backdrop of the human drama.

And then we need to globalize this history. To what extent (and to what value) can historians work comparatively across traditional political boundaries using the physical environment as their bellwether? Is it profitable to examine a “macro” past, following nature through time and place?

I submit that there are three ways of defining environmental history. Most simply, it is a branch of the historical enterprise, an historical subdiscipline. Alternatively, in a provocative 1996 essay, the geographer J. M. Powell argued that environmental history was not a subdiscipline of history, but rather its own interdisciplinary methodology. Environmental historians, he avowed, were charting novel avenues of inquiry, and laying trail for the environmental humanities to follow. This definition is intriguing, but it is also intimidating to the uninitiated. It discourages historians from engaging with environmental questions, because they feel this field is too alien to them. Finally, environmental history might be regarded as a category of historical analysis. As with race, class, and gender, historians must reckon with the physical environment’s influence on the human condition and its past. This course means to examine environmental history through all three of these portals, but I am especially interested in this final reading of the field as a critical lens for understanding the human past.

SCHEDULE

- 14 September:
Bouchier & Cruikshank, *The People & the Bay*
- 21 September:
Bonnell, *Reclaiming the Don*
- 28 September
Van Horssen, *A Town Called Asbestos*
- 5 October:
Review Essay 1 due
- 12 October:
Zhang, *The River, the Plain, & the State*
- 19 October:
Matteson, *Forests in Revolutionary France*
- 26 October:
Kiechle, *Smell Detectives*
- 2 November:
Review Essay 2 due
- 9 November:
Davis, *The Arid Lands*
- 16 November:
Bohme, *Toxic Injustice*
- 23 November:
Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*
- 30 November:
Review Essay 3 due

PARTICIPATION

Seminars will begin on time; punctuality is expected. Critical to a successful seminar is students' preparation. Students should come to class prepared to discuss the assigned topics, having identified key arguments and questions, and ready to share their reflections on how the arguments are presented and supported.

Note that students are required to participate in class discussion; attendance alone does not suffice. Students who attend but do not contribute to the class discussion on a regular basis should not expect to receive a passing grade for this portion of the class.

REVIEW ESSAYS

Students will prepare a short (1000 word max) reflection essay every three weeks on the three books we have just interrogated. The review essay should try to make connections (thematic, historiographic, etc.) between the titles, rather than simply list responses to each book independently. These reports should avoid evaluating the books. Rather: the short writing assignments should engage. Consider them a springboard to a think-piece.

HISTORIOGRAPHIC DISCUSSION

During the first week of the semester, students will each select one book as a jumping off point for a more extensive historiographic examination of the work and its themes. They should prepare a 10-minute presentation to the class on their findings. They should also submit a bibliography to their classmates. Finally, they should plan to use their historiographic analysis to develop some questions to stimulate class discussion for that week.

A NOTE ON HISTORICAL ENGAGEMENT

My research and the topics and questions that interest me typically stress making history relevant in twenty-first century political and cultural discourse. That is to say, I engage in a kind of contemporary history in which I try to bring valuable historical context to current debate. Here's the rub: while many of the themes that drive my research are grounded in presentist issues, I am—first and foremost—an historian. In this class, so are you. Your reflections on course readings, your research inquiries, and your papers should reflect good historical analysis and you should not be tempted to drift into philosophical or political assertions of what "ought" to be. Historians look backward on what "was" as a means of contributing to a larger discussion about the human condition, not as a means of forecasting an ideal future. In spite of the numerous siren calls that present themselves over the course of this semester, it is imperative that you cling to history as a discipline, methodology, and mode of inquiry.

THE RULES

Deadlines Deadlines are firm. They may be extended on an individual basis if good reasons for missing the deadline are provided. The following are not good reasons for extensions: scheduling difficulties with other classes, work, or other activities; overwork; computer breakdowns; inability to find resources; illness without a doctor's note.

Late assignments will be penalized 10% a day to a total of 20%. Late work will not be accepted more than two weeks after the deadline. In addition, late papers will be graded without comment.

Because assignments can get lost, and because questions of authorship sometimes arise, you are advised to keep your research notes and copies of your rough drafts of written work, even after it has been marked and returned. Make sure you keep backup files stored safely.

A Note on Style History is very much a craft, especially in its delivery. Clarity of thought and clarity of prose are acquired skills that take time and work. Students should take great care to ensure that these skills are well represented in their written submissions. Good writing matters; precision counts. Typos, misspellings, and poor syntax/grammar are an expression of insufficient effort, and will result in substantial reductions in marks.

Style and format must conform to Chicago Style, using footnotes or endnotes (the former is preferred) rather than internal citation systems. It is highly recommend that students have access to (and make use of) a style guide. I can recommend Kate Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, or the *Chicago Manual of Style*, both of which are widely available. Alongside a good dictionary and thesaurus, a style guide is a critical reference tool for serious historians.

THE FINE PRINT

E-mail Policy It is the policy of the Faculty of Humanities that all email communication sent from students to instructors (including TAs), and from students to staff, must originate from the student's own McMaster University email account. This policy protects confidentiality and confirms the identity of the student. Instructors will delete emails that do not originate from a McMaster email account.

Course Modifications The instructor and the university reserve the right to modify elements of the course during the term. The university may change the dates and deadlines for any or all courses in extreme circumstances. If either type of modification becomes necessary, reasonable notice and communication with the students will be given with the explanation and the opportunity to comment on changes. It is the responsibility of the student to check their McMaster e-mail and course websites weekly during the term to note any changes.

Support Services McMaster University provides a variety of support services to help students manage their many demands:

1. Reference librarians offer invaluable research assistance
2. The Centre for Student Development (CSD) provides assistance with personal as well as academic matters. <http://csd.mcmaster.ca/>

It is highly recommended that you make use of these services before problems or questions become irremediable disasters.

STATEMENT OF ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

You are expected to exhibit honesty and use ethical behaviour in all aspects of the learning process. Academic credentials you earn are rooted in principles of honesty and academic integrity. Academic dishonesty is to knowingly act or fail to act in a way that results or could result in unearned academic credit or advantage. This behaviour can result in serious consequences—e.g., the grade of zero on an assignment, loss of credit with a notation on the transcript (notation reads: “Grade of F assigned for academic dishonesty”), and/or suspension or expulsion from the university. It is your responsibility to understand what constitutes academic dishonesty. For information on the various types of academic dishonesty, please refer to the Academic Integrity Policy, located at:

<http://www.mcmaster.ca/academicintegrity>

The following illustrates only three forms of academic dishonesty:

- 1) Plagiarism—e.g., the submission of work that is not one's own or for which other credit has been obtained.
- 2) Improper collaboration in group work.
- 3) Copying or using unauthorized aids in tests and examinations.