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# British Environmental History

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## HISTORIA AMBIENTAL BRITÁNICA

### Resumen

Este artículo explora el estado actual del campo de la historia ambiental británica, centrándose en las tendencias actuales. El campo se encuentra en un momento de consolidación, con una mayor visibilidad en los campus universitarios, y ha experimentado un notable giro hacia el estudio de historias ambientales localizadas en la propia Gran Bretaña. Hay, sin embargo, una estrecha interrelación con campos afines, en particular con la geografía histórica, la historia económica y las historias regionales. Los temas actuales giran en torno a cuestiones relacionadas con el clima, el agua y la energía. Además, el campo afronta críticas previas en cuanto a la ausencia de teorías sociales e integra lo humano a la par que mantiene un fuerte sentido del papel de la naturaleza

### Palabras clave

Historia ambiental, historiografía británica, historia del clima, historia del agua

Códigos JEL: N5, N54, Q15

### Abstract

This article explores the current state of the field of environmental history in Britain, focusing on current trends. The field is consolidating, with a more visible presence at British universities, and a notable switch to the study of environmental histories of Great Britain itself. There is still considerable cross-over with related fields, in particular historical geography, economic history, and regional histories. Current themes in environmental history revolve around questions of climate, water, and energy. In addition, the field is addressing previous criticism related to the absence of social theories, and integrates the human world while remaining a sense of agency of nature.

### Key Words

Environmental history, historiography, Britain, climate history, water history

JEL codes: N5, N54, Q15

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## Introduction

Previous environmental historiographies have often pointed out that the majority of work conducted by environmental historians at British universities has been concerned with areas beyond the UK itself. For instance, Timothy Cooper wrote of a 'reluctance' to address environmental history issues in the UK (Cooper, 2008), while around the same time T.C. Smout stated that:

*what is usually meant by 'environmental history' internationally (...) the humanities-based and often ideologically committed subject associated with the Americans (...) has had enormous influence in Britain as elsewhere, but most notably it has been among historians working in British universities but studying other continents (Smout, 2009: 16).*

In recent years, however, the field has witnessed a shift to environmental histories of and in Britain itself<sup>1</sup>. It is tempting to consider this a sign of the field's consolidation and increasing confidence of its place in British academe, and it is a development that does not stand on its own. A deliberate support in funding for environmental history projects as well as the appointments of lectureships and chairs in environmental history are further indications of a maturing field. The question remains whether this is a distinct 'British' environmental history, rather than a local expression of the field at large. As a wide interdisciplinary and international subdiscipline, but at the same time concerned with the materialities of the places it studies, environmental history often balances large themes and site-specific histories that through their interaction influence the type of environmental histories produced. The development and growth of North American environmental history, for instance, has been influenced by its geographical conditions of large stretches of wilderness with low popula-

tion density. British environmental history has less of the traditional concern with wilderness, although it is significant to note that early environmental historians either situated their research where more of these conditions were present, or researched wilderness-related issues in the context of Scotland, where these were more relevant. As the field developed over the past few decades, some of the idiosyncrasies of British history have filtered through in its environmental historiography as well, most notably its colonial history, as well as concerns with industrialisation and urbanisation. Recent trends in British environmental history, such as the study of climate history and meteorology might originate from a British fascination with the weather, or could reflect a wider international trend for research in climate change and climate history.

Environmental history is a wide and diverse field that comprises several themes, approaches, and methodologies that only occasionally overlap, an issue that has been considered both its strength and its weakness (Sörlin and Warde, 2007). Donald Worster's 1989 subdivision into three themes explains the field as firstly, the study of nature itself through the reconstruction of past environments; secondly, the interaction between humans and nature, including socio-economic relations concerning natural resources; and, thirdly, thinking about nature, how knowledge of nature shaped how we thought and treated environments (Worster, 1989). As environmental history in the UK emerged as a self-conscious field in the early 1990s, these subthemes were dealt with in mostly separate clusters of research activity. In Scotland, the Institute for Environmental History was established at the University of St Andrews in 1992. This institute, led by Smout, mainly focused on the first two themes, with an emphasis on the history of the woodlands and uplands of Scotland and Northern England and how these interacted with their inhabitants. Key works that emerged from the research the Institute pursued include Smout's *Nature Contested, Environmental History in Scotland and Northern England since 1600*, as well as several edited collections on woodland history, that of Scotland in particular (Smout 1997, 2003). The institute was also the first in the UK to offer a degree in Environmental History, which fostered a group of scholars working on a variety of topics within the history of woodland and forestry (see e.g. Lambert, 2001; Oosthoek, 2013), and in 2001 St Andrews was the host and venue for the first conference of the European Society for Envi-

<sup>1</sup> The majority of this work has been concerned with England and Scotland, with some projects on Welsh environmental history. Northern Ireland is a mostly neglected area in the field. Queen's University Belfast has a Paleoecology group as well as geographer David Livingstone working on histories of Darwinism, climatology and environmental determinism, but neither identify their work as environmental history.

ronmental History (ESEH).

In Southern England, meanwhile, early environmental historians focused on the history of ideas about nature and the development of environmental consciousness, with Peter Coates in Bristol working on the development of Western thought about nature (Coates, 1998) and Richard Grove at Sussex University on the relation of colonisation and scientific knowledge about the human impact on environments (Grove, 1996). By 2002, a second UK environmental history centre was established at Sussex University. This Centre for World Environmental History (CWEH) grew out of Vinita Damodaran's and Richard Grove's work on work on the environmental history of India (Grove, Damodaran and Sangwan, 1998) and climate history (Grove, 1997), and gained a particular expertise on the environment of the tropics and global South.

Over time, environmental history in Scotland shifted towards the 'third category' of environmental history, reflecting the cultural turn in the wider field around this time. In the early 2000s, the Institute joined with the University of Stirling's Centre for Environmental History and Policy (CEHP), and research focused on a joint large project on the history of waste and wastelands. John Scanlan's *On Garbage* (2005) as well as Tim Cooper's and John Clark's work on refuse, re-use and recycling of waste in modern Britain emerged from the St Andrews side of this collaboration and contributed to material environmental histories as well as including a more metaphysical exploration of the concept of 'waste' and how it was dealt with over time (Cooper, 2009, 2010; Clark 2007; Scanlan, 2005, 2007). This was complemented by work on wastelands at Stirling, with research focusing on uncultivated and disused lands, examining the impact of industrialisation beyond its traditional focus of urbanisation. Current work at Stirling still examines the post-industrial landscape in a rural context, with several projects looking at the environmental histories of Scotland's old lead mining landscapes<sup>2</sup>. Research on the reconstruction of past landscapes still takes place, but is increasingly associated with paleoecology, paleoclimatology, and archaeology, rather than environmental history.

The study of the cultural side of environmental history, however, has blossomed in recent years. In part, this has been the result of several research programmes funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), one of the main funding bodies for historical research in UK universities. From the mid-2000s onwards, the AHRC has organised its available funding in strategic programmes or themes, which have been influential in setting the research agenda. Under two of its past and current themes, environmental history was more or less explicitly mentioned, allowing for the proliferation of projects that – in varying degrees – were framed as environmental history.

One of these strategic programmes was the 'Landscape and Environment' theme, which ran between 2006 and 2012, and funded projects that dealt with cultural forms and processes that shaped and were shaped by landscapes and the

environment<sup>3</sup>. While the programme itself did not explicitly position itself within the field of environmental history – interdisciplinarity was in fact one of the main features of the programme and it attracted scholars from a wide range of disciplines – its themes were well-suited to environmental historians and several of the projects' outcomes were framed as environmental history.

Appetite proved large enough to generate a separate network within this programme called Researching Environmental Change. This network funded small projects, mainly consisting of workshops and collaborative activities, between 2010 and 2011. Many of these projects addressed environmental history issues and, crucially, formed the catalyst for scholars to meet and collaborate. The theme proved successful and environmental history remained on the AHRC's agenda, with its next round of large strategic programmes including several environmental history projects under the 'Care for the Future' theme. It is from these sets of projects that we can see the current themes of British environmental history crystallise. In particular, climate change, water, and energy are important themes that recur in several of the projects under these programmes, as well as a conceptual shift towards the study of networks and flows as opposed to environmental histories of particular regions, landscapes or sites. In addition, these projects brought together British environmental historians whose research up till that point had been situated further afield, and as such played an important role in refocusing research back to the UK<sup>4</sup>.

As the field has grown and matured over the past few decades, a complete overview of environmental history in Britain would be beyond the scope of this paper – the field is simply too vast and too scattered for a complete overview. What I aim to do therefore, is to provide a brief introduction to the field's main influences in Britain, and then focus on current trends.

#### British environmental history: origins and influences

Before environmental history emerged in the UK as a self-identifying field in the early 1990s, themes which would now be considered environmental history were incorporated in other fields of history. In particular, the subdisciplines of landscape history and historical geography, two fields which traditionally have been strong in the UK, share many common themes with environmental history and scholarship within these fields continues to cross over. Key works in this tradition include landscape historian W.G. Hoskins' 1955 book *The Making of the English Landscape*, geographer H.C. Darby's 1940 book *The Draining of the Fens*, in addition to his work on forest clearance and heathland reclamation (Darby, 1940, 1951), and Oli-

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.landscape.ac.uk/landscape/index.aspx>.

<sup>4</sup> See for instance in particular the project 'Local Places, Global Processes', which consisted of environmental histories of several sites across the UK, and consisted of a collaboration of scholars who had previously mainly researched other areas: Peter Coates on Alaska/US, David Moon on Russia, and Paul Warde on Germany. Also the ongoing 'The Power and the Water' (2013-2016), which involved Coates, Warde, and Georgina Endfield, whose previous work was on Mexico.

<sup>2</sup> See Catherine Mills' work on Scottish lead legacy: <https://www.stir.ac.uk/cehp/projects/lead-legacy/> and <https://www.stir.ac.uk/cehp/projects/exposure-heavy-metals/>, as well as <https://www.stir.ac.uk/cehp/projects/hidden-legacies/>.

ver Rackham's 1986 *The History of the Countryside* (Rackham, 1986). These works take on the long history of particular landscapes, and consider the dual modifications of humans on the earth, including modifications of vegetation, animals, and soil, but also, if to a lesser degree, how the landscape shaped society. Some early British environmental history work followed in this tradition and took on a *longue-durée* view of human-environment relations, such as Ian Simmons' *An environmental history of Great Britain: from 10,000 years ago to the present* (Simmons 2001). As a physical geographer, Simmons had been working on natural resources and human-environment interactions for much of his career (Simmons, 1996a, 1996b, 1998), but by the 1990s he had started to identify his work as environmental history. Two follow-ups of his book include the long environmental history of English and Welsh moorlands in particular (Simmons, 2003) as well as a book on global environmental history (Simmons, 2008).

A related influence is Oliver Rackham's work on the history of ancient woodlands and forestry. In particular, Rackham's early work *Ancient Woodland*, which included a history of society's management of woodland, has been influential for its combination of methods, ranging from archival documents, pollen analysis, archaeology, and place name analysis (Rackham 1980). Forests and woodlands remain an ongoing strong theme in British environmental history (see e.g. Watkins, 2014; Rotherham, 2013), with an increasing focus on the animals within them, and concerns with conservation conflicts surrounding issues of rewilding and invasive species (Rotherham and Lambert, 2011; Rotherham, 2013).

There is still a considerable amount of scholarship happening in cultural and historical geography which crosses over into environmental history. For instance, Tom Williamson's recent environmental history of wildlife between 1650 and the twentieth century is grounded in the study of changes in the landscape over that time, in particular, the human impact on animals in framed through the effects of the agricultural and industrial revolutions on wildlife habitats (Williamson, 2013). John Sheail's most recent work, *Nature's Spectacle*, builds on his previous work on the history of conservation policies in Britain to examine the environmental history of national parks from a cultural as well as an ecological perspective (Sheail, 2002, 2010). Another environmental historian who came from a landscape history background and continued to combine the fields is Richard Oram, while Ben Anderson's work on the construction of Alpine landscapes, although rooted in cultural geography, was recognised for its contribution to environmental history by the ESEH in 2013 (Anderson, 2012). The link between the fields remain strong, as evidenced by the most recent International Conference of Historical Geographers, held in London in 2015, which featured a strong showing of British and international environmental historians, and included sessions on the American environment, animals, as well as multiple sessions on water history and climate history<sup>5</sup>.

A recent project that exemplifies the connection between landscape studies and environmental history was the 'Milita-

rized Landscapes' project, which was funded under the AHRC Environment and Landscape programme between 2007 and 2010<sup>6</sup>. By exploring how the environment is reshaped with the purpose of preparing for conflict and war, the project highlighted the role of these militarily landscapes as an important habitat for wildlife and studied a 'military environmentalism' that actively created and protected these sites (Pearson, Coates, and Cole 2010; Coates et al, 2011). Several of the outputs of this project were explicitly environmental history, and helped spark the careers of a new generation of British environmental historians. For instance, as part of this project Marianna Dudley focused on UK-based military training sites that were maintained as wilderness for training purposes, but over the course of the twentieth century also actively protected the habitats of species that could thrive under the conditions these environments provided (Dudley 2012). Chris Pearson, meanwhile, also highlighted how the landscape and animals were engaged in human conflict by exploring their roles as active agents in warfare in nineteenth and twentieth-century France (Pearson, 2012, 2008, 2006).

Further key influences on the development of British environmental history include social and economic history, colonial history, urban history, the history of science as well as regional histories, often through studies that display considerable interdisciplinarity. Economic history intersects with environmental history primarily through research on natural resources and energy. For instance, Paul Warde's work on woodlands in early modern Germany essentially combines economic and environmental history by considering wood both as an ecological as well as an economic resource (Warde, 2006). Research on the provision of food and fuel, even when executed with a focus on their economic functions, often supplied important information regarding the distribution and movement of natural resources. Scholars have addressed how people interacted with their environments through these networks in a wide variety of contexts, ranging from medieval and early modern fuel and food supplies (Galloway, Keene, and Murphy, 1996; Galloway, 2000; Winchester, 2000), nineteenth-century global trade networks of agricultural good (Ross, 2014), and twentieth-century electricity networks (Luckin, 1990; Sheail, 1991). Integrating methods from economic history produces more quantitative analysis than usually encountered in environmental history, which is particularly useful when covering long-term series of energy and natural resource use. In recent years, the research network 'Ecology, Economy and Society, 1500-2000' has brought together British and international researchers working on the history of energy and energy consumption, with projects explicitly positioned as crossovers of environmental and economic history (Kander, Malanima, and Warde, 2015; Kander and Warde, 2011)<sup>7</sup>.

An additional overlap between economic and environmental history has been the history of the Industrial Revolution, and particularly its impact on the environment. An early overview work which was allied with the early environmental

<sup>5</sup> ICHG: <http://www.ichg2015.org/programme/>.

<sup>6</sup> See the project site: <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/history/militarylandscapes/>.

<sup>7</sup> See the network's website: <http://www.histecon.magd.cam.ac.uk/ees/index.html>.

history movement in Britain is Brian Clapp's 1994 book *An Environmental History of Britain since the Industrial Revolution*, which, although more narrow in scope than its title suggests, provides a useful overview of industrial pollution and the changed economies surrounding natural resources as a result of the industrial revolution (Clapp, 1994).

The impact of industrialisation has received particular attention in the context of urban pollution. The history of air pollution was pioneered by Peter Brimblecombe in *The Big Smoke*, providing a *longue-durée* overview of air pollution in London beginning from wood smoke in medieval times, to the switch to coal, through industrialisation, and ending at efforts to tackle air pollution in the twentieth century (Brimblecombe, 1987). Brimblecombe combined his background in atmospheric chemistry with historical research and was one of the early scholars to identify his work as environmental history. This type of urban environmental history continues with Stephen Mosley's work on smoke pollution in Manchester, which focuses on pollution as a direct result of the industrial revolution (Mosley, 2001).

The polluting effects of industrialisation on water have been studied as well, starting from Bill Luckin's 1986 study *Pollution and Control*, on how the Victorians managed sewage, water pollution, and water-borne diseases (Luckin, 1986). The majority of these works have been focused on the urban context, although there have been studies on the relation of polluted urban water and the rural hinterland as well. For instance, Nicholas Goddard has examined the relationship between mainly urban-generated sewage and its possible value as an agricultural fertiliser (Goddard, 1996), while the urban-rural relationship surrounding water pollution has been further explored in recent work by Leslie Rosenthal (Rosenthal, 2013). With some exceptions, however, the majority of research on nature in the urban environment has not been positioned within the field of environmental history, or engages much with other work done within the field. As Genevieve Massard-Guilbaud and Peter Thorsheim suggested in a 2007 essay on urban environmental history, precisely because Britain had a strong tradition of urban history as well as the history of public health, scholars working on these themes often found a natural home in these subdisciplines (Massard-Guilbaud and Thorsheim, 2007: 694). In the eight years since, however, several completed PhD theses on urban environmental history (Skelton, 2012; Asuga, 2013; van Lieshout, 2013) as well as a book on environmental changes in the urban environment (Douglas, 2013) have been more explicit about their position in the field.

A final major influence on the development of British environmental history are the historiographies of particular regions. As previously noted, many scholars who became allied with the environmental history movement initially specialised in specific areas, often outside of the UK, and came to frame their questions as belonging to the environmental history of that region (e.g. Moon, 2013). Specifically, it has been the study of imperialism and colonial history that has had strong influence on how British environmental history developed as a field, and early works include Richard Grove's *Green Imperialism* (Grove, 1996), William Beinart and Peter Coates' com-

parative environmental histories of the USA and South Africa (Beinart and Coates, 1995), John MacKenzie's examination of the Scottish role in the environmental history of the British empire (MacKenzie, 1997), with William Beinart and Lotte Hughes' more recent work *Environment and Empire* providing a synthesis of how imperialism impacted on the natural world throughout the British Empire (Beinart and Hughes, 2007).

Much of this work takes place at the CWEH at Sussex University, with past and present research projects continuing Grove's and Damodaran's research on climate and imperial histories, particular in the context of the Indian Ocean world (Kumar, Damodaran, and D'Souza, 2010). Recent projects explore climate events in the Indian Ocean and their impact on the surrounding lands, the botanical history of India, and the role of the East India Company in compiling records of its encounters with the environment<sup>8</sup>. Other researchers have extended these questions towards Australia, Africa, and the Caribbean. For instance, James Beattie, while affiliated with the centre, has explored the flows of plants, people, and ideas, and how they linked South Asia and Australasia (Beattie, 2011), while Kate Showers' research on foresting grasslands in Lesotho (Showers, 2006) and Simon Pooley's work on forestry and wildfire on the Cape Peninsula (Pooley, 2014) contribute towards the environmental history of Africa. Similarly, water resources are studied in an imperial context, for example in the 'Coastal Frontiers' project at Birkbeck University, which explores water resources around the Bay of Bengal in the dual contexts of environmental change and imperial legacy.

#### Current trends in British Environmental History

A particular topic that has received a lot of recent attention in the environmental history community is climate history, or historical climatology. This incorporates the study and reconstruction of past climates, often based on environmental science studies, but also, and increasingly, includes a cultural approach. Cultural aspects of climate change, such as the study of how people perceived and responded to changing climates, how climatic events appeared in narratives and discourses, and how events were framed, has become a particular strength of British climate history. Britain has had a long tradition in this subfield, as shown by early works such as H.H. Lamb's 1972 book *Climate: Present, Past and Future and its follow ups Climatic History and the Future* (1977) and *Climate, History and the Modern World* (1982). These books combined a scientific analysis of past climates with the ways changing climates or weather phenomena affected society. Another early work in this genre is Jean M. Grove's *The Little Ice Age* (1988), and its successor *Little Ice Ages, ancient and modern* (2004), which similarly chart the occurrences of ice ages and their impact on society over time.

A climatic event that has attracted scholarly attention is the El Niño Southern Oscillation, in particular by Richard

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<sup>8</sup> For these projects see: <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/cweh/research>.



Grove. Using archival evidence from around the world, Grove examined the global economic, institutional, and societal consequences of the 1789-93 El Niño, one of the most severe ones in recorded history (Grove, 1998, 2007). Research on historical El Niño events has been continued by David Nash and Georgina Endfield, who examined nineteenth-century documentary sources to analyse the impact of El Niño events in central southern Africa, showing how related rainfall patterns affected local livelihoods (Nash and Endfield, 2008; Nash et al, 2015). Similarly, Nash and George Adamson have collaborated on the reconstruction of rainfall variability as a result of the monsoon in western India (Adamson and Nash, 2014). This and other research has shown the role historical documentary evidence can play in the task of establishing changing climate patterns (MacDonald et al, 2010), from private diaries (Adamson, 2015) to the weather records in the shiplogs of the British fleet (Wheeler, 2005).

Reconstruction of past climates remains a key theme, but increasingly climate historians have also focused on the question of how societies have coped with climatic changes. Integrating approaches from the study of disasters, historians have framed the impact of climate change in terms of hazards, risk, vulnerability and resilience. Greg Bankoff's work on how societies have managed the risk of disasters through institutional as well as physical adaptations has been very influential in research on cultural adaptation to climatic change (Bankoff, 2003a, 2003b, 2009, 2013). Vulnerability and the resilience of societies to react to climate change has become a distinct environmental history angle within the larger field of climate history, and scholars have teased out patterns of adaptation and coping strategies through linking documentary and physical evidence on societal changes in practices, livelihoods, and structures in response to climate change (see Endfield, 2008, 2012; Adamson, 2014). In addition, by moving away from deterministic interpretations of the effects of climate on society, British climate historians have gone towards a more complex narrative in which human actions worked alongside environmental factors. This considers climate change as a social construct, in which climatic extremes and the weather events associated with them affect different groups of society in different ways. The impact of these events are thus studied as an interaction between the effects of climate change and world imperialist and economic history.

In addition to societal adaptability to climate change, current work also focuses on the lived experience of changing and extreme weather, as well as on knowledge systems and the evolution of ideas about climate and weather patterns. Research on the lived experience of climate generally evolves around memories and regional practices in response to climate, and question through individuals' experiences of particular weather events and the memories these evoked, whether and how these events shaped their lives (Geoghehan and Leys-hon, 2012; Adamson, 2012). Recent research includes projects on the lived experiences of severe winter and snow events in Wales and Cumbria, which through combining archival evidence and oral histories examines how these events became memorised (Hall, 2014; Jones, 2014). On a larger scale, a current project on extreme weather events examines historical

weather extremes over the course of 300 years across Great Britain<sup>9</sup>. It considers extreme weather not only as material events but also as occurrences that are culturally constructed and refracted through recordings, representations, and collective memories. As such, the project forms a cultural perspective on how extreme weather event were experienced, understood and remembered, and how the memorisation of past events are used in turn to frame subsequent events.

Finally, the themes of climatic events and risk are researched in the context of the history of science. Climatic phenomena such as floods, droughts, and hailstorms affected the agricultural economy, while the patterns of trade winds and monsoons were important factors in the production and distribution of goods through the British empire. During the nineteenth century, the believe that through the impact of these events could be controlled or limited by better knowledge of weather patterns and the forces that drove them, led to increased recordings and scientific approaches in the understanding of the British and global climate (e.g. Endfield, Veale and Hall, 2015). James Kneale and Samuel Randalls have investigated the role of insurance businesses that insured against hailstorms in the creation of knowledge about weather patterns in the late-nineteenth century (Kneale and Randalls, 2014). Martin Mahony researches the history of imperial meteorology in the twentieth century, as British scientists applied their emerging understanding of natural phenomena to a globalised science of different climates in response to its usefulness to the empire (Mahony, 2016)<sup>10</sup>. These projects show how new ideas and practices related to increased scientific knowledge on weather phenomena and climate changed the relation society had with climate, and links the study of history of science with climate and environmental history.

A further theme which emerges is water. Again, historians working on water have made strong links with research on risk and hazards, in particular in the context of flood, and have focused on resilience, and the role of science in the understanding and prevention of floods. Links between the study of climate history and historical hydrology is evident in the work of Neil MacDonald, using archival and instrumental sources to create flood frequency (MacDonald, 2012, 2013). Alexander Hall has examined the aftermath of the 1953 North Sea Flood and analysed how flood risk was understood in different ways by the government, public, and scientific community (Hall, 2011, 2015). Further in time, James Galloway examined the impact of floods on eastern England, integrating socio-economic with environmental history to show the changes in risk associated with recurrent coastal floods (Galloway, 2013). These studies contribute to a deeper understanding of how different part of society relate to natural events in different ways. Recent extreme floods across the UK have led to increased attention to societal resilience to flooding, and recent histories have focused on coping strategies, memories, and the lived experience of communities living near water reacting to recent (McEwen

<sup>9</sup> The project runs from 2013 to 2016. See project website: <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/groups/weather-extremes/weather-extremes/weather-extremes.aspx>.

<sup>10</sup> See also project site: <http://imperialweather.com/about-this-project/>.

and Jones, 2010; McEwen et al, 2013) as well as early modern floods (Morgan, 2015).

A different approach to histories of water is the river history. River histories chart the interactions between the environment, the economy, politics, and culture through the histories of changes to river, including their banks as well as the water flowing through them. As such, they consider how rivers shaped the lives of people living on their banks by providing a source of water and power, a way of transport, political borders, as well as recreation, but also how the people changed the river by altering its banks and polluting, or cleaning up, its water (see e.g. Coates, 2013). Popular histories of the Thames have been particularly prolific (e.g. Ackroyd, 2007; Sargent, 2013), but recently, British environmental historians have branched out to river histories of the Mersey (in Coates, 2013) the Tyne (Skelton, 2015), as well as an estuary history on the Firth of Forth (Smout and Stewart, 2012).

Finally, a further outcome of the projects and networks emerging out of the UK's research funding landscape is a growing focus on engagement with both other parts of the humanities and the wider public. Environmental historians have been encouraged to link their work with artists, local communities, nature conservationists, as well as private sector bodies such as water companies and electricity boards<sup>11</sup>. This has resulted in an increased concern for people's relationship with their environments or with particular events, and methodologically, incorporates approaches from cultural geography as well as oral history. In a way, this shows British environmental history increasingly move towards the wider environmental humanities, involving approaches from literary and cultural studies as well as ecocriticism, environmental justice, and biopolitics.

Almost a decade ago, two separate papers (Mosley, 2006; Sörlin and Warde, 2007) called for a further engagement of social history and theory into environmental history, in order to increase integration within mainstream historical studies. While Mosley's article was aimed at social historians in particular to seek out common ground with questions arising from environmental history, Mosley also echoes William Cronon's complaint that environmental history's greatest weakness is "its failure to probe below the level of the group to explore the implications of social divisions" (Cronon, quoted in Mosley, 2006, 920). Sörlin and Warde, meanwhile, issued a similar call to environmental historians, urging them to include the ideas of sociological thinkers that have influenced other areas of history, as well as the "vocabularies of political science and economics" (Sörlin and Warde, 2007, 114). Areas that they highlighted as having particular potential to integrate these issues into environmental history were the risk society (Sörlin and Warde, 2007, 119) and the history of science as a source of both empirical data and ideas that have impacted on how society engaged with nature (Sörlin and Warde, 2007, 113).

Going by outputs of British environmental historians over

the past few years, these calls were heard. The growing emphasis on risk and resilience in the context of both climate change-related as well as flood research, shows a move towards a greater differentiation of responses within society. The impact of extreme events such as floods and weather events are not, and were not ever, evenly spread across all people, and the cultural turn towards the study of different responses within society shows that environmental historians now consider the complex dialectic between material events and their impact, leading to varying experiences and interpretations. This trend goes towards a deeper integration of the human into environmental history, without letting go of the idea of agency of nature.

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<sup>11</sup> See for example the list of project partners on 'The Power and the Water' project [http://powerwaterproject.net/?page\\_id=401](http://powerwaterproject.net/?page_id=401), and the 'Environmental Histories: Local Places, Global Processes' project: <http://www.environmentalhistories.net>.



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