

## Forum

# Ogres and Omnivores: Early American Historians and Climate History

Joyce E. Chaplin

Odds are, you're an ogre. You glut yourself on human flesh, slurping the blood, gnawing that which is still slippery, pausing only to scorch the meat and add some salt (maybe). By definition you crave the flesh of your own kind because, if you're reading the *William and Mary Quarterly*, you're some sort of historian. As the great French historian Marc Bloch wrote, "it is human beings that the historian is trying to discern. . . . The true historian is like the ogre in the story: wherever he smells human flesh he recognizes his prey."<sup>1</sup> "Nicely put," countered Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, "but in spite of my immense admiration for Marc Bloch his definition has always seemed to me too narrow." Le Roy Ladurie was not suggesting that we historians give up cannibalism but that we learn to be omnivores. To the human-centered topics of conventional historical inquiry, he added nature, specifically climate: "meteorological observations, phenological and glaciological texts, comments on climatological events, and so on." This Forum in the *William and Mary Quarterly* looks at that "so on," the natural but nonhuman parts of the past that historians of climate study because they are omnivores. The climate historian declines the steak and yet is not a vegetarian. (A vegan, according to the Bloch–Le Roy Ladurie definition, would be a scientist who ignores humans entirely.) Human flesh alone is poor intellectual meat because it is so artificially isolated from whatever sustains it in life. Le Roy Ladurie preferred his flesh as lardons, cut up small, crisply fried, and strewn atop frisée. Sound tasty? Keep reading.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Marc Bloch, *Apologie pour l'histoire ou métier d'historien* (Paris, 1949), 18, quoted in Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Times of Feast, Times of Famine: A History of Climate since the Year 1000*, trans. Barbara Bray (Garden City, N.Y., 1971), 18–19 ("human beings," 18).

<sup>2</sup> Le Roy Ladurie, *Times of Feast*, 18–19 ("Nicely put," 18, "meteorological," 18–19).

Bloch had adapted, in a macabre, fairy-tale fashion, the ancient Roman writer Terence's claim that because he was human, nothing human was alien to him. ("Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto.")<sup>3</sup> In fact, Terence lived at a time when humans were assumed to be part of the natural world and to be inexplicable without reference to it. The ancient Hippocratic tradition of explaining humans in terms of climate (airs, waters, and places) is the most famous example of this conviction. Only during the nineteenth century were natural history and civil history torn asunder. That decision reflected the world in which it was made: humans were alienated from the rest of nature at a place and point in time—the industrializing global West—when man's conquest of the natural world seemed to be an established and glorious fact.<sup>4</sup>

By the midpoint of the twentieth century, the facticity, let alone the glory, of that achievement was in question. Le Roy Ladurie was bold in his rebuke of Bloch's narrow definition of history, given his predecessor's canonical place in French historiography and heroic status as a martyred member of the Resistance. Writing in 1971, Le Roy Ladurie represented a first wave of modern, professional historians' engagement with climate. The wave actually occurred in two surges on opposite sides of the Atlantic. In France, several founders of the *Annales* school of history (a team of rivals if there ever was one) insisted that the natural world was deeply constitutive of human culture, more than mere background. Fernand Braudel had thus defined the Mediterranean world geologically, though Bloch died before the publication of Braudel's examination of the southern part of Europe within those terms. Le Roy Ladurie lived to follow that example, especially in his pioneering definition of climate as part of history. Meanwhile, within the United States, scholars drew upon the relatively new science of ecology and older traditions of forestry and historical geography in order to define environmental history. The Forest History Society, established in 1946, later joined by the American Society for Environmental History (founded in 1977), supported scholarly efforts in tracing first the history of environmentalism and later the broader range of human interactions with the natural world, whether protective of that world or destructive. Climate was part of this field, if not as prominently as in the work of many annalists.<sup>5</sup>

And if climate was on the margins of environmental history, environmental history was on the margins of early American history—our field was

<sup>3</sup> Terence, *Heauton Timorumenos*.

<sup>4</sup> See "Modern Airs, Waters, and Places," special issue, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 86, no. 4 (Winter 2012).

<sup>5</sup> J. R. McNeill, "Observations on the Nature and Culture of Environmental History," *History and Theory* 42, no. 4 (December 2003): 5–43, esp. 13–16; Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans. Siân Reynolds (Berkeley, Calif., 1995), 1: 7–22; H. H. Lamb and M. J. Ingram, "Climate and History," *Past and Present*, no. 88 (August 1980): 136–41.

at a double remove from the topic. Some early Americanists did develop Alfred W. Crosby Jr.'s concept of the "Columbian Exchange," though much of that effort has been surprisingly recent and all of it painfully determined to avoid any charge of material determinism. Toward that end, most assessments of early American climate tended to be culturally oriented, focused on contemporary ideas about early American climates. That was true of Karen Ordahl Kupperman's pioneering and essential work on English colonists' early perceptions of American climates (too hot in the south, too cold in the north). Other scholars interrogated the "dispute of the new world," a debate over whether the Americas had climates too extreme to foster the best of living creatures (including human beings), a debate that lasted roughly from Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés's sixteenth-century descriptions of the American tropics to Thomas Jefferson's frantic attempts to get a moose specimen to Paris in order to refute the comte du Buffon's influential claim that American animals were puny. In analyzing climate as a concept, early Americanists consulted human-generated records, and those records were mostly about human perceptions rather than natural events. (This was in contrast, for example, to Le Roy Ladurie's use of the records of French grape harvests to determine historical climate trends.)<sup>6</sup>

So, if this had been a *William and Mary Quarterly* Forum on climate published in the late 1970s or early 1980s, at the crest of the first wave of concern about the natural environment (a poignant counterfactual indeed), the essays would more than likely have traced some aspect of the "dispute of the new world" or possibly of the Columbian Exchange. Either way, they would have explored the perceived climatic differences that divided one side of the Atlantic world from the other, rarely venturing (even to the extent Crosby did) into whatever material reality might have informed those perceptions.

In this manner, the small initial band of colonial American climate historians deployed the early modern definition of climate as local, not global. The ancient Greeks had thought of climates (as in the "airs, waters, places" tradition) roughly in the way we talk of microclimates today, as chorographic patchworks of local variation in temperature, humidity, altitude,

<sup>6</sup> Antonello Gerbi, *The Dispute of the New World: The History of a Polemic, 1750–1900*, trans. Jeremy Moyle (Pittsburgh, 1973); Alfred W. Crosby Jr., *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport, Conn., 1972). See Karen Ordahl Kupperman, "Climate and Mastery of the Wilderness in Seventeenth-Century New England," in *Seventeenth-Century New England*, ed. David D. Hall and David Grayson Allen (Boston, 1984), 3–37; Kupperman, "Fear of Hot Climates in the Anglo-American Colonial Experience," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 41, no. 2 (April 1984): 213–40. See also Gerbi, *Nature in the New World: From Christopher Columbus to Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo*, trans. Moyle (Pittsburgh, 1985); Joyce E. Chaplin, *Subject Matter: Technology, the Body, and Science on the Anglo-American Frontier, 1500–1676* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001); Peter C. Mancall, "Pigs for Historians: *Changes in the Land* and Beyond," *WMQ* 67, no. 2 (April 2010): 347–75.

flora, and fauna. Climate could also designate position on the earth relative to the sun. During the earliest period of colonization, and following ancient geographic theory, climate was considered nearly synonymous with latitude: hence the many schemes, hapless in retrospect, to introduce wine making and silk spinning into the southern colonies, which after all lay parallel to Italy and China. By the eighteenth century, naturalists were steadily renouncing this definition of climate, moving toward the greater complexity represented in Alexander von Humboldt's isothermic lines, which were not straight like latitudes but wavering like Atlantic wind currents. If anything, however, this new emphasis on climatic-geographic irregularity underscored the comprehension of climates as highly localized, which had been inherited from antiquity.<sup>7</sup>

Today, historians of climate, including the four authors featured in this Forum, are as likely to emphasize what the western and eastern sides of the Atlantic Ocean had in common as they are to discuss whatever differences lay between them, and they are equally likely to use evidence generated by ongoing scientific investigation to establish hemispheric similarities. Typically, those similarities go under the name of the Little Ice Age. Where a dispute over the New World's oddities once raged, a common cold now reigns over the Atlantic world. Whether there was in fact a sustained climatic event that deserves the label of Little Ice Age is still itself disputed, though recurring weather extremes (too much rain in Europe, too little rain in North America, long winters and cool summers everywhere) are by now well documented for the early modern period. Moreover, climate history today encompasses both local and global, and climate historians more frequently consider data from the natural world along with records generated by people in the past, thus merging the "natural archive" with the "human archive." A new field called the science of the human past even more fully integrates the efforts of scientists and historians, each with their distinctive knowledge of the natural and human archives. Indeed, one of the first interrogations of climate in early America, as a set of empirically defined events, was a 1998 article that appeared in the journal *Science*. The article examined drought conditions in the areas around the early Roanoke and Jamestown colonies, where dendrochronological evidence pointed to a lack of rainfall and concomitant harvest failures. That data matched written evidence from early English records about deadly Anglo-Indian competition for food in greater Virginia. It was an invitation to historians, if not a challenge: is your historical evidence only meaningful as corroboration for science?<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Nicolás Wey Gómez, *The Tropics of Empire: Why Columbus Sailed South to the Indies* (Cambridge, Mass., 2008); Charles E. Rosenberg, "Epilogue: Airs, Waters, Places: A Status Report," in "Modern Airs, Waters, and Places," special issue, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 86, no. 4 (Winter 2012): 661–70.

<sup>8</sup> James Rodger Fleming, *Historical Perspectives on Climate Change* (New York, 1998), esp. 11–44; David W. Stahle et al., "The Lost Colony and Jamestown Droughts," *Science*

In response to the science of the human past invitation, we early Americanists might simply jump on the climate bandwagon—everyone is studying it, why not us too?—but it will be much better if we can find ways to make distinctive contributions to historical climate studies, ones that no other scholarly community can provide. There are two obvious and important intellectual opportunities in this regard. One could be called the true dispute of the new world, an updated (and more trenchant) analysis of Atlantic discourse on new world climates. The second is best posed as a question: whose human archive are we talking about when we talk about climate and colonization? These are two aspects of the critical issue at the heart of our field. We study what happened when the Americas were integrated into the rest of the world after a prolonged physical and cultural isolation. Climate is a powerful prompt for us to keep the physical dimensions of that reintegration in view even as we continue to ponder the cultural implications of it.

To the first point, we should remember that we focus, after all, on the very period during which naturalists were redefining climate away from its ancient meanings as a locality or latitude and toward its modern scientific definition as a complex pattern within a global system of geologic, geographic, and atmospheric variables. The dispute of the new world was a clear indication that hemispheric variation had begun to nudge post-Columbian observers into thinking differently about climate. Early Americanists are distinctively equipped to investigate this shift in thought. Our efforts as early modernists are particularly needed given that many current analyses of climate history have been done by specialists in the modern period and therefore privilege modern conceptions of nature and humanity. Experts on premodern history must intervene, lest we lose appreciation for the pastness of the past and of the total cultural forces that helped make the past into the present.<sup>9</sup>

The same is true of the second intellectual opportunity, to clarify which human archives are being, have been, and should be used to investigate climate. Particularly as the science of the human past continues to invite dialogue with climate scientists, it is our responsibility to remind them—and anyone else listening—that there is no single human archive. Rather,

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280, no. 5363 (April 1998): 564–67; Brian Fagan, *The Little Ice Age: How Climate Made History, 1300–1850* (New York, 2000); Wolfgang Behringer, *A Cultural History of Climate*, trans. Patrick Camiller (Cambridge, 2010); Michael McCormick, “History’s Changing Climate: Climate Science, Genomics, and the Emerging Consilient Approach to Interdisciplinary History,” review of *Climate Crises in Human History*, ed. A. Bruce Mainwaring, Robert Giegengack, and Claudio Vita-Finzi, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 42, no. 2 (Autumn 2011): 251–73; Geoffrey Parker, *Global Crisis: War, Climate Change, and Catastrophe in the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven, Conn., 2013); “The Little Ice Age: Climate and History Reconsidered,” special issue, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 44, no. 3 (Winter 2014).

<sup>9</sup> The reigning modern-tilted interpretation is Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (Winter 2009): 197–222.

there are competing sets of assertions about the meanings of the human experience in the past, including the experience of climate. Within imperial contexts in particular, not all actors were equally able to record their perspectives. Even when they did leave records, these may exist in forms that will require particular care when placed in dialogue with the natural archive. Much of modern science, which interprets the natural archive today, was historically specific to the cultures of the West, which were the same ones that invaded the Americas. But climate history, with its demand for close analysis of human experience and knowledge, must include how non-European people described nature in their own concepts and languages. There will be no adequate climate history if it fails to use either the Coromantee or the Inuit archives, for instance.<sup>10</sup>

The four essays in this *William and Mary Quarterly* Forum are not just first steps in addressing these new questions but also excellent guides to any future attempts to do so. The first two essays are notable for their interrogation of what evidence about climate historians can and should use. They each refer to both human and natural archives, though in intriguingly different proportions. Sam White's "Shewing the difference betweene their conjuration, and our invocation on the name of God for rayne: Weather, Prayer, and Magic in Early American Encounters," focuses on examples of Indian solicitation of Christian prayer for rain, placing these texts within the context of the Little Ice Age. This is a fascinating way to propose an integration of the human and natural archives. White uses scientific evidence about climate disruptions and proposes ways to read European accounts of native requests for prayer to identify Indian perspectives on those natural events. The next step, obviously, would be to interrogate native ideas about weather (not to mention prayer and magic) more closely and preferably in their own languages.<sup>11</sup>

Thomas Wickman, in his essay "Winters Embittered with Hardships': Severe Cold, Wabanaki Power, and English Adjustments, 1690–1710," ventures further into native language and culture in order to understand how cold and winter are culturally determined experiences, not mere thermostatic variations. He demonstrates that the settler population in New England suffered from dual anxieties: winter weather and Wabanaki military threats. Understanding one without the other is rather pointless. Complaints about the weather were never just about the weather but situated within a context of colonialism. Moreover, the essay shows that English cultural adaptation to both natural and human threats was slow, as seen in the case of the colonists' reluctance to adopt the use of snowshoes. When the adaptation finally

<sup>10</sup> Chaplin, *Subject Matter*, 25–32.

<sup>11</sup> Sam White, "Shewing the difference betweene their conjuration, and our invocation on the name of God for rayne: Weather, Prayer, and Magic in Early American Encounters," *WMQ* 72, no. 1 (January 2015): 33–56.

came, it was highly significant as a belated concession to both New England's distinctive climate and its native people. In contrast to White, however, Wickman uses less evidence from the natural archive, even as he uses more from the Indians. Is it necessary to lean one way or another, toward science or toward nonwestern perspectives, as these two essays do? Further work on early American climate history may help to identify whether this tension must always be in play. Certainly, there is a trend among climate historians to use evidence about the natural world when examining moments of early contact between Europeans and non-Europeans. This continues the long association between environmental history and Native American history. Will climate history be just another iteration of that or something else entirely?<sup>12</sup>

The final two essays in this Forum follow the older strategy of using the human archive to examine climate, but they do so to tackle the new question of how definitions of climate were changing during the eighteenth century. In "Climate Change and the Retreat of the Atlantic: The Cameralist Context of Pehr Kalm's Voyage to North America, 1748–51," Fredrik Albritton Jonsson interrogates Kalm's report on North America, which integrated local observations (climate knowledge "from below") into a cameralist interpretation of natural resources. Accordingly, the article extends and expands Lisbet Koerner's seminal analysis of Carolus Linnaeus's investigations of nature and economy, which the great man did himself and by proxy with his "apostles," including Kalm.<sup>13</sup> Cameralism was an analysis distinctive to the European nations that lacked the commercial heft and overseas empires of Britain and France because they were either landlocked or otherwise lacked access to oceanic conduits. Given that, it seems particularly apt that Kalm used observations from North America and the North Atlantic to test Anders Celsius's hypothesis that the world's oceans were receding, perhaps eventually redistributing the world's coastlines. The essay is a reminder of the significance of Enlightenment science to modern definitions of climate, which extended to examinations of the New World precisely in ways that complicated the old latitudinal understanding of climate.

Anya Zilberstein likewise shows how the Enlightenment analysis of climate blended the local and the hemispheric, though without clear resolution. Her essay, "Inured to Empire: Wild Rice and Climate Change," uses contemporary understandings of climate as highly place-specific to interpret the failed attempt to turn North American wild rice into a commodity

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Wickman, "'Winters Embittered with Hardships': Severe Cold, Wabanaki Power, and English Adjustments, 1690–1710," *WMQ* 72, no. 1 (January 2015): 57–98.

<sup>13</sup> Lisbet Koerner, *Linnaeus: Nature and Nation* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999), 113 ("apostles"); Fredrik Albritton Jonsson, "Climate Change and the Retreat of the Atlantic: The Cameralist Context of Pehr Kalm's Voyage to North America, 1748–51," *WMQ* 72, no. 1 (January 2015): 99–126.

during a period of widespread climatic cooling and harvest failures.<sup>14</sup> The result is important both for its argument about food commodities within an imperial context and for its wealth of information about wild rice in particular. It is an intriguing commodity study, very valuable as part of a continuing engagement with (and challenge to) Sidney W. Mintz's *Sweetness and Power*.<sup>15</sup> Although sugarcane's dependence on a particular (tropical) climate was no serious impediment to its eventual status as a hemispheric commodity—part of the Columbian Exchange—the case was very different for wild rice, with its even narrower environmental niche and tight connection to Native American knowledge. In both of these final essays, therefore, climate's local and global definitions feature strongly within eighteenth-century understandings of physical place, economics, and humanity.

It remains to be seen how many other early Americanists might take up the invitation to consider climate as a central part of their field. Certainly, climate history—more than environmental history (broadly defined)—seems unignorable. Climate is the part of the environment that matters most to us now because changes in it can change everything else in the natural world, with terrible implications for the quality of human life and for the observance of justice among peoples and nations. Although early Americanists have tended to sit on the sidelines of environmental history, that may change now that climate history seems a more immediately relevant concern. The following four essays point to the promising directions in which this emerging field could expand the realm of human history to include the natural world in which it has always been embedded. Early American historians should lead the way in interrogating the intertwined natures of modern climate and imperialism, all the better to situate the human experience within its fullest context, including the natural, nonhuman parts of the past that we have tended to ignore. Ogreish we shall always be—go ahead, lick the juicy streak of blood running down the back of your hand, enjoy—but Le Roy Ladurie, who liked quite a lot of frisée under his lardons, would have been pleased that more early American historians are also choosing to be omnivores.

<sup>14</sup> Anya Zilberstein, "Inured to Empire: Wild Rice and Climate Change," *WMQ* 72, no. 1 (January 2015): 127–58.

<sup>15</sup> Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York, 1985).