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Review of *The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Ecological Imagination* By Donald Worster

Andrew C. Isenberg
Brown University

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Ecological Imagination. By Donald Worster. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. Preface, notes, index. x + 255 pp. \$25.00.

On its surface, Donald Worster's collection of forceful and eloquent essays appears to revisit the subjects and themes he has explored in his previous books. There are sixteen essays in *Wealth of Nature*. The first three and the last one explore the concerns and practice of environmental history. Five essays investigate the ecological consequences of American agriculture, particularly in the Great Plains. Worster explored this subject in his Bancroft Prize-winning book, *Dust Bowl*. The next three essays primarily concern the economic and ecological irrationalities of irrigation in the West, a subject that Worster previously investigated in his book, *Rivers of Empire*. Finally, the twelfth through fifteenth essays—like Worster's first book, *Nature's Economy*—are explorations of human society's various apprehensions and misapprehensions of the natural world.

While *Wealth of Nature* returns Worster to some familiar ground, this compilation of essays is more than an eclectic collection of old favorites. An ethical sense—assured, outraged, and uncompromising—unites these disparate essays. Worster aims to define an “ethic informed by ecology” (p. 110) not unlike the “land ethic” of the naturalist Aldo Leopold, whom Worster admires. For Worster, ecology teaches that despite its turbulence and changeability “nature constitutes a different and greater kind of order than anything that we,

acting as one species alone, can create” (p. 183). Worster argues that industrial society has displayed little or no awareness of nature's limits. The title of the book is a play on the 1776 book *Wealth of Nations* by the architect of the capitalist ethic, Adam Smith; the message of the book is bluntly critical of capitalism: “Ecological harmony is a nonmarket value that takes a collective will to achieve” (p. 133).

This is not a cautious book. The premise of an orderly nature contradicts current ecologists' thinking. Worster's critique of Americans' relationships with the land draws alternately and somewhat indiscriminately on Marx, Rousseau, and Jefferson. Moreover, Worster yearns sentimentally for a pre-industrial America: “Nostalgia,” he writes, “may be our only hope of salvation” (p. 3). Worster aims to prick consciences and to debunk advocates of economic development and technological solutions to environmental problems. Almost everyone who reads *Wealth of Nature* will find something in it with which they will disagree. But readers will also discover a valuable ecological ethic that informs Worster's understanding of environmental history. That ethic teaches that everyone's well-being—perhaps even their survival—is dependent upon a cooperative effort to respect the limits of a fragile natural world.

ANDREW C. ISENBERG
Department of History
Brown University