

PREFACE:
RICHARD C. HOFFMANN, AN APPRECIATION

There is something down there and
you want it told.
Gwendolyn MacEwen (1941–1987),
Dark Pines Under Water

Those who know Professor Richard C. Hoffmann know all about his relentless pursuit of aquatic life in the rivers and coastal waters of premodern Europe. Few of us can boast that we love our work as much as he does. An avid angler in American and European rivers, Rich has applied all of the joy and enthusiasm of this pursuit to the formidable body of award-winning scholarship that he has produced on early fish husbandry, the history of fishing, and the impact of human beings on the premodern environment. On these topics, he has been a path-breaking explorer. Beginning in 1985 with the appearance in *Speculum* of an article entitled "Fishing for Sport in Medieval Europe: New Evidence" and followed closely by an unprecedented treatment of medieval fishponds, written at the invitation of Joseph Strayer for the *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, Rich began changing the way that historians think about the interaction between medieval people and the natural world in which they lived.¹ Many studies followed from these early works, most notably "Economic Development and Aquatic Ecosystems in Medieval Europe," which appeared in *The American Historical Review* in 1996. This article brought the study of medieval environmental history to the broadest possible audience of professional historians and won the prestigious Alice Hamilton Prize (1997) for best article in the field of environmental history from the American Society for Environmental History. In all of his published work, Rich has harnessed the energy of a life-long passion for fishing to a profound sympathy for the mutual influence of natural phenomena and human activity in the premodern world. The latter quality was already evident

¹ For a complete bibliography of Rich Hoffmann's published works to date (2008), see Appendix A.

in one of his earliest published works, an article entitled "Warfare, Weather and a Rural Economy: The Duchy of Wrocław in the Mid-Fifteenth Century," which added evidence of hostile environmental conditions to the list of causes behind the agricultural crisis that struck Silesia in the later Middle Ages. But fishing was never far from Rich's mind, even while he was writing his dissertation on medieval Poland in New Haven. He once told me that as a graduate student he employed a swivel chair at his desk with a dual purpose in mind. When he needed a break from pounding out the dissertation on his typewriter, a simple 90-degree turn directed his attention to the thread, hackles and tools of the fly fisherman that he always kept by his side. When he tired of tying flies, another turn of the chair returned his attention to the distant past. Like many American midwesterners, who grow up in a world of rivers and lakes, Rich was and remains "haunted by water."²

Not every famous explorer is also a successful cartographer, who can chart a clear and inviting path through otherwise difficult territory and thereby encourage others to follow his lead, but in his long career Rich Hoffmann has been both to many colleagues and students. Through his tireless sponsorship of sessions on premodern environmental history at the International Medieval Congress in Kalamazoo, Michigan, Rich has provided a unique forum for North American and European historians of all backgrounds to present their work on every conceivable aspect of human interaction with the natural world in medieval and early modern Europe. Participants in these sessions, several of whom are represented in the present volume, always found a welcoming audience of like-minded scholars open to interdisciplinary approaches to Europe's past. One of the biggest draws, many have told me, was firsthand access to Rich's expertise on these subjects, which he shared by means of formal and incisive comments on papers (enough to fill a volume on their own) and informal advice, imparted over a meal or a beer, that tapped the rich vein of his knowledge of the historiography of the premodern natural world in a staggering number of scholarly languages.

As daunting and esoteric as much of this historiography can be, Rich has the rare and enviable talent of making his field of expertise accessible and exciting to his students. In 1992/93, I was a participant in his

² Norman F. Maclean, *A River Runs Through It and Other Stories*, 25th Anniversary Edition (Chicago and London, 2001), p. 104.

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first undergraduate seminar on the topic of premodern environmental history at York University and recall distinctly the sense of standing on an intellectual precipice and looking down onto the canopy of an ancient forest of new possibilities. Rich already knew what was down there, but he shared it with us as though it was new to him as well, giving us all the sense that we were charting this territory together, even though the path had already been prepared by his labor. I had to become a teacher myself before I realized how generous this was of him. As a student I was too caught up by Rich's contagious excitement, in my first reading of Glacken's *Traces on the Rhodian Shore* and Crosby's *Ecological Imperialism*, and in the possibilities that his syllabus offered, in all of its bibliographical richness. Almost twenty years later, a perusal of the original syllabus for this course still evokes the feeling of intellectual discovery that is experienced at the start of each new semester by those who have been fortunate enough to call Rich their teacher.

The papers collected in this volume represent as much in their formidable erudition as in their dazzling diversity the integrity and vibrancy of the field of premodern environmental history that Rich's scholarship has done so much to foster. The collection is organized into two thematic sections, both of which entertain long chronological views. The first, "Premodern People and the Natural World," comprises papers that explore the complex relationships between human beings and the world in which they lived. While medieval and early modern people were willing and able to modify and control natural resources in creative ways to increase their productivity, these studies underscore the fact that human ingenuity was often a response to the realities of hunger and its allied hardships in preindustrial societies. Far from being carefree exploiters of the earth's riches, premodern people were constantly adapting their means of production and cultivation in the face of a natural world that they could not hope to control for long. The second section of papers, "Aquatic Ecosystems and Human Economies," continues the themes of the first, but focuses specifically on the relationship between human beings and the watersheds that surrounded and sustained them. More than any other historian, Rich has pioneered the research in this specific field of inquiry. It is only fitting that studies of the still pools, fast-flowing rivers and deep-sea currents of European waterways, with their abundance of fauna and indisputable impact on

human economies, find their place in a collection of papers in honor of his scholarly achievements.

As the contents of this collection make clear, medieval and early modern environmental history has taken on a coherent shape in recent decades, in no small part due to the efforts of Rich and his collaborators. While the papers in this volume highlight the variety of topics that beckon historians engaged in the study of Europe's natural past, they nonetheless share a broad interdisciplinary methodology that informs their approach to premodern environmental history. The integration of evidence derived from historical, archaeological and natural scientific data is a hallmark of this approach and a recent achievement that Rich's scholarship has done much to foster. This interdisciplinary methodology also provides a framework of understanding between premodern historians and those specialists studying human impact on the natural economy in the post-industrial world. Camped on common ground, environmental historians of all stripes have found that they share many of the same methodological concerns in their attempts to infer the character of past societies and their relationship with the natural world. The ensuing dialogue between specialists across the historical spectrum has enlivened and enriched this field of inquiry. The discipline of environmental history is no stagnant backwater; it is very much a welcoming harbor busy with the commerce of fresh ideas and open to the possibility of new perspectives.

After an introduction by Richard W. Unger that situates the work of Richard Hoffmann in the *longue durée* of the discipline of environmental history, our collection begins at the turn of the first millenium in the woodlands of central Italy. In recent years, many historians have been drawn to the study of premodern forests, both with respect to their role in local economies and their impact on the human imagination. Using the evidence of charters, Paolo Squatriti makes the case for the centrality of an over-looked forest commodity along the Amalfi coast: the chestnut. Far from being isolated holdovers from classical forests on the fringes of cleared and cultivated lands, Squatriti argues that chestnut groves drew the commercial interest of wealthy landowners because of their sustainable productivity (enhanced by their remarkable amenability to human care) and their value as a cash crop in the seaborne commerce of the Mediterranean Sea. He explains how laborers tended, cultivated, and prepared chestnuts for export, thus bringing to light the sophistication of early medieval arboricultural practices and thereby restoring the chestnut tree to its rightful place at the center of a

carefully managed Italian woodland that played an important role in a thriving early medieval economy.

For this occasion, William Chester Jordan revisits the topic of his award-winning book, *The Great Famine: Northern Europe in the Early Fourteenth Century*.³ Between 1315 and 1322, unusually harsh winters and summers of relentless rain cast a pall over the face of northern Europe and led to the most sustained subsistence crisis in medieval history. Jordan considers new sources and studies that have come to light since the publication of his book on the Great Famine in 1996. His paper reevaluates the causes of the famine, the experience of medieval people caught in the misery it created, and the consequences of this catastrophe, particularly its relationship to the devastating plague cycle known as the Black Death that struck northern Europe only a generation later (1348–1351). These new findings corroborate the fact that the Great Famine was a natural calamity of unprecedented severity that touched the lives of millions of people across late medieval Europe.

Petra van Dam's paper introduces us to some very enterprising rabbits. In the early modern period, the management of rabbit warrens in the coastal dunes of Holland was a serious preoccupation for local counts, who owned and systematically exploited rabbit populations for their fur and meat. It was forbidden by law to kill rabbits beyond this annual cull, so farmers and gardeners on the dunes had to take defensive measures to protect their produce from unwelcome intrusion by erecting elaborate fences and digging formidable ditches (sometimes in combination). By examining the use of these "micro-environmental infrastructures" in the context of dramatic changes in land use along the dunes between 1400 and 1700, Van Dam shows that farmers and gardeners constructed these complex and expensive barriers with a keen awareness of rabbit behavior based on observation of their life cycle and grazing activities.

Verena Winiwarter's contribution reveals medieval and early modern agronomists at work on the question of soil fertility. What role did the soil play in the growth of plants? Were some kinds of soil more conducive to plant fertility than others? What could human beings do to modify and improve soil quality in order to achieve long-term soil sustainability? These questions are commonly attributed to

³ William Chester Jordan, *The Great Famine: Northern Europe in the Early Fourteenth Century* (Princeton, N.J., 1996). In 2000, this book won the Haskins Medal from the Medieval Academy of America.

Enlightenment-era scientists, long considered the pioneers of this particular branch of earth science. Winiwarter challenges this historiographical presumption by examining the traditional ecological knowledge imbedded in a wide range of premodern agricultural treatises, from the tenth-century *Geoponika*, a Byzantine collection of agrarian wisdom commissioned by Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, to John Evelyn's *Terra: A Philosophical Discourse of the Earth* (1675) and Johann Theodor Eller's *Recherches sur la fertilité de la terre général* (1749). While these works vary considerably with respect to their context and the sensibilities and theoretical approaches of their authors, Winiwarter argues that they all have in common a shared body of practical, experience-based knowledge about soil constituents and the benefits of human intervention in its quality through the application of manures and composts.

The second half of the volume begins with Maryanne Kowaleski's innovative study of the thriving fishing industries of medieval England, where the seasonal migrations of fish to their spawning grounds had a profound influence not only on the orchestration of regional markets but also on the lives of fishermen and their families. Kowaleski charts the migration of herring in the North Sea and the fishers and traders who followed them. The economic impact of their migrations is most apparent in the dates of seasonal fairs in towns along the eastern coast of England, which coincided with the herring harvest. Kowaleski then broadens her discussion to consider the emergent western fisheries off the coasts of Cornwall and Devon and the entry of British fishermen into Atlantic maritime economies as far afield as Iceland, Greenland and Newfoundland. The seasonal absence of fishermen, often for months at a time, had a powerful effect on the rhythms of daily life in fishing towns, where mariners' wives had to manage households without their husbands, and did not go unnoticed by policy makers, who issued special dispensations for the activity of foreign fishermen in their waters and passed legislation to protect important species from over-fishing. Kowaleski argues that the commercial diaspora of English fishermen to distant waters in the later Middle Ages led to advances in curing technologies that made these new fisheries commercially viable. The availability of increased quantities of cured fish did little, however, to alter the rhythm of English fishermen and traders, who continued to organize their industry around the natural migrations of their catch.

Constance Berman's note examines records from the hospital of Saint Thomas at la Trinquetaille near Arles in the Rhône delta. In the

decades around 1200, she finds that families owing rents to the hospital often squared their debts to the community with an unusual form of currency: eels. Like other aquatic wildlife, eels were exempt from Christian fast restrictions, which applied primarily to the flesh of quadrupeds. They were thus in high demand in religious communities, especially during Lent. Berman argues that the eels of la Trinquetaille were captured and perhaps even cultivated in enclosed ponds in the marshy Camargue, where generations of human interaction with the Rhône watershed through land clearance, swamp drainage, and the planting of trees and vines inadvertently created localized habitats that were favorable to the propagation of eel populations, which mature in fresh water before returning to the sea to spawn.

Pierre Claude Reynard's paper examines the debates engendered in the eighteenth century by proposals to expand the city of Lyon beyond what many contemporaries considered to be its natural boundary: the Rhône river. Perched on the bank of the wide and fast-flowing Rhône and hemmed in by steep hills, Lyon is an old city, boasting a Roman and medieval pedigree. By the 1730s, unprecedented population growth finally betrayed the topographical constraints that had always kept the city limits in check. As Reynard shows, the practical difficulties presented by a cramped and crowded urban population colluded with Enlightenment-era visions of more open, and therefore more healthy, cities. Over the course of the eighteenth century, conflict brewed between those whose professional and political interests favored the expansion of Lyon across the Rhône and those who resisted this rationalization of natural space for the sake of urban improvement. Reynard charts how these citizens imagined and evoked the river in their debates surrounding four major renewal projects that transformed the urban landscape of Lyon in the decades around 1750.

Lastly, the collaborative contribution of Wim Van Neer and Anton Ervynck holds a special place in this volume because it illuminates how premodern historical research on the natural world can influence and benefit modern policy-makers in their decisions about crucial environmental issues. Taking as their case study the Water Framework Directive (WFD) established by the European Union in 2000 for the maintenance of water quality, Van Neer and Ervynck argue that historical and archaeozoological evidence from the premodern period provides an important but overlooked indication of the abundance of fish and the biodiversity of river systems before the impact of the Industrial Revolution. Although these data are often fragmentary, they

can nonetheless factor usefully into the formulation of "natural" target conditions for regulating authorities like the WFD. Taken together, documentary and archaeological research will add significantly to the historical reconstruction of environmental conditions before the periods of the most significant and sustained human disturbance. In the hands of responsible policy-makers, the results of scholarly inquiry into the quality and character of the premodern environment may one day play a significant role as benchmarks for the restoration, maintenance and protection of modern ecosystems in politics across the globe.

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