Visions of America's Heritage

Readings in United States History

Ronald A. Petrin
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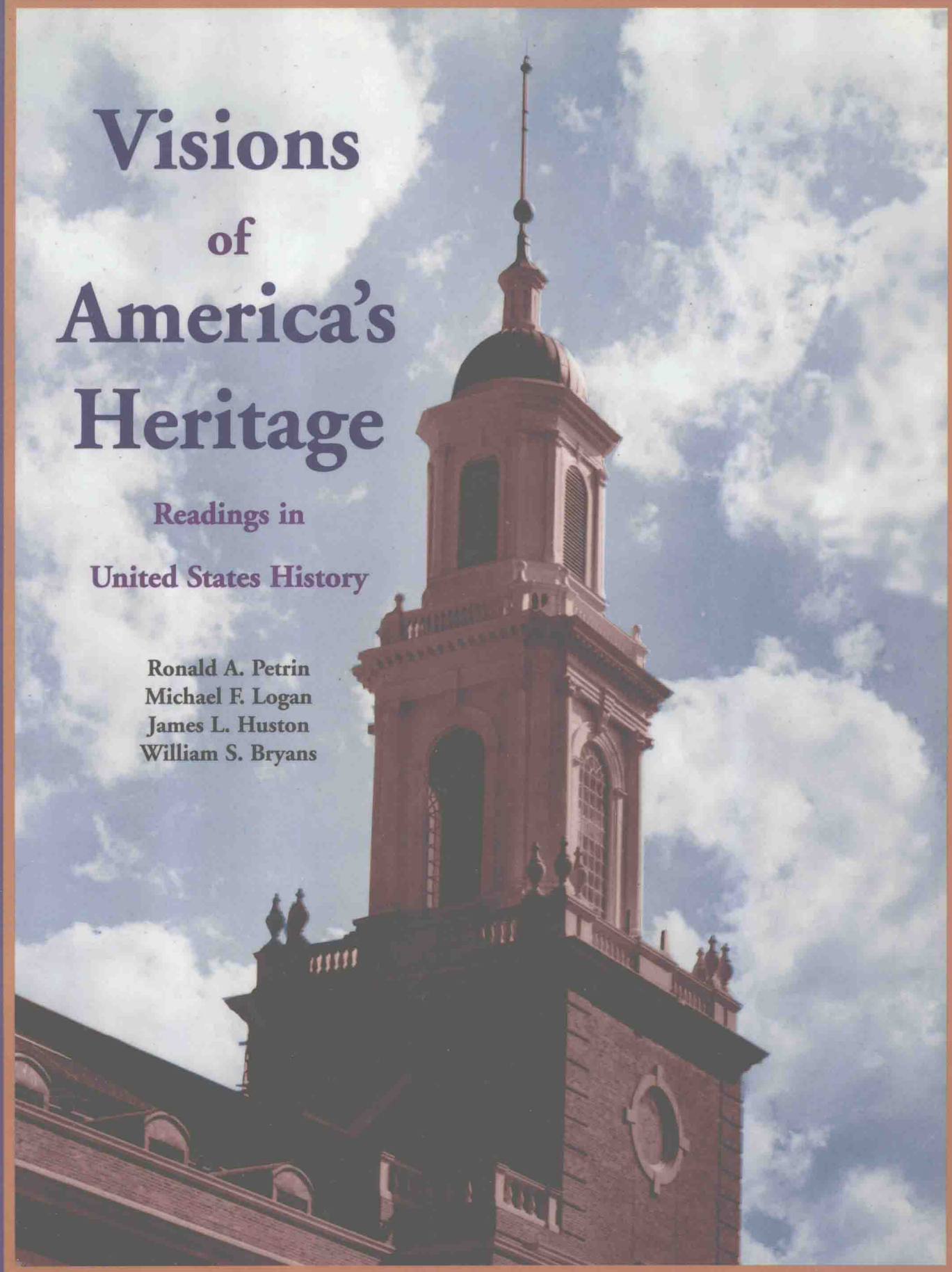
James L. Huston
William S. Bryans



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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO THE EDITORS' TEACHERS AND MENTORS

George A. Billias, Ronald P. Farmisano,
Paul Carter, Juan R. Garcia,
Robert W. Johannsen,
the late Meyer Nathan, and Robert W. Righter

General Introduction

The study of history at the college level has at least three distinct purposes. First, you have the opportunity to gain some knowledge about what happened in the past and how previous generations shaped the ideas, values, and institutions we share today. Second, you can expect to improve your reading, writing, and critical thinking skills. These skills are essential to your success in whatever field you may enter in the future. They are vital to every occupation or profession as well as to the exercise of responsible citizenship. Among the most valuable results of your college education will be the enhancement of your capacity to read with comprehension, to write with ease and grace, and to think analytically, seeing the relationship between the evidence an author considers, her assumptions, her reasoning, and her conclusions. These two purposes fit within the framework of a general education program, and may justify including a history course as a requirement for graduation.

The third purpose of learning history has more to do with the discipline of history itself. It is our hope that you will not only learn what happened and improve your skills, but also that you will come to understand the interpretative nature of the discipline of history. As John Lukacs wrote, "History is revisionism. It is the frequent—nay, the ceaseless—reviewing and revising and rethinking of the past." Almost all historians today share this view of studying history. They do not believe that the historical enterprise consists merely of accumulating and categorizing new facts about the past. Nor do they envision that anyone can ever produce the definitive, final account of any significant historical event. Historical research may bring new evidence to light, but often it re-evaluates extant evidence from a new perspective that brings refreshing insights to some problem or illuminates the evidence in such a way as to reveal meanings previously obscured from view or forgotten. The inherently revisionist nature of the study of history underlines how difficult it is to develop an accurate and meaningful picture of the past in all its complexity. It also inspires hope that the project of historical learning is indeed possible, that we can have some reliable knowledge of the past, and that our understanding of the past can be at times enhanced. But this is a formidable task, requiring that you learn what happened, communicate effectively what you have learned, and think critically about the sources you have used to come to your own conclusions.

Many students beginning the serious study of history view the task simply as a matter of memorizing facts and dates—a boring chore without immediate tangible value. When first introduced to Lukacs's idea that "history is revisionism," some students are prone to lapse into solipsism or radical scepticism about knowledge, which leads ultimately to intellectual paralysis or despair. They mistakenly conclude that all historical knowledge and understanding is simply a matter of personal opinion or that every interpretation is equally valid or valuable. The central task of a college course in history is to disabuse students of this first notion about history while guiding them away from the debilitating effects of the second. This is no easy undertaking.

Interpretative readings such as those included in this volume hope to achieve that end. They enable you to investigate events and individual stories in greater depth than a textbook can provide. The selections were chosen because they are interesting stories and represent some of the best historical writing intended for the general reading public. Many are biographical, reflecting our belief that many students enjoy reading about particular individuals whose lives illustrate certain patterns or problems of the past. Most importantly, the readings reveal how historical interpretations are shaped by the evidence, the interests and judgments of the researcher, and the assumptions and thought process of the

historian. They will illustrate that historical accounts differ, but also that this does not mean that we can know nothing at all about the past.

The reading reports that accompany each essay were designed with these purposes in mind. They aim to encourage you to develop your reading and writing skills while also developing critical thinking skills that will lead you to an appreciation of the interpretative nature of historical writing. Completing the reports requires you to read carefully, report accurately, and analyze the conclusions of each reading. Several questions direct you to considering the author's main claims and the evidence used to support those claims. Other questions ask you to integrate what you have learned from this source with what you have garnered from other sources and to show that you understand how they are similar or differ. Before reading the selection, read the editor's introduction, paying special attention to the questions you are urged to consider; you will find them useful. Complete all parts of each report, employing correct usage and complete sentences to express your thoughts as concisely and clearly as you can. Finally, develop your ideas thoroughly by defining key terms, by explaining what you mean to say, and by referring to specific evidence.

Students have enjoyed the readings we have used in earlier anthologies, and they often report that the assignments have helped them develop a new appreciation for America's heritage and a better understanding of historical thinking. We hope that you will find this volume equally valuable. Most of the selections are drawn from *American Heritage,* a monthly magazine that publishes articles written by some of the best historians. The faculty and graduate students who teach the American history survey at Oklahoma State University have found these articles interesting reading and useful teaching tools. We are grateful for their encouragement in the preparation of this volume, and for the perceptive comments and practical suggestions made by the students in survey classes concerning our selections. As the discipline of history is handed down from person to person, we wish also to acknowledge our gratitude to some of our teachers and mentors, without whom we would not have had the opportunity to learn and practice the craft of history, and to whom we dedicate this work: George A. Billias, Ronald P. Formisano, Paul Carter, Juan R. Garcia, Robert W. Johannsen, the late Meyer Nathan, and Robert W. Righter.

Ronald A. Petrin
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INDIANS IN THE LAND

A Conversation between William Cronon and Richard White

INTRODUCTION

As the year 1992 approached, many Americans prepared to celebrate what they considered one of the most significant benchmarks in American history. The year was filled with festivals, parades, and even scholarly symposia, all marking the five-hundredth anniversary of the "discovery" of the New World. Not all, however, joined in celebrating Christopher Columbus' landing on San Salvador in October 1492.

Columbus, of course, "discovered" the New World only from a European perspective. The Americas of the late-fifteenth century were hardly a vast, uninhabited wasteland. Scholars estimate that at the time of Columbus' arrival some 4 to 6 million people alone inhabited that portion of the hemisphere that would ultimately become the United States. These Native Americans represented an impressive array of cultures, ranging from rather advanced agricultural societies to sophisticated nomadic peoples. They also spoke over a thousand different languages. Each native culture was not only unique, but in anthropological terms, each was vibrant and viable in its own right. Only the Europeans tended to view them as one people, sharing the same characteristics and behavior. In hindsight, it clearly is a mistake to consider these Native Americans as one. They certainly did not.

Columbus' arrival, and the wave of European exploration and colonization that followed initiated an interaction of monumental consequence. Contact dramatically altered both the Europeans and the Native Americans. For example, as the number of Europeans in the Americas increased almost geometrically over the ensuing centuries, the Native American population plummeted at a rate which has prompted some to label the results as genocide. By the beginning of the twentieth century, only about 250,000 natives inhabited all of North America, a figure equalling a population loss of 97 to 99 percent since the late-fifteenth century. Warfare and often extremely brutal treatment at the hands of the Europeans clearly contributed to this devastating loss. However, the most significant factor by far was the introduction of European diseases, such as measles and smallpox, to which the Native Americans had no immunity.

The interaction between Europeans and Native Americans also had cultural dimensions, a dynamic scholar Alfred Crosby has termed the "Columbian Exchange." From the Native peoples of the New World, the Europeans learned to grow such soon-to-be staples as corn, beans, squash, and tomatoes. These revolutionized, and vastly enriched, the European diet. From the Europeans, the Native Americans adopted a wide array of metal goods, guns, and domesticated animals. The latter included the horse which radically transformed many Native American cultures. Quite simply, each side was profoundly altered by contact with the other—sometimes for good, sometimes for bad, but always in a complex, and often unappreciated, way.

This selection records a 1986 conversation between two leading historians of the American environment. In the course of their exchange, they reveal some of the complexities and interplay of European-Native American contact, especially as it impacted the New World lands they co-inhabited. While reading it, students should keep these questions in mind. How did Indians, according to Richard White, make sense of biological species? How did this differ from European perceptions? The authors contend that Indians should not be considered primal ecologists. Why not? They also claim that Indians were never militarily conquered. What then explains their ultimate subjugation at the hand of the Europeans? Do you agree that environmental history can transform the way we view Indian history? Why or why not?

—The Editors

When the historian Richard White wrote his first scholarly article about Native American environmental history in the mid-1970s, he knew he was taking a new approach to an old field, but he did not realize just how new it was. "I sent it to a historical journal," he reports, "and I never realized the U.S. mail could move so fast. It was back in three days. The editor told me it wasn't history."

Times have changed. The history of how Native Americans have lived in, used, and altered the environment of North America has emerged as one of the most exciting new fields in historical scholarship. It has changed our understanding not only of Native Americans but of the American landscape itself. To learn more about what historians in the field have been discovering, American Heritage asked two of its leading practitioners, Richard White and William Cronon, to meet and talk about their subject.

White, who is thirty-nine, teaches at the University of Utah. While earning his B.A. from the University of California at Santa Cruz in the late 1960s, he became involved in Native American politics. He wrote his doctoral dissertation at the University of Washington on the environmental history of Island County, Washington. That work, which became his first book—*Land Use, Environment, and Social Change*—earned him the Forest History Society's prize for the best book published in 1979–1980. This was followed by *The Roots of Dependency*, an environmental history of three Native American tribes: the Choctaws of the Southeast, the Pawnees of the Great Plains, and the Navajos of the Southwest. In it he showed how each had gradually been forced into economic dependency on the now-dominant white society.

William Cronon, thirty-two, teaches history at Yale University. His first book, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*, examined the different ways Native Americans and colonists had used the New England landscape. It won the Francis Parkman Prize in 1984. Cronon recently became a MacArthur Fellow, and is working on several projects in environmental history and the history of the American West.

This conversation, which was arranged and edited by William Cronon, took place late in 1985 at Richard White's home in Salt Lake City.

William Cronon If historians thought about the environment at all up until a few years ago, they thought of it in terms of an older school of American historians who are often called "environmental determinists." People like Frederick Jackson Turner argued that Europeans came to North America, settled on the frontier, and began to be changed by the environment.

Richard White In a delayed reaction to Turner, historians in the late 1960s and early 1970s reversed this. They began to emphasize a series of horror stories when they wrote about the environment. The standard metaphor of the time was "the rape of the earth," but what they were really describing was the way Americans moving west cut down the forests, ploughed the land, destroyed the grasslands, harnessed the rivers—how they in effect transformed the

whole appearance of the North American landscape.

WC Since then, I think, we've realized that both positions are true, but incomplete. The real problem is that human beings reshape the earth as they live upon it, but as they reshape it, the new form of the earth has an influence on the way those people can live. The two reshape each other. This is as true of Indians as it is of European settlers.

RW My first connections with Indians in the environment was very immediate. I became interested because of fishing-rights controversies in the Northwest, in which the Indians' leading opponents included several major environmental organizations. They argued that Indians were destroying the fisheries. What made this odd was that these same groups also held up Indians as sort of primal ecologists. I remember reading a Sierra Club book which claimed that Indians had moved over the face of the land and when they left you couldn't tell they'd ever been there. Actually, this idea demeans Indians. It makes them seem simply like an animal species, and thus deprives them of culture. It also demeans the environment by so simplifying it that all changes come to seem negative—as if somehow the ideal is never to have been here at all. It's a crude view of the environment, and it's a crude view of Indians.

WC Fundamentally, it's an ahistorical view. It says not only that the land never changed—"wilderness" was always in this condition—but that the people who lived upon it had no history, and existed outside of time. They were "natural."

RW That word *natural* is the key. Many of these concepts of Indians are quite old, and they all picture Indians as people without culture. Depending on your view of human nature, there are two versions. If human beings are inherently evil in a Calvinistic sense, then you see Indians as inherently violent and cruel. They're identified with nature, but it's the nature of the howling wilderness, which is full of Indians. But if you believe in a beneficent nature, and a basically good human nature, then you see Indians as noble savages, people at one with their environment.

WC To understand how Indians really did view and use their environment, we have to move beyond these notions of "noble savages" and "Indians as the original ecologists." We have to look instead at how they actually lived.

RW Well, take the case of fire. Fire transformed environments all over the continent. It was a basic tool used by Indians to reshape landscape, enabling them to clear forests to create grasslands for hunting and fields for planting. Hoe agriculture—as opposed to the plow agriculture of the Europeans—is another.

WC There's also the Indians' use of "wild" animals—animals that were not domesticated, not owned in ways Europeans recognized. Virtually all North American Indians were intimately linked to the animals around them, but they had no cattle or pigs or horses.

RW What's hardest for us to understand, I think, is the Indians' different way of making sense of species and the natural world in general. I'm currently writing about the Indians of the Great Lakes region. Most of them thought of animals as a species of *persons*. Until you grasp that fact, you can't really understand the way they treated animals. This is easy to romanticize—it's easy to turn it into a "my brother the buffalo" sort of thing. But it wasn't. The Indians *killed* animals. They often overhunted animals. But when they overhunted, they did so within the context of a moral universe that both they and the animals inhabited. They conceived of animals as having, not rights—that's the wrong word—but *powers*. To kill an animal was to be involved in a social relationship with the animal. One thing that has impressed me about Indians I've known is their realization that this is a harsh planet, that they survive by the deaths of other creatures. There's no attempt to gloss over that or romanticize it.

WC There's a kind of debt implied by killing animals.

RW Yes. You incur an obligation. And even more than the obligation is your sense that those animals have somehow surrendered themselves to you.

WC There's a gift relationship implied . . .

RW . . . which is also a *social* relationship. This is where it becomes almost impossible to compare Indian environmentalism and modern white environmentalism. You cannot take an American forester or an American wildlife manager and expect him to think that he has a

special social relationship with the species he's working on.

WC Or that he owes the forest some kind of gift in return for the gift of wood he's taking from it.

RW Exactly. And it seems to me hopeless to try to impose that attitude onto Western culture. We distort Indian reality when we say Indians were conservationists—that's not what conservation means. We don't give them full credit for their view, and so we falsify history.

Another thing that made Indians different from modern Euro-Americans was their commitment to producing for *security* rather than for maximum yield. Indians didn't try to maximize the production of any single commodity. Most tried to attain security by diversifying their diet, by following the seasonal cycles: they ate what was most abundant. What always confused Europeans was why Indians didn't simply concentrate on the most productive part of the cycle: agriculture, say. They could have grown more crops and neglected something else. But once you've done that, you lose a certain amount of security.

WC I like to think of Indian communities having a whole series of ecological nets under them. When one net failed, there was always another underneath it. If the corn died, they could always hunt deer or gather wild roots. In hard times—during an extended drought, for instance—those nets became crucial.

All of this was linked to seasonal cycles. For me, one of the best ways of understanding the great diversity of environmental practices among Indian peoples is to think about the different ways they moved across the seasons of the year. Because the seasons of North America differ markedly between, say, the Eastern forests and the Great Plains and the Southwestern deserts, Indian groups devised quite different ways of life to match different natural cycles.

New England is the region I know best. For Indians there, spring started with hunting groups drawing together to plant their crops after having been relatively dispersed for the winter. While women planted beans, squash, and corn, men hunted the migrating fish and birds. They dispersed for summer hunting and gathering while the crops matured, and then reassembled in the fall. The corn was harvested and great celebrations took place. Then, once the harvest was done and the corn stored in the ground, people broke up their villages and fanned out in small bands for the fall hunt, when deer and other animals were at their fattest. The hunt went on until winter faded and the season of agriculture began again. What they had was agriculture during one part of the year, gathering going on continuously, and hunting concentrated in special seasons. That was typical not just of the Indians of New England but of eastern Indians in general.

RW For me the most dramatic example of seasonal changes among Indian peoples would be the horticulturists of the eastern Great Plains. The Pawnees are the example I know best. Depending on when you saw the Pawnees, you might not recognize them as the same people. If you came upon them in the spring or early fall, when they were planting or harvesting crops, you would have found a people living in large, semi-subterranean earth lodges and surrounded by scattered fields of corn and beans and squash. They looked like horticultural people. If you encountered the Pawnees in early summer or late fall, you would have thought you were seeing Plains nomads—because then they followed the buffalo, and their whole economy revolved around the buffalo. They lived in tepees and were very similar, at least in outward appearance, to the Plains nomads who surrounded them.

For the Pawnees, these cycles of hunting and farming were intimately connected. One of my favorite examples is a conversation in the 1870s between the Pawnee Petalesharo and a Quaker Indian agent who was trying to explain to him why he should no longer hunt buffalo. Suddenly a cultural chasm opens between them, because Petalesharo is trying to explain that the corn will not grow without the buffalo hunt. Without buffalo to sacrifice at the ceremonies, corn will not come up and the Pawnee world will cease. You see them talking, but there's no communication.

WC It's difficult for a modern American hearing this to see Petalesharo's point of view as anything other than alien and wrong. This notion of sacrificing buffalo so corn will grow is fundamental to his view of nature, even

though it's utterly different from what *we* mean when we call him a conservationist.

RW And yet, if you want to understand people's actions historically, you have to take Petalesharo seriously.

WC Environmental historians have not only been reconstructing the ways Indians used and thought about the land, they've also been analyzing how those things changed when the Europeans invaded. A key discovery of the last couple of decades had been our radically changed sense of how important European disease was in changing Indian lives.

RW It was appalling. Two worlds that had been largely isolated suddenly came into contact. The Europeans brought with them diseases the Indians had never experienced. The resulting death rates are almost impossible to imagine: 90 to 95 percent in some places.

WC The ancestors of the Indians came to North America from ten to forty thousand years ago. They traveled through an Arctic environment in which many of the diseases common to temperate and tropical climates simply couldn't survive. They came in groups that were biologically too small to sustain those diseases. And they came without the domesticated animals with which we share several of our important illnesses. Those three circumstances meant that Indians shed many of the most common diseases of Europe and Asia. Measles, chicken pox, smallpox, and many of the venereal diseases vanished during migration., For over twenty thousand years, Indians lived without encountering these illnesses, and so lost the antibodies that would ordinarily have protected them.

RW Most historians would now agree that when the Europeans arrived, the Indian population of North America was between ten and twelve million (the old estimate was about one million). By the early twentieth century it had fallen to less than five hundred thousand. At the same time, Indian populations were also under stress from warfare. Their seasonal cycles were being broken up, and they were inadequately nourished as a result. All these things contributed to the tremendous mortality they suffered.

WC Part of the problem was biological; part of it was cultural. If a disease arrived in mid-summer, it had quite different effects from one that arrived in the middle of the winter, when people's nutrition levels were low and they were more susceptible to disease. A disease that arrived in spring, when crops had to be planted, could disrupt the food supply for the entire year. Nutrition levels would be down for the whole subsequent year, and new diseases would find readier victims as a result.

RW The effects extended well beyond the original epidemic—a whole series of changes occurred. If Indian peoples in fact shaped the North American landscape, this enormous drop in their population changed the way the land looked. For example, as the Indians of the Southeast died in what had once been a densely populated region with a lot of farmland, cleared areas reverted to grassy woodland. Deer and other animal populations increased in response. When whites arrived, they saw the abundance of animals as somehow natural, but it was nothing of the sort.

Disease also dramatically altered relationships among Indian peoples. In the 1780s and 1790s the most powerful and prosperous peoples on the Great Plains margins were the Mandans, the Arikaras, the Hidatsas, the Pawnees, all of whom raised corn as part of their subsistence cycles. Nomadic, nonagricultural groups like the Sioux were small and poor. Smallpox changed all that. Those peoples living in large, populous farming villages were precisely those who suffered the greatest death rates. So the group that had once controlled the region went into decline, while another fairly marginal group rose to historical prominence.

WC That's a perfect example of biological and cultural interaction, of how complex it is. A dense population is more susceptible to disease than a less dense one: that's a biological observation true of any animal species. But which Indian communities are dense and which are not, which ones are living in clustered settlements and which ones are scattered thinly on the ground—these aren't biological phenomena but *cultural* ones.

RW Perhaps the best example of this is the way different Plains Indians responded to the horse, which, along with disease, actually preceded the arrival of significant numbers of Europeans in the region. The older conception of what happened is that when the horse arrived, it transformed the world. That may

have been true for the Sioux, but not for the Pawnees. The Sioux became horse nomads; the Pawnees didn't. They were not willing to give up the security of raising crops. For them, the horse provided an ability to hunt buffalo more efficiently, but they were not about to rely solely on buffalo. If the buffalo hunt failed, and they had neglected their crops, they would be in great trouble. As far as I know, there is no agricultural group, with the exception of the Crows and perhaps the Cheyennes, that *willingly* gave up agriculture to rely solely on the buffalo. The people like the Sioux who became Plains nomads had always been hunters and gatherers, and for them horses represented a *more* secure subsistence, not a less secure one.

WC It's the ecological safety net again. People who practiced agriculture were reluctant to abandon it, because it was one of their strongest nets.

RW And they didn't. When given a choice, even under harsh circumstances, people tried to integrate the horse into their existing economy, not transform themselves.

The horse came to the Sioux at a time when they were in trouble. Their subsistence base had grown precarious: the buffalo and beavers they'd hunted farther east were declining, and the decline of the farming villages from disease meant the Sioux could no longer raid or trade with them for food. The horse was a godsend: buffalo hunting became more efficient, and the buffalo began to replace other food sources. Having adopted the horse, the Sioux moved farther out onto the Plains. By the time they had their famous conflicts with the United States in the 1860s and 1870s, they were the dominant people of the Great Plains. Their way of life was unimaginable without the horse and buffalo.

WC The result was that the Sioux reduced the number of ecological nets that sustained their economy and way of life. And although the bison were present in enormous numbers when the Sioux began to adopt the horse, by the 1860s the bison were disappearing from the Plains; by the early eighties they were virtually gone. That meant the Sioux's main ecological net was gone, and there wasn't much left to replace it.

RW To destroy the buffalo was to destroy the Sioux. Of course, given time, they might have been able to replace the buffalo with cattle and become a pastoral people. That seems well within the realm of historical possibility. But they were never allowed that option.

WC Disease and the horse are obviously important factors in Indian history. But there's a deeper theme underlying these things. All North American Indian peoples eventually found themselves in a relationship of dependency with the dominant Euro-American culture. At some point, in various ways, they ceased to be entirely autonomous peoples, controlling their own resources and their own political and cultural life. Is environmental history fundamental to explaining how this happened?

RW I think it's absolutely crucial. Compare the history of European settlement in North America with what happened in Asia and Africa. Colonialism in Asia and Africa was very important, but it was a passing phase. It has left a strong legacy, but Africa is nonetheless a continent inhabited by Africans, Asia a continent inhabited by Asians. American Indian peoples, on the other hand, are a small minority in North America. Part of what happened was simply the decline in population, but as we've said, that decline was not simple at all. To understand it, we have to understand environmental history.

Many Indians were never militarily conquered. They nonetheless became dependent on whites, partly because their subsistence economy was systematically undercut. Virtually every American Indian community eventually had to face the fact that it could no longer feed or shelter itself without outside aid. A key aspect of this was the arrival of a market economy in which certain resources came to be overexploited. The fur trade is the clearest example of this.

WC No question. The traditional picture of the fur trade is that Europeans arrive, wave a few guns and kettles and blankets in the air, and Indians come rushing forward to trade. What do they have to trade? They have beaver pelts, deerskins, bison robes. As soon as the incentive is present, as soon as those European goods are there to be had, the Indians sweep across the continent, wipe out the fur-bearing animals, and destroy their own subsistence. That's the classic myth of the fur trade.