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J. Donald Hughes, *What is Environmental History?* Cambridge, Polity Press, 2006. 180pp. £12.99 (pb). 0 7456 3189 4.

J. Donald Hughes answers his book's title question thus: environmental history is 'a kind of history that seeks understanding of human beings as they have lived, worked and thought in relationship to the rest of nature through the changes brought by time'. It is the most comprehensive approach to history, since all human events occur in relationship with the natural environment. Hughes sees it as an interpretive tool for every other form of history.

Environmental historians work within three broad areas. They examine the influence of environmental factors on human history; the ways in which human attitudes to nature motivate behaviour affecting the environment, and the ways in which human impact on the environment rebounds on the society making that impact. Hughes shows that the themes of environmental history can be identified as far back as Herodotus, and he surveys, with necessary but tantalising brevity, more than two millennia of forerunners of today's environmental historians. However, the notes are impressively detailed, making this compact book an essential reference source.

By its very nature, environmental history is inter-disciplinary. Geographers have written on the relationship between culture and environment; ecologists have shown how humanity depends for survival on a stable biotic community; anthropologists have studied how societies survive or collapse according to their use of natural resources; philosophers can illuminate the effects of religious beliefs on a civilisation's treatment of nature.

Since the environment consists of every inter-related aspect of the physical world, some brave spirits, including the author himself, have tackled global history. Their works are often 'declensionist' narratives, charting environmental despoliation under the impact of population growth and urbanisation. Other writers have taken a global perspective on specific topics such as forests or imperialism.

Hughes is explicit about one central aspect of environmental history: it is an academic discipline and first flourished in the United States of America, whose scholars still dominate the field. (United Kingdom readers will note that the British contribution to environmental history is dealt with in one page and that there is no reference to such major works as Edward Hyams's *Soil and Civilization* or *The Rape of the Earth* by G. V. Jacks and R. O. Whyte). The book concludes with a chapter of guidance for new practitioners, recommending examples to follow, resources to use and fresh themes worth investigating, these last including biodiversity and exhaustion of energy resources.

Having field experience in conservation with the United States National Park and Forest Services, Hughes makes his own environmental concerns evident, particularly in a passage on economic development. He rejects the idea that commitment to ecology need conflict with scholarly integrity, and argues that environmental history offers a perspective on humanity's relationship to nature essential for effective policy-making. Given that there is 'exponential growth' in the study of environmental history, one fears that the subject's practical implications risk being lost in a welter of learned papers

produced for the sake of career advancement. For Hughes's readable and informative introduction to assist such a process would be a regrettable piece of irony.

Philip Conford

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Robert Lee, *Rural Society and the Anglican Clergy, 1815–1914. Encountering and Managing the Poor*, Woodbridge, Boydell Press, xii + 235 pp., £45, 1 84383 202 X.

The rural society with which this spirited book is concerned is the county of Norfolk in a period, 1815 to 1914, when the clergy occupied a central, but changing place in village life. Its concern with the relationship between the Anglican clergy and the communities that they aspired to serve is the main concern of the book, but it is relations with the poor that form its central theme. Yet despite the focus on the clergy of the Church of England, the book is, in accordance with the aim of the series of which it is a part (*Studies in Modern British Religion*), not simply a piece of church history.

Attendance at, and the frequency of church services, conventional measures of the success of the Church of England, do not figure largely in its pages, and although the residence or non-residence of clergymen is seen as important, this is primarily in terms of the way that it impinged on the social relations rather than as a means of understanding the effectiveness of the Church's ministrations. Social relations in the 664 parishes that lie at the heart of this book are characterised as being marked by tensions, and the ways that the poor were encountered, and then managed in them, provide the principal themes of its two parts. Yet even this articulation of the transactions of rural life, along the axis of relations between the parson and the poor, still makes it far from easy to provide a general framework through which the working of rural society can be understood.

Keith Wrightson's characterisation of the parish as 'a tangled, messy skein of overlapping and intersecting social networks' is quoted in the Conclusion as being as applicable to the rural parishes of Norfolk as it is to those of early modern England with which Wrightson was concerned. Dr Lee suggests that there was a 'metaphysical layer' to the transactions of parish life in which 'revolutionary change was being balanced against . . . the appeal of the unchanging past', but this is a brave attempt to provide a conceptual framework for which his work is not yet ready, and its great strength lies in the argument of its individual chapters.

The introduction and conclusion that are provided to each of the chapters emphasise their importance as studies on particular themes that could almost stand in their own right as significant contributions to our understanding of the development of rural society in the period. Tithes and the 'Swing' disturbances, church restoration and religious and political radicalism are considered alongside the poor law, law and order, and education. It is an approach that fits well the complexity of parish life and yields significant insights.