

A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative

William Cronon

Children, only animals live entirely in the Here and Now. Only nature knows neither memory nor history. But man—let me offer you a definition—is the story-telling animal. Wherever he goes he wants to leave behind not a chaotic wake, not an empty space, but the comforting marker-buoys and trail-signs of stories. He has to go on telling stories. He has to keep on making them up. As long as there's a story, it's all right. Even in his last moments, it's said, in the split second of a fatal fall—or when he's about to drown—he sees, passing rapidly before him, the story of his whole life.

—Graham Swift, *Waterland*

In the beginning was the story. Or rather: many stories, of many places, in many voices, pointing toward many ends.

In 1979, two books were published about the long drought that struck the Great Plains during the 1930s. The two had nearly identical titles: one, by Paul Bonnifield, was called *The Dust Bowl*; the other, by Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl*.¹ The two authors dealt with virtually the same subject, had researched many of the same documents, and agreed on most of their facts, and yet their conclusions could hardly have been more different.

Bonnifield's closing argument runs like this:

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I would like to thank the many friends and colleagues who have read and criticized various versions of this essay. David Laurence was responsible for convincing me, rather against my will, that the perspective I've adopted here could be neither ignored nor evaded, and he offered generous guidance as I tried to acquire the critical vocabulary that would allow me to tackle these problems. As always, David Scobey has been my most faithful guide in helping me find my way through the dense thickets of literary theory. Comments and suggestions from Thomas Bender, Elise Broach, Robert Burt, Michael P. Cohen, James Davidson, David Brion Davis, Kai Erikson, Ann Fabian, Peter Gay, Amy Green, Michael Goldberg, Ramachandra Guha, Reeve Huston, Susan Johnson, Howard Lamar, Jonathan Lear, Patricia Limerick, Arch McCallum, George Miles, Katherine Morrissey, Jim O'Brien, Robert Shulman, Thompson Smith, Alan Taylor, Paul Taylor, Sylvia Tesh, Thompson Webb III, Timothy Weiskel, Richard White, Bryan Wolf, Donald Worster, and two anonymous readers likewise helped shape my thoughts on this subject. Finally, I owe a special debt to David Thelen and Steven Stowe for their persistence in encouraging me to return to an essay I had all but abandoned. I am grateful to all.

The opening quotation is from Graham Swift, *Waterland* (New York, 1983), 53–54.

¹ Paul Bonnifield, *The Dust Bowl: Men, Dirt, and Depression* (Albuquerque, 1979); Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York, 1979). On Dust Bowl historiography in general, see the collection of essays in *Great Plains Quarterly*, 6 (Spring 1986).

In the final analysis, the story of the dust bowl was the story of people, people with ability and talent, people with resourcefulness, fortitude, and courage. . . . The people of the dust bowl were not defeated, poverty-ridden people without hope. They were builders for tomorrow. During those hard years they continued to build their churches, their businesses, their schools, their colleges, their communities. They grew closer to God and fonder of the land. Hard years were common in their past, but the future belonged to those who were ready to seize the moment. . . . Because they stayed during those hard years and worked the land and tapped her natural resources, millions of people have eaten better, worked in healthier places, and enjoyed warmer homes. Because those determined people did not flee the stricken area during a crisis, the nation today enjoys a better standard of living.²

Worster, on the other hand, paints a bleaker picture:

The Dust Bowl was the darkest moment in the twentieth-century life of the southern plains. The name suggests a place—a region whose borders are as inexact and shifting as a sand dune. But it was also an event of national, even planetary significance. A widely respected authority on world food problems, George Borgstrom, has ranked the creation of the Dust Bowl as one of the three worst ecological blunders in history. . . . It cannot be blamed on illiteracy or overpopulation or social disorder. It came about because the culture was operating in precisely the way it was supposed to. . . . The Dust Bowl . . . was the inevitable outcome of a culture that deliberately, self-consciously, set itself [the] task of dominating and exploiting the land for all it was worth.³

For Bonnifield, the dust storms of the 1930s were mainly a natural disaster; when the rains gave out, people had to struggle for their farms, their homes, their very survival. Their success in that struggle was a triumph of individual and community spirit: nature made a mess, and human beings cleaned it up. Worster's version differs dramatically. Although the rains did fail during the 1930s, their disappearance expressed the cyclical climate of a semiarid environment. The story of the Dust Bowl is less about the failures of nature than about the failures of human beings to accommodate themselves to nature. A long series of willful human misunderstandings and assaults led finally to a collapse whose origins were mainly cultural.

Whichever of these interpretations we are inclined to follow, they pose a dilemma for scholars who study past environmental change—indeed, a dilemma for all historians. As often happens in history, they make us wonder how two competent authors looking at identical materials drawn from the same past can reach such divergent conclusions. But it is not merely their *conclusions* that differ. Although both narrate the same broad series of events with an essentially similar cast of characters, they tell two entirely different *stories*. In both texts, the story is inextricably bound to its conclusion, and the historical analysis derives much of its force from the upward or downward sweep of the plot. So we must eventually ask a more basic question: where did these stories come from?

² Bonnifield, *The Dust Bowl*, 202.

³ Worster, *Dust Bowl*, 4.

The question is trickier than it seems, for it transports us into the much contested terrain between traditional social science and postmodernist critical theory. As an environmental historian who tries to blend the analytical traditions of history with those of ecology, economics, anthropology, and other fields, I cannot help feeling uneasy about the shifting theoretical ground we all now seem to occupy. On the one hand, a fundamental premise of my field is that human acts occur within a network of relationships, processes, and systems that are as ecological as they are cultural. To such basic historical categories as gender, class, and race, environmental historians would add a theoretical vocabulary in which plants, animals, soils, climates, and other nonhuman entities become the coactors and codeterminants of a history not just of people but of the earth itself. For scholars who share my perspective, the importance of the natural world, its objective effects on people, and the concrete ways people affect it in turn are not at issue; they are the very heart of our intellectual project. We therefore ally our historical work with that of our colleagues in the sciences, whose models, however imperfectly, try to approximate the mechanisms of nature.⁴

And yet scholars of environmental history also maintain a powerful commitment to narrative form. When we describe human activities within an ecosystem, we seem always to tell *stories* about them.⁵ Like all historians, we configure the events of the past into causal sequences—stories—that order and simplify those events to give them new meanings. We do so because narrative is the chief literary form that tries to find meaning in an overwhelmingly crowded and disordered chronological reality. When we choose a plot to order our environmental histories, we give them a unity that neither nature nor the past possesses so clearly. In so doing, we move well beyond nature into the intensely human realm of value. There, we cannot avoid encountering the postmodernist assault on narrative, which calls into question not just the stories we tell but the deeper purpose that motivated us in the first place: trying to make sense of nature's place in the human past.

By writing stories about environmental change, we divide the causal relationships of an ecosystem with a rhetorical razor that defines included and excluded, relevant and irrelevant, empowered and disempowered. In the act of separating story from non-story, we wield the most powerful yet dangerous tool of the narrative form. It is a commonplace of modern literary theory that the very authority with which narrative presents its vision of reality is achieved by obscuring large portions of that reality. Narrative succeeds to the extent that it hides the discontinuities, ellipses,

⁴ For a wide-ranging discussion that explores the emerging intellectual agendas of environmental history, see "A Round Table: Environmental History," *Journal of American History*, 76 (March 1990), 1087–1147.

⁵ Throughout this essay, I will use "story" and "narrative" interchangeably, despite a technical distinction that can be made between them. For some literary critics and philosophers of history, "story" is a limited genre, whereas narrative (or *narratio*) is the much more encompassing part of classical rhetoric that organizes all representations of time into a configured sequence of completed actions. I intend the broader meaning for both words, since "storytelling" in its most fundamental sense is the activity I wish to criticize and defend. I hope it is emphatically clear at the outset that I am *not* urging a return to "traditional" narrative history that revolves around the biographies of "great" individuals (usually elite white male politicians and intellectuals); rather, I am urging historians to acknowledge storytelling as the necessary core even of *longue durée* histories that pay little attention to individual people. Environmental history is but one example of these, and most of my arguments apply just as readily to the others.

and contradictory experiences that would undermine the intended meaning of its story. Whatever its overt purpose, it cannot avoid a covert exercise of power: it inevitably sanctions some voices while silencing others. A powerful narrative reconstructs common sense to make the contingent seem determined and the artificial seem natural. If this is true, then narrative poses particularly difficult problems for environmental historians, for whom the boundary between the artificial and the natural is the very thing we most wish to study. The differences between Bonnifield's and Worster's versions of the Dust Bowl clearly have something to do with that boundary, as does my own uneasiness about the theoretical underpinnings of my historical craft.⁶

The disease of literary theory is to write too much in abstractions, so that even the simplest meanings become difficult if not downright opaque. Lest this essay wander off into litcrit fog, let me ground it on more familiar terrain. I propose to examine the role of narrative in environmental history by returning to the Great Plains to survey the ways historians have told that region's past. What I offer here will *not* be a comprehensive historiography, since my choice of texts is eclectic and I will ignore many major works. Rather, I will use a handful of Great Plains histories to explore the much vexed problems that narrative poses for all historians. On the one hand, I hope to acknowledge the deep challenges that postmodernism poses for those who applaud "the revival of narrative"; on the other, I wish to record my own conviction—chastened but still strong—that narrative remains essential to our understanding of history and the human place in nature.

If we consider the Plains in the half millennium since Christopher Columbus crossed the Atlantic, certain events seem likely to stand out in any long-term history of the region. If I were to try to write these not as a *story* but as a simple *list*—I will not entirely succeed in so doing, since the task of *not* telling stories about the past turns out to be much more difficult than it may seem—the resulting chronicle might run something like this.

Five centuries ago, people traveled west across the Atlantic Ocean. So did some plants and animals. One of these—the horse—appeared on the Plains. Native peoples used horses to hunt bison. Human migrants from across the Atlantic even-

⁶ Much of the reading that lies behind this essay cannot easily be attached to a single argument or footnote. Among the works that helped shape my views on the importance and problems of narrative are the following: William H. Dray, *Philosophy of History* (Englewood Cliffs, 1964); Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (New York, 1966); Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York, 1967); Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, 1973); Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, 1978); Robert H. Canary and Henry Kozicki, eds., *The Writing of History: Literary Form and Historical Understanding* (Madison, 1978); W. J. T. Mitchell, ed., *On Narrative* (Chicago, 1981); Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, 1981); Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca, 1982); Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis, 1983); Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* (3 vols., Chicago, 1984, 1985, 1988), trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer; Dominick LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language* (Ithaca, 1983); Arthur C. Danto, *Narration and Knowledge: Including the Integral Text of Analytical Philosophy of History* (New York, 1985); James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley, 1986); Wallace Martin, *Recent Theories of Narrative* (Ithaca, 1986); Louis O. Mink, *Historical Understanding* (Ithaca, 1987); Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, 1987); and Kai Erikson, "Obituary for Big Daddy: A Parable," unpublished manuscript (in William Cronon's possession).

tually appeared on the Plains as well. People fought a lot. The bison herds disappeared. Native peoples moved to reservations. The new immigrants built homes for themselves. Herds of cattle increased. Settlers plowed the prairie grasses, raising corn, wheat, and other grains. Railroads moved people and other things into and out of the region. Crops sometimes failed for lack of rain. Some people abandoned their farms and moved elsewhere; other people stayed. During the 1930s, there was a particularly bad drought, with many dust storms. Then the drought ended. A lot of people began to pump water out of the ground for use on their fields and in their towns. Today, Plains farmers continue to raise crops and herds of animals. Some have trouble making ends meet. Many Indians live on reservations. It will be interesting to see what happens next.

I trust that this list seems pretty peculiar to anyone who reads it, as if a child were trying to tell a story without quite knowing how. I've tried to remove as much sense of *connection* among these details as I can. I've presented them not as a narrative but as a *chronicle*, a simple chronological listing of events as they occurred in sequence.⁷ This was not a pure chronicle, since I presented only what I declared to be the "most important" events of Plains history. By the very act of separating important from unimportant events, I actually smuggled a number of not-so-hidden stories into my list, so that such things as the migration of the horse or the conquest of the Plains tribes began to form little narrative swirls in the midst of my ostensibly story-less account. A pure chronicle would have included every event that ever occurred on the Great Plains, no matter how large or small, so that a colorful sunset in September 1623 or a morning milking of cows on a farm near Leavenworth in 1897 would occupy just as prominent a place as the destruction of the bison herds or the 1930s dust storms.

Such a text is impossible even to imagine, let alone construct, for reasons that help explain historians' affection for narrative.⁸ When we encounter the past in the form of a chronicle, it becomes much less recognizable to us. We have trouble sorting out why things happened when and how they did, and it becomes hard to evaluate the relative significance of events. Things seem less *connected* to each other, and it becomes unclear how all this stuff relates to us. Most important, in a chronicle we easily lose the thread of what was going on at any particular moment. Without some plot to organize the flow of events, everything becomes much harder—even impossible—to understand.

How do we discover a story that will turn the facts of Great Plains history into something more easily recognized and understood? The repertoire of historical plots

⁷ This distinction between chronicle and narrative is more fully analyzed in White, *Metahistory*, 5–7; White, *Tropics of Discourse*, 109–11; Louis O. Mink, "Narrative Form as a Cognitive Instrument," in *Writing of History*, ed. Canary and Kozicki, 141–44; David Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History* (Bloomington, 1986), 59; Danto, *Narration and Knowledge*; and Paul A. Roth, "Narrative Explanations: The Case of History," *History and Theory*, 27 (no. 1, 1988), 1–13.

⁸ There are deeper epistemological problems here that I will not discuss, such as how we recognize what constitutes an "event" and how we draw boundaries around it. It should eventually become clear that "events" are themselves defined and delimited by the stories with which we configure them and are probably impossible to imagine apart from their narrative context.

we might apply to the events I've just chronicled is endless and could be drawn not just from history but from all of literature and myth. To simplify the range of choices, let me start by offering two large groups of possible plots. On the one hand, we can narrate Plains history as a story of improvement, in which the plot line gradually ascends toward an ending that is somehow more positive—happier, richer, freer, better—than the beginning. On the other hand, we can tell stories in which the plot line eventually falls toward an ending that is more negative—sadder, poorer, less free, worse—than the place where the story began. The one group of plots might be called “progressive,” given their historical dependence on eighteenth-century Enlightenment notions of progress; the other might be called “tragic” or “declensionist,” tracing their historical roots to romantic and antimodernist reactions against progress.

If we look at the ways historians have actually written about the changing environment of the Great Plains, the upward and downward lines of progress and declension are everywhere apparent. The very ease with which we recognize them constitutes a warning about the terrain we are entering. However compelling these stories may be as depictions of environmental change, their narrative form has less to do with nature than with human discourse. Their plots are cultural constructions so deeply embedded in our language that they resonate far beyond the Great Plains. Historians did not invent them, and their very familiarity encourages us to shape our storytelling to fit their patterns. Placed in a particular historical or ideological context, neither group of plots is innocent: both have hidden agendas that influence what the narrative includes and excludes. So powerful are these agendas that not even the historian as author entirely controls them.

Take, for instance, the historians who narrate Great Plains history as a tale of frontier progress. The most famous of those who embraced this basic plot was of course Frederick Jackson Turner, for whom the story of the nation recapitulated the ascending stages of European civilization to produce a uniquely democratic and egalitarian community. Turner saw the transformation of the American landscape from wilderness to trading post to farm to boomtown as the central saga of the nation.⁹ If ever there was a narrative that achieved its end by erasing its true subject, Turner's frontier was it: the heroic encounter between pioneers and “free land” could only become plausible by obscuring the conquest that traded one people's freedom for another's. By making Indians the foil for its story of progress, the frontier plot made their conquest seem natural, commonsensical, inevitable. But to say this is only to affirm the narrative's power. In countless versions both before and after it acquired its classic Turnerian form, this story of frontier struggle and progress remains among the oldest and most familiar narratives of American history. In its ability to turn ordinary people into heroes and to present a conflict-ridden invasion as an epic march toward enlightened democratic nationhood, it perfectly fulfilled the ideological needs of its late-nineteenth-century moment.¹⁰

⁹ Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York, 1920), 12.

¹⁰ I have written about the rhetorical structure of Turner's work in two essays: William Cronon, “Revisiting the Vanishing Frontier: The Legacy of Frederick Jackson Turner,” *Western Historical Quarterly*, 18 (April 1987), 157–76;

The Great Plains would eventually prove less tractable to frontier progress than many other parts of the nation. Turner himself would say of the region that it constituted the American farmer's "first defeat," but that didn't stop the settlers themselves from narrating their past with the frontier story.¹¹ One of Dakota Territory's leading missionaries, Bishop William Robert Hare, prophesied in the 1880s that the plot of Dakota settlement would follow an upward line of migration, struggle, and triumph:

You may stand ankle deep in the short burnt grass of an uninhabited wilderness—next month a mixed train will glide over the waste and stop at some point where the railroad has decided to locate a town. Men, women and children will jump out of the cars, and their chattel will be tumbled out after them. From that moment the building begins. The courage and faith of these pioneers are something extraordinary. Their spirit seems to rise above all obstacles.¹²

For Hare, this vision of progress was ongoing and prospective, a prophecy of future growth, but the same pattern could just as easily be applied to retrospective visions. An early historian of Oklahoma, Luther Hill, could look back in 1909 at the 1890s, a decade that had "wrought a great change in Oklahoma territory": in a mere ten years, settlers had transformed the "stagnant pool" of unused Indian lands into the "waving grain fields, the herds of cattle, and the broad prospect of agricultural prosperity [which] cause delight and even surprise in the beholder who sees the results of civilization in producing such marvels of wealth."¹³ Ordinary people saw such descriptions as the fulfillment of a grand story that had unfolded during the course of their own lifetimes. As one Kansas townswoman, Josephine Middlekauf, concluded,

After sixty years of pioneering in Hays, I could write volumes telling of its growth and progress. . . . I have been singularly privileged to have seen it develop from the raw materials into the almost finished product in comfortable homes, churches, schools, paved streets, trees, fruits and flowers.¹⁴

Consider these small narratives more abstractly. They tell a story of more or less linear progress, in which people struggle to transform a relatively responsive environment. There may be moderate setbacks along the way, but their narrative role is to play foil to the heroes who overcome them. Communities rapidly succeed in becoming ever more civilized and comfortable. The time frame of the stories is brief, limited to the lifespan of a single generation, and is located historically in the moment just after invading settlers first occupied Indian lands. Our attention

and William Cronon, "Turner's First Stand: The Significance of Significance in American History," in *Writing Western History: Classic Essays on Classic Western Historians*, ed. Richard Etulain (Albuquerque, 1991), 73–101. See also Ronald H. Carpenter, *The Eloquence of Frederick Jackson Turner* (San Marino, 1983).

¹¹ Turner, *Frontier in American History*, 147.

¹² William Robert Hare, ca. 1887, as quoted in Howard R. Lamar, "Public Values and Private Dreams: South Dakota's Search for Identity, 1850–1900," *South Dakota History*, 8 (Spring 1978), 129.

¹³ Luther B. Hill, *A History of the State of Oklahoma* (Chicago, 1909), 382, 386, 385.

¹⁴ Josephine Middlekauf, as quoted in Joanna L. Stratton, *Pioneer Women: Voices from the Kansas Frontier* (New York, 1981), 204.

as readers is focused on local events, those affecting individuals, families, townships, and other small communities. All of these framing devices, which are as literary as they are historical, compel us toward the conclusion that this is basically a happy story. It is tempered only by a hint of nostalgia for the world that is being lost, a quiet undercurrent of elderly regret for youthful passions and energies now fading.

If the story these narrators tell is about the drama of settlement and the courage of pioneers, it is just as much about the changing stage on which the drama plays itself out. The transformation of a Kansas town is revealed not just by its new buildings but by its shade trees, apple orchards, and gardens; the triumphant prosperity of Oklahoma resides in its wheat fields, cattle pastures, and oil derricks. As the literary critic Kenneth Burke long ago suggested, the scene of a story is as fundamental to what happens in it as the actions that comprise its more visible plot. Indeed, Burke argues that a story's actions are almost invariably consistent with its scene: "there is implicit in the quality of a scene," he writes, "the quality of the action that is to take place within it."¹⁵

If the way a narrator constructs a scene is directly related to the story that narrator tells, then this has deep implications for environmental history, which after all takes scenes of past nature as its primary object of study. If the history of the Great Plains is a progressive story about how grasslands were turned into ranches, farms, and gardens, then the end of the story requires a particular kind of scene for the ascending plot line to reach its necessary fulfillment. Just as important, the closing scene has to be different from the opening one. If the story ends in a wheatfield that is the happy conclusion of a struggle to transform the landscape, then the most basic requirement of the story is that the earlier form of that landscape must either be neutral or negative in value. It must *deserve* to be transformed.

It is thus no accident that these storytellers begin their narratives in the midst of landscapes that have few redeeming features. Bishop Hare's Dakota Territory begins as "an uninhabited wilderness," and his railroad carries future settlers across a "waste." Just so does narrative revalue nature by turning it into scenery and pushing to its margins such characters as Indians who play no role in the story—or rather, whose roles the story is designed to obscure. When Luther Hill's Oklahoma was still controlled by Indians, it remained "a stagnant pool," while Josephine Middlekauf perceived the unplowed Kansas grasslands chiefly as "raw materials." Even so seemingly neutral a phrase as this last one—"raw materials"—is freighted with narrative meaning. Indeed, it contains buried within it the entire story of progressive development in which the environment is transformed from "raw materials" to "finished product." In just this way, story and scene become entangled—with each other, and with the politics of invasion and civilized progress—as we try to understand the Plains environment and its history.

Now in fact, these optimistic stories about Great Plains settlement are by no means typical of historical writing in the twentieth century. The problems of settling a semiarid environment were simply too great for the frontier story to proceed

¹⁵ Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley, 1969), 6–7.

without multiple setbacks and crises. Even narrators who prefer an ascending plot line in their stories of regional environmental change must therefore tell a more complicated tale of failure, struggle, and accommodation in the face of a resistant if not hostile landscape.

Among the most important writers who adopt this narrative strategy are Walter Prescott Webb and James Malin, the two most influential historians of the Great Plains to write during the first half of the twentieth century. Webb's classic work, *The Great Plains*, was published over half a century ago and has remained in print to this day.¹⁶ It tells a story that significantly revises the Turnerian frontier. For Webb, the Plains were radically different from the more benign environments that Anglo-American settlers had encountered in the East. Having no trees and little water, the region posed an almost insurmountable obstacle to the westward march of civilization. After describing the scene in this way, Webb sets his story in motion with a revealing passage:

In the new region—level, timberless, and semi-arid—[settlers] were thrown by Mother Necessity into the clutch of new circumstances. Their plight has been stated in this way: east of the Mississippi civilization stood on three legs—land, water, and timber; west of the Mississippi not one but two of these legs were withdrawn,—water and timber,—and civilization was left on one leg—land. It is small wonder that it toppled over in temporary failure.¹⁷

It is easy to anticipate the narrative that will flow from this beginning: Webb will tell us how civilization fell over, then built itself new legs and regained its footing to continue its triumphant ascent. The central agency that solves these problems and drives the story forward is human invention. Unlike the simpler frontier narratives, Webb's history traces a dialectic between a resistant landscape and the technological innovations that will finally succeed in transforming it. Although his book is over five hundred pages long and is marvelously intricate in its arguments, certain great inventions mark the turning points of Webb's plot. Because water was so scarce, settlers had to obtain it from the only reliable source, underground aquifers, so they invented the humble but revolutionary windmill. Because so little wood was available to build fences that would keep cattle out of cornfields, barbed wire was invented in 1874 and rapidly spread throughout the grasslands. These and other inventions—railroads, irrigation, new legal systems for allocating water rights, even six-shooter revolvers—eventually destroyed the bison herds, created a vast cattle kingdom, and broke the prairie sod for farming.

Webb closes his story by characterizing the Plains as "a land of survival where nature has most stubbornly resisted the efforts of man. Nature's very stubbornness has driven man to the innovations which he has made."¹⁸ Given the scenic requirements of Webb's narrative, his Plains landscape must look rather different from that of earlier frontier narrators. For Webb, the semiarid environment is neither a wilder-

¹⁶ Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (New York, 1931).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 508.

ness nor a waste, but itself a worthy antagonist of civilization. It is a landscape the very resistance of which is the necessary spur urging human ingenuity to new levels of achievement. Webb thus spends much more time than earlier storytellers describing the climate, terrain, and ecology of the Great Plains so as to extol the features that made the region unique in American experience. Although his book ends with the same glowing image of a transformed landscape that we find in earlier frontier narratives, he in no way devalues the "uncivilized" landscape that preceded it. Quite the contrary: the more formidable it is as a rival, the more heroic become its human antagonists. In the struggle to make homes for themselves in this difficult land, the people of the Plains not only proved their inventiveness but built a regional culture beautifully adapted to the challenges of their regional environment.

Webb's story of struggle against a resistant environment has formed the core of most subsequent environmental histories of the Plains. We have already encountered one version of it in Paul Bonnifield's *The Dust Bowl*. It can also be discovered in the more ecologically sophisticated studies of James C. Malin, in which the evolution of "forest man" to "grass man" becomes the central plot of Great Plains history.¹⁹ Malin's prose is far less story-like in outward appearance than Webb's, but it nonetheless narrates an encounter between a resistant environment and human ingenuity. Malin's human agents begin as struggling immigrants who have no conception of how to live in a treeless landscape; by the end, they have become "grass men" who have brought their culture "into conformity with the requirements of maintaining rather than disrupting environmental equilibrium." So completely have they succeeded in adapting themselves that they can even "point the finger of scorn at the deficiencies of the forest land; grassless, wet, with an acid, leached, infertile soil."²⁰ Human inhabitants have become one with an environment that only a few decades before had almost destroyed them.

The beauty of these plots is that they present the harshness of the regional environment in such a way as to make the human struggle against it appear even more positive and heroic than the continuous ascent portrayed in earlier frontier narratives. The focus of our attention is still relatively small-scale, though both the geographical and the chronological context of the plot have expanded. The story is now much more a regional one, so that the histories of one family or town, or even of Kansas or Oklahoma, become less important than the broader history of the grassland environment as a whole. The time frame too has advanced, so that the history of technological progress on the Plains moves well into the twentieth century. Because the plot still commences at the moment that Euroamerican settlers began to

¹⁹ These terms appear, for instance, in Malin's magnum opus, James C. Malin, *The Grassland of North America: Prolegomena to Its History* (Gloucester, Mass., 1967), but this basic notion informs virtually all of his work on the grasslands. See also James C. Malin, *Grassland Historical Studies: Natural Resources Utilization in a Background of Science and Technology* (Lawrence, Kan., 1950); and the collection of essays, James C. Malin, *History and Ecology: Studies of the Grassland*, ed. Robert P. Swierenga (Lincoln, 1984).

²⁰ Malin, *Grassland of North America*, 154.

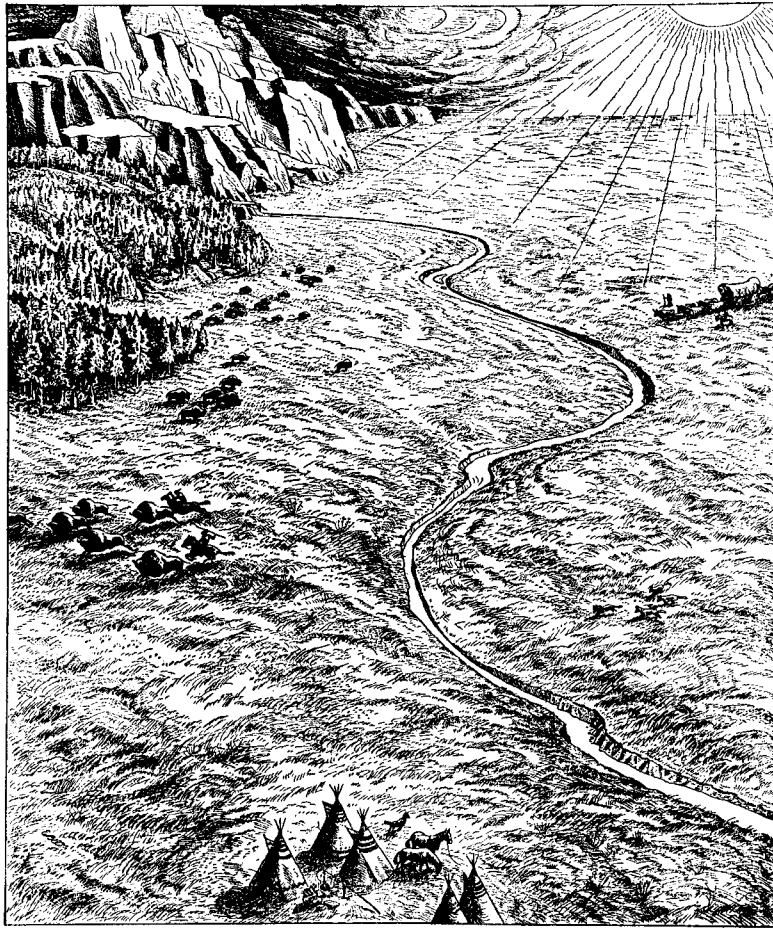
occupy the grasslands, though, there is no explicit *backward* extension of the time frame. The precontact history of the Indians is not part of this story.

Most interestingly, the human subject of these stories has become significantly broader than the earlier state and local frontier histories. Rather than focus primarily on individual pioneers and their communities, these new regional studies center their story on "civilization" or "man." The inventions that allowed people to adapt to life on the Great Plains are thus absorbed into the broader story of "man" and "his" long conquest of nature. No narrative centered on so singular a central character could be politically innocent. More erasures are at work here: Indians, yes, but also women, ethnic groups, underclasses, and any other communities that have been set apart from the collectivity represented by Man or Civilization. The narrative leaves little room for them, and even less for a natural realm that might appropriately be spared the conquests of technology. These are stories about a progress that, however hard-earned, is fated; its conquests are only what common sense and nature would expect. For Webb and Malin, the Great Plains gain significance from their ties to a world-historical plot, Darwinian in shape, that encompasses the entire sweep of human history. The ascending plot line we detect in these stories is in fact connected to a much longer plot line with the same rising characteristics. Whether that longer plot is expressed as the Making of the American Nation, the Rise of Western Civilization, or the Ascent of Man, it still lends its grand scale to Great Plains histories that outwardly appear much more limited in form. This may explain how we can find ourselves so entranced by a book whose principal subject for five hundred pages is the invention of windmills and barbed wire.

But there is another way to tell this history, one in which the plot ultimately falls rather than rises. The first examples of what we might call a "declensionist" or "tragic" Great Plains history began to appear during the Dust Bowl calamity of the 1930s. The dominant New Deal interpretation of what had gone wrong on the Plains was that settlers had been fooled by a climate that was sometimes perfectly adequate for farming and at other times disastrously inadequate. Settlement had expanded during "good" years when rainfall was abundant, and the perennial optimism of the frontier had prevented farmers from acknowledging that drought was a permanent fact of life on the Plains. In this version, Great Plains history becomes a tale of self-deluding hubris and refusal to accept reality. Only strong government action, planned by enlightened scientific experts to encourage cooperation among Plains farmers, could prevent future agricultural expansion and a return of the dust storms.

The classic early statement of this narrative is that of the committee that Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed to investigate the causes of the Dust Bowl, in its 1936 report on *The Future of the Great Plains*. Its version of the region's history up until the 1930s runs as follows:

The steady progress which we have come to look for in American communities was beginning to reverse itself. Instead of becoming more productive, the Great Plains

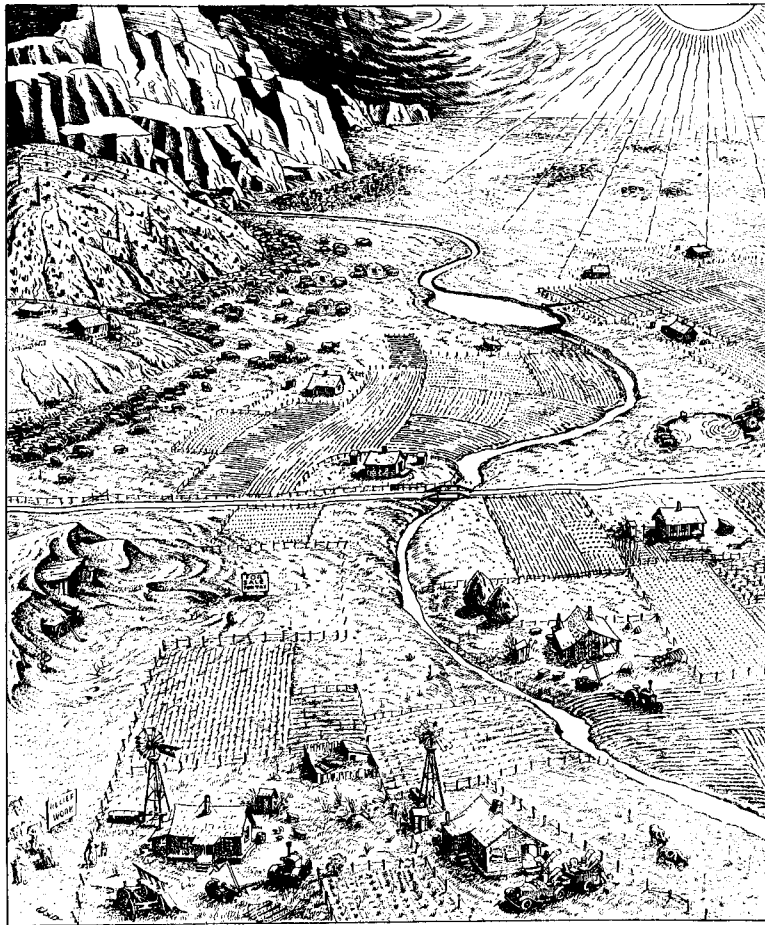


"The Great Plains of the Past," an illustration for *The Future of the Great Plains* (1936). This and its companion illustrations on the following pages illustrate the New Deal story of the Great Plains. The caption for this one reads, in part, "As the first white settlers drove their covered wagons slowly westward . . . they found the Red Man living in rude but productive harmony with Nature."

were becoming less so. Instead of giving their population a better standard of living, they were tending to give them a poorer one. The people were energetic and courageous, and they loved their land. Yet they were increasingly less secure in it.²¹

One did not have to look far to locate the reason for this unexpected reversal of the American success story. Plains settlers had failed in precisely the agricultural adaptations that Webb and Malin claimed for them. Radical steps would have to be taken if the Dust Bowl disaster were not to repeat itself. "It became clear," said the

²¹ *The Future of the Great Plains: Report of the Great Plains Committee* (Washington, 1936), 1. On this report, see Gilbert F. White, "The Future of the Great Plains Re-Visited," *Great Plains Quarterly*, 6 (Spring 1986), 84–93.



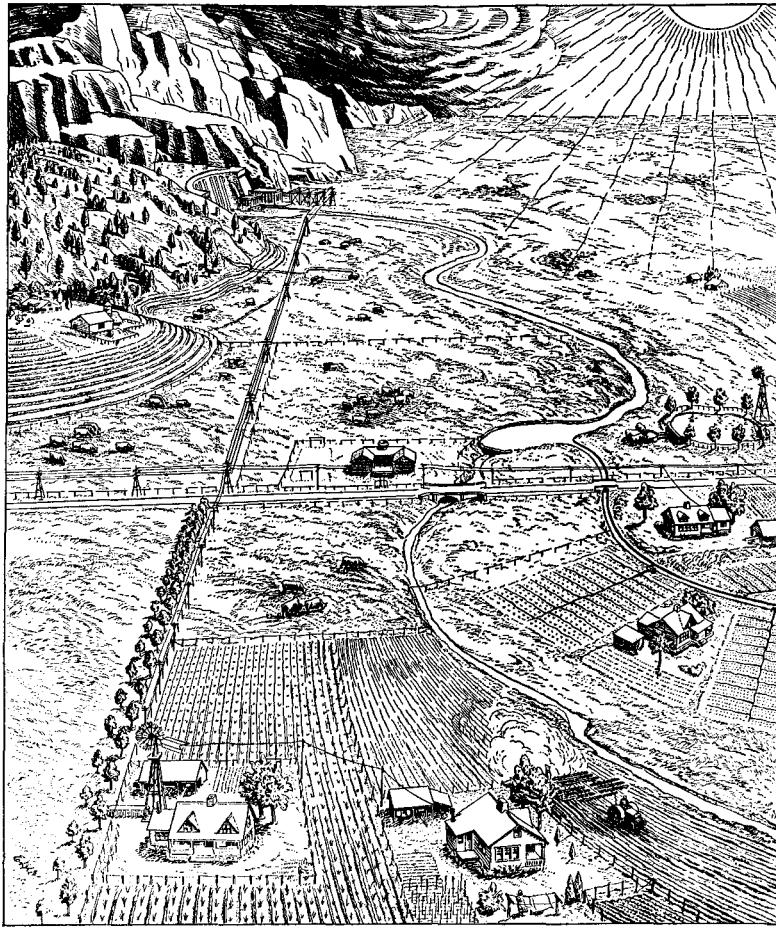
“The Great Plains of the Present.”

The original caption was, in part, “The White Man . . . came as a conqueror first of the Indian, then of Nature. . . . The plough ignores Nature’s ‘Keep Off’ signs; communities, for all the courage of their people, fall into decay.”

planners, describing their own controversial conclusions with the settled authority of the past tense, “that unless there was a permanent change in the agricultural pattern of the Plains, relief always would have to be extended whenever the available rainfall was deficient.”²²

Whatever the scientific or political merits of this description, consider its narrative implications. The New Deal planners in effect argued that the rising plot line of our earlier storytellers not only was false but was itself the principal cause of the environmental disaster that unfolded during the 1930s. The Dust Bowl had occurred because people had been telling themselves the wrong story and had tried

²² *Future of the Great Plains*, 1.



“The Great Plains of the Future.”

The original caption was, in part, “The land may bloom again if man once more makes his peace with Nature. Careful planting will give him back the foothill trees; . . . fewer and larger farms on scientifically selected sites may yield . . . a comfortable living. . . . This is no Utopian dream. It is a promise, to be realized if we will.”

to inscribe that story—the frontier—on a landscape incapable of supporting it.²³ The environmental rhythms of the Plains ecosystem were cyclical, with good years and bad years following each other like waves on a beach. The problem of human settlement in the region was that people insisted on imposing their linear notions of progress on this cyclical pattern. Their perennial optimism led them always to accept as “normal” the most favorable part of the precipitation cycle, and so they created a type and scale of agriculture that could not possibly be sustained through

²³ This image of colonial invaders seeking to “inscribe” their ideology on an alien landscape is one of the central notions of a fascinating monograph: Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America* (New York, 1984).

the dry years. In effect, bad storytelling had wreaked havoc with the balance of nature.

By this interpretation, the “plot” of Great Plains history rises as Euroamerican settlement begins, but the upward motion becomes problematic as farmers exceed the natural limits of the ecosystem. From that moment forward, the story moves toward a climax in which the tragic flaws of a self-deluding people finally yield crisis and decline. Although the geographical and chronological frame of this narrative are much the same as in the earlier progressive plots, the *scene* has shifted dramatically. For Webb and Malin, the Plains environment was resistant but changeable, so that struggle and ingenuity would finally make it conform to the human will. In this early New Deal incarnation of a pessimistic Great Plains history, the environment was not only resistant but in some fundamental ways unchangeable. Its most important characteristics—cyclical drought and aridity—could not be altered by human technology; they could only be accommodated. If the story was still about human beings learning to live in the grasslands, its ultimate message was about gaining the wisdom to recognize and accept natural limits rather than strive to overcome them. Although the close of the New Deal committee’s story still lay in the future when its report was released in 1936, its authors clearly intended readers to conclude that the only appropriate ending was for Americans to reject optimistic stories such as Webb’s and Malin’s in favor of environmental restraint and sound management.

The political subtext of this story is not hard to find. Whereas the heroes of earlier Great Plains narratives had been the courageous and inventive people who settled the region, the New Dealers constructed their stories so as to place themselves on center stage. Plainspeople, for all their energy, courage, and love of the land, were incapable of solving their own problems without help. They had made such a mess of their environment that only disinterested outsiders, offering the enlightened perspective of scientific management, could save them from their own folly. In this sense, the New Deal narrative is only partially tragic, for in fact the planners still intended a happy ending. Like Webb and Malin, they saw the human story on the Plains as a tale of adaptation, but their vision of progressive modernization ended in regional coordination and centralized state planning. Federal planners would aid local communities in developing new cooperative institutions and a more sustainable relation to the land. This was the conclusion of Pare Lorentz’s famous New Deal propaganda film, *The Plow that Broke the Plains* (1936), in which a seemingly inevitable environmental collapse is finally reversed by government intervention. Technology, education, cooperation, and state power—not individualism—would bring Plains society back into organic balance with Plains nature and thereby avert tragedy to produce a happy ending.

Seen in this light, James Malin’s storytelling takes on new meaning. Malin wrote in the wake of the New Deal and was a staunch conservative opponent of everything it represented. His narratives of regional adaptation expressed his own horror of collectivism by resisting the New Deal story at virtually every turn. The planners, he said, had exaggerated the severity of the Dust Bowl to serve their own statist ends

and had ignored the fact that dust storms had been a natural part of the Plains environment as far back as anyone remembered. Their scientific faith in ecology had grave political dangers, for the ecologists had themselves gone astray in viewing the Plains environment as a stable, self-equilibrating organism in which human action inevitably disturbed the balance of nature.²⁴ Ecosystems were dynamic, and so was the human story of technological progress: to assert that nature set insurmountable limits to human ingenuity was to deny the whole upward sweep of civilized history. The New Dealers' affection for stories in which nature and society were metaphorically cast as organisms only revealed their own hostility to individualism and their flirtation with communist notions of the state. "Scientism," Malin declared, "along with statism, have become major social myths that threaten freedom."²⁵

If the New Dealers' Great Plains was a constrained environment forcing inhabitants to accept its natural limits, Malin's was a landscape of multiple possibilities, a stage for human freedom. The story of the one began in balance, moved into chaos, and then returned to the wiser balance of a scientifically planned society. The story of the other had no such prophetic return to an organic whole but expressed instead a constant process of readaptation that continued the long march of human improvement that was the core plot of Malin's history. In both cases, the shape of the landscape conformed to the human narratives that were set within it and so became the terrain upon which their different politics contested each other. Malin's commitment to individualist freedom led him to probe more deeply into grassland ecology than any historian before him, but always in an effort to find human possibilities rather than natural limits. The scene he constructed for his story was an environment that responded well to human needs unless misguided bureaucrats interfered with people's efforts to adapt themselves to the land.

It is James Malin's anti-New Deal narrative that informs Paul Bonnifield's *The Dust Bowl*. Writing in the late 1970s, at a time when conservative critiques of the welfare state were becoming a dominant feature of American political discourse, Bonnifield argues less urgently and polemically than Malin, but he tells essentially the same story. For him, the Great Plains did pose special problems to the people who settled there, but no one grappled with those problems more successfully than they. When the Dust Bowl hit, it was the people who lived there, not government scientists, who invented new land-use practices that solved earlier problems. New Deal planners understood little about the region and were so caught up in their own ideology that they compounded its problems by trying to impose their vision of a planned society.

Rather than allow residents to come up with their own solutions, Bonnifield argues, the planners used every means possible to drive farmers from their land. They did this not to address the environmental problems of the Plains, but to solve their own problem of reducing the national overproduction of wheat. To justify this deceit, they caricatured Plains inhabitants as "defeated, poverty-ridden people without hope" in such propaganda as *The Plow that Broke the Plains* and the Farm

²⁴ On the role of the Dust Bowl in reshaping the science of ecology itself, see Ronald C. Tobey, *Saving the Prairies: The Life Cycle of the Founding School of American Plant Ecology, 1895-1955* (Berkeley, 1981).

²⁵ Malin, *Grassland of North America*, 168.

Security Administration photographs, with their mini-narratives of environmental destruction and social despair.²⁶ In fact, Bonnifield argues, the Plains contained some of the best farming soil in the world. The landscape was difficult but ultimately benign for people who could learn to thrive upon it. Their chief problem was less a hostile nature than a hostile government. The narrative echoes Malin's scenic landscape but gains a different kind of ideological force when placed at the historical moment of its narration—in the waning years of the Carter administration just prior to Ronald Reagan's triumphant election as president. Bonnifield's is a tale of ordinary folk needing nothing so much as to get government off their backs.

If Bonnifield elaborates the optimistic Dust Bowl narrative of a conservative critic of the New Deal, Donald Worster returns to the New Deal plot and deepens its tragic possibilities. Worster, who is with Webb the most powerful narrator among these writers, accepts the basic framework of Roosevelt's planners—the refusal of linear-minded Americans to recognize and accept cyclical environmental constraints—but he shears away its statist bias and considerably expands its cultural boundaries. One consequence of the New Deal tale was to remove the history of the Plains from its role in the long-term ascent of civilization; instead, the region became merely an unfortunate anomaly that imposed unusual constraints on the “steady progress” that was otherwise typical of American life. Worster rejects this reading of Plains history and argues instead that the Plains were actually a paradigmatic case in a larger story that might be called “the rise and fall of capitalism.”

For Worster, the refusal to recognize natural limits is one of the defining characteristics of a capitalist ethos and economy. He is therefore drawn to a narrative in which the same facts that betokened progress for Webb and Malin become signs of declension and of the compounding contradictions of capitalist expansion. The scene of the story is world historical, only this time the plot leads toward catastrophe:

That the thirties were a time of great crisis in American, indeed, in world, capitalism has long been an obvious fact. The Dust Bowl, I believe, was part of that same crisis. It came about because the expansionary energy of the United States had finally encountered a volatile, marginal land, destroying the delicate ecological balance that had evolved there. We speak of farmers and plows on the plains and the damage they did, but the language is inadequate. What brought them to the region was a social system, a set of values, an economic order. There is no word that so fully sums up those elements as “capitalism.” . . . Capitalism, it is my contention, has been the decisive factor in this nation's use of nature.²⁷

By this reading, the chief agent of the story is not “the pioneers” or “civilization” or “man”; it is capitalism. The plot leads from the origins of that economic system, through a series of crises, toward the future environmental cataclysm when the system will finally collapse. The tale of Worster's Dust Bowl thus concerns an intermediate crisis that foreshadows other crises yet to come; in this, it proclaims an apocalyptic prophecy that inverts the prophecy of progress found in earlier frontier narratives. Worster's inversion of the frontier story is deeply ironic, for it implies that

²⁶ Bonnifield, *The Dust Bowl*, 202.

²⁷ Worster, *Dust Bowl*, 5.

the increasing technological “control” represented by Webb’s and Malin’s human ingenuity leads only toward an escalating spiral of disasters. He also breaks rank with the New Dealers at this point, for in his view their efforts at solving the problems of the Dust Bowl did nothing to address the basic contradictions of capitalism itself. For Worster, the planners “propped up an agricultural economy that had proved itself to be socially and ecologically erosive.”²⁸

Given how much his basic plot differs from Webb’s and Malin’s, the scene Worster constructs for his narrative must differ just as dramatically. Since Worster’s story concerns the destruction of an entire ecosystem, it must end where the frontier story began: in a wasteland. His plot must move downward toward an ecological disaster called the Dust Bowl. Whereas the frontier narratives begin in a negatively valued landscape and end in a positive one, Worster begins his tale in a place whose narrative value is entirely good. His grasslands are “an old and unique ecological complex” that nature had struggled for millions of years to achieve, “determining by trial and error what would flourish best in this dry corner of the good earth.”²⁹ Delicate and beautiful, the Plains were an ecosystem living always on the edge of drought, and their survival depended on an intricate web of plants and animals that capitalism was incapable of valuing by any standard other than that of the marketplace. From this beginning, the story moves down a slope that ends in the dust storms whose narrative role is to stand as the most vivid possible symbol of human alienation from nature.

The very different scenes that progressive and declensionist narrators choose as the settings for their Great Plains histories bring us to another key observation about narrative itself: where one chooses to begin and end a story profoundly alters its shape and meaning. Worster’s is not, after all, the only possible plot that can organize Great Plains history into a tale of crisis and decline. Because his metanarrative has to do with the past and future of capitalism, his time frame, like that of the frontier storytellers, remains tied to the start of white settlement—the moment when the American plot of progress or decline begins its upward or downward sweep. Although he acknowledges the prior presence of Indians in the region, he devotes only a few pages to them. They are clearly peripheral to his narrative. This is true of *all* the stories we have examined thus far, for reasons that have as much to do with narrative rhetoric as with historical analysis. In their efforts to meet the narrative requirements that define a well-told tale—organic unity, a clear focus, and only the “relevant” details—these historians have little to say about the region’s earlier human inhabitants. They therefore ignore the entire first half of my original chronicle of “key events” in Great Plains history. If we shift time frames to encompass the Indian past, we suddenly encounter a new set of narratives, equally tragic in their sense of crisis and declension, but strikingly different in plot and scene. As such, they offer further proof of the narrative power to reframe the past so as to include certain events and people, exclude others, and redefine the meaning of landscape accordingly.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 163.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 66.

One can detect this process of inclusion and exclusion in the passing references that progressive frontier narrators make to the prior, less happy stories of Indians. Sometimes, the tone of such references is elegiac and melancholy, as in the classic image of a “vanishing race”; sometimes the tone is simply dismissive. As Webb put it, “The Plains Indians were survivals of savagery,” and “when there was nowhere else to push them they were permitted to settle down on the reservations.”³⁰ If progressive change was inevitable, then so too was the eventual death or removal of the Indians. Their marginalization is thus a necessary requirement of the narrative. The feature of the environment that served as the best scenic indicator of this inevitability was the American bison, whose destruction was among the most crucial steps in undermining Indian subsistence. Even if one did not feel favorably disposed toward Indians, one could still mourn the bison. Webb again: “The Great Plains afforded the last virgin hunting grounds in America, and it was there that the most characteristic American animal made its last stand against the advance of the white man’s civilization.”³¹

These passing references to Indian “pre-history” are essentially framing devices, the purpose of which is to set the stage for the more important drama that is soon to follow. Historians who focus more centrally on Indians in their narratives almost inevitably construct very different plots from the ones I have described thus far. Among such scholars, one of the most sophisticated is Richard White.³² Although his work too can be seen as a metaplot about the expansion of capitalism, the landscape he constructs is defined by Indian stories. White’s narrative of Pawnee history, for instance, begins with a people living in the mixed grasslands on the eastern margins of the Plains, dividing their activities in a seasonally shifting cycle of farming, gathering, and bison hunting. As one would expect of a declensionist plot, the initial scene is basically a benign and fruitful landscape, despite occasionally severe droughts. At the moment that the Pawnees began their encounter with Euro-american culture—first with the arrival of the horse, then with the fur trade—the Plains environment was furnishing them a comfortable subsistence. In narrative terms, its meaning was that of a much-loved home.

The downward line of White’s narrative records the steady erosion of the Pawnees’ landscape. European disease wiped out much of their population. The expanding Sioux tribes made it harder for them to hunt bison and raise crops. As hunting became more difficult, the material and spiritual underpinnings of Pawnee subsistence began to disintegrate. Pawnee life was increasingly in crisis, and by the 1870s—when the great herds were finally destroyed—the tribe was forced to abandon its traditional homeland and remove to Indian Territory. The story ends as a classic tragedy of exodus and despair: “When the Pawnees decided to leave the

³⁰ Webb, *Great Plains*, 508.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 509. For a similar use of the bison story as the symbol of an earlier Indian world that in some sense “vanished” during the last third of the nineteenth century, see William Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York, 1991), 213–18.

³² Richard White, *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change among the Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navajos* (Lincoln, 1983), 147–211.

Loup Valley, it was in the hope that to the south in Indian territory lay a land where they could hunt the buffalo, grow corn, and let the old life of the earthlodges flower beyond the reach of the Sioux and American settlers."³³ Unfortunately, this hoped-for ending to the Pawnee story would never be achieved, because the scene it required no longer existed. As White says, "Such a land had disappeared forever."³⁴

The frame of this story differs from anything we have seen thus far. It ends at the moment most of the other plots begin. It starts much further back in time, as European animals and trade goods begin to change the Plains landscape, offering opportunities and improvements in Pawnee life. Eventually a downward spiral begins, and the tragedy of the narrative becomes unrelenting as the Pawnees lose control of their familiar world. As for the scene of this plot, we have already encountered it in a different guise. The "wilderness" in which the progressive frontier narrators begin their stories is nothing less than the destroyed remnant of the Pawnees' home. It is less a wasteland than a land that has been wasted.

Narratives of this sort are by no means limited to white historians. Plenty Coups, a Crow Indian chief, tells in his 1930 autobiography of a boyhood vision sent him by his animal Helper, the Chickadee. In the dream, a great storm blown by the Four Winds destroyed a vast forest, leaving standing only the single tree in which the Chickadee—smallest but shrewdest of animals—made its lodge. The tribal elders interpreted this to mean that white settlers would eventually destroy not only the buffalo but also all tribes who resisted the American onslaught. On the basis of this prophetic dream, the Crows decided to ally themselves with the United States, and so they managed to preserve a portion of their homelands. Saving their land did not spare them from the destruction of the bison herds, however, and so they shared with other Plains tribes the loss of subsistence and spiritual communion that had previously been integral to the hunt. As Plenty Coups remarks at the end of his story, "when the buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened."³⁵

Few remarks more powerfully capture the importance of narrative to history than this last of Plenty Coups: "After this nothing happened." For the Crows as for other Plains tribes, the universe revolved around the bison herds, and life made sense only so long as the hunt continued. When the scene shifted—when the bison herds "went away"—that universe collapsed and history ended. Although the Crows continued to live on their reservation and although their identity as a people has never ceased, for Plenty Coups their subsequent life is all part of a different story.³⁶ The story he loved best ended with the buffalo. Everything that has happened since is part of some other plot, and there is neither sense nor joy in telling it.

³³ White, *Roots of Dependency*, 211.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Frank Linderman, *Plenty-coups: Chief of the Crows* (1930; reprint, Lincoln, 1962), 311.

³⁶ The danger in the way Plenty Coups ends his story, and in Richard White's ending as well, is that the close of these tragic narratives can all too easily be taken as the end of their protagonists' cultural history. The notion that Indian histories come to an end is among the classic imperialist myths of the frontier, wherein a "vanishing race" "melts away" before the advancing forces of "civilization." Plenty Coups's declaration that "after this nothing happened" conveys with great power the tragedy of an older Indian generation but says nothing about the generations of Indians who still live within the shadow of that narrative punctuation mark.

The nothingness at the end of Plenty Coups's story suggests just how completely a narrative can redefine the events of the past and the landscapes of nature to fit the needs of its plot. After this nothing happened: not frontier progress, not the challenge of adaptation to an arid land, not the Dust Bowl. Just the nothingness that follows the end of a story. It is this nothingness that carries me back to the place where I began, to my own awareness of a paradox at the heart of my intellectual practice as an historian. On the one hand, most environmental historians would be quite comfortable in asserting the importance of the nonhuman world to any understanding of the human past. Most would argue that nature is larger than humanity, that it is not completely an invention of human culture, that it impinges on our lives in ways we cannot completely control, that it is "real," and that our task as historians is to understand the way it affects us and vice versa. Black clouds bringing dust and darkness from the Kansas sky, overturned sod offering itself as a seedbed for alien grains sprouting amid the torn roots of dying prairie grasses, dry winds filled with the stench of rotting bison flesh as wolves and vultures linger over their feasts: these are more than just stories.

And yet — they are stories too. As such, they are human inventions despite all our efforts to preserve their "naturalness." They belong as much to rhetoric and human discourse as to ecology and nature. It is for this reason that we cannot escape confronting the challenge of multiple competing narratives in our efforts to understand both nature and the human past. As I hope my reading of Great Plains history suggests, the narrative theorists have much to teach us. Quite apart from the environmental historian's analytical premise that nature and culture have become inextricably entangled in their process of mutual reshaping, the rhetorical practice of environmental history commits us to narrative ways of talking about nature that are anything but "natural." If we fail to reflect on the plots and scenes and tropes that undergird our histories, we run the risk of missing the human artifice that lies at the heart of even the most "natural" of narratives.

And just what *is* a narrative? As the evidence of my Great Plains chronicle would imply, it is not merely a sequence of events. To shift from chronicle to narrative, a tale of environmental change must be structured so that, as Aristotle said, it "has beginning, middle, and end."³⁷ What distinguishes stories from other forms of discourse is that they describe an action that begins, continues over a well-defined period of time, and finally draws to a definite close, with consequences that become meaningful because of their placement within the narrative. Completed action gives a story its unity and allows us to evaluate and judge an act by its results. The moral of a story is defined by its ending: as Aristotle remarked, "the end is everywhere the chief thing."³⁸

Narrative is a peculiarly human way of organizing reality, and this has important implications for the way we approach the history of environmental change. Some

³⁷ Aristotle, *Poetics*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (2 vols., Princeton, 1984), II, 2321.

³⁸ *Ibid.* On the importance of a story's ending in determining its configured unity, see Kermode, *Sense of an Ending*; this can be usefully combined with Edward W. Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York, 1975).

nonhuman events can be said to have properties that conform to the Aristotelian beginning-middle-end requirement of storytelling, as when an individual organism (or a species or a mountain range or even the universe itself) is born, persists, and dies. One *can* tell stories about such things—geologists and evolutionary biologists often do—but they lack the compelling drama that comes from having a judgeable protagonist. Things in nature usually “just happen,” without raising questions of moral choice. Many natural events lack even this much linear structure. Some are cyclical: the motions of the planets, the seasons, or the rhythms of biological fertility and reproduction. Others are random: climate shifts, earthquakes, genetic mutations, and other events the causes of which remain hidden from us. One does not automatically describe such things with narrative plots, and yet environmental histories, which purport to set the human past in its natural context, all have plots. Nature and the universe do not tell stories; we do. Why is this?

Two possible answers to this question emerge from the work that philosophers and post-structuralist literary critics have done on the relationship between narrative and history. One group, which includes Hayden White and the late Louis Mink as well as many of the deconstructionists, argues that narrative is so basic to our cultural beliefs that we automatically impose it on a reality that bears little or no relation to the plots we use in organizing our experience.³⁹ Mink summarizes this position nicely by asserting that “the past is not an untold story.” The same could presumably be said about nature: we force our stories on a world that doesn’t fit them.⁴⁰ The historian’s project of recovering past realities and representing them “truly” or even “fairly” is thus a delusion. Trapped within our narrative discourse, we could not do justice either to nature or to the past no matter how hard we tried—presuming, of course, that “nature” or “the past” even exist at all.

An alternative position, most recently defended by David Carr but originally developed by Martin Heidegger, is that although narrative may not be intrinsic to events in the physical universe, it is fundamental to the way we humans organize our experience. Whatever may be the perspective of the universe on the things going on around us, our human perspective is that we inhabit an endlessly storied world. We narrate the triumphs and failures of our pasts. We tell stories to explore the alternative choices that might lead to feared or hoped-for futures. Our very habit of partitioning the flow of time into “events,” with their implied beginnings, middles, and ends, suggests how deeply the narrative structure inheres in our experience of the world. As Carr puts it, “Narrative is not merely a possibly successful way of describing events; its structure inheres in the events themselves. Far from being a

³⁹ See White, *Tropics of Discourse*; White, *Metahistory*; Mink, “Narrative Form as Cognitive Instrument”; a less extreme position that ultimately leads toward a similar conclusion can be found in Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, I. For a useful, if biased, explication of these debates, see Hayden White, “The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory,” *History and Theory*, 23 (no. 1, 1984), 1–33. A valuable survey can be found in Martin, *Recent Theories of Narrative*.

⁴⁰ Mink, “Narrative Form as Cognitive Instrument,” 148. See also Richard T. Vann, “Louis Mink’s Linguistic Turn,” *History and Theory*, 26 (no. 1, 1987), 14.

formal distortion of the events it relates, a narrative account is an extension of one of their primary features.”⁴¹

Carr’s position will undoubtedly be attractive to most historians, since it argues that, far from being arbitrary, our narratives reflect one of the most fundamental properties of human consciousness. It also gives us a way of absorbing the lessons of narrative theory without feeling we have abandoned all ties to an external reality. Insofar as people project their wills into the future, organizing their lives to make acts in the present yield predictable future results—to just that extent, they live their lives as if they were telling a story. It is undoubtedly true that we all constantly tell ourselves stories to remind ourselves who we are, how we got to be that person, and what we want to become. The same is true not just of individuals but of communities and societies: we use our histories to remember ourselves, just as we use our prophecies as tools for exploring what we do or do not wish to become.⁴² As Plenty Coups’s story implies, to recover the narratives people tell themselves about the meanings of their lives is to learn a great deal about their past actions and about the way they *understand* those actions. Stripped of the story, we lose track of understanding itself.

The storied reality of human experience suggests why environmental histories so consistently find plots in nature and also why those plots almost always center on people. Environmental history sets itself the task of including within its boundaries far more of the nonhuman world than most other histories, and yet human agents continue to be the main anchors of its narratives. Dust storms have been occurring on the Plains for millennia, and yet the ones we really care about—those we now narrate under the title “Dust Bowl”—are the ones we can most easily transform into stories in which people become the heroes or victims or villains of the piece. In this, historians consistently differ from ecologists, who more often than not treat people as exogenous variables that fit awkwardly if at all into the theoretical models of the discipline. The historian’s tendency is quite opposite. The chief protagonists and antagonists of our stories are almost always human, for reasons that go to the very heart of our narrative impulse.

Our histories of the Great Plains environment remain fixed on people because what we most care about in nature is its meaning for human beings. We care about the dust storms because they stand as a symbol of human endurance in the face of natural adversity—or as a symbol of human irresponsibility in the face of natural fragility. Human interests and conflicts create *values* in nature that in turn provide the moral center for our stories. We want to know whether environmental change

⁴¹ David Carr, “Narrative and the Real World: An Argument for Continuity,” *History and Theory*, 25 (no. 2, 1986), 117.

⁴² See Robert Cover, “Nomos and Narrative,” *Harvard Law Review*, 97 (Nov. 1983), 3–68. Carr’s argument that all human experience is narrated does not address a deeper relativist claim, that there is no necessary correlation between the stories people tell in their own lives and the stories historians tell in reconstructing those lives. On this issue, see Noel Carroll, review of *Time, Narrative, and History* by David Carr, *History and Theory*, 27 (no. 3, 1988), 297–306.

is good or bad, and that question can only be answered by referring to our own sense of right and wrong. Nature remains mute about such matters. However passionately we may care about the nonhuman world, however much we may believe in its innate worth, our historical narratives, even those about the nonhuman world, remain focused on a human struggle over values. If these values are in effect the meanings we attach to judgeable human actions—nonhuman actions being generally unjudgeable by us—then the center of our stories will remain focused on human thoughts, human acts, and human values.

It is because we care about the consequences of actions that narratives—unlike most natural processes—have beginnings, middles, and ends. Stories are intrinsically teleological forms, in which an event is explained by the prior events or causes that lead up to it. This accounts for one feature that all these Great Plains histories have in common: all are designed so that the plot and its changing scene—its environment—flow toward the ultimate end of the story. In the most extreme cases, if the tale is of progress, then the closing landscape is a garden; if the tale is of crisis and decline, the closing landscape (whether located in the past or the future) is a wasteland. As an obvious but very important consequence of this narrative requirement, opening landscapes must be different from closing ones to make the plot work. A trackless waste must become a grassland civilization. Or: a fragile ecosystem must become a Dust Bowl. The difference between beginning and end gives us our chance to extract a moral from the rhetorical landscape. Our narratives take changes in the land and situate them in stories whose endings become the lessons we wish to draw from those changes.

However serious the epistemological problems it creates, this commitment to teleology and narrative gives environmental history—all history—its moral center. Because stories concern the consequences of actions that are potentially valued in quite different ways, whether by agent, narrator, or audience, we can achieve no neutral objectivity in writing them. Historians may strive to be as fair as they can, but as these Plains examples demonstrate, it remains possible to narrate the same evidence in radically different ways. Within the field of our narratives we too—as narrators—are moral agents and political actors. As storytellers we commit ourselves to the task of judging the consequences of human actions, trying to understand the choices that confronted the people whose lives we narrate so as to capture the full tumult of their world. In the dilemmas they faced we discover our own, and at the intersection of the two we locate the moral of the story. If our goal is to tell tales that make the past meaningful, then we cannot escape struggling over the values that define what meaning is.

This vision of history as an endless struggle among competing narratives and values may not seem very reassuring. How, for instance, are we to choose among the infinite stories that our different values seem capable of generating? This is the question that lurks so threateningly at the intersections of the different Great Plains histories we have encountered. Are nature and the past infinitely malleable in the face of our ability to tell stories about them? The uneasiness that many historians feel in confronting the postmodernist challenge comes down to this basic concern,

which potentially seems to shake the very foundations of our enterprise. If our choice of narratives reflects only our power to impose our preferred version of reality on a past that cannot resist us, then what is left of history?⁴³

Most practicing historians, of course, do not believe that all stories about the past are equally good, even if we are not very articulate in explaining why one is better or worse than another. Usually we just declare that we recognize good history when we see it. If pressed, we may perhaps offer a few rules of thumb to help define what we are looking for. Some might argue for depth, saying that the narrative that explains more, that is richer in its suggestions about past causes, meanings, and ambiguities, is the better history. Others might seek breadth, preferring the historical narrative that accommodates the largest number of relevant details without contradicting any relevant facts.⁴⁴ Then again, less may be more: A simple story well told may reveal far more about a past world than a complicated text that never finds its own center. Inclusiveness is another virtue: a history is better, surely, when it incorporates many different voices and events to reflect the diversity of past human experiences. But maybe coherence is more important: we might demand of good history that its components be tightly enough linked that it contains no unnecessary parts or extraneous details, lest we call it antiquarian. We might ask that a good history reflect the full historiographical tradition that lies behind it while simultaneously pushing the boundaries of that tradition. We of course want it to offer a subtle and original reading of primary sources. It should surprise us with new perspectives and interpretations. We would prefer that it be lucid, engaging, a good read. And so the list goes on.

All of these are plausible criteria, and most of us would agree that they play a part in helping us recognize good history when we see it. The trouble, obviously, is that they themselves can all too easily become objects of disagreement and struggle. Indeed, many of them reflect the same sorts of aesthetic judgments that we make when encountering any narrative, historical or nonhistorical, fictional or nonfictional. It is not at all clear that they would help us very much in deciding whether Webb or Worster or Bonnifield or Plenty Coups is the better narrator of Great Plains history. If the criteria we use in deciding the relative merits of historical narratives are open to the same sorts of value judgments as the narratives themselves, then we have hardly escaped the dilemma that postmodernist theory has posed for us. We seem still to be rudderless in an endless sea of stories.

Before going any further, I should probably confess my own uncertainty about how to navigate from here to a safe harbor, wherever it might be. I first wrote this essay nearly five years ago in an effort to acknowledge the rich insights that postmodernism has given us into the complexities of narrative discourse. I assembled

⁴³ This question, in a somewhat different form, is the chief topic of Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, Eng., 1988).

⁴⁴ As with most of these criteria, there are deep problems here. To say that historical narratives must include all relevant details and contradict no relevant facts begs the most important question, for the tool we use to define relevance is narrative itself. Does this particular fact belong to this particular story? Only the story can tell us. To test a narrative by its ability to include facts—the relevance of which is defined by the narrative's own plot—is to slide rapidly into tautology.

a small collection of stories about the Great Plains to see what narrative theory might tell me about the way those stories shape our sense of a landscape and the people who live upon it. The exercise persuaded me that plot and scene and character, beginnings and middles and ends, the rhetoric of storytelling, the different agendas of narrators and readers, all permeate our activities as historians. To deny the richness of this insight would be an evasion of self-knowledge, a willful refusal to recognize the power and the paradoxes that flow from our narrative discourse.

And yet despite what I have learned in writing this essay, it has also been a frustrating struggle, because I, like most practicing historians, am only willing to follow the postmodernists so far. The essay has gone through four radically different versions, each with a different title, each trying to make a different kind of peace with the dilemmas these Great Plains histories pose. My goal throughout has been to acknowledge the immense power of narrative while still defending the past (and nature) as real things to which our storytelling must somehow conform lest it cease being history altogether. Alas, I shared each new version of the essay with a different group of readers and critics, and each time they persuaded me that my efforts to find safe harbor had failed. Each new version of the essay, and each letter and conversation that critiqued it, returned me to where I began: each became a different story about the meaning of stories, a different argument about how narrative does and does not ground itself in nature and the past. The essay, in other words, recapitulated the very problems it set out to solve.

But perhaps there lies hidden in this seemingly frustrating fact a partial solution to the narrative dilemma. (Watch: I try one more tack to seek some shelter in this rhetorical storm.) The same process of criticism that shaped the different versions of this essay typifies the production and consumption of all historical texts. The stories we tell about the past do not exist in a vacuum, and our storytelling practice is bounded in at least three ways that limit its power. First, our stories cannot contravene known facts about the past. This is so much a truism of traditional historical method that we rarely bother even to state it, but it is crucial if we wish to deny that all narratives do an equally good job of representing the past. At the most basic level, we judge a work bad history if it contradicts evidence we know to be accurate and true. Good history does not knowingly lie. A history of the Great Plains that narrated a story of continuous progress without once mentioning the Dust Bowl would instantly be suspect, as would a history of the Nazi treatment of Jews that failed to mention the concentration camps. Historical narratives are bounded at every turn by the evidence they can and cannot muster in their own support.

Environmental historians embrace a second set of narrative constraints: given our faith that the natural world ultimately transcends our narrative power, our stories must make ecological sense. You can't put dust in the air—or tell stories about putting dust in the air—if the dust isn't there.⁴⁵ Even though environmental histories transform ecosystems into the scenes of human narratives, the biological and geological processes of the earth set fundamental limits to what constitutes a plausible nar-

⁴⁵ I borrow this lovely epigram from a remark of Patricia Limerick's.

rative. The dust storms of the 1930s are not just historical facts but natural ones: they reflect the complex response of an entire ecosystem—its soils, its vegetation, its animals, its climate—to human actions. Insofar as we can know them, to exclude or obscure these natural “facts” would be another kind of false silence, another kind of lying.

In choosing to assign narrative meaning to “natural” events of this sort, we face a special problem, for nature does not tell us whether a dust storm is a good or bad thing; only we can do that. Nature is unlike most other historical subjects in lacking a clear voice of its own. The very fact that Great Plains historians can ascribe to the same landscape such different meanings is one consequence of this lack of voice. Still, nature is hardly silent. No matter what people do, their actions have real consequences in nature, just as natural events have real consequences for people. In narrating those consequences, we inevitably interpret their meaning according to human values—but the consequences themselves are as much nature’s choice as our own. To just that extent, nature coauthors our stories. A Bonnifield and a Worster may draw radically different lessons from the Dust Bowl, but neither can deny the great storms themselves. The power of narrative does not extend nearly so far.

Finally, historical narratives are constrained in a third important way as well. Historians do not tell stories by themselves. We write as members of communities, and we cannot help but take those communities into account as we do our work. Being American, being male, being white, being an upper-middle-class academic, being an environmentalist, I write in particular ways that are not all of my own choosing, and my biases are reflected in my work. But being a scholar, I write also for a community of other scholars—some very different from me in their backgrounds and biases—who know nearly as much about my subject as I do. They are in a position instantly to remind me of the excluded facts and wrong-headed interpretations that my own bias, self-delusion, and lack of diligence have kept me from acknowledging.

The stories we write, in other words, are judged not just as narratives, but as nonfictions. We construct them knowing that scholars will evaluate their accuracy, and knowing too that many other people and communities—those who have a present stake in the way the past is described—will also judge the fairness and truth of what we say. Because our readers have the skill to know what is *not* in a text as well as what is in it, we cannot afford to be arbitrary in deciding whether a fact does or does not belong in our stories. Someone among our readers—a bemused colleague, an angry partisan, a wounded victim—will eventually inform us of our failings. Nature, of course, will not bother to construct such a critique, but plenty of others will step forward to speak on its behalf as we ourselves have done. We therefore struggle to anticipate criticisms, to absorb contradictory accounts, and to fit our narratives to what we already know about our subject. Criticism can sometimes do more harm than good—sapping the life from a story, burying strong arguments beneath nitpicking caveats, reinforcing conventional wisdom at the expense of new or radical insights, and murdering passion—but it can also keep us honest by forcing us to confront contradictory evidence and counternarratives. We tell stories *with*

each other and *against* each other in order to speak *to* each other. Our readers, in short, play crucial roles in shaping the stories we tell. Just so has this essay gone through four separate incarnations to reach its present form, each of them responding in different ways to the critical communities that in a very real sense helped author them. No matter how frustrating this process of revision may be, the resulting text is in this case unquestionably better as a result.⁴⁶

And what of my own story here? What kind of tale have *I* been telling about Great Plains history? My most visible narrative has of course been a story about storytellers who express their own times and political visions. Each told tales that embodied the values of a particular community. Each tried to be true to the “facts” as they then appeared. Each looked back to earlier storytellers, accommodating them when possible and trying to demonstrate their inadequacy when this was necessary to the success of the newer story. The result was a sequence of contesting stories, from tales of frontier progress to the New Deal tragedies, to Malin’s and Bonifield’s stories of local resistance in the face of a hostile environment and bureaucracy, to Worster’s tragedy of environmental crisis and capitalist self-destruction.

But the meaning of my story about stories also reflects that other, more personal, narrative, the one about my struggle to accommodate the lessons of critical theory without giving in to relativism. That story began with a question. If postmodernism is correct in arguing that narrative devices are deeply present even in such a field as environmental history, which takes for its subject the least human and least storied of worlds—nature—must we then accept that the past is infinitely malleable, thereby apparently undermining the entire historical project? Given my biases, the answer to this question has got to be no, and so my story has worked its way toward an ending about the ultimate justification of history in community, past reality, and nature itself. For me, there is something profoundly unsatisfying and ultimately self-deluding about an endless postmodernist deconstruction of texts that fails to ground itself in history, in community, in politics, and finally in the moral problem of living on earth. Against it, I would assert the virtues of narrative as our best and most compelling tool for searching out meaning in a conflicted and contradictory world.

The danger of postmodernism, despite all the rich insights it offers into the contested terrain of narrative discourse, is that it threatens to lose track of the very thing that makes narrative so compelling a part of history and human consciousness both. After all, the principal difference between a chronicle and a narrative is that a good story makes us *care* about its subject in a way that a chronicle does not.⁴⁷ My list of “significant Great Plains events” surely had no effect on anyone’s emotions or moral vision, whereas I doubt anyone can read Donald Worster’s *Dust Bowl* without being moved in one way or another. More powerfully still, the nothingness at the end of Plenty Coups’s story suggests that even silence—the ability of narrative to

⁴⁶ I owe this argument about the role of criticism in limiting historical narratives to Richard White’s comments on an earlier version of this essay. His help, and the way it has reshaped the text you now read, precisely illustrates my point about the critical praxis of scholarly communities.

⁴⁷ Jim O’Brien pointed me toward the importance of this insight.

rupture the flow of time in the service of its meaning—can touch us deeply with its eloquence. When a narrator honestly makes an audience care about what happens in a story, the story expresses the ties between past and present in a way that lends deeper meaning to both. This process, like everything else in history, is open to criticism, since the rhetorical devices for making an audience care can become all too manipulative and sentimental. At its best, however, historical storytelling helps keep us morally engaged with the world by showing us how to care about it and its origins in ways we had not done before.

If this is true, then the special task of environmental history is to assert that stories about the past are better, all other things being equal, if they increase our attention to nature and the place of people within it. They succeed when they make us look at the grasslands and their peoples in a new way. This is different from saying that our histories should turn their readers into environmentalists or convince everyone of a particular political point of view. Good histories rarely do this. But if environmental history is successful in its project, the story of how different peoples have lived in and used the natural world will become one of the most basic and fundamental narratives in all of history, without which no understanding of the past could be complete. Despite the tensions that inevitably exist between nature and our narrative discourse, we cannot help but embrace storytelling if we hope to persuade readers of the importance of our subject. As Aristotle reminded us so long ago, narrative is among our most powerful ways of encountering the world, judging our actions within it, and learning to care about its many meanings.

Because I care so much about nature and storytelling both, I would urge upon environmental historians the task of telling not just stories about nature, but stories about stories about nature.⁴⁸ I do so because narratives remain our chief moral compass in the world. Because we use them to motivate and explain our actions, the stories we tell change the way we act in the world. They are not just passive accounts: in a very literal sense, the frontier stories helped *cause* the Dust Bowl, just as the New Deal stories helped cause the government response to that disaster. We find in such stories our histories and prophecies both, which means they remain our best path to an engaged moral life. In organizing ecological change into beginnings, middles, and ends—which from the point of view of the universe are fictions, pure and simple—we place human agents at the center of events that they themselves may not fully understand but that they constantly affect with their actions. The end of these human stories creates their unity, the telos against which we judge the efficacy, wisdom, and morality of human actions.

Historians and prophets share a common commitment to finding the meaning of endings. However much we understand that an ecosystem transcends mere humanity, we cannot escape the valuing process that defines our relationship to it. To see how much this is so, one has only to consider the various labels Americans have attached to the Great Plains since 1800: the Land of the Buffalo; the Great American

⁴⁸ An extraordinary example of such stories about stories, set within the boundaries of a single Kansas county on the eastern Plains, is William Least Heat-Moon, *PrairieEarth (a deep map)* (Boston, 1991).

Desert; the Great Plains; the Wheat Belt; the Dust Bowl; the Breadbasket of the World; the Land Where the Sky Begins.⁴⁹ These are not simply names or descriptive phrases. Each implies a different possible *narrative* for environmental histories of the region, and different possible endings for each of those stories. Narrative is thus inescapably bound to the very names we give the world. Rather than evade it—which is in any event impossible—we must learn to use it consciously, responsibly, self-critically. To try to escape the value judgments that accompany storytelling is to miss the point of history itself, for the stories we tell, like the questions we ask, are all finally about value. So it is with questions that I will end:

What do people care most about in the world they inhabit?

How do they use and assign meaning to that world?

How does the earth respond to their actions and desires?

What sort of communities do people, plants, and animals create together?

How do people struggle with each other for control of the earth, its creatures, and its meanings?

And on the grandest scale: what is the mutual fate of humanity and the earth?

Good questions all, and starting points for many a story

⁴⁹ The shifting meanings of the Plains as “Great American Desert” are explored in Martyn J. Bowden, “The Great American Desert in the American Mind: The Historiography of a Geographical Notion,” in *Geographies of the Mind: Essays in Historical Geography*, ed. David Lowenthal and Martyn J. Bowden (New York, 1976), 119–47. See also William E. Riebsame, “The Dust Bowl: Historical Image, Psychological Anchor, and Ecological Taboo,” *Great Plains Quarterly*, 6 (Spring 1986), 127–36.