

William Cronon

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Photo by Hilary Fey Cronon.

William Cronon

The most obvious things about William Cronon are also probably the most misleading. He achieved success as a historian, a writer, and an academic early and seemingly effortlessly. It is, however, his later career, less visible to most of his colleagues, that better captures the full measure of his achievements, his sense of his obligation as a citizen, and the scope of his commitments to a larger intellectual community.

Bill Cronon's first book, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*, began as a seminar paper during his initial year of graduate study at Yale University. He researched for four months, but he wrote it in three days, finishing at 4:00 a.m. on the day of the class. Two years later, Arthur Wang of Hill & Wang asked to see it. Three more months of work and the paper was a finished manuscript. When published, it won the Francis Parkman Prize. *Changes in the Land* was spectacularly successful and nearly thirty years later, it remains a staple of undergraduate reading lists and an early classic of environmental history.

Changes in the Land appeared in 1983 before its author had received his PhD or had reached his thirtieth birthday. He had, it is true, a British DPhil, but if that had been enough to launch a career in the American academy, Bill Cronon wouldn't have been in graduate school at Yale. In 1985 he was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship.

Cronon's second book, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*, was his doctoral dissertation. It was not his revised doctoral dissertation. It was the thing itself. He had filed the book manuscript as his dissertation in 1990. W. W. Norton & Company published *Nature's Metropolis* in 1991, and it won the Bancroft Prize and was a finalist for the Pulitzer. By then he had already been teaching at Yale University for ten years. *Nature's Metropolis* put environmental history on the map, spawned a host of imitations, many of them very impressive in their own right, and reshaped the field by turning attention away from the wild and the rural toward the urban. The book also made him a full professor at Yale.

Glossed this way, William Cronon seemed a *wunderkind*. Success had effortlessly followed success. This was the kind of career—both admired and, truth be told, often envied—not seen since Arthur Schlesinger, except Cronon's scholarship was more rigorous, his arguments more imaginative, and his prose more graceful than Schlesinger's.

Wunderkind, however, leads us astray. There is a second, less visible trajectory in his career, one that needs some explaining. It is rooted more in Madison, Wisconsin, than in New Haven, Connecticut. What stands

out about Bill Cronon's trajectory is how little attention he has paid to the temptations of being a celebrity scholar. He has had more serious things to do. He left a tenured full professorship at an Ivy League university to return to the University of Wisconsin-Madison, a public university, at a time when everyone knew that public universities were underfunded and under attack. When offered the opportunity to take an easy route, he has quietly pursued a different path.

What is striking about his career is not how well the world has treated Bill Cronon but rather how much of his professional life has been devoted to the kind of work that gets little public notice or professional recognition. At Wisconsin he has devoted a considerable amount of his time to institution building that has little payoff in the wider professional world, unless a person is interested in climbing an administrative ladder. This is a prospect that has, thus far at least, failed to tempt him.

Understanding this other trajectory to Cronon's career involves understanding his relation to Madison, Wisconsin. Madison is the pole to which he has chosen to tether himself. It is where, in the deepest sense, he is from. It is where he has always returned. It is the place where his intellectual interests, connections, and commitments were forged. As a historian, Bill Cronon is both a consummate and self-conscious storyteller, and Madison is at the heart of his story.

Madison

William Cronon was not born in Wisconsin, but he grew up there. As a child he spent parts of his summers at his grandparents' summer cottage on Wisconsin's Green Lake, which would later play a role in *Nature's Metropolis*. His father, E. David Cronon, was a leading American political historian who had earned his PhD from Wisconsin, met his wife Jean there, and moved the family back to Madison in 1962 when Bill was eight. E. David Cronon would eventually chair the history department and serve as dean of the College of Letters and Science.

Bill was very much a historian's son. Family travels became an occasion for historical narratives, and the narratives gave Bill the habit of understanding the past in place, a tendency that is visible in almost all of his subsequent work. His father taught him how to use the collections of the Wisconsin Historical Society, and also fostered his early love of writing.

Professionally, it might seem that the fruit did not fall far from the tree, but the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s were years of complicated relations between fathers and sons. It was the particular soil of Madison as much as his father that shaped how Bill Cronon grew intellectually. He was a professor's precocious son, not only bookish but also the writer, editor, and publisher

of his own personal childhood newspaper. His father encouraged his son's literary efforts while tirelessly critiquing his prose and showing through careful editing how it could be improved. Bill read even more avidly than he wrote, beginning a life of book collecting that ended only recently when the weight of his accumulated collection quite literally caused such sagging to the misaligned bearing walls of his house that he wound up donating tens of thousands of volumes to the libraries of UW-Madison and the Wisconsin Historical Society. But, encouraged by his mother, Jean Cronon, he was also a child in love with the natural world around him.

In 1990 Bill Cronon wrote an essay about growing up in Wisconsin. It focused on caves and spelunking, and mustered considerable geological and local detail, but its aim was to make larger points. Bill Cronon always makes larger points. Caves, he wrote, taught him how to apply skills that he encountered at workshops he attended as a high school student at the University of Wisconsin arboretum on how to read a local landscape—its deep geological past and its more recent environmental changes. The course was modeled after ones that Aldo Leopold taught in the 1930s, and these skills were naturalists' skills, ones cultivated with the aid of his mother Jean, but they were something more.

At least retrospectively, he recognized that he was already refusing to draw sharp distinctions between human history and natural history. He noticed the changes that human beings had brought to the land; he came to see the landscape as a site of stories. He was learning, although he did not yet have a name for it, to do environmental history, which is always about entangling human history with the natural world. In Madison being enthralled with the land and its stories appeared quite normal because of the traditions that Leopold and others had bequeathed that community. For Bill, it also seemed to be an obvious way to merge the natural history he had learned from his mother with the human history he had learned from his father.

It would be easy to conclude that this distinctive tilt of his vision foreordained his future, but these instincts and interests did not immediately map out his road to environmental history. He knew certain things about what he wanted to do in life. He knew that his future had to involve the study of the natural world. He knew, too, that he wanted to be a writer. And, as the son of a historian, he recognized that his first intellectual reaction was not to accept the world as given but to wonder how it got to be the way that it was. When he entered college at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, however, Cronon thought that he was going to be an ecologist or a geologist.

The University of Wisconsin turned him toward history—he ultimately double majored in history and English—but not initially environmental history or the history of the American West. During his freshman year, he enrolled in a course entitled *The Anglo-Saxons* taught in the English Department by Dick Ringler, a professor of English and Scandinavian studies. Ringler taught the history of early medieval Britain by weaving together literature, architecture, art history, politics, theology, philology, social history, and material life in ways that Cronon found absolutely riveting. Ringler lectured using projected images on a screen, a technique Cronon later adopted when he became a teacher himself. Ringler conveyed to his students an understanding that the human past requires kaleidoscopic engagement with every aspect of lived experience. Inspired by Ringler, he spent two and a half years preparing to do an independent major in medieval studies, learning Old English, Old Norse, and even taking a semester of Old Irish. The experience left him with a fascination for etymology and the history of the English language. Ringler became his most important undergraduate mentor, and Cronon eventually won a Rhodes scholarship to study Old English and Old Norse at Oxford.

By the time he left for England, he had abandoned his plans to become a medievalist, though he would carry Ringler's lessons into American history. The signs that his interests were shifting were evident in the honors thesis he wrote during his senior year: a full-length biography of Robinson Jeffers, the misanthropic nature-loving poet of Carmel, California. Although Bill Cronon has never said this in so many words, Jeffers seems to have served him well as a cautionary example of the bitter and cruel fruits that the love of nature can produce when indulged to the neglect of other values. Jeffers is the road he never followed.

The second sign that he was not going to be a medievalist was his enthusiasm for the course on the American West that he took from Allan Bogue during his senior year. Bogue's course was not an environmental history, though it did include a six-week module on the history of public land law in the tradition of Bogue's mentor, Paul Wallace Gates, that Cronon found enthralling. There was, after all, as yet no such thing as environmental history, at least as William Cronon would write it. Always generous, Cronon will cite a long list of scholars who laid the foundation for environmental history. And so they did, but they never called themselves environmental historians and most would not recognize themselves in the kind of history that environmental historians now write.

Allan Bogue's course had a different attraction. As Cronon would later explain, the American West offered him and a whole generation of scholars the chance to write about subjects and people that seemed peripheral or

downright odd in the then dominant fields of American history. He, of course, did not know this as a senior in college. But he did know that western history allowed him to write about the natural world and the human world in the same frame and that no one would think this peculiar.

This linkage of nature and history connected Cronon to a particular Wisconsin triumvirate, one closely associated with Madison, whose members—Frederick Jackson Turner, John Muir, and Aldo Leopold—had already attracted him. Turner had traced the changes humans make in the landscape and commended it as progress. Muir had posed the question of whether humans should change all of nature, while Leopold—probably the figure whose sensibility was closest to Cronon’s own—posed the moral question of how we should change nature, since change it we inevitably must.

It also connected him to a midwestern, and particularly Wisconsin, intellectual tradition. In the late nineteenth century the Midwest was the heart of the American intellectual and cultural world. American thinkers, writers, and politicians did not always stay in the Midwest, but an inordinate number of important figures came from the region. Then, during the Progressive Era, Madison had been the center of the Wisconsin Idea, which connected the university’s intellectual life with the public life of a the state. It was an idea still very much alive during Cronon’s childhood, and it lives on in his academic career.

At Oxford Cronon joined a group of American and British students who challenged and stretched him intellectually in ways he hadn’t experienced back home in Wisconsin. It was there that he became an environmental historian, writing a thesis on the history of energy consumption in the British city of Coventry from 1860–1950. But even while writing about Coventry at Oxford, Madison was still present. His dissertation topic sprang from a speech about the moral and political dilemmas posed by the 1970s energy crisis, which he had delivered as the convocation speaker to the graduating class of Honors students at UW-Madison the spring before he left for Oxford. Living in England also enabled him to continue informally the interdisciplinary practice of “reading the landscape” that he had learned in Madison, and that Dick Ringler had taught him to extend into the more distant human past. He made a point of visiting medieval, Roman, and Iron Age sites whenever he had the opportunity. W. G. Hoskins’ *Making of the English Landscape* became a major intellectual influence on him during this period. His two years in Oxford broadened and deepened his interest in natural and cultural landscapes, adding to the toolbox he would use for interpreting environmental history when he returned to the United States and began graduate studies on the history of the American West at Yale.

New Haven

When he arrived at Yale, Bill Cronon became part of a remarkable cohort of graduate students who studied under Howard Lamar. John Faragher, Marni Sandweiss, Patty Limerick, Ann Fabian, Clyde Milner, Carol O'Connor, Jay Gitlin, and more would combine to spark a renaissance in western history. It occurred alongside the birth of environmental history, and the two fields were sometimes mistakenly conflated because so many scholars worked in both.

The New Western History gestated at Yale, and those outside the field as well as the popular press sometimes lumped Yale, the New Western History, and a rejection of Turner's frontier thesis into one homogenous lump. In a way this formulation got everything backwards. Turner and the Frontier Thesis had long ago lost influence among American historians, although Turner retained, at least indirectly, a great hold on the American popular imagination. Patty Limerick certainly was explicitly and wittily anti-Turnerian, but her target was his hold over popular culture and popular history. Attacking Turner among academic historians was akin to shooting a corpse.

Bill Cronon, John Faragher, and other scholars lumped together as the New Western historians were actually, in academic terms, taking a much more radical stance. They were trying to resuscitate the idea of the frontier. They were neo-Turnerians (with the stress on the neo), who, although they dumped much of Turner's thesis overboard, argued for continued utility of the frontier. Divisions over Turner, debates over whether the American West as a region to concentrate on the frontier process split New Western historians. These debates seem rather tired now, but they created an intellectually contentious and boisterous atmosphere within the field that, while it lasted, made western history a lot of fun. And, despite their differences, all of the New Western historians shared what Bill Cronon had recognized at Madison: western history was both remarkably open to writing about things that most academic historians either did not take seriously or never thought about at all. Also, because most academic historians regarded it as a backwater, western history and the Western History Association became places that both welcomed younger scholars and allowed them have a rapid and ultimately far-reaching impact on the field.

Even as western history underwent a renaissance, Cronon remained very much connected with the Midwest and its intellectual life. The Newberry Library is one of the Midwest's, and the nation's, great cultural treasures, and as a graduate student in the early 1980s Cronon attended the Newberry Summer Institute in Quantitative Methods. As a participant, he was so engaged in the seminar, so critical to advancing the methods and the historical questions being explored, that the Newberry invited him back the

following summer as a member of the teaching team. Those working with him remember his generosity and his intellectual contributions. But mostly they remember his conviction and example of how high-quality individual scholarship rests on a broad and engaged intellectual community.

Those who knew Bill Cronon in the early 1980s might have been excused for concluding that they could predict his scholarly trajectory. He would use social science methods in the service of an environmental history situated on American frontiers. They would have been only partially right. Social science history became only one tool in his bag. He would never disengage from western history, but as it became more and more focused on the West as region, he devoted more of his time to environmental history. He along, with Donald Worster, became the key advocates for the field. He also devoted a great deal of energy and also part of the money that he received from his MacArthur Fellowship to promoting and organizing environmental history as a field. He served as president of the American Society for Environmental History (ASEH) from 1989–93.

This devotion to the ASEH was typical of him. Over the last twenty years Bill Cronon has donated an extraordinary amount of time to professional organizations. He has served on numerous prize and membership committees. He has been a member of the Organization of American Historians Nominating Committee and that organization's board. Before becoming president of the American Historical Association, he was the vice president for the Professional Division, and was responsible for leading the most extensive revisions of AHA's *Statement on Standards* since that document was first drafted. He has been generous with his time, and his colleagues have long trusted his judgment.

In 1995 Bill launched the Weyerhaeuser Environmental Book Series at the University of Washington Press. The series was and remains a great success. It has produced a succession of prize-winning, influential books. All of them benefited immensely from Cronon's editing and criticism. Making the series successful and promoting its authors demanded time and effort that could have gone into his own scholarship. Most academics of William Cronon's stature do not become editors. Many admittedly do not have the talent for it, but most realize that there are few things that the profession rewards as poorly. Cronon founded the series and has long supervised it to advance the field and help younger scholars. In a sense, the series became an extension of his graduate teaching, not because he treated his authors as graduate students, but because in both his teaching and his editing he saw scholarship as at least in part a collaborative enterprise.

Bill Cronon began attracting graduate students early in his career, and he attracts them still. They have been as remarkable a group as the cohort with whom he studied in graduate school. Despite the notorious 8 a.m. meetings that bring all his students together once every two weeks, they are as devoted to him as he is to them.

What set Bill apart for his graduate students was less his scholarship—Yale and Wisconsin are full of distinguished scholars—than that he taught graduate students the skills other professors assumed the students were just supposed to master by themselves. When he ran research seminars, he taught them how to choose a topic, one that was doable as well as compelling. He taught them how to teach and how to write. They regarded him as a legendary lecturer, and he is, but he treated lecturing as an art, not a gift. It, like other aspects of teaching, could be learned.

One of his former students, herself as graceful an essayist as any historian writing, credits him with raising the quality of not just her writing but also the writing in the profession as a whole. Writing is an art, but the product is also a commodity, one necessary to get a job, advance in the profession, and to communicate knowledge. For her, Bill Cronon proved a font of practical knowledge and connections.

As Cronon helped build the field, there was some confusion in the early years, even among practitioners, as to whether environmental history was the scholarly arm of the environmental movement. In 1995 Bill Cronon published his essay, “The Trouble with Wilderness,” in the *New York Times*. Its thesis did not surprise anyone familiar with his work. He had worked on the essay while hosting a seminar during the spring semester of 1994 entitled “Reinventing Nature” at the University of California Humanities Research Institute at the University of California, Irvine. By concentrating on wilderness preservation, he argued, environmentalism failed to value, and protect, the more accessible natural world of our everyday lives.

The article produced howls of rage and rabid denunciations. When the full version of the essay appeared in *Uncommon Ground*, a volume that he edited from work produced during the Irvine seminar, the outrage was rekindled. The volume was critical of environmentalists and environmentalism. He criticized not what environmentalists had done but what the movement had failed to do: the problems it failed to address, and the constituencies it both failed to serve and needlessly alienated. The essays were written when everyone presumed the Clinton administration would push environmental reform and they were an attempt to contextualize, critique, and shape those reforms, but they came out after the Republican takeover of Congress in the fall of 1994. The book triggered an “*Et tu Brute?*” response from environmentalists. They felt betrayed.

Perhaps the most telling criticism ever made of William Cronon is that he is “pathologically even-handed.” His response to the complaints of environmentalists was to arrange two retreats that brought together scholars and leaders of national environmental organizations. For most of those present, the meetings emphasized how uncommon the ground between scholarship and popular environmentalism had become, but Cronon went in another direction. Without retracting his own critique of wilderness, he joined the Governing Council of the Wilderness Society, on which he serves to this day, and he also serves on the Board of Directors of the Trust for Public Lands.

The evenhandedness, the willingness, indeed sometimes eagerness, to listen to critics—at least thoughtful ones—has always been a mark of his scholarship, teaching, and writing. One of his most influential articles, “A Place for Stories: History, Nature, and Narrative,” published in 1992, arose from a literary scholar’s question and challenge to a talk he gave during the heyday of the linguistic turn. Bill Cronon, like most environmental historians, remained at heart a materialist, but he recognized the force of the challenge the linguistic turn represented and the real strengths of its argument.

“A Place for Stories” expressed some of Cronon’s deepest convictions about how humans create meaning and the role of historians in that process. The definition of the human that Cronon most often cites is that humans are storytelling animals. And as he has repeatedly told audiences, what historians do is tell stories with morals about the past.

Back to Madison

When the controversy over “The Trouble with Wilderness” broke, Cronon was back in Madison. In 1992 he left Yale to become the Frederick Jackson Turner Professor of History, Geography, and Environmental Studies. In 2003 he would add the Vilas Research Professorship—the university’s highest academic rank—to his title.

That he was a member of the geography department as well as the history department was an acknowledgment of something that had been apparent since *Changes in the Land*. Environmental geographers regarded that book as something they could have written. *Nature’s Metropolis* was a book that many geographers wished they had written. Not all of them, of course. The book was attacked as well as admired, but this only further underlined the centrality of the book to the discipline. It mattered. Bill has maintained an office on the Madison campus in Science Hall, home to the Geography Department, where he has nurtured many students. He is the first historian most geographers think of when they think of history.

Leaving Yale was not easy. He was very close to Howard Lamar, and Yale did everything it could to keep him. New Haven was full of friends, colleagues, and wonderful students, but to his family it never seemed like home. Madison was home. Both he and his former wife, Nan Fey, wanted to raise their children, Hilary and Jeremy, near their families.

It was not just personal. In 1998 Bill Cronon wrote what is his most republished essay: “Only Connect ... : The Goals of a Liberal Education.” The essay is eloquent and compelling, and it is perhaps most revealing in its last lines. “Liberal education nurtures human freedom in the service of human community”

Community and service drew him back to Madison. It was not that he was not an effective teacher and scholar at Yale. He was. It was not that he could not affect local and national affairs from there. He could. It was that Yale, in a sense, could never engage him as much as the University of Wisconsin and Madison. It lacked the same tradition of community service, and, as anyone who has taught at both well-endowed private universities and public universities—particularly land-grant universities—knows, it is the public universities, not the private, that are the backbones of a democratic society.

The year after he wrote his essay, “Only Connect ...” he wrote a second article entitled “A Great Undergraduate University.” The article acknowledged the centrality of research to modern universities, but it also demanded that universities be great undergraduate teaching institutions marked by the ability to both communicate knowledge and connect it to public life. Its subtext was that the University of Wisconsin, like other research universities, was no longer a great undergraduate university, but it could be and should be.

Bill Cronon did not just write the article, he spent a good deal of the next six years of his life working to improve undergraduate education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the Honors Program of its College of Letters & Science. It is among the achievements of which he is most proud.

His goal was to take the Honors Program out of its cocoon, and make Honors work more accessible to undergraduates who did not discover their own capacity for excellence until after entering college. At the same, he wanted to make Honors work more rigorous and consistent across the university. The goals of the program would not surprise anyone who read his essays: engagement with the life of the mind, empowerment of undergraduates to do real and important work, and involvement in community.

He founded and served as the first faculty director of the Chadbourne Residential College, replacing an older “Honors dorm” with an intellectual

community that welcomed all undergraduates, no matter what their grade point averages, who sought the experience of a liberal arts college within a large research university. But he did more. He began the Writing Fellows Program, in which talented undergrad writers read and critique the rough drafts of their peers to improve writing on campus, and created the Undergraduate Research Scholars Program, in which undergrads become research assistants assigned to faculty research projects across campus.

In all of this he thought of himself as going back to the ideals of a Madison that he had inherited. His father had begun leading bus tours of the state for new faculty members, and Bill took up the mantle. A colleague remembers that when “Bill took his show on the road, the windows of the bus became his screens. He read the landscapes through which we rolled. He moved effortlessly from geology to architecture, from the deep past to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.” The techniques he had developed as a teacher worked just as well with new faculty and staff. Years later, the same colleague recalls not only “the details of his stories (a surprising number of which have remained with me),” but also “the warm, rounded tone of his words; the apparently effortless way that he spoke in paragraphs, emphasizing particular words and syllables to convey transitions; the quiet passion he brought to such a wide range of questions and observations.”

What Bill Cronon did on the bus demanded using the windows as screens. It was impossible to convey his meanings through the written word alone. He needed a way to visualize his material. As a scholar, he needed other kinds of screens. His interest in geography, his conviction that knowledge is best conveyed through place, his devotion to the visual as well as the written word all made his turn to digital scholarship, as we used to say, overdetermined.

When Bill created a digital site, as he did when he served as chair of the committee that oversees and sets policy for UW-Madison’s Lakeshore Nature Preserve (<http://lakeshorepreserve.wisc.edu>), it predictably won a national prize for the best digital map produced that year. A website on how to do historical research that he developed with one of his graduate seminars is now used by teachers and students all over the world, and has for several years been the number one Google hit if one searches for the phrase “learning historical research.” He continues to be an enthusiastic advocate of digital scholarship.

For someone who is never polemical or pugnacious and who gives the impression, at least to friends temperamentally disposed otherwise, of preferring to mediate than fight, he has been remarkably unafraid of public controversy. He launched his Scholar as Citizen blog in 2011. It was very much in the tradition of the Wisconsin Idea, and his post on the American

Legislative Exchange Council and its role in shaping state legislation involved him in a firestorm. The challenge was not the accuracy of what he said but rather his daring to say it. The response from the Wisconsin Republican Party was an unsuccessful attempt to use open records legislation to gain access to his e-mail and correspondence. He once again found himself immersed in a national debate. He conducted himself with grace, dignity, and skill. His opponents had tried to intimidate the wrong person.

Bill Cronon has never been an either/or person. His involvement in the new digital world and in public scholarship have necessarily slowed his own publications, but they have hardly halted them. No one takes writing, research, and publishing more seriously. *Saving Nature in Time: The Environmental Past and the Human Future*, a work long in preparation, continues his interest in having contemporary environmental politics be informed by environmental history. He also been working for twenty years on a book that may well prove to be his magnum opus, entitled simply *The Portage*, a kind of sequel critique of *Nature's Metropolis* that uses a small town in central Wisconsin and its rural countryside to explore the role of storytelling in transforming natural geographies into human places. These two books, like *Changes in the Land*, *Nature's Metropolis*, and *Uncommon Ground*, will define him among historians, but they no more than the earlier books should overshadow his much larger role as an intellectual, an academic, and a citizen.

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