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Andy Manis for The New York Times

William Cronon, a professor in environmental history, in the arboretum's prairie at the University of Wisconsin. He calls the ideal of wilderness a fantasy and a threat.

An Environmentalist on a Different Path

A Fresh View of the Supposed 'Wilderness' and Even the Indians' Place in It

MADISON, Wis. — On the short flight from Chicago on a clear cold day, the descent into Madison is not a bad way to begin to understand William Cronon and the ideas that have made him a pivotal and provocative figure in the growing field of environmental history.

Spread out below is the landscape of Mr. Cronon's childhood, where he hiked and camped and spent summers at his grandparents' lake-front cottage — the fields and farms, woodlands and subdivisions, the city intertwined with its lakes, where he sees humans inextricably entangled with nature.

"I like a landscape that reminds one of those connections," he said in an interview. "Much as I love wilderness and much as I love Manhattan, I'm conscious when I'm in those places that it's hard to see how Manhattan is implicated in Yosemite or how Yosemite is implicated in Manhattan."

Which, he said, they very much are.

At 44, Mr. Cronon is one of the most influential figures in environmental history, the study of what Americans have done to and thought about the natural world, a field founded on the belief that human history cannot be understood without its natural context.

A Rhodes scholar and former MacArthur fellow who gave up tenure at Yale to return home in 1992 and teach at the University of Wisconsin, he is a generator of ideas that have repeatedly shaken up the ways people think about nature.

In a field that grew out of the environmental movement, he defies easy political labeling. He is on the board of governors of the Wilderness Society, but several years back he alienated many environmentalists by publishing

an essay critiquing the very idea of wilderness.

He is also a slightly unorthodox member of the group of new Western historians who have rewritten the history of the American West, a mentor to many younger scholars and the author of several prize-winning and strikingly literary books that have become staples of history reading lists.

"Bill's real influence is that his work often gets translated into a larger American history," said Richard White, a Western and environmental historian at Stanford. "He has taken what is a subfield of American history and made it part of the basic literature of American history itself."

Mr. Cronon's first book, "Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists and the Ecology of New England" (Hill & Wang, 1983), looked at the way plant and animal communities in colonial New England changed in the shift from Indian to European dominance. It revealed not only that people's ideas about property shape their environment but also that even the Indians had not lived passively on a pristine landscape.

His second book, "Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West" (W. W. Norton, 1991), a history of the relationship between 19th-century Chicago and its hinterland, is credited with having radically widened many environmental historians' gaze beyond such things as forests and public lands to include cities and what Mr. Cronon calls the "elaborate and intimate linkages" between city and country.

Then in 1995, he published the essay called "The Trouble With Wilderness," which appeared in The New York Times Magazine and the next year in a book he

edited. In it he challenged the environmental movement's focus on wilderness as an ideal. He called the dream of an untouched landscape a fantasy of people who had never had to work the land for a living and suggested it posed "a serious threat to responsible environmentalism at the end of the century."

He wrote, "The flight from history that is very nearly the core of wilderness represents the false hope of an escape from responsibility, the illusion that if we can somehow wipe clean the slate of our past and return to the tabula rasa that supposedly existed before we began to leave our marks on the world." That leaves little room, he continued, for figuring out "what an ethical, sustainable, honorable human place in nature might actually look like."

Many environmentalists remain infuriated by the essay. They accuse Mr. Cronon of misunderstanding the conservation movement, ignoring biology and caring too little about the political consequences of his critique. They accuse him of such sins as relativism and anthropocentrism, ceding to human beings too prominent a place in the hierarchy of life.

"I must confess I'm getting a bit grumpy about the dumb arguments being put forth by high-paid intellectual types in which they are trying to knock Nature, knock the people who value Nature and still come out smelling smart and progressive," Gary Snyder, the poet and environmentalist, wrote in *Wild Earth* in an issue of the wilderness-protection quarterly that was devoted to answering Mr. Cronon.

Yet after Mr. Cronon's essay appeared, he was

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An Environmentalist With a Different Approach to Nature

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invited to join the Wilderness Society's governing council, in part because its chairman at the time, Christopher Elliman, thought Mr. Cronon could carry on the society's tradition of fostering original thinking about wilderness while also nudging the environmental movement forward.

"The point is, we're so implicated in nature that you can't just stop now," said Michael Pollan, an author who writes frequently on environmental topics and who admires Mr. Cronon's work. "Once you've changed the world, you have a responsibility to stay involved. Then the issues get much harder: How do you weed a wilderness? Do you encourage fire? Do you set fire?"

"You get into all these gray areas where Bill is happy to go and that I find very exciting to think about. But most environmentalists, who may be shrewder politically than we are, know that it's a very hard place to go, and you're going to get into all sorts of trouble. It's so much easier to say, 'Lock it up and throw away the key'

with a piece of land."

"We're very invested in a stark opposition between nature and culture," he added. "And Bill is interested in breaking that down. That breaks a lot of china, too; it goes to the heart of Americans' ideas about nature."

Environmental history first took shape in American universities in the late 1960's and early 70's as younger historians interested in environmentalism began emerging from graduate school dissatisfied with what their elders were calling history.

Donald Worster, a 57-year-old historian at the University of Kansas whom many see as the dean of the field, recalled in an interview that when he was a graduate student at Yale, every American historian in the department seemed to be working on one of two topics, Puritanism or slavery. He picked Puritanism, then got sick of it.

"I had grown up on the Great Plains," said Mr. Worster, the author of books on the Dust Bowl and water supply in the American West, among others. "For me, things like climate and grasses and the memory of bison

didn't seem to have much to do with the imaginations of my mentors. They didn't seem to be aware that those things had any significance."

But the field's relationship with the movement has grown strained, some historians say, as scientists have realized that natural systems are not as predictable as popular notions about the "balance of nature" once implied, and as historians have shown that human beings were manipulating ecosystems as far back as any record or evidence extends.

"Virtually all early environmental historians considered themselves environmentalists," Mr. White said. "Most still do. But precisely because so much environmental history is pointing out the problems with naïve ideas about nature and untouched pristine lands, there has come to be a sense that we're not fully to be trusted. And I guess in some sense we aren't."

A tall man with a youthful lope, angular face and preference for well-worn flannel shirts, William Cronon grew up mostly in Madison. From his father, E. David Cronon, a political historian and former dean at the

university, he inherited his historian's predilection for asking, upon encountering almost anything, how it got to be the way it is.

From his mother, Jean Cronon, he says he acquired a passion for nature. He remembers an endless series of nature activities, like rock collecting, instigated by her, and a fifth-grade vacation in the family station wagon, circumnavigating the West from the Grand Canyon to the Black Hills, that was one of the formative experiences of his life.

"My father's library is full of biographical books, which is typical of scholars of his generation," Mr. Cronon said one afternoon, his legs dangling over the arm of a chair in a campus office. "Whereas the dominant thing that operates in my mind is landscape. I think in maps, actually. I tend to ask how these places came to be the way they are."

One of his earliest research projects occurred in his junior year in high school. Using original land records from the 1830's, he reconstructed the presettlement vegetation of a Wisconsin county. "I was just endlessly fascinated by the notion that a landscape is a palimpsest,

these layers that can be peeled off," he said.

He entered the University of Wisconsin as an undergraduate thinking he might be a quantitative plant ecologist or a novelist; drifted toward geology; alighted in medieval studies; won a Rhodes scholarship to study Old English and Old Norse, and then, in his senior year at Wisconsin, walked into a course on the history of the American West, taught with an environmental focus, that convinced him that would be his field.

He spent his two years at Oxford doing a research project on Coventry and how shifts in energy consumption affected this English town's social life and political economy. His paper earned him a Ph.D. Then he headed off to Yale to study with Howard Lamar, at that time the best-known graduate teacher of Western history.

For his dissertation topic, he chose Chicago. Feeling he had failed in Coventry to look at the coal fields that had given the town its economic life, he decided to study the interaction between Chicago and its hinterland over a long sweep of time, and the environmental and economic

links that arose.

Then Mr. Lamar became the dean of Yale College, creating an opening on the faculty for a Western historian. Though only a graduate student, Mr. Cronon got the job. He was 27. He received tenure in 1988 before completing his dissertation, having already published "Changes in the Land," which had begun as a paper for a seminar during his first year at Yale.

In 1992, a year after the publication of the ground-breaking "Nature's Metropolis," Mr. Cronon accepted his current job as a professor of history, geography and environmental studies. He and his wife, Nancy Fey, returned home to raise their two children near their grandparents and to settle in the part of the world that has so profoundly shaped Mr. Cronon's thinking.

Passing through O'Hare Airport around the same time, Richard White, the Stanford historian, recalls having noticed a businessman beside a baggage-claim carousel reading "Nature's Metropolis." He remembers thinking, "What I would give to have a guy like that reading one of my books."