

BETWEEN SEA AND STEPPE: A HISTORICAL FORAY IN THREE PARTS

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MASTER OF ARTS

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ABSTRACT

Examinations into marine environmental history, Great Plains environmental history, and the city of Odessa, Ukraine, demonstrate these three areas have strong methodological and topical foundations and even stronger potential for future scholarship. Marine environmental history is a growing sub-field that necessitates a multidisciplinary approach to both situate the ocean as an active and dynamic participant in human history and allow it a history in its own right. Great Plains environmental history incorporates many kinds of scholarship including creative works—like those of novelist Will Cather—that shape historical memory as surely as they include marginalized perspectives. Finally, the city of Odessa, Ukraine, underwent such a transformation in the early twentieth century that it became a different city entirely, rendering its formative years (1794 to 1905) a mythologized memory.

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DEDICATION

To my parents, who taught me how to read and started this whole mess - you are my everything.

And to my Nana. Every minute with you was a gift.

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THE CHANGING TIDES OF MARINE ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY

Complex life emerged from the oceans almost one billion years ago, slipping into a foreign and terrestrial world that would define its nature and existence. Yet, life would never lose the connection it had with its first home, where the first spark ignited in a single cell deep within the sea. The sea and its relationship with us have remained an integral part of the human story, one whose complexity we are only now beginning to examine and understand. Historians have utilized many different perspectives in this endeavor, and as environmental history continues to expand into the oceanic realm, it will be heavily informed by this existing scholarship.

Marine environmental history, like all environmental history, incorporates a multi-disciplinary approach in its methodologies and analyses. Marine environmental history differs from maritime history in that maritime history, as Frank Broeze defines in his seminal article *Great Circle* (1989), studies humanity's categorical *use* of the ocean. Conversely, in its scrutiny of humanity's relationship with the sea across space, time, and communities both human and non-human, marine environmental history allows the ocean to have a history in its own right. This sub-field of environmental history is still a developing arena, and much of the current scholarship is largely contingent on the ocean as a passive character or simple setting. W. Jeffery Bolster calls on historians to instead situate the ocean as an active and central participant in their examinations: "Considering the living ocean as a dynamic player in human dramas could generate significant contributions to what we know about people as ecological actors. And it might just lead to carefully wrought stories breathtaking in their own right."¹

¹ W. Jeffrey Bolster, "Opportunities in Marine Environmental History," *Environmental History*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (Jul., 2006), pg. 571.

The very question of how to define the very term ‘ocean’ has troubled both scientists and historians alike. Indeed, Helen Rozwadowski illustrates that until the discovery that the oceans were connected in the 15th century, oceans were understood as individual bodies with unique properties. The meaning of the term ‘ocean’ in itself can vary; it can mean the physical body of one world ocean, the five great oceans, or the seven seas, or it can mean the myriad of ways we as humans conceptualize these bodies. Here, the singular ‘ocean’ is employed to consider all these and adheres frequently to the idea of the ocean as a world-wide body in its survey of marine environmental history.

This paper examines the more recent scholarship, both historical and non-historical in nature, that informs marine environmental history and its development. The basic foundations run deep, as studies of ocean exploration, scientific discovery, and marine biology, while not historical in methodology, have informed the historical perspective and shaped analysis. For example, Rachel Carson’s 1951 *The Sea Around Us* illuminates the ocean and its processes, including how humans perceive time on our own biological meter, yet oceans operate on a wholly different timetable. Historical scholarship like Alfred Crosby’s pivotal and discipline-expanding 1972 *The Colombian Exchange* highlights how the ocean transformed after European expansion into the Americas - once a dividing expanse, it became a vessel of connection and transference. In examining these works and more, common themes appear which further the idea of situating the ocean as its own historical entity. Concepts of authority, ownership, and technocratic idealism, as well as the importance of scale – both physical and of time – are represented frequently. Humans have also conceptualized the sea as an unchanging enigma, ultimately impervious to our actions. Yet, the ever-changing ecology of the ocean and our relationship with it makes the seas of the present contingent on the activities of eras past. The history of the ocean is far more intertwined with our own than we realize – making our future as well.

Part I

“There is, one knows not what sweet mystery about this sea, whose gently awful stirring seem to speak of some hidden soul beneath.”

--Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*

“Through want of instruments, the sea beyond a certain depth has been found unfathomable.”

--Entry for ‘Sea’ in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1823

For much of human history the ocean has been an unknowable and impervious force, one which we merely interacted with to sail, fish, or dream. It has been only in understanding the basic functions of the ocean on its own terms that have we found ways to more fully comprehend our relationship with it, and in doing so, how our pasts and futures are connected. Thus, the history of ocean science and discovery provides a foundation of essential scholarship for marine environmental history.

Modern oceanography began full fold in the onslaught of World War I, but its early roots lay with the British *Challenger* expedition, which ventured to explore the world’s oceans and seafloor in 1872. It was after this, and then during the rise of environmentalism, that histories of ocean science, as well as the pursuit of it, arose to chart our endeavors in uncovering, comprehending, and fathoming the ocean. One of the first works to map the historical trajectory of oceanography was Susan Schlee’s *The Edge of an Unfamiliar World: A History of Oceanography* (1973). It provided a broad outline of ocean science in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Furthering these investigations, Margaret Deacon’s *Scientists and the Sea 1650-1900: A Study of Marine Science* (1997) explored the motivations and explorations of early scientists into the realm of oceans. In the anthology she co-edited, *Understanding the Oceans: A Century of Ocean Exploration* (2000), she moved onto the last century of ocean exploration, from the *Challenger* Expedition. This work brought together oceanographers, biologists, ecologists, and historians, as it considers the development of marine science and all its

discoveries. From oceanic geology, circulation, and ecosystems, *Ocean Exploration* illustrated the development of oceanic knowledge through the last century.

Scientific journalist Robert Kunzig builds on these histories in *Mapping the Deep: The Extraordinary Story of Ocean Science* (2000). Intended for popular audiences, *Mapping the Deep* is meant to serve as a type of 'biography' of the ocean, as it charts the changes in oceanic knowledge. Kunzig structures his book around the ocean, starting at the bottom and drifting up through ocean space and time. At each level, he relates the explorations, discoveries, and still unknowns that lie within. In the deepest part of the ocean, called the Challenger Deep within the Mariana Trench, he writes of the only two human beings to have been to the bottom. He then moves on to the sonographic maps made by Bruce Heezen and Marie Tharp in 1967, the same period in which geologic thinking was transforming through new ideas in plate tectonics. Kunzig makes the important point that the scale of the slopes in all the maps we generally see is exaggerated by a factor of about four, and although advances in sonography have allowed more accurate maps to be made, funding for oceanographic research has continually lost out to terrestrial and extra-terrestrial exploration. As he examines the different biodiversity occurring at different levels of the ocean, Kunzig charts the early conceptions of marine life and diversity, with early expeditions concluding the deep sea to be largely devoid of life. The degree to which they were mistaken continues to astonish, when even in the most hostile of environments oceanographers continue to find different and extraordinary forms of life.

Mapping the Deep tends toward a more biological approach than historical at times, but Kunzig's overall focus is on the narrative of the ocean as a whole, and it highlights multiple themes that occur throughout marine environmental history. Kunzig deftly charts the scientific discovery and unraveling of the ocean's natural processes, and thus highlights the importance of time scale. Most significantly, *Mapping the Deep* highlights the provisional nature of our knowledge, especially of the sea: "Before the *Challenger*, scientists thought that the ocean below the sunlit zone was essentially

lifeless...and then they found that's not true. There were things down there."² Once perceived as an empty and dead abyss, the deep ocean - and the life it contains - continues to defy our comprehension.

The progression of this comprehension is the focus of much of Helen M. Rozwadowski's work, one of the most prominent historians who examines the ocean. In addition to encouraging the continued integration of oceanic history with environmental history and the history of science and technology, Rozwadowski has explored the history of who has ownership and authority over "ocean space and ocean resources," as well as the history of ocean science, those that pursued it, and the dynamics that evolved from this pursuit.³ Throughout this scholarship, Rozwadowski insists that marine environmental history must include even the ocean's "most remote parts, because even those are intertwined with human history."⁴

In her first book, *The Sea Knows No Boundaries* (2002), written during her tenure as the institutional historian for the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES), Rozwadowski charted the pursuit of international, collaborative ocean science from the early twentieth century to the present. While it served primarily as an institutional history, Rozwadowski demonstrated the complex interplay between nation-states and international institutions for ocean science, discovery, and resources, as well as the technocratic idealism that so many of these actors upheld. In doing so, the sea's relationship with not only humans, but also those of the nation-state and internationalism, came more clearly into view.

² Robert Kunzig, *Mapping the Deep: The Extraordinary Story of Ocean Science* (New York: Norton, 2000), 198.

³ Helen Rozwadowski, "The Promise of Ocean History for Environmental History," *Journal of American History* 100, (2013): 137.

⁴ Helen Rozwadowski, "Oceans: Fusing the History of Science and Technology with Environmental History," in *A Companion to American Environmental History*, ed. Douglas Cazaux Sackman (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010), 442.

It was her next book, however, that has become an integral part of marine environmental historiography. In *Fathoming the Ocean: The Discovery and Exploration of the Deep Sea*, Rozwadowski probed cultural and political considerations in her examination of deep ocean exploration in the nineteenth century. Focusing on the stories of early ocean scientists, as well as technological innovations that emerged from new expeditions, Rozwadowski showed how these actors and instruments interacted between an industrializing West and the world's oceans to create the field of oceanography.

Rozwadowski's narrative follows how individuals studied the ocean and its creatures, what they discovered, and how this new knowledge was disseminated into society. Whalers tracked the migratory paths of their prey and discovered the depths to which harpooned whales dove when they measured the lengths of line drawn below, a unit of measurement given the term 'fathom'. Using fishing nets and portable dredges and working aboard rowboats and yachts, some mariners hauled in oceanic organisms and from the ocean's floor in hopes of finding new life. Rozwadowski traced this development of oceanography from the technological innovation, as well as the shift from civilian to naval vessels.

The development of oceanography as a science had repercussions that rippled culturally and politically as well. When this "science of the sea" moved to all- male naval vessels, the exclusion of women became an aspect which was used to tout this new discipline's professionalization, or as Rozwadowski writes, "[the exclusion of women] was a by-product of efforts by ocean scientists to define themselves."⁵ Additionally, economic and political aspirations influenced the questions and interpretations driving the field. For example, she asserts research was first shaped by the United

⁵ Helen M. Rozwadowski, *Fathoming the Ocean: The Discovery and Exploration of the Deep Sea* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2008), 132.

States and British governments' desire to improve navigation charts for their merchant marines, and later by the prospect of laying submarine telegraph cables across the floor of the Atlantic. In *Fathoming the Deep*, Rozwadowski fully explores the history of marine science, taking into account not only the ocean but also the ways in which new understandings of it evolved in society.

Rozwadowski provides in-depth research and a compelling narrative to her account of ocean exploration, emphasizing common themes and threads throughout the history of ocean. In detailing the various attributes and roles of all the actors involved in this account, her work emphasizes that changes brought on by the development of oceanography changed the way humans viewed the ocean in general. Once an empty expanse to be crossed and feared, the ocean was now familiar and ready to be mastered: "The deep ocean is a realm with an identifiable, historical relationship to human activity, one that began in the era of mid-nineteenth century imperialism and industrialization and has intensified with time."⁶ Thus, as we came to learn that the sea was indeed dynamic in nature, we find now its history is as well.

The development and continued evolution of oceanic science has also changed how we perceive and conceptualize the ocean, individually as well as culturally. In his work *America's Ocean Wilderness: A Cultural History of Twentieth-Century Exploration*, Gary Kroll aims to explore the transference of terrestrial concepts of wilderness and the frontier to the ocean within the American imagination during the twentieth century. He uses seven separate biographical narratives to show how perceptions of the ocean transformed in the American imagination and popular culture, arguing that these figures shaped the American "mental process" and thus transferred "the predominately terrestrial nature of America's wilderness ethic to the oceans."⁷

⁶ Ibid, 213.

⁷ Gary Kroll, *America's Ocean Wilderness: A Cultural History of Twentieth Century Exploration* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 1.

Kroll's narrative follows a loose chronology as he profiles seven different scientists and explorers whose achievements and legacies influenced how Americans came to perceive the ocean with terrestrial concepts. At the turn of the century, naturalist Roy Chapman Andrews studied North Pacific whales amongst whaling operations, which Kroll connected to the emerging traditions and attitudes of sport hunting among the elite, arguing that Andrews helped transfer these ideas to the oceanic realm. Kroll then turns to Robert Cushman Murphy, a conservationist who believed that like the American West, the ocean was being transformed by the "destructive human process of discovery, exploitation, and exhaustion."⁸ William Beebe and Rachel Carson follow, as Kroll argues that both helped transfer ideas akin to Thoreau and Muir about nature's wonder and the sublime to the oceans through their writing. Kroll links Eugenie Clark, known as the Shark Lady, through changing postwar gender roles and contends that through her Americans began to see the ocean as more familiar and docile. Two explorers, Thor Heyerdahl and Jacques Cousteau, made for opposing figures of the transformation of American thought. Kroll contends that through Heyerdahl, Americans began to imagine the ocean as a pure state of nature and a cure for modern life, while Cousteau and his technologies represented the "conquest of the ocean frontier."⁹

In his examination of these individuals and their accomplishments, Kroll makes a significant contribution to marine environmental history. The ways in which we perceive, imagine and culturally integrate ideas about the ocean impacts our relationship with it, and Kroll demonstrates the value of examining the transformation of these ideas within American culture. However, in arguing that the terrestrial concepts of the frontier and wilderness were transferred to the ocean within the American imagination, he ultimately classifies frontier and wilderness as one in the same.

⁸ Ibid, 64.

⁹ Ibid, 169.

While this classification detracts from the power of his argument, it may pose another in return - perhaps it is not how concepts like wilderness have transformed our understanding of the ocean - but rather how the ocean has transformed our understanding of wilderness.

Part II

“Roll on, deep and dark blue ocean, roll! Ten thousand fleets sweep over thee in vain; man marks the earth with ruin - his control stops with the shore.”

--Lord Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*

“Wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man...and which generally appears to have affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable.”

--*The Wilderness Act of 1964*

In our unceasing and unattainable pursuit to become masters of each other and the natural world, our dynamic with the Earth's oceans has become extractive, exploitative, and exhausting. The ways in which we have altered the oceans have been the subject of many works throughout various disciplines, and the preponderance of historical scholarship on oceans revolves around the repercussions of humanity's relationship with the sea. Recent popular and prolific authors like marine biologist Sylvia Earle and anthropologist Brian Fagan have pondered this historical relationship and its consequences, in works such as *Sea Change: A Message of the Oceans* (1996) and *Beyond the Blue Horizon* (2012), respectively. Eleven years before her seminal *Silent Spring* in 1962, Rachel Carson's aforementioned *The Sea Around Us* illuminated the ocean and its processes but failed to notice the impacts of human activity on it. It was a decade later when she added a foreword about the impacts of human activity on our planet's oceans, noting, “The mistakes made now are made for all time.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Rachel Carson, *The Sea Around Us*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1951), xiii.

In historicizing the ocean, historians and ecologists have recently begun incorporating scientific methods in examining historical ocean populations in order to chart not only how the oceans have changed, but how these changes have influenced and been influenced by human populations. These scholars are also examining ‘shifting/sliding baseline syndrome’ – measuring current populations against earlier “baselines”, which may likely themselves be representative of significant change - in order to paint a clearer picture of oceans past. Beginning in the 1990s with the establishment of History of Marine Animal Population (HMAP) projects, maritime historians like David J. Starkey and Poul Holm began to incorporate and look for historical reference points in their analyses. This focus is beginning to help historians and scientists alike better understand the variables in marine population fluctuations, as well as to ascertain the significance of these populations on human societies. In their first edited volume, *The Exploited Seas: New Directions in Marine Environmental History*, Starkey and Holm, in addition to Tim D. Smith, aimed to apply historical methodology in testing ecological ideas about the relationship between exploited species and environmental changes – abrupt, gradual and cyclical - as well as to consider the intricacies of trophic levels on these species. They emphasize the analysis of both historical, statistical, and paleo-ecological data in conjunction with one another and note that historians rely on sources “that relate to the human predator rather than the natural prey,” and this data has different properties depending on its period, purpose, and location.¹¹ Ecological data can be seen, however, in “anecdotal observations of fish size and abundance” and thus ideas and information can be deduced about energy flows and biomass at different trophic levels.¹² These can be used to determine different

¹¹ Paul Holm, Tim D. Smith, David J. Starkey, eds. *The Exploited Seas: New Directions for Marine Environmental History*, Research in Maritime History, vol. 21 (St. John’s: International Maritime Economic History, 2001), xiv.

¹² *Ibid*, xvi.

environmental changes, the amount of time over which they occurred, and what kind of impact they had.

It is this kind of integration and interpretation of various data sources that *Exploited Seas* highlights, and from which new data and ideas about the history of oceans can be extrapolated. While some of the sources and interpretive analysis within it are presented as new methodologies, they are indeed types of analysis typical of environmental historians. Yet the potential for historical reference points in biological and ecological studies remains, and more historians and ecologists are starting to integrate them. Starkey and Holm produced the follow up volume, *Oceans Past*, in 2008 while Jeremy Jackson, Karen Alexander, and Enric Sala edited the 2011 *Shifting Baselines: The Past and the Future of Ocean Fisheries*. The environmental historiography of oceans becomes ever more expanded as scientific basis and fact become more established within its inquiries.

Perhaps one of the broadest and historically methodological of such inquiries is by Sylvia Earle's fellow marine biologist, Callum Roberts. In his *The Unnatural History of the Sea*, Roberts aims to demonstrate "how we arrived at this low point in our relationship with [the] ocean," by examining the history of fishing on a global scale.¹³ In doing this, his main point is how peoples across time and space have been drastically altering marine ecosystems for far longer than what is most often perceived. A scientist, Roberts uses the tools, resources, and methodologies of a historian to conduct his analysis. In doing this, his work provides a more dynamic account of humanity's relationship with ocean life.

Largely centered on Atlantic ecosystems, Roberts tells of rapid decimation of marine organisms long before the onset of industrialized fishing. Roberts begins his discussion in the eleventh century, using historical records like logbooks, expedition accounts, and colonial records to

¹³ Callum Roberts, *The Unnatural History of the Sea* (London: Gaia, 2007), xiv.

approximate sizes of past populations. Additionally, he explains that fishing has the effect of reducing the average size of individuals in a population, and fishing of large marine animals significantly restructured the ecosystems in which they were (and are) found. The remaining large animals in these systems are substantially smaller than their counterparts in unfished areas. These changes prompted change throughout the entire ocean system, changes we have now taken as being the status quo.

Roberts highlights the problem of “shifting baselines” and shows how people in each new generation perceived the current abundance and diversity of marine populations to be the norm, only noticing declines from this norm rather than preceding ones. Roberts illustrates this issue clearly, using geographically specific accounts to narrate the generational variability in populations. These accounts came from not only mariner operations large, small, and industrialized, but also from organisms such as whales, cod, and oysters. To Roberts, the abundance once held by the sea is almost beyond modern comprehension.

Expounding on cultural, geographical, economic, and technological influences on fishing, he provides deep insight into how humans have shaped the sea, and also more subtly, how the sea has shaped us. After the invention of trawling in the fourteenth century and the introduction of steam-powered commercial fishing ships in the 1870s, ocean exploitation grew exponentially. Roberts asserts that this not only affected the populations of the time, but also of the future with “lost gear” floating and settling in the ocean, affecting marine life for years. Additionally, economic attitudes contributed to decline. A British royal commission of 1863 concluded that fishery regulations, even for the most detrimental forms of trawling, were simply not necessary.¹⁴ At the time, the sea was commonly viewed as inexhaustible and trawling was seen as “cultivating” the sea. Prevailing 19th

¹⁴ Ibid, 140.

century economic theory maintained that fishing for any particular species would decrease with a decrease in stocks, thus allowing for recovery without regulation.

In reconstructing the past states of nature, Roberts provides a substantial and illuminating work. His passion is evident, and although it is indeed declensionist in tone, he offers possible solutions. While this is not generally a task of the historian or historical works, *The Unnatural of the Sea* reminds us that environmental history has the perspective needed to inform these solutions. As Roberts states, “If we are to break out of this spiral...then it is vital that we gain a clearer picture of how things have changed and what has been lost.”¹⁵ *The Unnatural History of the Sea* gives us pause to examine how we understand the ocean, not only as a concept and a living system, but one which is also dying.

As one of the sub-field’s most prominent and prolific advocates, W. Jeffrey Bolster adds significant scholarship to marine environmental history, exploring the reciprocal relationship between humans and the sea in his many works examining ocean resources. His most recent independent works are integral to any marine environmental history, including the 2008 article “Putting the Ocean in Atlantic History: Maritime Communities and Marine Ecology in the Northwest Atlantic, 1500-1800,” which he expands upon in his newest book, *The Mortal Sea: Fishing the Atlantic in the Age of Sail*. In both, Bolster examines our relationship with ocean resources, and its impact on both the sea and culture, demonstrating that the idea of the ocean as an aloof and unchanging landscape is outdated.

In “Putting the Ocean in Atlantic History,” Bolster explicates the value of oceanic history by examining the many ways in which the relationship between man and sea changed Northwest Atlantic systems between 1500 and 1800. Acting as a foundation for his book *The Mortal Sea*,

¹⁵ Ibid, xv.

Bolster's article examines the various ways in which human and ecological systems interacted with one another to produce change, as well as highlighting the ecological and biological science that explains it. In doing so, Bolster highlights many themes central not only to ocean history, but environmental history as a whole.

In *The Mortal Sea*, Bolster expands on the environmental history of fishing in the Atlantic from the tenth century to the First World War, stretching from Old World to New. Having been introduced to deep-sea fishing by the Vikings, Europeans began to partake voraciously in the catch, harvesting herring, cod, haddock, oysters, as well as aquatic mammals and birds.¹⁶ As the European population increased, so did ocean fishing and by 1500 European coastal ecosystems “had been significantly degraded.”¹⁷ After the ‘discovery’ of the New World, Europeans began fishing operations in rivers, estuaries, and deep waters off of North America, stunned and spurred on by the abundance they found. Whereas other historians have regarded the first-person accounts of this abundance as promotional and hyperbolic, Bolster argued that these accounts are as true as the authors could perceive. Yet, this abundance as truthfully reported or not, would not last. Fishing practices began to take their toll, even with attempted restrictions on cod, bass, and mackerel hauls and bans on using fish as fertilizer on crops. “By 1800 the northwest Atlantic was beginning to resemble European seas.”¹⁸

The central focus of Bolster's book is in the changes in fishing practices, technologies, and thinking in New England during the 1800s. As people conceptualized the ocean “as limitless,

¹⁶ W. Jeffrey Bolster, *The Mortal Sea: Fishing the Atlantic in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2012), 25; 31.

¹⁷ Ibid, 34.

¹⁸ Ibid, 87.

unfathomable, implacable, and wild,” new technologies accelerated the reaping of its resources.¹⁹ Technological changes ranging from mackerel jib (tackle), trawls, and steam and gas-powered engines in sea vessels led to greater and greater depletion over time, as did the development of long-lining and the introduction of new and foreign markets. This led to “a stunning series of population crashes” in the late nineteenth century and the passing of the first fishing regulation in the U.S. in 1887.²⁰ Bolster argues fishermen were the first advocates for haul limits, writing “it was primarily fishermen, hand-hardened and relatively unlettered, who argued that the watery world they knew firsthand was changing” and that they “sought to protect the resources... wanting fish for the future even as they insisted on fishing.”²¹ Meanwhile, scientists and naturalists purported to have “superior knowledge”, that “science and progress were on their side” even as they sided with the interests of industrialists.²² Dismissing the concerns of fishermen, they insisted that “the perceived depletions were simply natural fluctuations” and “the number of fish in the sea is as far beyond our estimation as the insects and can be no more influenced by legislative acts.”²³

Bolster incorporates ecology, biology, and environmental science to paint a clearer and more accurate portrait of the change over time in marine communities, demonstrating how the ocean is not impervious to humanity’s actions nor exists outside of history. He engagingly explores the consequences of various changes on the whole of these communities – both ecological and cultural. These changes included temperature fluctuations in ocean waters (as during the Little Ice Age) on primary production, the system-wide repercussions of species-specific overfishing, and the

¹⁹ Ibid, 119.

²⁰ Ibid, 170.

²¹ Ibid, 168; 171.

²² Ibid, 218.

²³ Ibid, 171; 217.

destabilizing effects of harvesting large mammals: “Whales embody vast biomass in stable form [which impose] constraints on variability. Overharvesting . . . allowed prey populations to oscillate more dramatically.”²⁴ These changes reciprocally affected human populations, changing their dynamic with nature and the meanings they assigned to it.

Ideas of scale and the imperviousness of the ocean are found throughout Bolster’s article. Scale, especially, is crucial when discussing the many different timescales and geographic scales that occur within and upon the ocean. As Bolster writes, “Marine ecosystems function in terms of multiple timescales, simultaneously tidal, seasonal, life-span. . . There is no ‘normal’.”²⁵ These many different fluctuations, changes, and interactions within the ocean dispel the assumption that the ocean is without history or is impervious to our own – and thus, historically situating the ocean encourages us to “imagine multiple timescales, multiple chronologies, and multiple topics within a single historical interpretation.”²⁶ The ocean, as Bolster demonstrates, has its own history.

Bolster provides an impressive contribution to environmental history of the ocean, answering his own call for scholarship and demonstrating the value of ocean history. *The Mortal Sea* carries many themes and methodologies that are found throughout this historiography, including scale, timelessness, and historical marine populations. Significantly, Bolster provides a model for what marine environmental history can achieve when done by *historians*, not scientists or popular authors. It is only through historical perspective that the true scale of the ocean and its story can be understood, as “nothing else conveys the magnitude of what has been lost and what be restored.”²⁷

²⁴ W. Jeffrey Bolster, “Putting the Ocean in Atlantic History: Maritime Communities and Marine Ecology in the Northwest Atlantic, 1500-1800,” *American Historical Review* 11, no. 1 (Feb. 2008): 35.

²⁵ Bolster, *The Mortal Sea*, 216.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 24.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 277.

Additionally, the historical discipline allows us to understand how peoples have thought about the ocean within the context of their own time and culture, and thus reveals that these values “exist in light of historically contingent meanings.”²⁸ These meanings, Bolster demonstrates, led people to “balance short-term needs against long-term costs, even as they harvested marine resources with the fervor of men on the make and squabbled over rights of access.”²⁹

The boundless and dynamic nature of the ocean has proven to be confounding to not only questions of access, but to other constructs of political boundaries and regulations. The question of who has authority over the sea and its resources has emerged as a common theme in marine environmental history, and scholars like Jeffery Bolster and Helen Rozwadowski have examined how borders and institutions have attempted to answer this question. Kurkpatrick Dorsey adds considerably to this scholarship in *Whales and Nations: Environmental Diplomacy on the High Seas*, in which he explores the diplomatic interplay of “sustainability, sovereignty, and science” on the ocean.³⁰ Beginning in the early twentieth century, Dorsey examines the international efforts to regulate the whaling industry in order to create a system of ‘rational exploitation.’ The signing of international conventions in the 1930s and the establishment of the International Whaling Commission (IWC) in 1946 were some of the first attempts to manage an oceanic resource on an international scale. These efforts were spurred by the technological innovations of the late nineteenth century, which allowed for vast expansion of whaling into the Antarctic and other international waters, marked by an unparalleled rapaciousness.

²⁸ Bolster, “Putting the Ocean in Atlantic History,” 37.

²⁹ Bolster, *The Mortal Sea*, 58.

³⁰ Kurkpatrick Dorsey, *Whales and Nations: Environmental Diplomacy on the High Seas* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014), xx.

Throughout most of the twentieth century, Dorsey demonstrates how these and other efforts were not meant to save whales but to save the industry from collapse. The idea that whales deserved special protection did not emerge until the 1970s. Until the rise of environmentalism, “the dominant idea about whales was that they were...first food and energy for humans.”³¹ This sentiment mirrors the histories of almost every other oceanic resource humanity has exploited, except that people began to conceptualize whales in a whole new way, believing not only that whaling was fundamentally unethical but that whales were special and thus needed special protection. People saw themselves as “fundamentally pretty ugly,” Dorsey writes, “but whales are pure. People could redeem themselves...through whales.”³²

Even with the global moratorium on commercial whaling in 1982, the power of these efforts and ideas remained limited, as issues of sovereignty eclipsed those of sustainability. Dorsey examines the complex relationships between nations, industry, science, and the IWC’s regulations. However, although “creators of the IWC believed that whaling could be salvaged if all members would make similar sacrifices, and those sacrifices were based on science,” an objection system was put into place within the Commission which let members opt out of rules they particularly disagreed with.³³ Not only were Japan and the Soviet Union particularly vociferous in utilizing this system, Dorsey shows, but available science was limited and inadequate. These factors made a sustainable whaling system impossible.

Utilizing a vast number of archival sources from around the world, Dorsey demonstrates the foundation, rise, and ultimate failure of these efforts and the difficult relationship between sovereignty and sustainability. The concept of who possesses authority over the ocean, and to whom

³¹ Ibid, 10.

³² Ibid, 216.

³³ Ibid, 93.

any part of it belongs, are strong themes in marine environmental history, and *Whales and Nations* clearly situates itself among the analyses which interrogate these concepts. It highlights the omnipresent struggle of humanity throughout history to define, delineate, and measure parts of nature that transcend human constructs, and also highlights the ways in which we have used science to try. *Whales and Nations* also demonstrates that human demands on ocean resources, including who is permitted to make those demands, far outpace human understanding of those resources and ocean processes. Dorsey acknowledges the historical shortcomings of using science to support sustainability, writing “a commitment to saving resources for the morrow was neither wide nor deep...while the largest whales were still numerous, the concerns about protecting sovereignty were real, and the science was a slender reed on which to lean.”³⁴

Part III

“...a dark illimitable ocean without bound, without dimension, where length, breadth, and height, and time, and place are lost.”

--John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

“There is, then, no water that is wholly of the Pacific or wholly of the Atlantic, or of the Indian or Antarctic... It is by the deep, hidden currents that oceans are made one.”

--Rachel Carson, *The Sea Around Us*

Examinations of humanity’s historical relationship with ocean are becoming ever more expansive in their scope and subject. Endeavoring to historicize the broader concepts of the ocean as bodies, as well as the larger histories of those bodies, these works are investigating the whole ocean itself. This scholarship is not only more inclusive in area and time period, but in diversity of human perspectives and experiences, providing a more encompassing narrative and revealing that humanity’s relationship with the sea transcends all.

³⁴ Ibid, xxii.

Bernhard Klein and Gesa Mackenthun strive to provide conceptual frameworks for situating the ocean as not only its own historical agent, but one who has shaped how we perceive each other and ourselves. In *Sea Changes: Historicizing the Ocean* the editors endeavor to “[make] the sea the focal point of a critical inquiry into the historical force field from which our modern notions of self and other have emerged.”³⁵ Synthesizing historical analysis and literary influences, the editors cover both the Pacific and Atlantic from 1500, examining racial, cultural, commercial, and nautical currents. This includes how changing perception, understanding, and use of the ocean had corresponding changes in ethnic identities through cultural syncretism, using the Celebes and Sulu Seas in the 18th century as an example, and further analyzing the experience of Pacific Islanders in the 19th century. Analyzed through the lens of ocean history, these narratives bring new dimensions to the people and places under investigation and opens up a field largely confined to European and Atlantic analysis.

The Pacific Ocean has received significantly less scrutiny than its Atlantic counterpart in historical examinations of this relationship, but David Igler provides a much-needed investigation into this history in *The Great Ocean*. Shifting the historical focus of the eastern coastal Americas and Pacific Islands from a terrestrial lens to a watery one, Igler focuses on the period of rapid transformation that occurred from Captain Cook’s voyages in 1768 through the discovery of gold deposits in California in 1848. He notes that the Pacific is “not a single ocean world” but rather “a vast waterscape,” where encounters and exchanges between cultures occurred not only on its immense expanse but also throughout its long continental shorelines and twenty-five thousand

³⁵ Bernhard Klein and Gesa Mackenthun, eds. *Sea Changes: Historicizing the Ocean* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 7.

islands.³⁶ Here, water was “neither barrier or devoid of humanity” but rather “deeply etched with history.”³⁷

In his aim to examine the transformation the Eastern Pacific and its peoples, Iglers strengths lie in his ability to illustrate and structure the immense complexity of the Pacific world – both human and oceanic. To Pacific peoples, the ocean was profoundly laden with meaning; the ocean was a source of sustenance, passage, cosmology, and as Iglers demonstrates, enormous change and destruction. It was once a region that seemed remote and empty to Europeans, but quickly became integral to international networks of commerce and power. Iglers utilizes five themes to provide a framework for this narrative and relies on individual stories to highlight bigger pictures and narratives.

Iglers begins with the transformative power of commerce and sea-driven trade, especially from American ports. The volume of this trade increased steadily until 1820 and then swelled, as “both private voyages and government sponsored ventures took to the seas following...international conflagrations” like the Napoleonic Wars, the War of 1812, and Mexican independence.³⁸ Iglers then smoothly transitions into his second theme, demonstrating that this commerce was both world-changing and world –ending for the indigenous communities it encountered, especially biologically. Here, Iglers emphasizes the importance of smallpox, malaria, and especially sexually transmitted diseases like syphilis and gonorrhea, in the demographic transformation of the Pacific world.

The consequences of this biological transfer also come into play in Iglers’s third theme of captivity and hostage taking. A practice habitually practiced by both sea captains and locals, hostage taking transformed from small-scale situations to wide-spread violent encounters and led to the

³⁶ David Iglers, *The Great Ocean* (New York: Oxford, 2013), 4.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 5.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 25.

colonial marginalization of indigenous people throughout the Eastern Pacific. Here, Igler utilizes individual narratives to highlight the intricate ways local and European histories, politics, and meanings intersected to produce new realities. Igler notes, “social worlds expanded and intermingled through ongoing contacts, while mistrust and miscommunication all but predicted the violence that ensued.”³⁹

As Igler examines the transformation of both the natural world and the knowledge of it in the Eastern Pacific, he demonstrates that this violence was not limited to human communities. The massive commodification and slaughter of marine mammals was perhaps only matched by the pervasiveness of thought that these resources were unlimited. As demand for whale oil in the West and otter pelts in China skyrocketed, so did the desire to know more about the Pacific world. Igler neatly examines this quest and the process of “assembling the Pacific” in scientific thought and theory, looking at explorers and naturalists like James Dwight Dana and demonstrating that in all ways, the Eastern Pacific truly was the object of “The Great Hunt.”⁴⁰ This hunt transformed the Eastern Pacific from a multitude of singular, disconnected worlds into a plural, interconnected waterscape of commerce and exploration.

Igler has provided a long needed example of how to historicize the Pacific into the larger historiography of oceans. His emphasis on the European viewpoint tends to marginalize indigenous experiences, however, leaving it to other historians to give voice to their experiences. Additionally, his examination of the “The Great Hunt” does little to interrogate the wider ecological impacts this hunt had on the Pacific environment, noting only the immense depletion in species population but not what this depletion did to the Pacific ecosystem - or its relationships with both indigenous

³⁹ Ibid, 97.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 155.

communities and Europeans. Yet, in a field dominated by Atlantic considerations, Iglar has provided a model for the Pacific's inclusion, and encourages us to "fathom [it] in its entirety."⁴¹

Lincoln Paine attempts to fathom the entirety of maritime history in his prodigious and exhaustive work *The Sea and Civilization*. He endeavors to chart maritime history from humanity's first nautical adventures fifty thousand years ago to the United States Navy in the twenty-first century, as well as our relationship with the ocean, setting it as a fluvial conduit of change and collision. As it is a maritime history, it also includes freshwater exploits, however its main focus is on man's emigrational, economic, and cultural dynamic across the sea as well as with it. Paine's aim here, much like *Sea Changes*, is in the first line: "I want to change the way you see the world."⁴²

Much of his book is spent on maritime endeavors before Columbus and Western contact. His genesis of seafaring is depicted by Norwegian rock drawings dating to 4,200 BCE, and he continues to the modern modes of marine transportation, including oil tankers and nuclear-powered naval vessels. Paine's geographical focus is admirable, incorporating the Caribbean, Oceania, and Baltic areas. Some of the most illuminating chapters concern the growth of trade in the Indian Ocean and the China Sea prior to the arrival of the Portuguese in the 15th century. Over millennia mariners formed the longest shipping lanes in the world, developed commercial networks, and civilizations rose (and fell) alongside maritime trade. Paine links maritime skills heavily with societal changes, highlighting the influence of oceans and oceanic knowledge on the human story.

To describe maritime activity during such a large span, the author has utilized an array of works that are collected together in an impressive bibliography that runs to close to fifty pages. His chronological construct provides a cohesive and engaging narrative that provides a comprehensive

⁴¹ Ibid, 183.

⁴² Lincoln Paine, *The Sea and Civilization* (New York: Knopf, 2013), 3.

view into humanity's life at sea. Much like *The Great Ocean*, the varying ways in which different peoples encountered and experienced the ocean are also found here. As Paine writes, "The sea held no promise for...the dispossessed, and across cultures people have reviled maritime commerce for its noxious cargoes of alien people and ideas, deadly plagues, and ruthless enemies from beyond the sea."⁴³ However, what Paine lacks is exactly what W. Jeffery Bolster called for: giving the ocean an active voice in history. As a maritime history, much of Paine's work charts the influence of the ocean as an avenue upon which human history occurred, collided, and integrated. However, it informs marine environmental history through its exhaustive account of our maritime relationship with oceans, as well as the scale to which this relationship changed and changed us. The ocean in this case, is not an historical agent but a historical vessel, a vessel that Paine admits humans have altered "on a scale as unimaginable to our ancestors as the ships and other technologies we have created to make it so."⁴⁴

Helen Rozwadowski builds on these preceding works in what is perhaps the first comprehensive environmental history of the earth's oceans, in her 2018 *Vast Expanses: A History of the Oceans*. Here, Rozwadowski returns to investigate the ocean once more, charting the history of the sea and humanity from the point of earth's creation. Given the amount of time covered, Rozwadowski's analysis is surprisingly concise and fluid, ultimately arguing that the ocean is "a conflation of natural forces and human constructs... a human ocean" and "the ocean has a history relevant to humanity starting when life evolved in the sea."⁴⁵

⁴³ Ibid, 599.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Helen Rozwadowski, *Vast Expanses: A History of the Oceans* (London: Reaktion, 2018), 227; 215.

Rozwadowski employs a chronological framework which heavily relies on the themes of connection, imagination, and transformation. “The human relationship with the ocean started right at the beginning,” she states, and as humans migrated and diversified in various ways, so did their relationship with the sea, including their understanding of it.⁴⁶ Rozwadowski illustrates that until the 15th century, oceans were culturally perceived individually and these cultures “evolved distinctive connections to the ocean shaped by geography but also by experience.”⁴⁷ Like Iglar, Rozwadowski reiterates here the unique experience Pacific peoples held with the sea – “nowhere on our planet have people seemed to be more comfortable with the ocean than in the Pacific... [here] they continue to experience the sea as home.”⁴⁸

Once European powers determined the seas were connected in the 15th century, how these powers engaged with the ocean – and each other – intensified. The ways in which humanity imagined the ocean and its possible uses began to transform and accelerate, leading the ocean to the forefront of geopolitical importance as well as the Scientific Revolution, creating an “intersection of science, imperialism and oceans.”⁴⁹ Knowledge of and power over the sea shifted and grew, shifting human exploitation of its resources from subsistence to heavily commercial. Industrialization beginning in the 19th century further intensified and transformed our relationship with the ocean as innovation, technology, and new knowledge turned “the blue water into a workplace on an entirely different scale.”⁵⁰ Additionally, as Rozwadowski demonstrates, people began experiencing and connecting with the ocean individually and “for the first time in history, the sea became a

⁴⁶ Ibid, 37.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 70.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 56-57; 60.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 103.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 104.

destination.”⁵¹ The consequences of these transformations had significant ecological impacts, as many of the preceding works have illustrated, yet Rozwadowski highlights the transformation that took place within human imaginations. By the mid 20th century the people saw the ocean as a wilderness landscape which stood outside of time and a frontier from which limitless resources could propel progress. Rozwadowski pinpoints this perceived timelessness and imperviousness as what delayed the inclusion of the ocean in the environmental movement, for “how can a place outside history be involved with massive change and urgent problems?”⁵²

Vast Expanses is an impressive analysis of humanity’s relationship with the ocean and provides a substantial and necessary contribution to the historiography, while leaving room for future scholarship. Rozwadowski takes an incredible amount of data and produces a condensed yet illuminating history, skillfully highlighting the most significant themes and concerns in studying the historical human relationship with the sea. She demonstrates this relationship is as old as humanity itself, and “the same patterns that tied earlier peoples to the sea,” that is, “combining experience with imagination to know and use the ocean” is what drove global connection and transformation of peoples, the sea, and the relationships between them.⁵³ *Vast Expanses* is not comprehensive, but an overview, an outline of what any comprehensive history should possess and start with. The central cultural perspective is still predominately Western, however, and her interrogation of how individuals began personally experiencing the sea lacks mention of the influence of class and race. Yet, she successfully explores how not only human innovation has affected our relationship with the ocean, but human constructs and imagination as well. In fact, Rozwadowski finds it may well be the

⁵¹ Ibid, 129.

⁵² Ibid, 215.

⁵³ Ibid, 70.

historian's imagination, not science, which proves most successful in changing the course of our relationship with the sea. "A new vision, with new metaphors, can form the foundation for positive change" she writes, but only if we acknowledge and understand the ocean's past and the role of our relationship in it.⁵⁴

Conclusion

In his call for environmental historians to embrace and explore the oceans, Jeffery Bolster writes that "people today neither use nor imagine the oceans in the same ways as their ancestors."⁵⁵ This holds true throughout the historical discipline, but the field of marine environmental history is beginning to change not only how we historically situate the ocean, but also the historical questions we ask and how we ask them. The very nature of the field necessitates the integration of multiple fields across multiple disciplines into historical methodologies and narratives. Marine environmental history must be as dynamic as the sea itself.

The preceding works have provided foundations and frameworks for historicizing the ocean and its processes, as well as the many aspects and themes of our relationship with it. From the importance of scale, to the complexities of overlaying human constructs of power on the ocean, these themes become the deeper currents of marine environmental historiography. Most poignantly, the sea that humanity once believed a timeless and unchanging background to our journeys and discoveries, is in fact a system in perpetual fluctuation - one which we have perpetually altered. And the alterations we have reaped within and upon the sea, scarcely considering the ocean's stories from eras past, reciprocally affect us in turn. The oceans we perceive today are but reflections of our past activities. They are never the same.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 227.

⁵⁵ Bolster, "Opportunities in Marine Environmental History," 574.

While this paper has provided a brief overview of marine environmental history, there is still much for historians to do - like the sea, so much remains unexplored. Issues of fisheries, shifting baselines, and ocean consumption need to continue to integrate ecological and biological disciplines in order to more comprehensively evaluate how the ocean has changed, the scale of this change, as well its meaning. Inquiries into humanity's cultural and economic dynamic with the ocean need to consider new perspectives, as so much of the sub-field has centered on Atlantic and European subjects and narratives. Additionally, there are vast areas of potential scholarship that have yet to be examined in marine environmental history. The historical relationship between the ocean and humanity's refuse – whether emissions, plastics, or other – is rife with possibilities for research, as is considering humanity's relationship with the sea in the age of globalization. As historians and ecologists alike become more adept at discerning the conditions of oceans past, considering the ocean's different trophic levels, especially primary production, will also be essential to the historiography. And in considering single-species histories, perhaps it is time to so consider the ocean in a “new vision” as Helen Rozwadowski suggested - a living, complex system, possessing a history and narrative all to itself. It will be the environmental historian's task to write this history. As Bolster states, “the ocean deserves nothing less.”⁵⁶

From the depths reached by the HMS Challenger to the expanses traversed, harnessed, and endured by millennia of mariners, the sea has remained an integral part of society, culture, and imagination. It is time it becomes as integral to the historic discipline. The ocean possesses a past all its own, one which operates on a scale of time and complexity we are just beginning to understand. It is not timeless, nor impervious, nor unchangeable, as humanity once thought. Yet, as the

⁵⁶ Bolster, “Putting the Ocean in Atlantic History,” 47.

consequences of our predecessors unfurl before us, altering the oceans as well as the climate, many still cling to the myth of the static ocean. Perhaps, as its tides take back shorelines, its storms strengthen and intensify, as its waters warm and turn to acid, and its waves fill with plastic and finally empty of life, it will be the ocean that will convince them otherwise. It will be the historian's job to tell the story.

“And then, as never on land, [man] knows the truth that his world is a water world, a planet dominated by its covering mantle of ocean, in which the continents are but transient intrusions of land above the surface of the all-encircling sea.”

- Rachel Carson

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A STORIED LAND: A BRIEF HISTORIOGRAPHY OF GREAT PLAINS

ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY

We come and go, but the land is always here. And the people who love it and understand it are the people who own it--for a little while."

--Willa Cather, *O Pioneer!*, 1913

In the land west of the Mississippi River and east of the Rocky Mountains, in the vast swath of North America stretching from central Texas to central Saskatchewan, one can drown in the immensity of sky and unending seas of grass. This is the land of the Great Plains, a unique and sprawling area that has shared a complex and dynamic relationship with those who have called it home. This relationship has long inspired creative imaginations and interested scholars of varying disciplines, producing a historiography as broad as the Great Plains horizon. This relationship, too, continues to shift and change with the people and Great Plains environment - producing new stories, crafting new histories and expanding the historiography of the Great Plains environment.

The story of Great Plains Environmental History is one still being written, but this paper aims to tell a portion of this story, offering a glimpse into the most significant chapters, as well as into what the next might hold. Notably, this historiography includes not only works by historians, but also those of novelists and creative writers like Willa Cather, Wallace Stegner, and Scott Momaday. These creative works are integral as they have helped shape historical memory on the Great Plains, that is, how people have collectively thought about and remembered the Great Plains environment. This historical memory is thus formed by a blend of creative and scholarly endeavors, or as Momaday writes, "The imaginative experience and the historical express equally the traditions of man's reality."⁵⁷ In this, expressive works also provide parts of the story that have, until recently,

⁵⁷ N. Scott Momaday, *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (Albuquerque: New Mexico, 1969), 4.

been left out of scholarly interrogations of the Great Plains, as marginalized people also have marginalized stories. Creative literature thus helps fill these voids in Great Plains environmental history and provides a more accurate and meaningful narrative to take shape. In examining this narrative, common themes and concepts appear throughout all works, including identity, scale, the frontier, the divide between rural and urban, and the cultural “other.” How these concepts have been perceived and understood, by historical subjects and historians alike, have also noticeably changed with the processes of time. Thus, this is a brief examination of the relationship between the Great Plains environment and the peoples that have called it home, as well as what this relationship has wrought.

Writing from her experience growing up in Nebraska during the late 19th century, novelist Willa Cather provides some of the first literature of pioneer life on the Great Plains. Beginning in 1913 with the publication of *O Pioneer!*, Cather intimately captures the risks, rigors, and rewards of this life, providing a primary source on the experience of white settlers, their connection to the land and each other, and how these dynamics changed over time.⁵⁸ Perhaps Cather’s most famous and illuminating work about the prairie, however, remains the 1918 *My Ántonia*, from which emerges various historical elements that provide Cather’s first-hand insight into life and land of the Great Plains.⁵⁹

Through the eyes of the protagonist, Jim Burden, the audience experiences the prairie as pioneers once did. Jim is an orphan sent to live with his grandparents in Nebraska and the titular Ántonia is in fact Burden’s childhood friend, a Bohemian girl whose parents immigrated in pursuit of a wealthier, agrarian life on the Great Plains. Like many, they came unprepared for the realities of

⁵⁸ Willa Cather, *O, Pioneer!* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1913).

⁵⁹ Willa Cather, *My Ántonia* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1918).

that life, and through Jim we encounter the harsh and tragic consequences of their new existence, including the prejudice that comes with being the “other.” As Jim and *Ántonia* grow up, their lives move from the country to town, highlighting the emerging complexities of the rural and urban divide, while also contrasting the different paths a life raised on the prairie can take.

My Ántonia showcases many significant historical elements of Great Plains life. The immigrant experience in the decades after the Homestead Act on the Great Plains is heavily explored throughout *My Ántonia*, as many of the characters come from Eastern Europe and Scandinavia to make a new life for themselves. The harsh sentiments towards these people considered “other” were difficult to resist for even the established settler, as exemplified when Jake decries “They ain’t the same, Jimmy...these foreigners ain’t the same.”⁶⁰ Indeed, *Ántonia* serves as a reminder that the past joins us in our present struggle against bigotry and ethnic scapegoating. Additionally, Cather examines the conformity of gender roles during this time and how those that failed to conform were regarded as less. Throughout *My Ántonia*, Cather also illuminates the changes in demography and divides that existed on the Plains during the period, including the changes in the land as the prairie and its relationship with those that settled there underwent undulations much like the terrain.

Through her characters, Cather shows her personal experiences of the Great Plains environment and its natural history, as her own memories of the landscape are incorporated into her protagonist’s experiences and connections. This familiarity highlights the duality of roles the environment played in the lives of those who experienced it, as the Great Plains often serves as both setting and subject, nurturer and antagonist. Cather paints the Great Plains as a place mired in beauty, one inspiring awe and tranquility, while simultaneously portraying this same landscape as an

⁶⁰ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 103.

active participant in forming identities and shaping the future. It should be noted that Cather's account of the Great Plains environment does not grant it agency, but rather shows the ways in which it affected the agency of the men and women living there. Cather shows the ways in which the Great Plains acted as an antagonist, as natural resources, climate, and the emerging pioneer culture provided hardships and obstacles to those attempting to thrive. Here, Cather's narrative is triumphalist in its treatment of man's relationship with the Great Plains environment; those that managed to thrive were victors who not only endured but subdued the main antagonist into cooperation. Cather's celebratory perspective on the transformation of the Great Plains can be seen as an adult Jim ruminates on the changes in the landscape he finds upon returning:

The old pasture land was now being broken up into wheatfields [*sic*] and cornfields, the red grass disappearing, and the whole face of the country was changing... The windy springs and blazing summers, one after another, had enriched and mellowed that flat tableland; all the human effort that had gone into was coming back in long, sweeping lines of fertility. The changes seemed beautiful and harmonious to me; it was like watching the growth of a great man or of a great idea.⁶¹

Cather, like Webb preceding her, sees the white settler's transformation of the Great Plains environment as a fair and righteous outcome of settler's virtuous progress.

My Ántonia is an integral part of the environmental history of the Great Plains and through Cather's narrative, scholars can glimpse the ways in which people have connected to the land and each other. *My Ántonia* provides a connection to the human voice in the examination of the past, a connection to the land so loved by Cather, Jim, and Ántonia, and a tribute to a vast and unique beauty that only life on the Great Plains can provide; "The word was left behind," Jim notes on his first glimpse, "This was the complete dome of heaven, all of it."⁶²

⁶¹ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 306.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 12-13.

One of the first major studies to historically investigate this ‘dome of heaven’ was Walter Prescott Webb’s 1931 seminal work, *The Great Plains*. Here, Webb examines the interplay between landscape and pioneer history on the Great Plains, asserting that this distinct environment demanded massive adaptation on the part of white settler culture. He investigates these adaptations, as well as the specific conditions of weather and landscape on the Great Plains which produced them. Like Cather, Webb’s narrative follows the white settler experience, however, Webb almost exclusively focuses on male Anglo-Americans. His treatment of Native Americans and Mexicans, while stereotypical of Webb’s time, remains definitively racist. Yet, Webb’s emphasis on the influence of the environment on human trajectory and culture was a revelatory one, one which laid the foundation for historical investigations into the relationship between the Great Plains landscape and humanity.

Webb argues two main points in *The Great Plains*. First, Webb asserts the Great Plains were a distinct region which differed greatly from the land east of the 98th parallel due to three defining characteristics - lack of water, trees, and slope. Second, this new environment shaped the white settler experience and culture by forcing them to constantly adapt in order to survive. It is here that Webb spends the majority of his time, highlighting the many innovations that occurred due to the Great Plains landscape. For example, the lack of trees and the open plains led white settlers to adapt with the invention of barbed wire, which “opened up to the homesteader the fertile prairie plains.”⁶³ Additionally, the defining environmental characteristics of the Great Plains led white settlers to innovate various new ways of irrigation and cultivation, including open range cattle ranching. Webb also notes the many ways in which ideas, institutions, and laws adapted in response to the Great

⁶³ Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (Boston: Ginn, 1931), 317.

Plains environment and the conflicts that arose when “the Easterner was...reluctant to approve any proposal made by the Westerner for new institutions for the West.”⁶⁴ The Great Plains environment had changed the white settler so greatly that he now “talked in terms that the Eastern man could not understand because...[he] lacked the experience that enabled [him] to appreciate the new problems.”⁶⁵

However foundational, *The Great Plains* contains weakness that are worth noting. In arguing his points, Webb uses geological, topographical, and climatic evidence with a greater or lesser degree of accuracy and frequently relies on single, outdated sources for his scientific arguments. For instance, his geological information is based on one reference from the turn of the century, and his hydrological claims that wells should “strike groundwater anywhere” as “ground water at a greater or less depth is a universal phenomenon,” were known to be false at the time of publication.⁶⁶ Additionally, Webb’s examination of Plains peoples, while indicative of the period in which he lived, follows an overwhelmingly environmental determinism trajectory, and he delineates between “civilized Indians, or the Eastern tribes, and the ‘wild Indians, or the Plains tribes.”⁶⁷ And when Webb states “Practically all that scholars know about the Plains Indians comes from [1540-1880],” he ignores the main reason why: after the last herds of bison were all but extinct in the mid 1880s, the majority of Plains Indians were forced into relocation on reservations.

Even with these flaws, *The Great Plains* remains integral to any discussion of the Great Plains environment, as well as its relationship to and interactions with humanity. Webb’s examination of environmental influences set the stage for the emergence of environmental history, while his flaws

⁶⁴ Webb, 386.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 328.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 59.

remind historians that perspectives and knowledge evolve over time and much like the settlers on the Great Plains, our historical questions must not only adapt to yield more meaningful answers, but incorporate broader perspectives to yield a more inclusive and accurate narrative.

Wallace Stegner's 1962 *Wolf Willow: A History, A Story, and A Memory of the Last Plains Frontier* offers one such different perspective, bringing to light the differences and similarities between life on the Great Plains in the United States and life on the Great Plains in Canada. Stegner uses fiction and non-fiction writings to historically examine and remember his childhood home on the Northern Great Plains in southern Saskatchewan. He notes the ways in which both the land and settlers influenced transformations of the other, and much like Cather, illuminates the way in which the Great Plains environment shaped the identity of those that lived there. In doing so, Stegner paints an evocative and poignant portrait of the Great Plains landscape, highlighting the ways in which this landscape shaped the lives and narratives of the people that lived there, as well as how these same lives reshaped the Great Plains.

Wolf Willow is structured around the forms of writing Stegner employs. In the first part of the book Stegner argues that the Milk River region retained longer than any other “the characteristics of the West that [William Clark] knew in 1805.”⁶⁸ Here was “a land with no transition between earth and sky...densely peopled with small creatures as with large...[with] winds that searched the grass and were almost never still.”⁶⁹ He examines the creation of the Medicine Line - the national boundary between the US and Canada along the forty-ninth parallel – and the differences between life and change on the Great Plains frontier between the two nations. Stegner then highlights the

⁶⁸ Wallace Stegner, *Wolf Willow: A History, A Story, and A Memory of the Last Plains Frontier* (USA: Viking Press, 1962), 43.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 41.

plight of the different tribes and mixed-race *metis* and contrasts how the Royal Canadian Mounted Police instituted order on the Great Plains to the American Cavalry and “wild west” lawmen. The middle and last part of the book utilizes fictional and personal stories to depict how landscape, and conditions of landscape, shape the experiences of those living there. Like Cather, Stegner recognizes how the vastness of the Great Plains landscape influenced identity, writing “The prairie taught me identity by exposing me,” and all the characteristics that define him, both large and minute, were “in good part scored into me by the little womb-village and the lovely, lonely, exposed prairie.”⁷⁰

In all his accounts and explorations of the landscape, Stegner highlights the historical elements that were common to the Plains and the unique environmental circumstances and connections that shaped human experiences and vice versa. Here, his narrative deviates from Cather and Webb, as he ultimately regards the settlers’ transformation of the Great Plains environment as one of destruction and loss, where “their bequest to the future would be death and emptiness” and “the fulfillment of the American dream [meant] inevitably the death of the noble savagery and the freedom of the wild.”⁷¹ This declensionist narrative is not uncommon in environmental history, nor is Stegner’s view that the Great Plains were once an untouched wilderness, an “Eden” that settlers transformed into “the lamentable modern world.”⁷² However, Stegner also illustrates that the Great Plains environment had the ability to share a type of communion with those that lived there. For him, it was the wearing of trails and paths, for these paths “took off across the prairie like an extension of [himself]” and “wearing any such path in the earth’s rind is an intimate act, an act like love.”⁷³

⁷⁰ Stegner, 22-23.

⁷¹ Ibid., 66; 282.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid., 271; 273.

Wolf Willow provides an unconventional, yet informative historical addition to Great Plains environmental history. Stegner's examination of the differences between the Canadian and American Plains experience is particularly valuable and offers a contrast to Webb's nostalgic view of cowboy culture. Additionally, Stegner's analysis of the effect of settlement on the Great Plains counters the reverent nature of Webb's and Cather's, offering itself to common themes found in the greater environmental historiography – a narrative of destruction and decline (declensionism) and the idea that landscapes once held a single, uninhabited, and unchanging ecological purity (the Pristine Myth). Like Cather, it is obvious that Stegner feels a strong intimacy with the landscape of the Plains. It becomes more apparent that unlike any other environment, the Plains has a particular hold on those that experience it: "These prairies are quiescent, close to static," Stegner ruminates, "looked at for any length of time, they begin to impose their awful perfection on the observer's mind. Eternity is a peneplain."⁷⁴

Rainy Mountain rises like a singularity out of this 'peneplain' in Oklahoma, and to the Kiowa people it is the point of origin and creation. And while it might be difficult for those unfamiliar with the prairie to fully comprehend the effect a single hill rising out the horizon would have, N. Scott Momaday illuminates and weaves these effects in with history in his 1969 *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. Momaday provides an invaluable Native American voice and perspective in demonstrating the intimate and spiritual relationship between the Kiowa and the Great Plains environment.

Momaday's work recounts and expounds upon his quest to remember and understand his ancestral Kiowa heritage and its deep connection with the land. Significantly, he uses the oral history and folklore his grandmother taught him of his people and their relationship to the Great Plains,

⁷⁴ Stegner, 7.

writing “The immense landscape of the continental interior lay like memory in her blood.”⁷⁵ Their origin said to be entering the world through a hollow log, the Kiowa began in the headwaters of the Yellowstone and migrated to what is now southwestern Oklahoma. Like many Plains tribes, their lives were interwoven with bison and the bison’s near extinction correlates with the Kiowa’s. One of the Kiowa’s principal ritual was and remains the Sun Dance, a ritual last performed as a people in 1887, and one that Momaday’s grandmother was present for.

The Way to Rainy Mountain grants scholars access to this memory and more, and in doing so provides insights into the kinds of relationships that the Great Plains environment held with the Kiowa. Significantly, Momaday illustrates the Kiowa’s cosmological and spiritual connection to the land not found in the white settler experience. The Kiowa’s origins were not of the Great Plains, but they had not truly become the Kiowa until they settled there. On the Great Plains, “they had found the sun’s home” for it was only “precisely there [did] it have the certain character of a god.”⁷⁶ The Great Plains environment shaped how the Kiowa explained who and why they were. As Momaday writes, upon experiencing the Great Plains “they had conceived a good idea of themselves, they had dared to imagine and determine who they [were].”⁷⁷ By examining early Great Plains’ culture and cosmological context, Momaday provides a new perspective on Plains’ historical events and processes, as well as how these events and processes affected the Kiowa and their relationship with the land. Notably, he shows how these events and processes become entrenched and understood in the larger historical memory of an entire people, and how these stories shape perceptions of the past, present, and future.

⁷⁵ Momaday, 7.

⁷⁶ Momaday, 60; 7.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

The Way to Rainy Mountain not only demonstrates the necessity for Native American voices within this historiography, but also the need to examine and incorporate oral histories. These histories are real, and *Rainy Mountain* highlights how underused and underrated oral histories are in the historiographical record. Additionally, Momaday's examination demonstrates that the environmental history of the Great Plains is not confined to the white settler narrative, that the Plains were not just viewed as an environment to be cultivated, tamed, or dominated, but rather an environment which was integral to a society's cosmology and with which peoples could share a transcendent and enduring connection.

Donald Worster returns to the white settler narrative in his groundbreaking 1979 *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*, considered one of the first true works of environmental history. His own parents being survivors of the "black bizzards" that swept away the southern Great Plains, Worster details the causes and responses to one of the most devastating environmental disasters in American history. In doing so, Worster pointedly argues that the roots of this disaster were not purely ecological but human, and that it was no coincidence the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression occurred simultaneously. The values and ideas of unregulated capitalism, he argues, are the final culprits in both – revealing "fundamental weaknesses in the traditional culture of America, the one in ecological terms, the other in economic."⁷⁸

Using counties in Oklahoma and Kansas as case studies, Worster unfolds the events of the Dust Bowl and asserts that the ecological values of capitalism were the root cause of the Dust Bowl. After millions of acres of grassland had been converted into wheat fields since the late 19th century, wheat prices dropped with the Great Depression, causing farmers to increase production. Thus,

⁷⁸ Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 5.

when severe drought hit in 1932, there was no vegetation to secure the soil from the mighty Great Plains winds, leading to massive clouds of dust that covered homes, blocked out the sun, and caused suffering and poverty for millions. This, Worster argues, was not simply due to the drought and misfortune, but due to the American economic ethos which viewed the purpose of farming to be not just producing a crop, but producing an ever-increasing profit. “In their behavior toward the land,” Worster writes, “capitalism was the major defining influence.”⁷⁹ Additionally, Worster finds this influence in the response to the Dust Bowl as he explains that New Deal programs were designed to remedy and relieve, not reform. The “emerging welfare state...propped up an agricultural economy that had proved itself to be socially and ecologically corrosive.”⁸⁰

Since its publication, *The Dust Bowl* has become a cornerstone in Great Plains and environmental history, and Worster’s argument remains not only relevant, but one which is still heavily debated. His treatment of Plains’ farmers overly critical at times, as they were, after all, trying to carve out a life on the Great Plains with the only techniques they knew and without the ecological understanding to know better. Those who did, however, had a technocratic response – a common theme in environmental history. Policy makers believed the very things that had caused an ecological disaster – capitalism and capitalist technology – would eventually fix them, a belief that Worster finds absurd. Approaching its fortieth year, *The Dust Bowl* continues to shape historians’ understanding of not only the relationships between humanity and the Great Plains environment, but how human institutions have shaped, and continue to shape, these relationships.

How these relationships came to be are the focus of environmental historian Dan Flores’ 2001 *The Natural West*. A revised collection of previously published works, as well as some new

⁷⁹ Ibid., 6.

⁸⁰ Worster, 163.

additions, *The Natural West* is a meditative and thought-provoking analysis of the ways in which humans have engaged with, perceived, and valued the natural environments of the Rocky Mountain region and the Great Plains. Flores questions if the ways we interact with nature are entirely cultural, or if there is something “more universal...a ‘human nature’ that influences the way we – all of us – see and interact with the flux we call the natural world.”⁸¹ Here, Flores shifts slightly from Worster’s argument - while he sees American capitalism as a driving force for transformation on the Great Plains, he finds it is but a construct of the root cause. Instead, Flores finds that a deeper, more fundamental aspect of human behavior and biology determines our relationship with the natural world, one where humans are inherently driven to alter our environment and most often for the worse. *The Natural West* is a substantial contribution to the Great Plains narrative, one which highlights the unique and fragile conditions on the Great Plains and interrogates how and why humans have adapted to and transformed the swaths of grasslands found there.

In the most relevant chapters to this historiography, “Bison Ecology and Bison Diplomacy Redux” and “A Long Love Affair with an Uncommon Country,” Flores illustrates why, in the “story of human efforts at adaptation to landscape...the American Great Plains stand in the first rank.”⁸² In the former, he deftly examines the “biocultural history” of bison ecology and Plains Indians, demonstrating the role Plains Indians played in the decline of the bison and the historical and cultural contingencies that contributed to it. Here, he illustrates the ways in which these contingencies interacted with external and ecological factors to produce the bison’s decline and near extinction in the late 19th century. In “A Long Love Affair,” Flores shows that the Great Plains have

⁸¹ Dan Flores, *The Natural West: Environmental History in the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains* (University of Oklahoma: Norman, 2001), 5.

⁸² Flores, 166.

been an “occupied landscape, much shaped by human activity” since the Pleistocene, yet over the last century they have become the “least appreciated” place in the West.⁸³ This is due partly, he explains, to the Plains’ perceived deficiencies by Anglo-Americans – arboreal, agricultural, and aesthetic – and the transformation of the Great Plains from a “hollowing wilderness” to a privatized and ploughed under expanse.⁸⁴ Throughout his book, Flores reiterates the unique and delicate ecological system of the Great Plains environment, noting that perhaps nowhere else on Earth so finely captures “the precarious fingerholds by which human cultures cling to Earth.”⁸⁵

Flores asks readers to consider a larger, older, and more intricate picture of the Great Plains, and *The Natural West* thus expands the historiography considerably. Incorporating personal stories, philosophical ruminations, and natural science into his historical analysis, Flores sets a higher bar for any environmental history. He demonstrates the Great Plains were transforming well before Anglo-Americans settled the continent and asks if there exists a universal, human tendency to convert or corrupt nature. Flores credits Webb with introducing environmental interrogations into the Great Plains historiography, yet notes Webb’s work as being “essentially a pioneer celebration at the conquest of nature and the subjugation of native inhabitants,” and asks to dig deeper, and more thoroughly, into other types of environmental relationships humanity has had with the Great Plains.⁸⁶ *The Natural West* establishes that explorations in Great Plains environmental history can and need to incorporate older, more ecological stories to render a more accurate past.

Geoff Cunfer explores one such ecological story in his 2001 *On the Great Plains: Agriculture and Environment*, where he examines land-use on the Great Plains between the Homestead Act of

⁸³ Ibid., 173, 168.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 173.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 166.

⁸⁶ Flores, 172.

1862 and the turn of the 21st century. Using an impressive methodological model which combines 130 years of agricultural census data with GIS mapping techniques, he aims to show land use over time in 450 counties on the Great Plains. Like Webb and Worster, Cunfer focuses on the white settler experience, but he deviates from his predecessors by finding humanity to be neither victor nor villain in the Great Plains narrative. He instead asserts that the story of humanity and the Great Plains environment is more complex than other narratives have allowed, one whose “trajectory is neither steadily upward nor steadily downward, but a series of temporary stages of land use equilibrium.”⁸⁷

An environmental history as much as an agricultural history, *On the Great Plains* paints a different picture of the Great Plains than hitherto seen. Cunfer’s argument follows a pattern of punctuated equilibrium, to borrow a concept from evolutionary biologist Stephen J. Gould, which asserts that transformations in land and land-use did not happen gradually, but in rapid spurts with stasis in between. Cunfer argues that the conversion of the Great Plains to farmland happened quite rapidly and changes in land-use, and thus the environment itself, have been caused only by temporary and naturally-driven ecological circumstances which force humanity to adapt. For example, in examining the ‘temporary circumstance’ of the Dust Bowl he finds that “human land-use choices were less prominent in creating dust storms than was the weather.”⁸⁸ In turn, the dry 1930s produced adaptations in irrigation techniques, like the use of underground aquifers like that of the Ogallala Aquifer in the southern and central Great Plains. He identifies nitrate mining, fossil fuel-driven machinery, and chemical fertilizers as other examples of adaptation to new natural

⁸⁷Geoff Cunfer, *On the Great Plains: Agriculture and the Environment* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2005), 10.

⁸⁸ Cunfer, 163.

circumstances, ones which allowed farmers to maintain “a stable land-use pattern that fit the environment.” Thus, Cunfer writes, “the story of human interaction with nature is a rather routine minor tragedy of mundane errors and missed opportunities ameliorated by occasional successes,” a story that he finds altogether “more human and more plausible” than other Great Plains narratives.⁸⁹

On the Great Plains is a valuable contribution to Great Plains environmental history and encourages us to review our understanding of transformation on the Great Plains – both human and environmental. Cunfer’s statistical prowess and methodological approach impressively tackle a large amount of data to produce a thorough and innovative historical analysis, while his rejection of triumphalist and declensionist narratives challenges how we cast humanity in the Great Plains story. In doing so, Cunfer frequently states that humanity is “fully apart of nature, not separate from in in any ecological sense” and that humans are just another species which “conform[s] to environmental pressures while at the same time altering and shifting the physical world to a greater or lesser degree.”⁹⁰ By placing humanity and its activities within the natural ecological sphere instead of positing them as outside forces, Cunfer thus also places human induced environmental change. It is worth noting here that, in our era of climate science and climate-change denial, this argument can be dangerous. No other species on the planet has the ability to affect environmental change on the scale that humans do, and our ability to adapt to temporary circumstances may not be enough in the face of a very permanent global climate catastrophe. Ultimately, *On the Great Plains* demonstrates the importance of challenging established narratives, as well as the value of empirical, methodological analysis, and the necessity of considering scale and perspective in both.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 15.

⁹⁰ Cunfer, 6; 234.

Elizabeth Fenn deftly succeeds in considering both of these in her 2014 Pulitzer Prize winning *Encounters at the Heart of the World: A History of the Mandan People*. Tracing the history of the Mandan people over 800 years, Fenn’s exhaustive work examines the story of an entire people on the Great Plains by utilizing a vast array of material from a plethora of disciplines. Fenn examines Mandan migrations, transformations, and adaptations across the Northern Great Plains, highlighting the intersections between ecological and cultural adaptation in the process. While her emphasis is on Mandan encounters with other peoples, including the Arikara, Hidatsa, Sioux, Shoshone, and Lakota, Fenn also explores the environmental and ecological encounters which helped shape the Mandan story. While *Encounters at the Heart of World* is not an explicitly environmental history, it does illustrate the ways in which a people interacted with the Great Plains landscape across time, and iterates the necessity and value in incorporating First Peoples narratives into Great Plains environmental history.

In Western North Dakota where the Missouri River meets the Heart River, lies the “heart of the world,” the homeland of the Mandan people and the focus of Fenn’s endeavors.⁹¹ The Mandan lived here for centuries, Fenn establishes, developing a culture centered around agriculture, hunting, ceremony, and trade. A sedentary people, the Mandan nonetheless created widespread trading networks which extended to the Pacific coast, while learning to “accommodate the vicissitudes of drought, climate change, and competition” on the Great Plains.⁹² The cornerstone of Mandan cosmology and culture was the *Okipa*, a days-long ceremony performed at least once a year which “transmitted history, power, and wisdom from one generation to the next” and “brought good

⁹¹ Elizabeth Fenn, *Encounters at the Heart of the World: A History of the Mandan People* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2014), XIV.

⁹² *Ibid.*, XIII.

things to the Mandan world” like bison and abundant corn.⁹³ Corn, Fenn demonstrates, lay at the center of their life – economically, culturally, and spiritually – both before and after European contact. This contact, for the Mandan, began in the mid-eighteenth century as their trade networks brought in European goods, then visitors, and then, too, smallpox. The disease ravaged the Mandan first in 1781 and then most significantly in 1837, in an epidemic which killed 90% of their population. Fenn illustrates that the remaining survivors may have briefly adopted a nomadic lifestyle but “even as the wandered...they clung fiercely to the traits that made them Mandan... [their] material world had unraveled, but their history and identity remained.”⁹⁴

The Northern Great Plains environment influenced this history and identity deeply and, as Fenn shows, as it changed so did the Mandan. The Mandan’s two creation stories center their existence on the earth, on corn, and on their home: the First Creator, upon arriving at the Heart River, declared that it would be “the heart-the center of the world.”⁹⁵ Here, they built earthen homes which were “one with the surrounding landscape...[their] domed outline converged with the undulating prairie” and planted corn, beans, and squash by tracking seasons through the “cues of the natural world: the sharp crack of river ice beginning to break up, the honking and V-shaped outline of geese on the wing...[the] signs of winter turning to spring.”⁹⁶ The Mandan remained settled gardeners even when the horse made its introduction on the Northern Great Plains, although the animal did aide their travel for trade and hunting. The introduction of other European organisms also changed Great Plains ecology in other ways, producing change for the Mandan as well. Mustard and thistles proved to be great annoyances in their crops and the invasive Norway rat was viewed as

⁹³ Ibid., 100.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 329.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁹⁶ Fenn, 54; 60.

a curse. Reproducing rapidly, the rat “burrowed assiduously” and devastated corn stores, causing the literal foundations of Mandan life to collapse: “maize in many of these repositories...supported the earth that people walked on.”⁹⁷ The destruction of corn, as well as bison, was also a crucial factor in the spread of smallpox which decimated the Mandan, an Old World organism that invaded the Great Plains and to which the Mandan’s “sacred beings made no promise of immunity.”⁹⁸ These new natural dynamics affected profound and devastating change upon the Mandan, who saw themselves and this change through the prairie itself, as the Mandan chief Little Walker told President Lincoln in 1864:

Great Father, look over the prairie, when it is covered with grass and dotted with beautiful flowers of all colors, pleasant to the sight and the smell. Throw a burning torch into this vast prairie, and then look at it, and remember the life and happiness that reigned there before the fire. Then you will have an image of my nation.⁹⁹

The Mandan were of the prairie and the prairie of the Mandan; changes and transformations of one meant the same for the other.

“The landscape itself was a sort of winter count,” writes Fenn of the Mandan, “marking the stories and events that made them a people.”¹⁰⁰ *Encounters at the Heart of the World* illuminates this “winter count” and thus the long history of the Mandan and the land to which they belonged. It is a considerable addition to the story of humanity’s relationship with the Great Plains environment, tracing the transformation of life, culture, ecology, and the intersections in-between. Significantly, in a historiography dominated by white settler narratives, Fenn provides a new and necessary work which actively pursues Native perceptions and interpretations of the past. Fenn’s utilization of multiple types of sources, combined with her ability to interrogate and draw meaning from them,

⁹⁷ Ibid., 292.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 161.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 245.

¹⁰⁰ Fenn, 117.

provides for greater analysis of the Mandan story, as well as of Great Plains environmental history. Like the works of Webb and Cunfer, *Encounters at the Heart of the World* highlights how humans have related to and changed with the Great Plains landscape, and how in the face of colliding and changing cultures it is often the ecological elements that are the most threatening. Yet, Fenn demonstrates that Mandan's "fluid" spirituality encouraged adaptation and thus "allowed the Mandan to preserve their identity in the face of change."¹⁰¹ Through its magnificent scope and delicate depth *Encounters at the Heart of the World* demands the inclusion of more indigenous narratives in Great Plains history and reveals these narratives to be rife with opportunities for environmental historians.

Conclusion

To many, the immense expanse of the Great Plains is thought to be mundane and empty, an unattractive monotony of sky, grass, and wind. However, to those that know better, the Great Plains possesses limitless beauty and meaning, where its vast sky, undulating grasses, and pervading wind provides identity and history. Great Plains environmental historiography has unfolded similarly, as historians have examined the ways in which peoples have interacted with and lived on the Great Plains, as writers have explored the stories and connections found therein, they have come to know the Great Plains story as anything but empty or mundane. The preceding works have demonstrated this, and show that the history of people and the Great Plains is not a simple, linear narrative, but one of immense complexity and change. There exists enormous potential for future scholarship in Great Plains environmental history, any of which must aim to be as diverse and complex as the Great Plains environment itself, while maintaining the same commitment to interrogating common themes and deeper meaning as the works included here.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 100.

From Cather to Fenn, the relationship between humanity and the Great Plains has long been meditated upon and investigated, producing common elements and directions. Adaption and scale, both on the part of peoples and the landscape, is heavily laced throughout the historiography, their pervasiveness itself insightful of life on the Great Plains. Concepts of identity, individually and culturally, present in many works found here, within which concepts of ‘the other’ and divisions between rural and urban are rooted. The idea of wilderness, in conjunction with triumphalist and declensionist narratives, reveal that the Great Plains have also suffered from the application of the pristine myth, as well as a lack of non-white perspectives. These fallacies will become ever clearer as environmental historians continue to investigate the relationship between the Great Plains and all those that have interacted with it. It will become clearer, too, as these works have shown, how deeply and profoundly this relationship can affect the people in it; for some, the Great Plains are as much a physical home as a spiritual one. Stegner writes, “I came to know that country, not in the way a traveler knows the landmarks he sees in the distance, but more truly and intimately in every season, from a thousand points of view.”¹⁰²

The foundations of Great Plains environmental history may lie in the white settler narrative, but its future belongs to the diverse array of perspectives that are still waiting to be explored and illuminated. Momaday and Fenn have demonstrated there is enormous potential for deep and profound scholarship in the Native American experience with the Great Plains, where interrogating the ways in which First Peoples interacted, changed, and conceptualized the Great Plains landscape. Additionally, historians must consider other minority voices in their examinations of the Great Plains environmental history, and investigate the relationships which African-Americans, Mexican-Americans, Asian-Americans, and others held with the Great Plains. Historians must also utilize

¹⁰² Stegner, 67.

broader and more informed methodology and analysis in order to properly integrate concepts of natural sciences into their narratives – investigating the environmental history of the Great Plains requires a proper understanding of both the environmental and the historical. Environmental historians of the Great Plains must also consider issues of land ownership and land use, as Webb, Worster, Flores and Cunfer have highlighted poignantly. Who owns the Plains and how they use it are questions laden with possibilities, and investigations into public lands, Native American Reservations, and industrialized agriculture on the Great Plains are rife with possibility. The future of Great Plains environmental history is thus one that must build on its considerable foundation and diversify in its narratives, perspectives, and questions in order to render a more complete and accurate story; it must be as encompassing and vibrant as the Great Plains horizon.

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BETWEEN SEA AND STEPPE: THE PERIPHERAL ODESSA, 1764-1905

After the end of the last ice age, approximately eight to nine thousand years ago, a new sea was born. The world's oceans swelled as glaciers melted and the Mediterranean Sea began to invade a small, shallow lake in the most Southwestern corner of the Eurasian Steppes.¹⁰³ This invasion expanded the lake's coastlines, introduced diverse marine life, and blended saltwater with fresh, creating new and dynamic systems of life. Out of this once small and unremarkable lake, the Black Sea was born. And as peoples, cultures, and cities emerged on its shores, none would be so alike the Black Sea as the city of Odessa.

Perched on the windswept cliffs above its waves, Odessa possesses a history as dynamic as the Black Sea itself. Once the small and unremarkable Tatar settlement of Khadjibey, Odessa rose to become one of the most historically cosmopolitan and diverse cities in the world. In the city's first hundred years, it went from a dusty, inconsequential village to the fourth largest city in the Russian Empire, possessing vast economic prosperity and a uniquely diverse population. This century of growth and development, cultivated by astute administrators as well as the freedom of the geographic and cultural periphery of the Russian Empire, produced the very character and essence of Odessa.¹⁰⁴ Yet, this Odessa would not last. As the nineteenth century and the city's time on the periphery drew to a close, Odessa transformed into a different city altogether, one characterized not by tolerance and prosperity, but by conflict, violence, and hatred. Indeed, the dynamic life of Odessa

¹⁰³ Charles King, *The Black Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 13. This creation story of the Black Sea is known as the Black Sea deluge theory, which possesses two opposing hypotheses, gradual and oscillating, but geologic and archeological data supports the theory.

¹⁰⁴ Jarrod Tanny, *City of Rogues and Schnorrers: Russia's Jews and the Myth of Old Odessa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 21. Tanny's observations on Odessa's peripheral position inspired this paper's notion of a separate, conceptual, peripheral Odessa.

is a story still in motion, but its youth on the periphery remains as distinctive and definitive as ever; it is an Odessa that is both origin and myth.

This paper aims to examine this Odessa by charting its life from the settlement of Khandjibey up to the transformative events of 1905, exploring the pivotal figures and events which influenced its development. In doing so, this story draws on numerous authors and scholars who have evaluated Odessa through a variety of historical lenses and objectives. The work begins early on; in 1934 Vernon Puryear examined Odessa's commercial rise and its international implications in "Odessa: Its Rise and International Importance." Frederick William Skinner, in "City Planning in Russia: The Development of Odessa, 1789-1892," followed with an analysis of city planning in Odessa in 1973. Cultural and social examinations have also been conducted by Steven J. Zipperstein (1986), Roshanna Sylvester (2005), Tanya Richardson (2008), and Jarrod Tanny (2011). In 1986, Patricia Herlihy produced her seminal monograph *Odessa: A History, 1794-1914*, which remains the foremost publication on early Odessa, while Charles King followed in 2011 with his popular city-biography *Odessa: Genius and Death in a City of Dreams*. These resources and others have produced considerable insight into the life of Odessa, and this paper offers a synthesis in order to create a narrative of the city from 1794 to 1905. Thus, this is the story of the first Odessa, the peripheral city between sea and steppe.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ Vernon J. Puryear, "Odessa: Its Rise and International Importance, 1815-1850," *Pacific Historical Review* 3, no. 2 (Jun., 1934): 192-215; Frederick William Skinner, "City Planning in Russia: The Development of Odessa 1789-1892" (Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, 1973); Steven J. Zipperstein, *The Jews of Odessa: A Cultural History, 1794-1881* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986); Roshannah P. Sylvester, *Tales of Old Odessa: Crime and Civility in a City of Thieves* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2005); Tanya Richardson, *Kaleidoscopic Odessa: History and Place in Contemporary Ukraine* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008); Tanny, *City of Rogues*; Patricia Herlihy, *Odessa: A History 1794-1914* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986); Charles King, *Odessa: Genius and Death in the City of Dreams* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2011).

Conception: 1764 – 1803

Odessa was born selectively, chosen by the expanding Russian Empire in the late eighteenth century for the natural environment in which Khadjibey was situated. The Empire had been gradually acquiring lands through skirmishes with both the Ottomans and Cossacks throughout the majority of the 1700s, creating a new southern province on the steppes, deemed *Novorussiya* or New Russia. This area possessed productive hinterlands, where “seas of grass” had historically been areas of nomadic pastoralism and were now transforming through the spread of European agriculture.¹⁰⁶ While the flat and treeless landscape, coupled with its rich and fertile soils, proved the Steppes amenable to cultivation, the natural ecosystem would be prone to periodic drought.¹⁰⁷ Yet, the hinterlands of Khadjibey were located near the mouths of four rivers – the Danube, the Bug, the Dniester, and the Dnieper - which not only offered a source of water for surrounding areas, but also a vein of transport for the Empire’s goods.

However, it was the settlement’s position on the Black Sea that most attracted the Empire. Set high up on a peninsula overlooking a wide harbor on the Black Sea, Khadjibey offered a relatively mild climate which acted as a natural channel between Mediterranean and Continental weather systems. Most importantly, where most harbors in the Black Sea were shallow, variable to tides, and vulnerable to ice for most of the winter, they found the harbor at Khadjibey different. This harbor had mild tides, produced very little ice during most winter months, and was quite deep,

¹⁰⁶ Andrew C. Isenberg, “Seas of Grass: Grasslands in World Environmental History,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental History*, ed. Andrew C. Isenberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 133-154.

¹⁰⁷ David Moon, *The Plough That Broke the Steppes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1.

which meant the need to lighter goods from large ships would be greatly reduced. Approached by sea or by steppe, Khadjibey's position was advantageous.¹⁰⁸

These advantages intrigued an Italian born admiral in the Russian navy, José Domingo de Ribas. Born to Spanish and Irish parents, de Ribas had joined Catherine's advancement against the Ottomans in 1772 and quickly proved himself a loyal officer of the Empress. Having led the garrison that captured Khadjibey from the Ottomans in 1789, de Ribas saw a potential for the settlement that stayed with him until the end of the conflict in 1792. In this small dusty outcrop overlooking the Black Sea, he envisioned a city that could rival St. Petersburg and become a symbol for the Empress herself, a city that would become "the jewel of her southern possessions... a purposeful city [which] could rise like a beacon at the edge of the sea."¹⁰⁹ De Ribas convinced Catherine of this vision and on May 27, 1794 she issued an edict declaring the development of Khadjibey into a Russian commercial center – with one alteration. Catherine's new city was to be called 'Odessa' – the feminized version of Odessos, an ancient Greek settlement located further southwest on the Black Sea.¹¹⁰ And so Odessa was born.

Within a year of Catherine's edict, de Ribas' vision of an organized, planned, and populated cityscape began to emerge. As the Dutch chief architect Franz de Voland laid out the city in grids with broad streets, Tatar huts were replaced by stone houses and administrative buildings, and construction of a jetty began to protect ships coming into the harbor.¹¹¹ Greek and Orthodox churches laid foundations and a stock exchange was established as Catherine and de Ribas promoted resettlement and trade in Odessa, both domestic and foreign. Within two years, Odessa's population

¹⁰⁸ Herlihy, *Odessa*, 10-11; King, *Black Sea*, 15-17; King, *Odessa*, 50.

¹⁰⁹ King, *Odessa*, 51.

¹¹⁰ Neal Ascherson, *Black Sea* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), 74.

¹¹¹ Tanny, 25.

reached almost three thousand people - with a third being from foreign settlement, while ships coming to port increased from seven to eighty-six, and both the city's imports and exports more than doubled.¹¹² The potential and promise that de Ribas saw in the little settlement of Khadjibey was now becoming apparent in the burgeoning Odessa, yet neither he nor Catherine would live to see it fully realized. Catherine died suddenly in 1796 and de Ribas in 1801, but his vision would firmly remain the blueprint for Odessa's rise.

Inception: 1803 -1814

If Odessa was born selectively through de Ribas, it was raised assiduously by a series of chief administrators, most significantly by a French aristocrat named Armand Emmanuel Duc de Richelieu. Having escaped to Catherine's court during the French Revolution, Richelieu proved invaluable to the Empire through his political, commercial, and economic prowess. Alexander I appointed Richelieu chief administrator of Odessa in 1803, when the city's development was stagnating and in desperate need of a leader. Following de Ribas' and de Voland's vision, Richelieu served Odessa for eleven years, guiding the city during its most formative years and laying the foundations for the city's success, character, and legacy.

With almost unequivocal support from the Tsar, Richelieu began to build Odessa from mere plans and foundations to a peopled and prosperous city. His main task, as mandated when Alexander named him Governor General of New Russia in 1805, was "to increase the population by extending all encouragements and privileges to foreigners."¹¹³ Significantly, the post afforded him the power to further incentivize both foreign immigration and domestic migration to the city and its hinterland. Recognizing that trade and commerce within the port were dependent on a healthy and

¹¹² Herlihy, *Odessa*, 19-20.

¹¹³ Herlihy, *Odessa*, 24.

functional network of farmers, laborers, merchants and tradesman, Richelieu offered settlers incentives like cheap land, loans, tax exemptions, and religious tolerance to settle the region and city. Additionally, while the Tsarist government reserved and exercised its authority to move the Empire's serfs into its new areas involuntarily, the Duc believed voluntary relocation ensured more willing and effective labor. As a result, within eleven years the city's population went from seven thousand to thirty-five thousand, with internal and external immigration producing an unusually diverse population which varied in nationality, ethnicity, language, social status and religion, a population which would cultivate Odessa's very identity.¹¹⁴

Odessa's unique influx and mixture of cultures included a significant number of Jewish settlers. While the city had a Jewish community from its origin – a synagogue, cemetery, and *Kehillah* (Jewish administrative committee) were present at the time of Richelieu's arrival – it would substantially transform over the course of the nineteenth century as migration increased¹¹⁵. This migration largely came from the Pale of Settlement, a stretch of territory that included much of modern day Belarus, eastern Poland, Lithuania, Moldova, and western Ukraine. The Russian Empire largely confined its Jewish population to the Pale following the Partitions of Poland in the late eighteenth century, and migration from the Pale was generally prohibited, as were many types of occupations and commercial activity. However, Richelieu and the Tsarist government encouraged Jewish migration to New Russia and Odessa in order to settle the empty steppes and induce trade.¹¹⁶ By 1815, the Jewish population of Odessa was four thousand and climbing, while the 1830s saw an immense surge of Jewish immigration - within the next half decade it was over seventeen thousand,

¹¹⁴ Herlihy, *Odessa*, 12, 24, 37.

¹¹⁵ Zipperstein, 35.

¹¹⁶ Richardson, 30, 173-174.

almost a quarter of the total population.¹¹⁷ To Odessa, Jewish settlement became integral to its culture, commerce, and very essence. To Jews, Odessa became not only a place where they could find economic opportunity, but a city where they could live culturally, spiritually, and civically as a part of society, not separate from it.

In addition to populating the city, Richelieu began to build Odessa's physical, economic, and administrative infrastructure. In this task he is often regarded by both his contemporaries and historians, as exceptionally brilliant and level-headed, as "no detail of administration - or corner of social life - was so menial as to escape his direct attention."¹¹⁸ With an authority characterized as an "enlightened despotism," Richelieu was exceptionally diplomatic and adept at fundraising, skills which were crucial in Odessa's development.¹¹⁹ The duc solicited funds from the Tsar authority and private citizens to build roads, municipal buildings, wells, and sanitation systems. He stayed true to de Ribas' grid system and maintained wide boulevards, giving emphasis to planting trees and public spaces, encouraging botanical gardens, and installing sidewalks and streetlights. The Duc also created policies to encourage private construction, granting city land in exchange for its development, and placed special emphasis on constructing port facilities, including those for quarantine.¹²⁰ These facilities were greatly enlarged and improved so as those travelling through the Straights and subject to quarantine could do so in "reasonable comfort" overlooking the limestone cliffs of the city.¹²¹

Additionally, Richelieu paid special attention to creating mechanisms for a thriving civic and cultural life. Almost immediately upon his arrival, he ordered the construction of a theatre and opera house that would become an icon of the city. A library, a printing shop, and public schools

¹¹⁷ King, *Odessa*, 98.

¹¹⁸ Herlihy, *Odessa*, 23.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Herlihy, *Odessa*, 35-37.

¹²¹ Ibid., 37.

(*gymnasiasms*) for merchants' sons were all established within a decade as well. Richelieu also understood the importance of possessing strong and secure commercial systems to realize Odessa's trade potential. He established credit and insurance institutions, a commercial court, and agreeable tariffs while encouraging the establishment of foreign consulates. Significantly, he also petitioned the Tsar to allow Odessa free-port status, believing such a designation would lead to Odessa's commercial preeminence. Richelieu also advocated for a quarter reduction in all duties throughout Black Sea ports, wanting to not only expand free-trade throughout the region, but also reduce smuggling. For as long as duties were high, he knew, so too would be contraband – and the risk of disease.¹²²

Odessa's first great test arrived in summer of 1812 in the form of the bubonic plague, which ravaged the city for almost half a year. Upon hearing the first reports of outbreak, Richelieu immediately took action, closing all churches, courts, and commercial places and divided Odessa into five districts, each with a doctor and a monitor to report back on the rate of infection. As the death rate continued to rise sharply, Richelieu took even bolder measures, quarantining Odessa entirely – all doors and windows were to be closed, rations fumigated, and houses inspected daily - and ordering the area around the docks to be burned. These measures proved successful as Odessa entered recovery in the spring of 1813 and significantly, while over ten percent of the city's population had been lost, it had been without the ethnic scapegoating that frequently occurred elsewhere. Richelieu's measures were enforced with relative equality, ensuring that the growing culture of diversity and openness within Odessa would be able to survive even when so many of its people did not.¹²³

¹²² King, *Odessa*, 60-61; Zipperstein, 25-26.

¹²³ King, *Odessa*, 63-66; Herlihy, *Odessa*, 45-46; Zipperstein, 32.

After ensuring Odessa's survival, Richelieu retired in the fall of 1814, having raised Odessa from a small and struggling outline into a city on the cusp of greatness. With his abilities and guidance, Odessa had grown into a burgeoning port city with a diverse demographic, one which was separated more by class than by ethnicity and which maintained a level of tolerance unseen elsewhere in the Russian Empire. Physically, it now had the adornments required of a city, with buildings of stone, rows of *acacias*, street signs in both Russian and Italian – the language of commerce –and a theatre.¹²⁴ Odessa had also developed commercially, financially, and administratively, with the necessary institutions for healthy commerce and a functioning municipality having been established and supervised by Richelieu. The culture that would define the city's character and inform its identity also found its roots in the foundations Richelieu laid, through his promotion of public schools, libraries, printing press, and emphasis on international trade. Yet, even with all Richelieu had accomplished, Odessa was still growing and its best years lay ahead.

Transcendence, 1815-1871

Odessa experienced immense economic and cultural growth in the years following Richelieu's departure, a period which would come to constitute the memory of 'Old Odessa' and define its legacy. For over half a century, the city would prosper as it grew increasingly more European and cosmopolitan, enjoying fortuitous commercial success while developing an identity all its own, distinct from the Empire to which it belonged and the nations from which its peoples heralded. In so doing, it also developed a reputation for not only being a haven for intellectuals and artists, but also for swindlers and thieves. These developments constituted a remarkable transcendence for Odessa, one which was born out of the city's unique beginnings and cultivated by

¹²⁴ Herlihy, *Odessa*, 44.

its administration, economic policies, international circumstances, as well as its ever -advantageous location on the Black Sea. And so, Odessa, “cherished like a child... grew above all other cities.”¹²⁵

After Richelieu retired from Odessa, his immediate successors cultivated Odessa’s growing prominence and economic prosperity. His first successor was fellow Frenchman Alexander Langeron, whose short tenure most notably secured free-port status for the city in 1819, a designation which stimulated foreign commerce in the city for the next fifty years. However, it would be Odessa’s first Russian leader, Mikhail Vorontsov, as well as his successor, Aleksandr Stroganov, who propelled the city through its most prosperous era, raising Odessa to the pinnacle of success and solidifying it as a major Russian city. Vorontsov became Governor General of New Russia in 1823 and retained his title for over thirty years, directly presiding over Odessa for the first two decades and inducing the most substantial period of Odessa’s growth. Vorontsov was known as a skilled businessman and diplomat, one who was frequently in favor with the Tsarist regime, and with him Odessa found its place within the Empire. His tenure would usher in Odessa’s ascension to “the commercial capital of southern Russia” where it would remain until the fall of the Tsarist regime.¹²⁶

While Vorontsov advocated for liberal economic policies in Odessa, much of the city’s commercial success came from a combination of international and domestic factors. In 1829, the Treaty of Adrianople ended the Russo-Turkish War and guaranteed free passage for all commercial ships through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits.¹²⁷ Expansion of trade zones in the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov followed and the 1840s saw the repeal of the highly restrictive tariffs on grain

¹²⁵ King, *Odessa*, 95.

¹²⁶ Frederick William Skinner, “City Planning in Russia: The Development of Odessa 1789-1892” (Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, 1973), 183.

¹²⁷ Skinner, *City Planning*, 180.

imports known as the English Corn Laws.¹²⁸ New ease of travel and new markets, coupled with Odessa's free-port status, so increased and intensified commerce in Odessa that by the 1860s it was the "breadbasket" of much of the Western world.¹²⁹

As Odessa grew commercially, so did its population. At the time Vorontsov took office, 35,000 people called Odessa home and by the time he left it more than doubled, topping 100,000 by 1860.¹³⁰ These numbers, the rapid rate at which they came, and the diverse areas from which they came, built on and reinforced the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the city which Richelieu's administration had induced. Additionally, Vorontsov's tenure saw the emergence of an enormous 'urban class,' comprised of both Russians and foreigners, that included shop-owners, tradesmen, small-time manufacturers, and financiers, as well as others engaged in providing essential goods and services to the city. By 1858 this 'urban class' represented over three quarters of the population, further augmenting Odessa's cosmopolitan atmosphere and reputation, as no other city in Russia possessed a population where a "far greater proportion...[stood] on the middle rung of the social ladder."¹³¹ Significantly, this 'middle rung' included Jews, especially as the city's Jewish population experienced immense growth during the mid-nineteenth century. And perhaps no other aspect or demographic group of the city so influenced Odessa as did its Jewish citizens.

Large scale Jewish immigration to Odessa began in the 1830s and would continue for the remainder of the century, transforming the city, its character, and its culture. Odessa was home to about 4,000 Jews in 1815, but by the turn of the century this number was almost 140,000 – well over

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ King, *Odessa*, 109.

¹³⁰ Skinner, *City Planning*, 167.

¹³¹ Skinner, *City Planning*, 174.

30% of the entire city and second only to Slavs.¹³² This immigration was fueled by Odessa's growing reputation for unrestricted commerce and ambivalent ethnic attitudes, New Russia's partial exemption from anti-Semitic regulation, which Vorontsov had argued would "disrupt the business of the city," as well as Stroganov's call to end all residential and employment restrictions on Jews in 1856.¹³³ Additionally, Odessa became a haven for members of the Jewish Enlightenment (*Haskalah*), which sought the modernization of Jewish life to be more "in line with the values of reason, freedom, and progress."¹³⁴ This influx of not only Jews, but especially those of the *Haskalah*, cultivated a community of Jewish intellectuals, artists, and writers, eventually producing the likes of Zionist Vladimir Jabotinsky and fiction writer Isaac Babel. Jewish life became so ingrained in the fabric of Odessa during the mid to late 1800s that not only did Jewish schools, synagogues, medical services, and philanthropies benefit the whole of the city but Jews also held official municipal positions, as both Vorontsov and Stroganov advocated for Jewish participation in all forms of city engagement.¹³⁵ Odessa's Jews thus gave "texture to the Odessan form of modernity" and imbued the city with a Jewishness that it would never lose, even when it tried.¹³⁶

However, not all aspects of the city kept pace with the immense commercial, cultural, and demographic growth of the mid-nineteenth century. Development of industry and the city's physical infrastructure faltered, depreciating the city's ability to not only meet the basic needs of its citizenry, but those of modernization. Construction of new roads stagnated while existing ones deteriorated, installation of street lights stalled despite the advent of gas lamps, and the city's port began to show

¹³² King, *Odessa*, 102; Herlihy, *Odessa*, 251.

¹³³ Herlihy, *Odessa*, 124; Zipperstein, 165. Stroganov's written support for full Jewish emancipation was the first of its kind from a high-ranking Russian official.

¹³⁴ Zipperstein, 3; King, *Odessa*, 103.

¹³⁵ Herlihy, *Odessa*, 125; Zipperstein, 37.

¹³⁶ Slyvester, 15.

signs of ill-maintenance. Even more problematic was the fact that Odessa's sewage system continued to be simple ditches that failed to solve the city's water problem. Fresh water had to be transported into the city from miles away or tapped from deep within the ground, and even then, wells were privately held by owners that charged exorbitant fees for their use.¹³⁷ The poet Pushkin, who spent a year in the city romancing Vorontsov's wife in 1824, infamously commented that in Odessa, wine was cheaper than water.¹³⁸

Industry in the city was also slow to emerge. Odessa's scarcity of reliable water, fuel, and waste management stunted the development of factories and manufacturing, and until the late nineteenth century labor also proved scarce as the port competed heavily for unskilled free workers and other peasants were tied to land as serfs. Even after emancipation in 1861, the demand for agricultural workers kept competition and labor costs high. By 1874, Odessa had three times fewer industrial workers than St. Petersburg and four times fewer than Berlin.¹³⁹ Additionally, Odessa lacked the capital needed for industry as investors consistently chose to invest in land and real estate rather than new enterprises.¹⁴⁰ As Charles King notes, Odessa was a city of "movement" dominated by commerce and finance, and few invested the time or imagination into cultivating industrial operations.¹⁴¹ The wealth of the grain trade, and the "effective slave labor" that produced it, kept modernization of any kind – agricultural, industrial, entrepreneurial – at a minimum in Odessa until the end of the century, hampering the city's ability to meet the challenges of a changing world.¹⁴²

¹³⁷ Skinner, *City Planning*, 195-197.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 197.

¹³⁹ Herlihy, *Odessa*, 197.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 187.

¹⁴¹ King, *Odessa*, 114.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

When the Empire entered the Crimean War in 1853, it initiated a decade of change and decline for Odessa, one that altered the city's trajectory and signaled the coming of a new era. First, the onset of the war caused the Empire to suspend Odessa's profitable and much-heralded free-port status. Then, as the Black Sea became a naval battleground and the city found itself physically experiencing war for the first time, the Empire also initiated a ban on all grain exports, essentially stymying trade in the city – "transactions have been abated to such a degree as never yet has been experienced in this place" commented the U.S. Consul, John Ralli.¹⁴³ Even when the war ended in 1856, Odessa's international position never quite recovered—Britain and France now traded elsewhere for food, the American territories Kansas and Nebraska became large competitors for the bulk of the European grain trade, and the Empire indefinitely ended Odessa's free-port status in 1859.¹⁴⁴ Then, in 1861, in an effort to contend with the growing "chaos and confusion" that its own dichotomous policies regarding interior and peripheral serfdom had created, the government emancipated the Empire's serfs.¹⁴⁵ Even in Odessa, the effects were more consequential than the Tsarist authority had anticipated; there were, as Strogonav said, grave "misunderstandings" as many of the newly freed serfs believed their freedom came with property, and the ones that migrated to Odessa found they occupied the lowest rung of the socio-economic ladder – below that of even Jews.¹⁴⁶ This reality bred the resentment which would exemplify the coming era.

By the end of the 1860s, it was clear that Odessa's time on the periphery, as well as its prominence, was beginning to wane. Odessa's preeminence in the grain trade diminished with the opening of not only new markets in America, but with the railroad (1865), and the Suez Canal

¹⁴³ King, *Odessa*, 116.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 120.

¹⁴⁵ Herlihy, *Odessa*, 83.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 169.

(1869). This economic shift was also met with a new social hierarchy, one which now had free, Christian peasants resenting the higher status of Jewish merchants and tradesmen. Vorontsov and Stroganov were gone, their predecessors never able to produce the same kind of “enlightened governance...forged by the founding generation.”¹⁴⁷ A still expanding population taxed an already overwhelmed and failing public system, and the need for industrialization could no longer be ignored. The Tsarist regime which had produced Odessa now was hampering its progress, as its highly-centralized bureaucracy and inherent conservatism restricted the resources and authority of city administration to make essential municipal, physical and economic changes.¹⁴⁸ The Empire finally bestowed the city more autonomy in 1871, permitting it to make administrative and municipal reforms, like a water pipeline. However, the Empire would also abolish the office of Governor General three years later in an effort to create a new administration, one tasked less with governing than with containing and subverting political discontent. As Odessa’s time on the frontier dimmed, societal fractures began to splinter along ethnic fault lines, signaling the emergence of a new Odessa altogether, one whose social attitudes were no longer ambivalent but resentful, and whose cosmopolitan nature was no longer present but rather mythologized into the past.

Descent, 1871-1905

In late May 1871, Orthodox Easter services were interrupted by a skirmish between Jewish boys and Greek Christians. Within four days six people lay murdered, twenty-one wounded, and over a thousand Jewish homes and businesses destroyed.¹⁴⁹ It was the first major pogrom in Odessa, born out of a changing economic, social, and ideological landscape where Jewish prosperity, or even the perception of it, bred Christian hostility. While Odessa had experienced smaller pogroms in the

¹⁴⁷ King, *Odessa*, 121.

¹⁴⁸ Skinner, *City Planning*, 159.

¹⁴⁹ Zipperstein, 114.

past, this was the first time in which anti-Semitic violence was not just ignored by the government, but facilitated by it. This violence, and the state's role in it, would fester throughout the rest of the nineteenth century, exploding definitively in 1905, in what would be the largest and deadliest pogrom in Russia's history. The period between 1871 and 1905 thus constitutes the metamorphosis of the peripheral Odessa, from which emerged a city no longer defined by its place on the cultural and geographical frontier, but instead by conflict, violence, and war.

Change and conflict characterized the remainder of the nineteenth century in Odessa, in a variety of ways. Ethnic attitudes and aggressions continued to swell in the city following the 1871 pogrom, especially as the population increased dramatically - nearly tripling by 1900.¹⁵⁰ The 1870s saw increased post-emancipation immigration as peasants fled to the city, especially as the countryside experienced vast crop failures in the first half of the decade and the demand for Russian wheat weakened. The infamous May 'Temporary' Laws of 1882 also caused Jews to flee to Odessa after their expulsion from towns and villages, so much so that by the turn of the century Jews accounted for thirty five percent of Odessa's entire population.¹⁵¹ Most of these immigrants were poor and uneducated, and found Odessa possessed too few opportunities for unskilled workers, even as the city's economic composition began to shift.

Although the economic success of the first half of the nineteenth century would never quite return, Odessa's economy began to transition to a more balanced mixture of commerce and industry. After the city had finally wrought the necessary elements for industry, including the construction of the water pipeline in 1874, municipal reforms in the '70s and '80s, and construction

¹⁵⁰ Herlihy, *Odessa*, 234.

¹⁵¹ Robert Weinberg, *The Revolution of 1905 in Odessa: Blood on the Steps* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 13.

of the railroad which made the transportation of mass resources possible, factories began to appear more frequently in Odessa. Between 1883 and 1898, the number of factories increased by two hundred and fifty percent.¹⁵² Odessa's outskirts became perfect grounds for these developing industries, where there was enough space for metal processing, chemical production, machine building, sugar refining, grain elevators and other trades.¹⁵³ These enterprises employed more and more workers, particularly throughout the last decade of the century, but labor concentration remained low compared to other cities of industry. Additionally, the rate of immigration in Odessa far outpaced the rate of new industry. Yet, until the nascent twentieth century, industry would alter the essence of Odessan life. And while the commercial economy remained the largest contributor to Odessa's economy, one observer noted the city had reached a "noticeable turning point...and ceased living exclusively by the grain trade."¹⁵⁴

This turning point was evident in not only Odessa's economy, but the city's physical and cultural attributes as well. In the final two decades of the nineteenth century, Odessa experienced a speculation-fueled building boom that transformed its streets and greatly expanded its perimeter. As industry and immigration stretched neighborhoods like Peresyp and Moldavanka, the city center grew denser, adding more libraries, auditoriums, theaters, museums, and parks. By 1900, 1,000 buildings were being constructed each year, all filled with shops, restaurants, bakeries, and coffeehouses. Odessa had several theaters, a university, and over 200 public and private schools.¹⁵⁵ In 1873, the famous opera house commissioned by Richelieu suffered a disastrous fire, but within

¹⁵² Ibid., 5.

¹⁵³ Herlihy, *Odessa*, 194-197.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 7.

¹⁵⁵ Frederick Skinner, "Odessa and the Problem of Urban Modernization" in *The City in Late Imperial Russia*, ed. Michael F. Hamm (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 221.

fifteen years a new opera house stood in its place. Designed by Viennese architects in Italian Renaissance style it was, and remains, “exceedingly grand.”¹⁵⁶ In the last days of the nineteenth century, Odessa’s atmosphere continued to attract vacationers, intellectuals, and lovers of drama and literature. Odessa was, as Robert Weinberg says, a “cultural oasis.”¹⁵⁷ Yet by 1905 the St. Petersburg journalist Aleskei Svirskii would assert the opposite, writing “Odessa is not a paradise... [and] the army of hungry is growing and spreading.”¹⁵⁸

Like elsewhere in Russia, tensions were boiling just under the surface in Odessa. Rising Russian nationalism and political radicalization were spreading throughout the Empire and Odessa became a “natural meeting place for radicals of varying persuasions.”¹⁵⁹ The regime’s growing suspicion and fear of socialist-revolutionaries caused the state to increase its policing authority in the city, in both severity and size. Odessa’s first political execution— as a result of belonging to a socialist organization – occurred in 1878, and the city experienced more hangings in the following decades than any other city in the Empire.¹⁶⁰ The state also began to take an increasingly facilitative role in anti-Semitic behavior and crime, in large part to divert anger of the discontented away from the state. With economic and political tensions rising in the city, it was an effective ploy. Many already blamed Jews for their misfortunes and believed that Jewish competition and even exploitation were responsible for their difficulties. The relative prominence and number of Jews in Odessa made them ready scapegoats for non-Jews, poor and wealthy alike, who saw them as possessing an “inordinate

¹⁵⁶ Patricia Herlihy, “Commerce and Architecture in Odessa in Late Imperial Russia,” in *Commerce in Russian Urban Culture, 1861-1914*, eds. William Craft Brumfield, Boris V. Anan’ich, and Yuri A. Petrov (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 185.

¹⁵⁷ Weinberg, *Revolution*, 14.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ King, *Odessa*, 122.

¹⁶⁰ King, *Odessa*, 122.

amount of wealth, power, and influence,” and viewed the growth of the Jewish population as “indication of the Jewish ‘threat.’”¹⁶¹ When these tensions erupted into pogroms, as they did in 1871 and again in 1881 after the assassination of Alexander II, authorities not only ignored the violence, but often encouraged and participated in it, intervening only when the violence threatened the “general order.”¹⁶² For Odessa’s Jews, this was a frightening break from the past, where authorities had once “put down riots with great resolve.”¹⁶³ Perhaps the most frightening and revealing change was the response of Odessa’s intelligentsia: whereas non-Jewish intellectuals had previously served as “barometers of the country’s best instincts,” Jews now found them apathetic at best, for “even as the pogrom was raging, [they] openly maintained that Jews themselves were to blame.”¹⁶⁴

By Odessa’s centennial, the city’s promise of a cosmopolitan, dynamic society began to yield to the threat of something much darker, and the following decade would see this threat transform Odessa entirely. “The song of Odessa has been sung,” said an Odessan engineer at the turn of the century, “it will [now] fall into decline and face a slow death.”¹⁶⁵ Indeed, by 1900 Odessa was no longer Southern Russia’s favored port, a central railroad connection remained non-existent, and economic recession coalesced with the ever-growing migrant class to produce a “permanent core of impoverished and unemployed workers.”¹⁶⁶ The outbreak of war with Japan in 1904 further worsened conditions in Odessa, once the largest grain supplier to the Pacific, which now saw its exports cut in half.¹⁶⁷ The workless “permanent core” grew as commerce and shipping drastically

¹⁶¹ Robert Weinberg, “The Pogrom of 1905 in Odessa: A Case Study” in *Pogroms: Anti-Jewish Violence in Modern Russian History*, eds. John D. Klier and Shlomo Lambroza (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 252.

¹⁶² King, *Odessa*, 155.

¹⁶³ Zipperstein, 119.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 124.

¹⁶⁵ Herlihy, *Odessa*, 202, 225.

¹⁶⁶ Weinberg, *Revolution*, 20.

¹⁶⁷ King, *Odessa*, 160.

declined, while soldiers bound for Japan waited haplessly in the streets. On the eve of 1905, desperation and discontent permeated the city, further fueling grievous anti-Semitism, and creating a mixture that, when given the right catalyst, would erupt so violently it would irrevocably and fundamentally alter Odessa itself.

For Russia, the fraught political tensions and transformations of 1905 signaled the first march toward the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917; for Odessa, they were cataclysmic. As the costly war with Japan toiled on through spring, worker demonstrations throughout the Empire intensified. When Violent January demonstrations in St. Petersburg further exacerbated political unease in Odessa, and summer brought a contentious general strike, the arrival of the mutinous battleship *Potemkin*, and a resulting mass riot which resulted in six hundred dead.¹⁶⁸ While this riot did not devolve into a pogrom, attempts to blame the chaos and destruction on Odessa's Jews began almost immediately and intensified as mass demonstrations continued. The tumultuous political landscape of Russia in autumn of 1905 only served to escalate this ethnic scapegoating further, and the Tsar's issuing of the October Manifesto catalyzed Odessa into a darker, different city.

The deadliest pogrom in Russia's history began as a celebration. On October 18th, 1905, as news of the October Manifesto and its promise of civil and political liberties spread, thousands began to rejoice in Odessa's streets. The celebration began peacefully, but as the day wore on tensions mounted between the crowd and supporters of the autocracy. Soon, pro-government and extreme right-winged forces organized their own counter-demonstrations throughout the city. Then, on October 19th, during a counter-march through central Odessa, shots rang out through the streets and a young boy lay dead. No one could say for certain where the shots had originated, but

¹⁶⁸ Herlihy, *Odessa*, 298.

combined with the city's long-festering anti-Semitism and its zeal to see Odessa's Jews as "the source of Russia's current problems," it did not matter.¹⁶⁹ With indescribable viciousness, attacks on Jews began, and Russia's deadliest and most destructive pogrom was in full swing. As Weinberg writes:

The list of atrocities perpetuated against the Jews is too long to recount here, but suffice it to say that pogromists brutally and indiscriminately beat, mutilated, and murdered defenseless Jewish men, women, and children. They hurled Jews out of windows, raped and cut open the stomachs of pregnant women, and slaughtered infants in front of their parents.¹⁷⁰

The rabid fervor and brutality of the pogromists lasted for three days. Authorities, rather than try to quell the violence, often encouraged and engaged in it. Few of those not participating in the slaughter defended their Jewish neighbors. When it was finally over, hundreds of Odessan Jews lay murdered, thousands injured and even more Jewish homes and business were destroyed or damaged. Estimates varied greatly based on who was doing the estimating, but police reported 400 Jewish dead while the Jewish newspaper *Voskhod* reported 2,500.¹⁷¹ News of the pogrom sent shockwaves through the rest of Russia as well as the world. The scale, relentlessness, and intensity of the pogrom's cruelty was unlike anything Odessa had ever experienced – it was an "unprecedented hurricane of hatred."¹⁷² The city that emerged from this catastrophic violence was not the same; like so many of its Jewish citizens, Odessa lay victim to its own unchecked bigotry, unrestrained hatred, and haunting apathy.

The Odessa that was - the Odessa defined by its place on the periphery, the Odessa defined by its inclusivity - was gone. The violence of the 1905 pogrom so fundamentally altered the city's

¹⁶⁹ Robert Weinberg, "Workers, Pogroms, and the 1905 Revolution in Odessa," *The Russian Review* 46, no. 1 (January 1987): 62.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 63-64.

¹⁷¹ Weinberg, *Revolution*, 164.

¹⁷² Herlihy, *Odessa*, 307.

characterization that this Odessa ceased to exist. The Odessa that remained was still on the Black Sea, but no longer on the geographical, cultural, or even political periphery. The city's once legendary cosmopolitan atmosphere dissolved, leaving a hostile, nationalist entropy in its place. And the most defining feature at Odessa's heart – its Jewish citizenry – found that the city “was not, as it had been, a comfortable home.”¹⁷³ Within two months of the pogrom, approximately 50,000 Jews left Odessa, a trend that would continue as nationalism and anti-Semitism became increasingly virulent throughout Russia and Europe.¹⁷⁴ The events of 1905 so transformed the city that it now appeared “more dead than alive” according to the American consul.¹⁷⁵ Indeed, the 1905 pogrom was “a nightmarish circus that upended all the city had built” Charles King writes, “Odessa's civilized core seemed to have withered and blown out to sea.”¹⁷⁶

After 1905, Odessa was no longer the city of de Ribas vision, or Richelieu's guidance or Vorontsov's success; it was a city where the violence of the 1905 pogrom defined its nature and its future. World War I, revolution, civil war, and the establishment of the Soviet Union all occurred within two decades. Odessa then experienced, and participated in, the horrific events of World War II and the Holocaust; occupied by Axis-allied Romania, Odessa watched the remainder of its Jews emptied from the ghetto in 1942 with “a steely willingness to disregard what was happening before [their] very eyes.”¹⁷⁷ The breakup of the Soviet Union and Ukraine's independence in 1991 created Odessa anew yet again, but conflict and violence still define the city on the Black Sea. Like so many areas today, Odessa struggles to rectify the truth of its multicultural origins with a desire for a

¹⁷³ Ibid., 308.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 307.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 308.

¹⁷⁶ King, *Odessa*, 162.

¹⁷⁷ King, *Odessa*, 248.

comfortable history and a single, homogenous identity. It is a city where language, nation of origin, and ethnicity are still used to assign blame for misfortune and make the ‘other’ the enemy. In the violence of 1905, the Odessa that was became a memory – and the peripheral Odessa, the city of “vital movement, surrounded by inert steppe and empty sea...[where] life was lived intensively” a myth.¹⁷⁸ Yet, this creation story was once real; it remains distinctively and eternally on the periphery.

“How is it possible to leave Odessa, a land where milk and honey flow, where trade flourishes, where the rule is mild, where there [is] the fullest tranquility and freedom...?”¹⁷⁹

- *Greek Odessan, 1826*

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¹⁷⁸ Herlihy, *Odessa*, 10.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 126.

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