

Otis L. Graham, Jr. is professor of history at the University of California - Santa Barbara, and editor of *The Public Historian*. He has just revised his textbook on *American History* to include, for the first time in such a text, a strong emphasis on the population, resources and environmental components of what ends up as history.

# The Role of Population and the Environment in World History

A Book Review by Otis L. Graham, Jr.

## A GREEN HISTORY OF THE WORLD

By Clive Ponting  
New York: Viking/Pelican, 1993  
448 pp. Paperback, \$12.00

There aren't many world histories, since the massive erudition required to produce them is increasingly beyond historians' grasp. But most of those we have are chronicles of the rise and fall of civilizations, usually with ample attention to monarchs, dynasties, armies, and the other familiar themes of political history. Fernand Braudel is a large figure because he wrote trans-national histories with a focus on economics, climate, disease and demography — history, that is, with strong environmental awareness. Clive Ponting offers, in *A Green History of the World*, an historical tour of humanity's abuse of the environment as human numbers grew beyond carrying capacity from Mesopotamia to the Yucatan Peninsula to Easter Island.

Readers should not expect a series of case studies of high civilizations brought low by their bad environmental habits. Ponting begins by linking the end of Easter Island civilization to overpopulation and environmental abuse, and there are other such stories. But this is no systematic tour of civilizations weakened by their environmental blindness (a book we very much need). It is instead a 400-page sketch of the engagement of humans with their environment over two million years, bringing more depth to our perception of contemporary issues.

*Homo erectus* spread outside Africa 1.5 million years ago, *Homo sapiens* settled most of the globe by 10,000 years ago, and then came the "first transition" from hunter-gathering to agriculture, animal husbandry, and stupendous increases in population growth. Ponting ranges from China to Mesopotamia to Greece as he tells a global story of human population increase, deforestation, famine. Then comes the era of fossil fuels — our own phase of history. Humans everywhere must face the realities of global warming and ozone depletion as rampant human population growth continues to burden the environment.

This is an account of global crisis, and it is grim reading. Governmental and private efforts to intervene

to produce different outcomes are given no space. Nor are thoughts about remedies: "[t]his book," which is "a grim warning to the world," "does not attempt to propose solutions." Ponting gives us 400 pages of societal self-destruction, and no advice on what to do about it. Perhaps his tapestry overwhelmed whatever remedial impulses he might have felt. The book situates us at the very micro-second end of a long evolutionary process. We have "cultural lag," still desiring growth without understanding that we have in this century entered the most stupendous disconnect from our past. Ponting's most difficult assignment was to convey this sense of the irrelevance of our working assumptions. It is a worthy attempt.

But how can one so skillfully frame the problem and abdicate the making of solutions? Ponting tells a story, principally, of repetitive overpopulation. How do we find remedies? The author is intellectually adventurous, but a moral coward. These are strong words, but those who describe crises without proposing remedies are hiding (usually) in academic neutrality. I hope that these blunt words will galvanize him and others toward an engagement more forthright than we find in *A Green History of the World*. [Ed. Note: see the concluding paragraph of Ira Mehlman's review on page 293.] ■