

Reader's Guide

for the
Summer Reading Requirement for 2010-2011 American History Students
(American Civilization, United States History, Advanced Placement United States History)

Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists and the Ecology of New England
by William Cronon

American history teachers are asking all of their incoming students to read William Cronon's classic work *Changes in the Land* this summer. The book is widely recognized by scholars as one of the best monographs on early United States History written in the past fifty years. So that you are able to appreciate what the book has to offer as an introduction to American history, we have developed this reader's guide. In it we ask you to complete certain kinds of notes and write out some thoughts on a few questions. **In the first week of your American history course in the fall your teacher will either collect these notes and three reflections or give a short test for which you will be able to consult your notes.** Before you start reading *Changes in the Land*, read through this entire reader's guide so that you know all that you will be doing. Then follow along step by step.

Step 1: Preview

Look through the entire book – if only to see how long it is, but hopefully to see if you can figure out at a glance what it's all about. Can you tell right away why the history department might want you to read this book at this time?

Read the preface and see if you can find where Cronon states the main point of the book, where he describes how it's structured, and where he outlines the main points of his argument. Can you think of a question or questions that he seems to be answering with this book? Can you tell from glancing at his "thank-yous" at the end of the preface what kinds of sources he has used as his research base? You don't need to write out the answer to these questions here, but think about them.

Look at the table of contents and the quotations on the following page. How do these reinforce what you have decided is his main idea and the way he plans to develop that main idea.

Now start your notes: jot down the book's title and author and date of publication (the date is found on the back of the title page). Then make a list of three or four big questions that you think the book will answer. Now you are ready to begin reading.

Step 2: Active Reading

Read each chapter actively, looking carefully for the points that the author promised in his preface to take up. If you have your own copy, you can underline important sections and make margin notes (key words, for example, that reinforce the main idea of a paragraph). If you are borrowing a copy, you can make notes as you go along. As you read or after you have completed

underlining each chapter, try to limit the notes you take on each chapter to about half of one side of a page. As you read you may find it helpful to consult the endnotes. This section of the book will identify the sources Cronon used to draw evidence from and to arrive at his conclusions.

You can see by now that the book is divided into three parts. Part I is one chapter, Part II has six, and Part III is just one. Here are some particular comments on each part of the book:

Part I: A bit of warning: the first chapter is the most difficult to understand. First, he begins at the end of his time period. Why does he do that? Again, and in more detail, he gives us his thesis and his main arguments. But from page 8 to 14 his discussion becomes theoretical. It is not terribly important that you understand all that he is writing here – he comes back to describing the story that he will tell on the last few pages. On pages 8 to 14 he is trying to fit his book into what has already been written by other historians, and probably he is addressing other historians more than he is addressing the intelligent reader (Right now you are the latter; in several months you will be the former). If you are following him, see if you can describe “the state of scholarship” before Cronon made his contribution with this book.

Part II: This is the main story. In fact, some of you have already read one of these chapters at Loomis Chaffee in “World History” or “The World After Columbus.” If you feel as though you are getting lost, you can refer back to pages 14 and 15 where Cronon writes his summary, but generally it’s easy to follow and there’s a lot to learn here.

Part III: Cronon gets theoretical again in this last chapter, but he has important things to say to the intelligent reader as well as to other historians. Not only does he review his argument and thesis, but he also gives us a lot to think about in terms of our own world and the impact of long-established habits on it.

Step 3: Reflecting

After you finish each of the three parts of the book, you should write a reflection of a page or two in length for a total of three reflections. A reflection, by definition, is “free writing.” You do not need to make a formal essay out of it, just think and write what you think. In fact, we are not suggesting here any particular questions to write about. You should instead focus on what YOU are getting out of the book. For example, what surprised you as you read? What did you learn, or have to unlearn? What kinds of questions have come to your mind? What confuses you? What kinds of relationships do you see between what Cronon has to say and other issues not discussed in the book? These are just some possible ways to reflect on a reading. It’s really up to you. Think of this activity as preparation for the conversations on the book that will take place in the fall in your history course. What would you like to say about the book? Are you left with any unanswered questions?