

Love Letter to ASEH

(Sleepless in Chicago)

In 1997, I flew to Baltimore to attend the meeting of the ASEH. I had submitted a paper about our research on a small village in Austria, which had been accepted. The entire conference book exhibit fit into the upper balcony of the hotel ballroom and Susan Flader gave the presidential address. Jackie Corn, with her ever-so-proper navy blue skirt and perennial blonde hair hosted the meeting. My panel had broken apart and I read on the message board that I should consult with a “Doug Weiner”, in whose session my paper had been squeezed. I was unhappy but I eventually found the man, the room, the overhead projector and, talking after someone who had delivered what he had called a “Formula 1” version of his paper, I stood up to give what I called the “Bonneville Flats Version” of mine. I commented on the tables my predecessor had shown in fine print, calling them an eye test apologetically, by showing a complicated model of what was going on in the village of Theyern as the “more sophisticated version of an eye test”. People in the audience actually laughed. Afterwards, a tall guy came up to me and said something that I took to be praise, but I was much too excited about it all to understand much. This someone would much later become president of the organisation, a good friend, among many other joint interests the co-editor of a book on a subject dear to my heart, soil.

But back to 1997. For three days I heard papers on all kinds of interesting subjects. I remember a paper on ‘Malthusians versus Cornucopians’ which took all my Latin to figure out what that could be about (and, along the way, I learned how grossly distorted the pronunciation of Latin by native English speakers sounds to someone who learned it from a German language background).

I spoke to Susan Flader after her presidential address (that I found incredibly impressive) calling her “Susan” (hey, 20 years ago I was a grad student and this was totally inappropriate), but good-natured and diversity-driven as the crowd was, not only she, but also Don Hughes, with whom I went out for cheap spring rolls one evening, not realizing that he probably did not consider this a Dinner as he would have liked to have, and many others were interested in what I was doing and put up with my apparent lack of manners.

Many years later, I once spoke to Jackie Corn who, upon noticing a dearth of giveaways at one of the conferences, said to me ‘Bah, they all thought I could not raise the money for the conference, but, of course, I could and we even had printed conference bags.’ I miss dapper East-Coast-Jackie as much as I miss John Opie, whom I got to know better on a field trip some years later.

In Baltimore, I went to the American Museum for Visionary Arts with Mart Stewart (another old friend by now), and when I boarded the plane back to Europe I had not only seen every single book on display, talked to countless important people without ever realizing that they were, I also felt that these three days had been the best days of my professional life so far. For three days, no-one had asked me if environmental history was a legitimate subject to pursue, had confounded accepting that there was something else than humans that mattered with environmental determinism or simply, was not interested in fields, trees, pollution and garbage histories. I sat on the plane for excruciatingly long hours, but it did not matter. I had found my tribe and I was going to come back to their gatherings.

This meeting changed my life profoundly. When I came back, I wanted to enable others in Europe, struggling like me with the inexistence of Environmental History as a discernible scholarly matter, to have the same epiphany. So I became engaged into efforts to create ESEH, and later on, ICEHO, the international consortium of environmental history organizations. And members of the tribe flocked to the conferences on the other side of the water.

I befriended Doug Weiner, who once introduced himself at a gathering of ASEH members interested in international subjects as “born and raised in Brooklyn, but teaching in the United States”, (a joke that took a while to sink in), I met and fell for Richard Tucker’s never-ending enthusiasm for unequal exchange, over drinks and during field trips I also became friends with Pam Hughes, Julie Billingsley, and Caroline Melosi. There are too many of you who became such an important part of my life to name you all and that hurts. St. Patrick’s Day With Graeme is unforgettable, and neither Marty Melosi, the first one I heard talking about the necessity of environmental histories of war at an ASEH conference, nor Ravi Rajan, who knows how to go to bed real late after discussions that last almost as long as the Mahābhārata nor Steve Anderson, who talked me into joint membership with FHS elegantly, nor the one and only Lisa Mighetto, who seemed to never lose her calm in the eye of the hurricane called ‘conference’ can go unmentioned. I must also mention Melissa, one of you who also became a room-mate, and pit-bull rescuing Nancy, as well as bird-Nancy, and Kate and Cathy and Cheryl and Mary ... who helped midwife WHEN, a particularly good idea, if I may say so.

A lot of spin-off was created over the years, as many of you asked me to come and give talks at your home institutions. Don Worster invited me to Lawrence, Kansas, and I met the family Iguano at the house of Mark Stoll in Lubbock. I was invited to give a paper for which I had to fly to Sioux Falls, South Dakota and I let Georgetown scholars taste soils as the Romans had done. You enriched my world forever.

At a breakfast in Houston, I persuaded Steve Anderson and Carolyn Merchant to hold a World Congress for Environmental History, which Poul Holm eventually would pull off so well at Copenhagen. By then, the tribal elders had elected me to the board of the journal and the executive board of ASEH.

Sometime during these years, I must have become ESEH president myself. The 2001 ESEH conference in St. Andrews, thanks foremost to Fiona Watson, was a huge success. The last morning in the St. Andrews dormitory cafeteria, when all people, instead of saying Good-Bye, hugged and said, “See you in Prague”, was a morning I shall never want to forget. ESEH would survive its toddler years. The rest, as they say, is history.

ASEH, without you, and the fine people you are made of, so much in this world that matters deeply to me would not exist. So, upon your 40th anniversary, proudly sharing half of your life with you, let me tell you that I love you.

Many Happy Returns,

Verena