

✘ That was the phrase used in 1975 by OPEC co-founder and Venezuelan Oil Minister [Juan Perez Alfonso](#) to describe crude oil: Perez predicted that it would bring wealth, but also ruin. Fortunately for the rest of us, the Organization of American Historians has devoted the most recent issue of the *Journal of American History* to pursue its scatological interests. The result is [a terrific symposium](#), “Oil in American History,” that anyone interested in the environment should check out. (Many thanks to OAH for making the whole issue free on-line).

Environmental history is a relatively new subdiscipline. My first encounter with it was William Cronon’s now-classic [Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England](#) (1983), which I read in college. It’s a terrific book, but for undergraduates, it wasn’t what we expected: “I’ve just read a 200-page book about grass,” commented a classmate. No matter: it was worth it. And since the 1980’s, the field has really burgeoned, as evidenced by [the OAH symposium](#):

This special issue of the *Journal of American History*, “Oil in American History,” addresses one of the most central and controversial topics of contemporary political and social debates: the reliance of the United States and its citizens on petroleum and its by-products. For decades, American society has run on oil. Yet despite its nearly pervasive role in our daily lives, few Americans have ever directly viewed the oil that travels from the well to their cars, and most consumers have had only a vague sense of their dependence on a multitude of synthetic materials derived from oil. Similarly, oil is largely invisible in many narratives of twentieth-century U.S. history. Prompted by a growing awareness of oil’s centrality to American life following a dramatic rise in crude prices, the spectacular drilling disaster in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010, and concern about climate change driven by the use of fossil fuels, this special issue assembles a variety of approaches to writing oil into U.S. history.

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