



2018 Dr A.H. Heineken Prize for History, awarded to John McNeill

Presentation speech by Josine Blok, chair of jury of the 2018 Dr A.H. Heineken Prize for History

Ladies and gentlemen, one of the most important tasks of historians is telling stories. But human history spans billions of people, and thousands of years, cultures, languages, religions and wars. That makes it a pretty complicated picture to sketch.

Historians, therefore, often focus on just a few dots in that massive cloud of complexity. We dig for new artefacts; we comb through books, archives or boxes; or we listen to people's oral accounts.

Then we connect the dots and construct story lines that, taken together, help us make sense of the world.

This year's laureate, ladies and gentlemen, is a story-teller as well. His riveting tales, however, do not zoom in on details. On the contrary, he takes a giant step back, because sometimes that is what it takes to really see the bigger story.

John McNeill, ladies and gentlemen, has been writing big stories for decades. In the year 2000, he wrote a book called *Something New Under the Sun: An Environmental History of the 20th-Century World*. That was, and still is, a pretty bold title.

In this book, McNeill followed a broader trend of studying history on a global scale. He also looked beyond whatever happened to humans: his story included the fate of our planet as well.

He showed how economic, demographic, social, technological and agricultural changes affected natural environments around the world. And he showed that the reverse was true as well: The natural world had tremendous impacts on the lives of people and their institutions.

McNeill made the case that in the 20th century, people and planet transformed each other more extensively and more rapidly than ever before. Biodiversity was lost, soils have eroded, climates began to heat up and sea levels started rising.

You just heard him explain how he thinks humans may have ended the Holocene, a relatively steady geological era, and started a more unstable one, the Anthropocene.

The jury had many reasons, ladies and gentlemen, to find that John McNeill's work really stands out. One is the apparent ease with which he uses an unmatched variety of scientific disciplines to support his historical stories. Those include archaeology and geosciences as well as various natural, medical, technical, and agricultural sciences.

His exceptional breadth also allows him to use sources that span multiple continents, languages, cultures and centuries.

His prose is clear, precise, lively and sprinkled with humour, which helps him grab the attention not just of fellow historians but of many lay people as well.

No one has contributed more to the creation and strengthening of Global Environmental History as one, unifying historical discipline. And never before has it been more important to better understand how people and planet are sharing one common history.

So please join me, ladies and gentlemen, in honouring John McNeill, winner of the 2018 Heineken Prize for History!