

Carolyn Merchant, *The Anthropocene and the Humanities: From Climate Change to a New Age of Sustainability* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020), April 21, \$26.

Now and then a book appears that helps transform public opinion about crucial needed changes. Thus Charles Dickens continues to remind readers of the horrors of industrialism and the urgent need to create a more humane society. Annie Dillard tells of the change made by trains from a peaceful past to a screeching future. Now Carolyn Merchant, who in her landmark book *The Death of Nature* (3e, 2020), explored the connections between early industrialization, the Scientific Revolution, and the part played by women, hammers home the role that humanists can play in saving us from the disasters of climate change. After reading her new book, humanists and others will have a deeper understanding of why we are at a major turning point in earth's history.

Other humanists—historians, artists, writers, poets, philosophers, and ethicists—have all described the urgent need for change. Merchant's stellar contribution in *The Anthropocene and the Humanities* is to bring their reactions together to illustrate common themes. After reading her account, any humanist will find her critique incisive, informative, and above all an eloquent plea for action.

In setting the stage for the Anthropocene, Merchant takes us through various stages of geologic and human history and urges that we must move rapidly into a new Age of Sustainability. The Anthropocene, from the Greek word for humankind, is the period in which humans over the past 250 years have been changing the climate of the earth by burning fossil fuels. The resulting "greenhouse gases" (especially carbon dioxide, methane, and ozone) have altered the earth's atmosphere and hence the ecology of the oceans and land.

Why should humanists care and how can we help to convince politicians and the public worldwide to take action? Merchant examines the reactions and responses of novelists, poets, and artists to the black smoke, denuded hillsides, and polluted cities created by the burning of coal, oil, and natural gas. She looks at ways that humanists can help move us toward a sustainable future.

Her examples include Dickens who complained about the soot and smoke blanketing Coketown, Thoreau of the whistle of the train that disturbed the tranquility of Walden Pond, and Anne Waldman of climate grief and the "Anthropocene Blues," Winona LaDuke says that it is solar and wind, not pipelines and fossil fuels, that will promote earth justice. And Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim propose that established religions and indigenous peoples can come together to promote environmental ethics and awaken people to ways of preserving "God's earth."

The book's cover image, painted by artist John Kane in 1931 of "The Monongahela River Valley, Pennsylvania" dramatically illustrates the effects of burning coal on the landscape. A multitude of steamboats, steam trains, and factories spew smoke into the atmosphere, changing the quality of life for all earth's inhabitants. Can we reduce these effects by moving out of the Age of the Anthropocene and into a new Age of Sustainability? Many

scientists argue that we must do so by 2021 or sooner if life on earth *as we know it today* is to survive.

Merchant shows that we must move rapidly into a new Age of Sustainability based on solar, wind, tidal, and other forms of renewable energy, organic agriculture, and biodegradable materials. We must adopt an ethic of partnership with each other and the earth, in which we take from the earth only what we need and give back to it whatever will help to restore and sustain it for future generations.

She concludes with her mantra for the future: Solar panels on every roof, bicycles in every garage, and vegetables in every backyard!

Carolyn Merchant is Professor *emerita* at the University of California, Berkeley. She is the author of *Spare the Birds!: George Bird Grinnell and the First Audubon Society* (Yale, 2016) and *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*, 3rd edition; fortieth anniversary edition (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1980, 1990, 2020), among other books.