

7-30-2012

Interview with Chris Wells, Professor of Environmental Studies

Chris Wells

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/envi_oralhist

Recommended Citation

Wells, Chris, "Interview with Chris Wells, Professor of Environmental Studies" (2012). *Environmental Studies Department Oral Histories*. Paper 1.
http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/envi_oralhist/1

This Oral History is brought to you for free and open access by the Environmental Studies Department at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Environmental Studies Department Oral Histories by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact scholarpub@macalester.edu.



MACALESTER COLLEGE
Macalester College Archives, DeWitt Wallace Library
Oral History Project

Interview with: **Chris Wells**
Associate Professor of Environmental Studies, 2005-present

Date: **Monday, July 30th, 2012**

Place: Macalester College DeWitt Wallace Library, Harmon Room
Interviewer: Alana Horton, Class of 2014

Interview run time: 1:45:56 minutes

Accession: 2015-03-20-01

Agreement: Signed, on file, no restrictions

Subjects

0:00	Brief introduction
0:36	Educational background and prior work
3:32	Role within Macalester departments
	Brief history and description of Environmental Studies Department at Mac
7:37	Coming to Mac
10:30	Experience with Mac interview process
12:55	Description of Mac's physical and social environment
19:01	Impressions of being a new faculty member at Mac
	Early interactions with colleagues
28:02	Changes in ES and History departments since arrival
	Brief discussion of departments
30:47	First impressions of political and cultural atmosphere at Mac
	Faculty involvement in community
38:18	Experience with tenure process
40:47	Description of book in press
41:50	Previous teaching experience and its influences on current work
50:29	Brief description of areas of work
	Books in progress
1:04:55	Courses taught

1:11:19	Comparing Mac's ES program to that at other institutions
1:15:02	Involvement with and history of Clean Energy Revolving Fund
1:21:15	Involvement with and history of EcoHouse
1:30:39	Discussion of Mac's environmental consciousness
	Goals for improvement of Mac's environmental impact
1:34:57	Goals for future of ES department
1:37:49	Favorite aspects of being Mac faculty member
	Mac's strengths and weaknesses
1:41:12	Most memorable moments at Mac
1:42:35	Impressions of post-tenure life
	Plans for upcoming sabbatical

Interview with Chris Wells

Alana Horton, Interviewer

**July 30, 2012
Macalester College
DeWitt Wallace Library
Harmon Room**

AH: My name is Alana Horton, member of the Macalester class of 2014, conducting interviews for the Macalester Oral History Project. Today is Monday, July 30, 2012, and I'm interviewing Chris Wells, Professor of Environmental Studies, in the DeWitt room—sorry, the Harmon Room of the DeWitt Wallace Library. Thank you so much for being here—

CW: Yeah, absolutely.

AH: —and if you could start off by stating your full name, your hometown, and the year you came to Macalester.

CW: My name is Christopher Wright Wells. I was born and grew up in Atlanta, Georgia. And I arrived at Macalester in 2005.

[00:36]

AH: Great. And what's your educational background, and what kind of work had you been doing prior to coming to Macalester?

CW: Well I went through the Atlanta public school system, so the first twelve years of my education were there. Then I went to Williams College in Western Mass [Massachusetts], which is a very similar sort of place to Macalester. Then I spent—I finished my Ph.D. at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, in 2004. And then I had a one-year visiting appointment at Davidson College, another, again, very similar sort of place, only both of them are pretty rural. And then got to Macalester in 2005.

[01:25]

AH: Great. And what did you study undergrad and graduate?

CW: Undergrad, I was a double major in history and English. And decided to go to graduate school in history after spending a little bit of time as a high school teacher, teaching history. And, originally, I thought that I would focus on intellectual and cultural history. And so I got to Madison, I was going to work with Paul Boyer, who's a big name in that field. But as I was sort of casting around for topics and thinking about what I wanted to do, one of the things that kind of captured my imagination was something that's fairly familiar for Macalester students coming back from studying abroad. I was thinking about the radically different ways that people get around and interact with the places that they live, compared to the United States. And so I decided to take a course on environmental history as part of my preparation to do that work. Initially, I suspected that most of the differences were cultural, hence the topic. But increasingly, I became convinced that the ways we think about nature, and landscape, and the physical world that we inhabit, had better answers to the questions I was answering than just cultural ones. Um, and so I migrated into the field of environmental history kind of sideways. And Madison turns

out to be just an amazing place to do that. Bill Cronon, who's one of the, the founders of the field, is there. And after taking his seminar, I was increasingly convinced that there was something there I needed to be paying attention to. So that's kind of how I came to the topic first, and then to the approach next.

[03:32]

AH: Absolutely. So, you—what led you to apply for a job in environmental studies at Macalester? It seems like you're sort of split between—where does environmental history fit into, sort of, environmental studies—

CW: How does that work?

AH: — or history? Yeah, exactly.

CW: Well, the position—I don't know if people know this or not anymore, um, there's a sort of short institutional memory for these things—but I was hired as a historian—

AH: Oh.

[04:03]

CW: —into the Environmental Studies Department. So the department was undergoing, well, it was becoming a department. It had been a program that offered a major for years and years and years and years. It was founded, I think, in 1973, so one of the first environmental studies

programs in the country. But Macalester was going through a transition in 2004, 2005, to a new set of rules about the terms on which majors are offered at Macalester. Basically, there were a lot of little programs that spread resources really thin, and there was worry that students weren't getting people's full commitment and support in each of the things that they were doing. So, a new set of guidelines got issued and approved at the college level that basically said, "If you're going to offer a major, you have to be a department. And in order to be a department, you have to have at least three core full-time, tenure-track or tenured members. Unless you're interdisciplinary. In which case, you can get by with two." And the expectation there is that you've got so many other people contributing courses and support that two is enough to do an interdisciplinary major. Environmental Studies is interdisciplinary. So, up until that point, there had been one full-time position in environmental studies. And so, in 2004, two lines were approved for the department. One to fill a line that was being vacated, and the other, a completely new one. So, one of those new lines was for a political scientist. That job is now Roopali's, Roopali Phadke, my colleague in ES [Environmental Studies]. And she was hired specifically as a social scientist, doing environmental studies. I was hired into the other line, um, which was specifically for an environmental historian to represent, basically, the environmental humanities. And most of the courses that were being contributed at that point were coming from the sciences. So Mark Davis, Dan Hornbach, there's a pretty strong set of science courses, already, that are cross-listed. And so the thought was that [it's] better to expand in directions where we're a little bit weaker, and maintain the strength that we already have. A little bit farther down the line, we were able to add a full-time scientist. It's our climate scientist, Louisa Bradtmiller. She does paleoclimatology. So we are now three and a half people, plus a handful of other, single-course or, in some cases, more than that, but on a part-time basis. And Dan

Hornbach, in biology, formally split his appointment so he's half biology and half environmental studies. And since we were both junior, he agreed to be the chair, to kind of shepherd us through the tenure and promotion process.

[07:37]

AH: Great. So, how did you first hear about the job appointment at Macalester?

CW: Well, when, when you're a historian, looking for a job, there are certain places that you look, and because this, they were looking for a historian specifically, it was advertised in all of those places. So I saw it in multiple iterations across multiple, um, advertising sites, basically. But it was immediately what I wanted. And it was—I saw the ad and, um, there are jobs, there are good jobs, and there are dream jobs. And it was the dream job. And I went to a small liberal arts school. My two teaching experiences at the college level were both at small liberal arts schools: one at Davidson. I also took a year off in the middle of graduate school and taught environmental history at Northland College, which is up in Ashland, Wisconsin, looking out onto Lake Superior, Chequamegon Bay. So I really wanted to teach at this sort of institution. It's the kind of place that made me want to do this sort of work in the first place.

[08:59]

AH: Absolutely. Had you heard of Macalester prior to this—

CW: Oh, yeah, yeah.

AH: Yeah. Had prior knowledge?

CW: Yeah. The big difference, of course, is its urban location. Right. So, I had, I had sort of resigned myself to living in a more small town, isolated—

AH: —especially after going to Williams.

CW: —kind of place. After—especially. Which is sort of the outer extreme of that trend. But even the small liberal arts schools that have a claim on proximity to cities, they're really ex-urban. Davidson is a good example of that, right? It was a small, isolated town in the traditional liberal arts model. Until Charlotte [North Carolina] grew up into a pretty big city and the interstate came through and provided a, you know, thirty minutes at seventy miles an hour access to the core. And Haverford and the—I mean, there are others, but Macalester is different. And so the one chance, really, to—especially in that job market—to be able to do what I wanted to do in the kind of place I wanted to live, was unusual to say the least. And actually getting the job was...you can imagine the [unclear].

[10:30]

AH: I—yeah. Certainly. What was the first time you came to Macalester? Was it for your interview?

CW: It was for my interview, yes. So even though I went to graduate school in Madison, which is close enough, um, I had not been to either of the Twin Cities before, except to go through the

airports. Which is not exactly being in the city. So, yes, that was—my interview was the first direct exposure.

AH: And what was your interview process like?

CW: It was pretty standard, as far as these things go. So they call it the on-campus portion of the interview. Most history jobs go through a two-part process for interviews. The first stage is always at the American Historical Association, which is the big, um, the big—I was going to say meat market, but probably not quite the language I ought to be using. It's the place where everyone does their preliminaries. So, typically, applications come in; there's a process by which either the department or the committee sorts through, identifies ten or twelve top candidates. And then those people get a half-hour slot, face-to-face with the committee. And then they choose usually three people to come to campus. So the only exceptional things about the interview was that Macalester skipped that stage—

[12:06]

AH: The meat market?

CW: They did not do interviews at the AHA. So, I went to the AHA very disappointed, thinking, "Ah, I didn't get even a preliminary interview with Macalester. It's off the table." But then I got a call, right around the time that people were calling to line up on-campus interviews, from Macalester, asking me if I wanted to come to campus. And of course, I said, "Yes."

[both laugh]

CW: In fact, I ended up cancelling—I came back on, I think it was a Monday-Tuesday interview, and got offered the job on Wednesday, and was supposed to be leaving for another on-campus on Thursday. So, I called and canceled—ate the cost of the plane ticket...

[both laugh]

[12:55]

AH: Great. Well, how would you describe the environme—the, excuse me, sorry, the environment of Macalester when you first arrived as a faculty member?

CW: Environment's a tricky word, and especially when you're talking to an environmental historian, so, do you mean the physical campus? Do you mean the—

AH: Well, I usually split this question into two parts. And one of them is the physical campus, just impressions of the physical relations between buildings, et cetera. And then the other part is sort of relationships that you saw within the campus between students, faculty, administration—

CW: Right. Campus climate.

AH: Yes.

[13:34]

CW: As you're recognizing. So, physically, one of the things I love about Macalester is the neighborhood that it's in, which came out of a very particular moment in history. The nineteenth-
teens, 1920s, streetcar suburbs were springing up all around cities like St. Paul and Minneapolis. And this neighborhood was developed around streetcar lines during that era. And one of the things that—the legacy that that leaves for us is very walkable landscape. There's retail clusters right up on the street with storefronts abutting the sidewalks, right here. Right? You go out to the corner of Macalester Street and Grand Avenue and that's an old streetcar stop, right, Snelling and Grand. And that walkability means a lot to me. And that's one thing that small liberal arts college towns have that some cities don't. And I would have valued that if I had ended up at a place like that. The truth is that this is kind of the best of both worlds. Because it's situated in such close proximity to a lot of other stuff, and at the same time, the immediate campus is, is populated with lots of different—in my work, I call it opportunities per square mile. Right? There's a lot to do, and it's all close by, and you can get to it on foot. I walk to work. So this is all stuff that matters to me and meshes well with my personal values and aspirations for a more sustainable future, right? So that part of the campus environment is fantastic. The—I like the fact that the campus itself, relative to other schools its size, it's pretty compact. Again, because it makes for very easy social encounters. And, you know, even at a place like Williams, I think a lot of professors, especially if they don't live in town, they drive in, they teach their classes, they leave—

[16:09]

AH: Yeah.

CW: And although that's true here too, right—people come, they teach, they go home. Not everyone lives in this neighborhood. It does mean that while you're here, there's the chances for bumping into people serendipitously, and the cross-pollination of ideas and agendas that comes with that. I think this kind of place fosters that. So, physically, I'd say that's all good. I like the compactness, while still having the nice lawns and gathering spaces. But lots of buildings and lots of people in close proximity is a good thing, in my worldview. It's not crowded, but it's dense. In terms of campus climate, the more social side of things, you know the first thing that any professor is likely to tell you is that the students—[unclear], that's the most important encounters that we have. It's the heart of what we do, it's the—why, you know, mix your metaphors, I'm here. And the students are fantastic. I was always telling people who were pushing me to describe what I liked so much about my undergrad experience, was that it wasn't so much anything that the college did, right? The college is buildings. And some of them are very nice and some of them are very expensive. Um, and the college's support from an extended network of people from the alumni network which keep money flowing in and allow you to hire good people, and so forth. But all of that, I think, is secondary, in many ways, um, to your encounters with students. And that's what was valuable to me when I was an undergrad. The professors were great; I liked them a lot; I learned a lot from them; they set the agenda, et cetera, et cetera. But I learned way more from my peers than, than from anyone else. And that continues to be true as a professor. I learn way more from the classes that I teach and the students who I teach than I suspect they learn from me. And that's a—like I said, it's a dream job. And that's, that I think is the essential component to it. You get a bunch of talented,

creative, caring people together and force them to think deeply together, and good things are bound to happen.

[19:01]

AH: What were some of your initial encounters with faculty like? As you said, um, the Environmental Studies Program was becoming a major, so not only were you going through sort of a tenure process and you were also—

CW: Well, yeah, so it had been a major—

AH: Oh, sorry.

CW: —it became a department. So, that the year Roopali and I arrived was its first year as a department. So, it never stopped offering—

AH: —being a major.

CW: —a major. Um—

AH: My apologies.

[19:25]

CW: No, it's—in some ways, it's a semantic clarification. But, well, so my—the easiest way to describe it would be to say it's a ton of work, right? It's a ton of work to be a new faculty member, period. Um, because for most of us, we don't have a ton of experience, which means that suddenly you've got a full suite of courses. And, many of them are often new. You think about how much work it is to get ready for, say a single day when you've got two hundred pages of reading. Or a week when you have two or three hundred pages. Multiple that across fourteen weeks, plus all of the stuff you've got to have a handle on before you know that you're not going to assign that, you're going to assign the—what [unclear] described as an “overwhelming load,” that you've picked, right? So, it's just a huge amount of material. And to put it into a coherent and compelling course, before you've taught it, takes...a lot of imagination, and projection, and figuring things out, and then, of course, you've got to do the work. And then you've got to do the teaching, and then you've got to do all of the grading. Um, and you do that across five new courses, or four new courses, or whatever the number ends up being, in the first couple of years, and that's—it's just a lot of work. You don't sleep much and you don't do much other than work in those first two years. On top of that, the expectation when you're hired into a tenure-track job is that you will publish. And that has its own, um, criteria. There's a peer review process. So, anything you write goes out for blind review by people who are experts in your field and they say, “This is worthy,” or, “This might be worthy *if* you do a bunch of extra work in these areas,” um, or they say, “Nope, sorry, not good enough.” And so finding the time to stay on top of that, while trying to do all of the teaching is pretty demanding. Um, so that's where it should stop, right? The problem was that because Environmental Studies was new as a department, there was an awful lot of overhauling and change that needed to occur in a very short amount of time,

which happened to be the same short amount of time that we were trying to get our teaching portfolios up and full—

[22:33]

AH: —and trying to get acclimatized to the school.

CW: Right, so, the department overhauled its curriculum and did an external review, which means you're, you bring in experts from a mix of research universities and small liberal arts schools with similar programs to give advice about—to assess what you're doing and to give advice about what you might do. So it was shortly after that that we decided we need to hire a climatologist, for example. So, all of that took, took a lot of work. Also, because I'm a historian, I—for the first four years, I went to every History Department meeting and was on a variety of searches for new people in that department. And the search process means weeding through often hundreds of applications to get a list down, and then going through the on-campus interviews, which are multiday affairs with job talks, and teaching demonstrations, and one-on-one interviews with people on the committee. And so, I was insanely busy for the first—

AH: Certainly sounds like it.

CW: —four years. And—

[24:04]

AH: Did you find there [were] many advocates or mentors in the process of shaping the department?

CW: Oh, well, I wouldn't be sitting here if it weren't a huge amount of help.

[both laugh]

CW: Seriously. I mean, no one does any of this by themselves. And, I guess that's the thing I ought to emphasize at this point. So, it's a huge amount of work; it feels isolated if you let it. But it's—all of the work is collaborative. Even though a professor sets the agenda for a course and assigns the readings, and that's a huge amount of work, the *courses* are collaborative. They succeed or fail based on the collaboration between the professor and the students. Right? Um, and although it is work to do those collaborations, it's work that pays back, right? And this is what I was saying about learning more from the students here than, than from anyone else. So that's one area, and when it comes to things like building a new curriculum, and doing an external review, and hiring new people, those are also intensely collaborative. You're working with other people; you're trying to align your visions together with what you want, what you need, what's going to be good for the school, what's going to be the individuals involved, right? So, there's a lot of high-level, strategic thinking. But also a lot of just negotiation, and discussion, and thinking about how to build a better place. Right, and how to get the right people in to make the place, and the curriculum, and the collaborations that are classes, better, right? So, none of that's going to work very well without experienced people helping guide the process.

[26:11]

AH: Absolutely.

CW: And Dan Hornbach has just been tremendous as a mentor for us in Environmental Studies. He's a, he was provost *twice*. He was actually the provost who hired both of us: Roopali and me. He was in his last year, so we were in the last group of people that he hired. His—our first year, we had a different chair, Brett Smith, who was a longtime visitor at the school, and actively involved in International Studies and Environmental Studies. And he was amazing, as well, in that first year while Dan was on sabbatical. And then when Dan came back, he has been chair ever since. So there's, there's no way that any of that would work without them helping. It would have worked, it just would have been a very different process. And the same goes in history. You know, it's been, it's been going through a generational shift. When I got here in 2005, I think there was, there were two people—one of whom has since left—whose Ph.D. was not earned between 1970 and 1974. I mean, it was just everyone was right there. So, they were thirty-five years on the job, some of them, ready for retirement when I was coming in. And the one person who, whose Ph.D. was not then, I think, was 1983. So, it was...

[28:02]

AH: So, what was that like—having a foot in two departments: one who seems so young, I mean, Environmental Studies, all new professors, and then History, sort of the old vanguard?

CW: Well, it's really different. It's really different. In some ways, the project is the same because as people leave, it means you need to hire new people. And so, a lot of the same issues:

what is this department? What is its identity? What is its mission? What are we trying to do here? Is our curriculum right? Should we be changing that? Because when people leave is an opportunity to do something different. And so, history has also gone through an external review [laughs], uh, in the last—I think it was the year after ES did its external review. So, in some ways, it's been remarkably similar. But that's it. The differences are enormous. History's a big department, in terms of the number of faculty and the number of students who take history classes. It used to be one of the biggest majors on campus and is now right about the same number of majors as ES. I have to look that up, but I think they're, you know, within half a dozen majors of each other. And ES has three and a half full-time assigned people and history has, I think, nine. So that's a big difference, in terms of resources.

[29:45]

AH: Do you feel the department has trouble taking care of that load?

CW: Oh—which department?

AH: Environmental Studies.

CW: No, no, I think we're as big as we ought to be. Any bigger and we might run into some problems, with the way our curriculum is structured. We're running into a few issues with the capstone requirement and the way the senior seminar is set up—

AH: Just due to number of students, or...?

CW: Yeah. Once you reach a certain number of majors, trying to get them all together in a class—

AH: —in a seminar.

CW: —at the same time becomes unwieldy. So that, I think, is the main challenge. We don't want to be any bigger than we are right now. Just, I think, between forty and forty-five majors, spread across the junior and senior class. I think it's a pretty good size for who we are right now.

[30:47]

AH: Great. To go back to just, sort of, your first impressions of Mac, um, what was your impression of the political and cultural atmosphere when you came here? So, less so climate, but more so—

CW: Yeah. The—so there were two things that were immediately apparent. One was, sort of, the three pillars, right? And an institutional identity is one of those interesting things, you know, there's—especially if that identity tries to diverge from longstanding practices. But Macalester has a pretty deep tradition of doing things that the three-pillars approach to describing it does well to capture. So it wasn't really a departure, I don't think. But having three things to focus on is handy. Right? I mean, it's, it's an easy way to keep things oriented. And it certainly rang true with the things that the students I encountered were interested in and concerned about. So environmental issues match up really well with commitment to thinking globally, to thinking in

terms of civic engagement and community engagement. And so it was a rhetoric that the student had a lot of. The other piece of it that I thought was really valuable is something that's just now—I don't know if I should say it's wrapping up or if it's morphing into something new. Probably the latter. But the money that it has used to keep going is up. So it's going to *have* to become something new. Is the—it was called the Urban Faculty Colloquium. And so basically, it—the two people that organized it, Paul Schadewald in the Civic Engagement Center, and Karin Aguilar-San Juan in American Studies, and Duchess Harris has been in and out in an organizing role, but as much out as in recently, because she went to law school—

[both laugh]

[33:41]

CW: —which will do that to a person's involvement. So they basically gather a group of faculty together every summer, to practice what we preach, in terms of civic engagement. And it has been different in each iteration. But that first summer that I was here after my first year of teaching, I participated. And that year, at least, it was basically a week of getting in a van, driving around the cities, and meeting with various community partners, and listening to them—what they're doing, what they need, what collaborations with Macalester that would be fruitful might look like, right? So, it was basically: here are the cities, here are some opportunities. Um, and that set a really wonderful tone and provided support. There was some sort of stipend that participants got to help. But that really set the tone and said here's some money where our mouth is, in some ways. So I found that really, really productive and that group of people is just an amazing and vital group on campus. So...

[35:19]

AH: Do you find that the majority of your faculty peers are interested in that sort of outreach? I've actually never heard of this program, which seems unfortunate.

CW: No, but I'm sure it—well, it's because it's not for students—

AH: I mean, yes, but even research and such—

[35:36]

CW: —but I'm pretty sure that if you name a professor who you think is engaged in the community and is doing interesting things, they have some connection to this group. And that's not an accident, right? So, the fact that you haven't heard of it doesn't mean that it hasn't influenced what's going on in classes that you take and the ways that you see the school engaged with the community. But no, I don't think the majority of professors are—but, you don't have—not all classes lend themselves to that sort of approach. [pause] And I'm sure that's part of it. Right? But for those that do, having a group of people who are interested in thinking about it, figuring out what best practices are, thinking through issues like, “Well how does this match up with, say, the tenure and promotion process?” which is rigorous enough as it is. You're—you know, the three things that people get assessed on are: teaching, scholarship, and community service. But community service is far and away the smallest category. And, in fact, Macalester tries to protect its junior faculty from service responsibilities. Aside from departmental stuff. My departmental stuff happened to be much more demanding than most people, because of the

situation that both of the two departments I've been active in, just their needs dictated a much heavier burden. The—I don't know. It's a small, but vital core of people who are interested in these things. And by no means a majority, but enough, enough that talking about civic engagement is, has overlap with courses. It's not just something that some administrative agency over in the IGC [Institute for Global Citizenship] building is in charge of. It's not just internships. There's more there, I think.

[38:18]

AH: —more active involvement. Well, you mentioned tenure and you just received tenure, so congratulations for that.

CW: Thank you.

AH: Um, what was that process like? Pretty self-explanatory?

CW: If you know what the process is, it is. [laughs]

AH: I mean—

CW: Yeah, so, the college handbook spells out what the expectations are. As I mentioned, there are three categories that traditionally get assessed: teaching, scholarship, and service. Service is the small one; teaching and scholarship are both quite big. Either one, if you fall down, can be a reason for not getting tenure. I don't know though. I think that, for most people, getting the job

is harder than keeping the job. And what I mean by that is: when you're coming out of graduate school, you got very little track record. So, people are trying to assess your promise. And if you do the hiring right, you identify someone who's following the right trajectory. It's not an easy trajectory; it takes a lot of work to maintain it. But everyone knows what the trajectory is. So there's a lot of pressure in the sense that, uh, the whole point of the tenure process is to determine whether you need to find another job or whether you get to keep this one. And that does generate pressure. Especially since the standards are high. But, you know, once you're hired into the position and you know what the clock is, and you know what, sort of, the rate of scholarly production is, and you know what the expectations in the classroom are, it's more about putting in the work than it is anything else.

[40:47]

AH: And you certainly seemed to have put in the work—you managed to write a book during your tenure time, it seems—

CW: Mm-hm.

AH: —that's coming out this year: *Car—Car Country*?

CW: *Car Country*. That's right.

AH: Um, could you tell me more about that project.

CW: Sure. So the name of the book is *Car Country: An Environmental History*. It's part of [a] series called the Weyerhaeuser Environmental Books. It's the same Weyerhaeusers as all over campus. Which my graduate co-advisor, Bill Cronon, edits. It's the University of Washington Press. So the basic question that I started with and I only did this earlier, um, was I was kind of interested in why Americans drove so much compared to Europeans, which were my, the—when I taught high school, it was in Switzerland. I was teaching at a Swiss boarding school, as elite and crazy as it sounds.

[41:50]

AH: How, how did you, how did you end up there?

CW: Uh, almost by accident. So I'll digress and tell you the story. I was applying for teaching jobs as a senior in college. I had spent the last couple of summers, at a couple of different places: first at Amherst College, right around the corner from Williams, and second at Northfield Mount Hermon, which is a boarding school—

AH: I grew up in Northampton [Massachusetts].

CW: Oh. Where?

AH: I played field hockey against them. [unclear] Um, yeah.

CW: OK, so you know both Amherst and NMH. So, I taught at the summer programs, basically, at each of those two schools. I ended up going back to NMH every year, save one, for ten years. So, basically through grad school. Ended up as a—I'm not entirely sure what the title was, we were called "duty teens."

[both laugh]

CW: So, whatever that—

AH: D-U-T-Y?

CW: D-U-T-Y. Yes, so it—because it was a boarding scenario, there were—you know, you have your academic dean who deals with that sort of stuff and then there's like the dean of students which is sort of the disciplinary, um, Laurie Hamre-type position, and then there were the people who were in charge afterhours when everyone else was in bed. Sort of: you are the person in charge of everything from five o'clock until classes the next morning. So, it meant touring through all the buildings and checking in with the teaching fellows who were doing "duty" rounds in the dorms and fielding calls if there were problems, that sort of thing.

[43:58]

AH: And this led to a job at a Swiss boarding school?

CW: Well, the two—the first two summers did. Right? So, I had some teaching experience. I was sort of on the track to do that. I was interested very much in teaching. Williams does [not]—or, at least, did not at the time—have any sort of teacher certification program. And I was kind of on the fence. I wasn't sure if I wanted to go to graduate school. I wasn't sure if I wanted to jump into the working world. I was pretty sure, from the two summers that I spent teaching, that I enjoyed teaching. So I decided to apply for teaching jobs first: be sort of away from school for a little while, decide whether I missed it enough to go back or not. And so in the process of applying for schools, because Williams is in the middle of nowhere, there's a—it's the equivalent of the jobs office, career center, whatever it's called, [Career Development Center], those guys. So there's an equivalent there, they were—they brought in a pretty steady stream of people who were looking to hire, to do interviews in that center, the equivalent of that center. And so you'd go in every week, and you'd see what was coming up. And you often submitted resumes ahead of time, and they'd look through and pick as many as they had interview spots for, and then take it from there. So I was doing that for most of the schools that were coming through. Hadn't even considered teaching abroad. But a friend of mine, who was also looking at teaching jobs, came back—he was one of my housemates—came back from his weekly visit to the center, said, "Hey, are you going to apply for this job?" I was like, "What job?" And he handed me the brochure. And I casually flipped through it and the casual flipping through became a much more interested, careful scrutinizing of things. And, long story short: I put in the resume, got an interview, and got the job. It was the only international school I applied to. It was not at all what I thought I would be doing. I wanted to teach but I was thinking domestic somewhere. But I had decided not to study abroad as a junior and almost immediately regretted it. So I kind of looked at it as an opportunity to get some working experience and to make up for

that, that missed opportunity. And am very glad that I did. But I decided that, that I—as much as I liked the teaching, I wanted to do more than just teach. And so decided to go to grad school and see if that was actually true or not or, or whether I—I know I could always go back to teaching high school. But I thought I'd see what opportunities lay in this direction.

[47:30]

AH: Great. And so, that was the European experience that you were referencing?

CW: Yes, that was the European experience.

AH: And now, to go back to where we were—

CW: —and that was my long digression. So one of the things that I was struck by, again, this is, in many ways, this is pretty clichéd stuff. Right? American, young American abroad sees that life can be lived very differently at other places, that very smart, very talented people think that ways you do things are downright stupid, if not counterproductive. You see the ways that they do it, you start to question, right? So, again, pretty basic stuff. And one of the things that really, really struck me was how people got around. So part of the job was to take students on, basically, weekend adventures, for lack of a better way of describing it. And half the time we'd just go down to the train station, get on the train, and go to whatever city we were going to. So, sometimes in overnight sleeping cars, I would load up on Friday after classes, go for hours and hours, wake up the next morning on the other side of Europe, spend a couple of days, then go back and be back in time for classes on Monday. But no one would ever think of taking a plane.

The only way to get a plane would—go to Zürich, which is a big trip in itself. We were in the southern, Italian-speaking region, just north of Lake Como. And so all of that, coupled with the really intensely-walkable downtown of Lugano, which was the city where the school was, um, really got me thinking about why that's so different. And I grew up in Atlanta, which is sort of notorious for its car-based sprawl. And I didn't know immediately that that's what I was going to grad school to think about. But, you know, you get in there, you do your reading, you get generally educated, but there's an expectation that you pick a project that you want to work on. And so this raised a whole host of questions for me that ultimately led me to change the kind of history that I was doing so that I was doing environmental history. And eventually, after *way* too much time, produced the book that'll be out in December.

[both laugh]

[50:29]

CW: So, the dissertation version of things began in 1890 and ended in 1929. The book goes through 1960, so it was a significant additional amount of work. The manuscript for the dissertation was close to five hundred pages for that short period. And the book is three hundred pages on a much bigger period. So, there wasn't a whole lot from the dissertation that made it unblemished into the book. I think there's one chapter that's mostly the same. But the rest is all, uh, either barbarized or unrecognizable, in the book. But luckily, Macalester has a pretty good support system, you know, if you're going to ask people to produce a huge amount of scholarship, it's helpful if you give them the resources to do it. And the junior sabbatical that we have here was absolutely crucial for getting that book done. So...um...

[51:46]

AH: Certainly. And I hear you have another book in the works?

CW: Yeah, there are, there are a couple that I'm working on right now. One is an edited book, basically on the relationship between the Twin Cities and Greater Minnesota. That's an edited collection; my coeditor is in my equivalent position down at Carleton.

[52:10]

AH: And, [when] we left off, we were talking about the books you have in progress at the moment.

CW: Right. So, one is a book on, basically, the environmental history of Minnesota, read through the lens of the Twin Cities. And so I'm coediting that with my colleague at Carleton, George Vrtis, whose position is basically the same as mine here. Although he is formally split half between history and environmental studies. And it basically came out of a conversation that began when he arrived in 2006. "Hey, what are you teaching in your classes when you want to do local history?" And, counter intuitively, because there's a very strong environmental legacy in Minnesota. It's very much an outdoors culture. The, you know, going north to cabins on the weekends; the Boundary Waters in the northern part of the state; um, political leadership, dating back decades that's been environmentally focused, uh, very progressive environmental legislation in the state. Despite all of this and despite a huge wealth of topics that are environmental, there hasn't been very much self-conscious environmental history written about

the state. And so we decided to try to put together a collection of scholarship that would sort of fill that role. So we had a—we got a very generous grant—

[53:56]

AH: From the Minnesota Historical Society?

CW: Right. So, this is part of the Legacy Amendment, which is a sales tax that Minnesota voters assessed on themselves, a few years ago in the middle of all of the anti-tax and Taxpayer League push for lower taxes. People voted for higher taxes, specifically to help preserve the environmental and cultural legacy of the state. So, it's called the Legacy Amendment. And it fits right in with what I was just saying about environmental issues being important to Minnesotans. So they provided us with funding to hold a conference, which we had earlier this summer, about a month ago, where we brought together people from all over the country and the state to present new scholarship on various environmental topics, all fit with a self-consciously environmental history approach. And I've spent much of the time since then, trying to solicit some essays on particular topics that weren't covered when we put out a call for papers, so that we can round out the coverage, and have a coherent volume. So, if all goes well, we should have that manuscript together by this time next summer. So, I'll spend a big chunk of my upcoming sabbatical working on that. The other book that I'm sort of in the early stages of working on is—I'm calling it *Building with Nature: Architecture and the Environmental Imagination*.

AH: That's changed since last—the title I found.

CW: Oh, mokay.

AH: I have: *Building with Nature: American Domestic Architecture*.

CW: And—*and the Environmental Imagination?* Or just *American Domestic Architecture*?

AH: Just that.

[56:06]

CW: OK, well, something like that. Working titles are working titles; they change all the time. But one of the things that I find interesting, and this grows out of my work on the ways that the built environment, the—what environmental historians like to call “second nature”—right, the version of the world that we make for ourselves. Where we go out and we take what we find and we change it to suit our purposes. So, in the first book, I was really interested in the ways that we created car-dependent landscapes, where you pretty much have to have a car to function as what you might call a “normal adult,” in American society. There are people who don’t, but it often comes at great cost and inconvenience. And there are some places that are much more conducive to doing it, like, say, Minneapolis, than others, like, say, Atlanta. Right? And that’s—those are landscape differences and they say as much about the built landscape, the ways we’ve constructed the everyday world for ourselves. And there are serious environment consequences attached to them, right? If you drive fifteen thousand miles a year in a SUV, you’re putting *a lot* of CO₂ into the atmosphere and air. The infrastructure itself has all sorts of environmental ramifications. So being interested in that side of topics, one of the other big

issues that people who are concerned about climate change right now are focused on is another aspect of the built environment, which is the buildings that we live and work in. And I've been fairly continuously impressed as, sort of, the spate of green architecture has made it into the press. Just since I've gotten here—I mean, this is all relatively recent stuff, within the last decade or so. The—green architecture has really exploded as a field. There's a lot of really interesting work and a lot of very promising work. But as a historian, I'm always interested in the ways that people either misunderstand, misappropriate, or otherwise abuse the past. And there are lots of different ways that you can do that, but in the case of architecture, I'm particularly interested in the way that, over time, what architects thought they were doing when they said they were building with nature—

AH: Mm-hm.

[59:13]

CW: —has changed dramatically, so that the, most of the houses in this neighborhood were built at the tail end of the Arts and Crafts movement. And Minneapolis-St. Paul were one of the major places where this architectural style really took hold. And so most of the work that I've done so far has been on that period, which is going to launch the book. But one of the things that they were really interested in during that period was building with nature. Only, very Minnesota, virtually all of the houses are uninsulated. Insulation was not new at the time. People knew it was cold here. So if you're building with nature but you're not putting insulation at all, is, you know, what's, what do you mean by building with nature? Because if you talk to a green architect now, most of what they're going to be focused on is energy efficiency. The

performance of the building is one of the ways that they describe things. So, when they say they're building with nature, they mean something altogether different from earlier people. And they were talking about things like the honest use of materials, like making sure you were using natural materials instead of that newfangled steel that's beginning to—they were talking about adapting to regional, vernacular styles, something that contemporary green architects often don't care much about, you know, right? They're—everything is modern and post-modern now. And what works here could just as easily work in desert Arizona, in some ways. The major difference being the performance characteristics rather than the aesthetics of the building. So I'm really interested in that piece of things. But I'm also interested in the ways that myopia has existed in the different presents that I'm looking at. So, it's one thing to, to say, "Hey, contemporary green architects, you've totally missed the boat on some of this earlier stuff. You don't know the past very well." Most people don't know the past very well; it's not a very trenchant critique, in many ways. But during the Arts and Crafts movement, one of the things that happened to American homes is that they shrink. They shrink considerably. The houses in this neighborhood, built in the teens and twenties are a lot smaller than the ones that were built in the, say the 1890s. And if you go closer to downtown St. Paul, along what used to be the old railroad cars, the houses get really big—it's not just on Summit. Victorian houses were big. But what they didn't have was built-in bathrooms, and they didn't have built-in electricity, and they didn't have piped-in natural gas. All that stuff costs a lot of money. They didn't have modern kitchens. And the reason houses got small, in the teens and twenties, is that a *big* percent of the budget for new houses went to a modern kitchen, and a modern bathroom, and piped-in water, and electricity, and natural gas. And the reason you have those things is that they make life a lot more comfortable. Sanitary facilities shield you from disease, right? Which intersects with a lot

of the public health, community global health stuff, that people are increasingly interested [in] here on campus. Having electricity is a labor saver. But it's one that also has big implications for the way that life in—inside the house is lived, and who's doing the work, and standards for cleanliness. There's a gender dimension there that's really interesting. But it's all related to the architecture and to that built environment, what people thought they were doing. So the fact that, that a whole group of architects could say, "We're building with nature," and yet be blind to things like energy efficiency, on the one hand, or the impact of bringing in these modern technologies and making them central, on the other, I just find endlessly fascinating. So, that, that's the sort of thing that I'm tracing through the book. And the plan, at least for now, is to have a first unit on Arts and Crafts stuff, at the beginning of the century; another unit on mid-century, modern, especially suburban ranch development, the picture glass window being one of the ways that people tried to bring nature into the house; and then contemporary green architecture, at the end. Um...

[1:04:55]

AH: Now, have you brought this subject into any of your classes at Macalester? Or is that just, sort of, separate research for—from your classes?

CW: It's still pretty new, so it hasn't, it hasn't come in full-bore in the way that it will. But it makes—let's say, it makes a brief, on-stage appearance in a couple of classes. So, I teach a course on urban environmental history. And we talk about some of these issues toward the end of the class, when we get into contemporary stuff. And also in the ways that I approach

suburbanization for midcentury. And then I teach a class called “Car Country,” and at the end of that class—remember my book ends in 1960, but the—

AH: —class keeps going.

CW: —the class keeps going. And so, when we get into more contemporary stuff, there are intersections between—usually what I’m talking about there is New Urbanism, and smart growth, and some of the different movements today among planners and architects that are designed to address these issues. So, I’m talking about that more than the actual architecture but it’s still the same people and a lot of the same ideas. So...

[1:06:26]

AH: Certainly. What are your favorite classes to teach?

CW: I don’t teach classes that I don’t like. So I don’t really have an answer for that, other than, “All of them.” Right? I mean, the—I have taught classes that I won’t teach again. But the ones that I teach on a recurring basis are all great, for me.

AH: And what are those classes?

CW: Well the one that I always teach is, “American Environmental History,” which is sort of a survey of the field, beginning just before European contact, moving all the way through the present. So, it’s a huge span of time, on a continental scale. So we move through it pretty

quickly. But that one's fun because it, it's the broad outlines of the place that is my intellectual home. So, it's an excuse to stay on top of new developments, and to introduce exciting new books as they come out, and that sort of thing. Um, it's also a class that's fun to teach because the field, as its pioneers kind of envisioned it in the late '70s and early '80s, is set up to ask people to think about the world in a completely different way. To see the world with different eyes. And whenever you teach a class like that and you see people as they start to see something completely differently, and the light bulbs are going off, and the implications start to become clear, and people, "Oh my god..." you know as a teacher, that's a wonderful, wonderful thing.

AH: Certainly.

[1:08:44]

CW: So, as a bread-and-butter class, I can think of worse ones to have. Some of my other classes: I have a survey class called "Consumer Nation," which is basically the long twentieth century history of consumerism and the United States, with a heavy focus on its environmental implications. I teach upper-level courses on urban environmental history: "Car Country." I have a course I'll teach this fall called, "Imperial Nature: The US and the Global Environment." The basic idea there is that the United States has had a disproportionate influence and impact on the global environment. Some of those through the consumer demand that has caused people to do things, in order to service the demand. Exporting various policy things, like the Green Revolution, which brought American-style agribusiness to the rest of the world—so: pesticides, and fertilizers, and crop irrigation, and large-scale production for commodity export, et cetera, et cetera. Population control measures, public health stuff, spraying DDT all over the place to try

to control malaria, for example. So it's kind of a smattering of topics. Um, oil. But that one's always fun because the—one of the recurring, genuine commitments among Macalester students is to thinking about America's role on a global stage and the—what it means to be a global citizen. So this is basically the environmental layer of that. So, that's always a fun class to teach. Not always the most uplifting material, but it's fun anyway.

[both laugh]

[1:11:19]

AH: And how would you say that Macalester's environmental studies program compares to similar programs at other schools?

CW: It's really different. I mean, one difference is that it is actually a department instead of a program. So many places, the environmental studies curriculum continues to rely on the uncompensated contributions of people who just happen to be interested in environmental issues and could teach some courses with environmental content. So to have a departmental home, whose—that's staffed with people whose entire responsibility is to environmental studies is really different, and it makes a really big difference. Talking with colleagues who have split appointments and partial appointments and, you know, when you have multiple people to answer to, it's really hard to focus as wholeheartedly on one part of your portfolio. You have to give equal parts attention. So that makes a big difference. Another is that we are, we are aggressively interdisciplinary. But a lot of the programs and departments out there tend to specialize a bit more. And again, this is a staffing thing as much as anything else, but the fact that if you look at

the core members of our department, the ones who have tenured or tenure-track appointments, there's a humanist (me), a social scientist in Roopali, and then one and a half scientists: our climatologist and an aquatic ecologist. And then, we also have part-time but ongoing contributions from a psychologist, from a terrestrial ecologist, from a conservation biologist, from a linguist. It's a really interesting mix of people. And so we're not loaded up in any one area, but we have very strong political science coursework, because that's Roopali's specialty. We have strong historical content because that's my specialty. We have very strong geological and paleoclimatological stuff, because that's Louisa's, right? So, it's a nice mix of depth and breadth that's structured into the department. And that's rare. It feels like it ought to be the norm, I think, because that's the norm as I experience it. But most of my colleagues who I talk to, when they are lamenting things about the programs that they're associated with, boil down to not being structured the way we are. So, again, we're back into dream job territory. [laughs]

[1:15:02]

AH: Well, that's great. I know that you're heavily involved in the Clean Energy Revolving Fund, and I was wondering how you got involved with that.

CW: Yeah, so, it was a student initiative: Timothy DenHerder-Thomas and Asa Diebolt. I'm trying to remember what year they graduated—um, '09 maybe? Or maybe '10? They are very interested in finding ways to build sustainability and environmental responsibility into institutional structures, in ways that are economically profitable. Not just responsible, but actually profitable. And so one of the models that they came across was Harvard's revolving fund, which was very new, just in its first couple of years at the point they came across it. But

the basic model for a revolving fund is that you create a pot of money and it can invest that money in different projects. And for a *clean energy* revolving fund, all of those investments, by charter, were required to be in energy-saving areas. And so, the basic idea was: we would pay for things at the college that saves the college money and the college would pay us back with energy savings. Right, so they would say, “OK, well, if you didn’t do anything, we’d be paying X in energy costs for this particular thing over the next ten years. You’re going to step in, and it’s not going to cost us X, it’s going to cost us Y, which is less than X. But we’ll continue to pay X and the difference between the energy costs that we’re paying out to Xcel and what we would have been paying will go back into the fund, with interest.” So, it actually built size over time. And so when the fund was active, we insulated a bunch of off-campus houses. The biggest project was replacing light bulbs across campus, so basically, the light bulbs that are here now put out the same amount of light but draw less energy than the ones that we had before. So the fund paid to swap out every single light bulb on campus, every single four-foot light bulb, florescent light bulb, with the new energy-efficient ones. And the payback was two and a half years, I think, and just saved a huge amount of energy, just with that one, simple thing. So the— I guess, the biggest sign of success of this whole thing is that instead of being a separate fund with a board of directors that has to make all of these decisions and students who have to go around trying to find these projects for us to invest in, it has become built into the Facilities budget. So, there is a pot of money that they administer to do these things which is dedicated for energy-efficiency projects. So, CERF itself technically is dead, but it lives on in that new incarnation in the way Facilities operates which, in many ways, is a bigger victory than if it had actually survived.

[1:19:11]

AH: How did it die?

CW: Well, I mean, it just—it became so successful as a financial model for investing in these projects that it became wrapped into the way Facilities budgets things. And so, the biggest difference is that they identify the projects and invest the money, whereas before, there was a—we called it the CERF Board—

[both laugh]

CW: —Clean Energy Revolving Fund: CERF, and so we were the CERF Board. And I was chair of the board. We had a variety of people: the head of Facilities; the head of the High Winds Fund; an alumni rep; a student at-large rep; a student rep from MCSG [Macalester College Student Government]. And we all met on a regular basis and tried to generate proposals, initially, and then simply reviewed proposals once enough were in the works. And it was a slow phase-out. Facilities added a student worker position, focused entirely on energy and energy-efficiency projects. So, initially, that student was generating stuff that we were investing in and eventually, they just—they took it over. So, our pot of money went to Facilities and they've continued to use it. But we were up to something more than a hundred thousand dollars by the time we handed it over. I don't remember what the initial investment was but I think it might have been thirty or forty thousand dollars from the President's Fund. He has a discretionary fund at MCSG. It built up.

[1:21:15]

AH: Great. And you've also been tied to the Macalester EcoHouse since you arrived in 2005.

And I think you've mostly been on an advisory position for that. Um—

CW: Yeah, that one—well, the EcoHouse was actually my idea and I got it launched. So, unlike CERF, which students initiated and they needed a faculty member to be on the board, and I ended up as chair, EcoHouse was mine. But it was—remember I said we were trying to draw up ideas to support CERF? It was an idea to support CERF. One of the problems we ran into, especially early with CERF, was that the kinds of investments that we were looking at making are, under the best of circumstances, invisible. Right? If we replaced all of the bulbs on campus and people noticed, because they were dimmer or something, it would be a problem, right? I mean, the whole idea was: replace the bulbs without changing the functionality of the lighting system. Putting insulation in walls: you don't see it. You stop feeling drafts, houses are more comfortable to occupy, um, the energy bills are lower. But you don't see insulation; it doesn't change the physical appearance of any—right. So this is one of the ironies, or problems, that come with trying to run something where you're fundraising. I mean, we wanted the fund to grow. And so, my idea was, "Well, maybe we should have sort of a demonstration project where we can put the money on display and interpret it for people so that they can *see* this stuff that's invisible." Right, so if people come into the house, you can talk about the insulation in the walls, you can put the solar tube in the bathroom on display. Actually say, "Hey, all the light that's coming in is coming through that tube. Notice that the lights are off." "What do you mean the lights are off?" Right? Something you wouldn't notice otherwise becomes... And so that was—the initial idea is: we need a demonstration house where we can do this stuff, prove that it

pays back, right? But as—houses are expensive, to say the least. Much less renovating them. So, the amount of money that we had dictated that we really needed someone to donate a house—

[both laugh]

[1:24:21]

CW: —in order for this to work. Well, who's going to donate a house? No one's going to donate a house. Um, except maybe the college. Because it owns a bunch of houses, right? And it's not actually donating it, it's just making it available for investment, that save it money in the long term. So, basically, as we engaged with the administration about possibilities, the—rather than having it sort of an empty house that would be open for tours, which requires staffing, and volunteers, and advertising, and regular schedules, and... Right, that's a pretty big budgetary commitment. The idea kind of morphed into what it is now, which is a student residence where people who are interested in what it means to live sustainably can live in a house that's been retrofitted with a bunch of stuff to make it more energy efficient. But to focus more on the residential lifestyle stuff, and self-conscious thinking, and [to] talk about what it means to live in a place that's labeled the EcoHouse. So Facilities ended up paying for the renovations rather than CERF, and they just paid for them. There was no pay back or assessment of energy costs, or anything like that. So, the idea changed pretty dramatically, but originally it was a, uh, fundraising idea for the CERF project. I ended up teaching a senior seminar in—the Environmental Studies senior seminar wrote a series of grants to try to fund different things for the house. All but one of those eventually bore fruit, so we were awarded a grant from the Xcel

Foundation to do civic engagement work in the house's first year. We ended up with a solar thermal system on the roof of the garage as part of the basic renovations, because of the research that students did on solar systems and payback. Solar thermal has a much better payback than solar photovoltaic, especially five years ago, six years ago, whenever it was we were doing this. What was the other one? Oh—energy-monitoring system. So, the original proposal failed, but one of the house's residents took it on in subsequent years and got all of the equipment donated straight from the manufacturer. So, it took a little longer than we would have liked. The geothermal proposal, basically found out that those systems are really expensive and the payback is really slow. And so, we continued with the proposal because we said we would but, it did not succeed and nor should it have.

[both laugh]

[1:27:46]

AH: Now, how has the house changed or evolved since it started?

CW: Well, initially, because the focus was on physically improving the house, and doing all of the research, and generating the ideas for how to make this house so much better, there was a lot of interest around those things. Right? It was a research project, and a mobilization project, and a let's-get-this-done... But now, we're several generations removed from any sort of physical changes to the house. We've made very minor improvements every year since, but very minor. And so it's much less about the house as a physical reality, and much more about the people who live in it. The conversations that they have, the common commitments that they generate, the—a

lot of emphasis on food, especially in the years since Michael Pollan wrote [*The Omnivore's Dilemma*] and then *In Defense of Food*, that's been a major, major focus. Not least of which, because for busy college students, the act of buying food, cooking it, and eating it together requires a surprisingly large time commitment. Which is kind of a sad commentary in some ways. Speaks to the overscheduled nature of modern student life, I think. But, at the same time, it—you know, it's one of those things that people can rally around, and get behind, and get excited about in the same way that it was initially rallying around the renovations, or writing the grants to do some really cool thing with the house. This past year, there was a waste reduction project that one of the residents ran, that served a similar focus and get people focused on this one thing: what it means, how their everyday actions are affecting the data that's—that she's reporting, and thinking about small things and large that they could do to try to shift that data in a direction that's more desirable.

[1:30:39]

AH: Certainly. How environmentally conscious would you say Macalester is as a school, overall?

CW: I think we do pretty well. President Rosenberg has been committed, much more than many college presidents, and has been willing—has with, you know, the big seeding of the Clean Energy Revolving Fund, and the commitment to hire a sustainability manager, Suzanne Savanick Hansen. He's actually put resources behind the commitment. He was instrumental in building the IGC building, which is LEED [Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, rating system for green buildings] Platinum. So, there's some pretty high-profile, noticeable stuff

going on that makes a big difference. That said, there's always more that you can do. And I think that there is an opportunity for Macalester to make sustainability much more central to the way that it thinks about global citizenship. Global warming and climate change are, I think, one of the—I mean, I'd be less qualifying about this—I think that it is the single biggest challenge to notions of global citizenship that exists right now. I don't think there is a bigger issue that calls into question the ways we think about global governance and pitching in for a common future. I just—I don't think there's a bigger issue. There are other really important issues. But I don't think there's a bigger one. It's fundamental. And I think that so far, we're really missing an opportunity, to make the campus not just zero emissions, but a net, um, negative institution. There's a pretty straight-forward way of doing that, that would cost half as much as, say, building the Leonard Center. Um—

[1:33:14]

AH: What would that be?

CW: —but the way that fundraising and capital campaigns—the politics of raising money—work, it's a much harder batch of money to raise. And so far, it has not even really been discussed. The way you do it is, is really quite simple. You buy three or four wind turbines in southwestern Minnesota, you shift everything on campus to electric, and you maximize the energy efficiency of every building on campus, so that you're not wasting that electricity. That's it. I mean, seriously, that's it. We use about three industrial turbines worth of energy, if you were to convert everything to electric. And a fourth would cover all international travel for study

abroad. Everything else has an offset, so... So, you run the numbers, that's four turbines, more or less.

AH: Wow. Wow, OK.

CW: So...eight million dollars a piece, that's a thirty-two million dollar project. I think the Leonard Center was forty million.

AH: Forty-five.

CW: Forty-five.

AH: Yeah. So, that is the big step you'd like to see for Macalester? Ideal dream—

CW: That's, this—if you gave me a magic wand, that's what I would ask for as I was waving.

[both laugh]

[1:34:57]

AH: Great. And what would you say is your vision for the future of the Environmental Studies Department? Looking towards the future?

CW: Um, I don't know—we're kind of in the middle of... Our curriculum has finally settled down. We are finally doing what we were working so hard to be doing in the first three or four years that we were here. So I think actually, the near-term goal is basically to get through all of the leaves that people have coming in the next two or three years. And to maintain, basically, things in a relatively homeostatic way. There are small things that are part of doing what we're doing, that if we keep doing them over the next four or five years, will produce some changes. We'd like to see a little bit more international and internationally-focused courses, and students who are interested in those issues, a little bit more. And we're constantly trying to get...minority and international students into our classes. And it's an interesting thing that we don't have those students in big numbers. And I think that's a legacy of environmentalism as a political movement in the United States that's largely affluent and largely white. And that's something we're actively trying to counteract and break down. But it's slow going. Those are the two big things that we're working on right now. But I would expect that once we're out on the other side of all of these leaves and everything, that it'll be about time to reassess and figure out what the new normal ought to look like, the next period of more dynamic change.

[1:37:49]

AH: Certainly. And to move on to some more general reflections as we close the interview, what do you enjoy most about being part of the faculty at Macalester?

CW: Well, I mean, the easy answer is the teaching. And I've said that already, at length. So I won't belabor it. But, you know, this is a teaching school; it's at the heart of what we do, it's the best things that we do. That said, Macalester's faculty—and this extends to the staff as well,

I think it's pretty much institution-wide, it characterizes the students in some ways too. I think this is an institution of overachievers. You know, based on the resources that we have, and the size that we are, and what the competition looks like, I think we really outperform where we probably ought to be. We do a lot with a little, I think. And as someone who kind of fits that, that caricature, it's nice to be around other people who do, as well. It would be nice to have more resources. It would be nice not to have to overachieve. But, it's also really nice to be surrounded by people who care passionately about what they do. And who work really hard to make things happen. Who are really interested in the world and the way it works. That makes coming to work a lot easier.

[1:39:56]

AH: Definitely. And what would you say are your major critiques of Macalester and, and what would you say are Macalester's greatest strengths?

CW: Um... [laughs] What I just said. I mean, the—it's great to have a culture of overachievement. It's also another thing to be overstretched. Right? So that's—it is both a good thing and a bad thing.

AH: Classic answer to the interview question, "What's your greatest weakness?"

CW: Yeah.

AH: "Work too hard."

CW: Something, something that—exactly. Something that makes me look good. Um...yeah. I do see it as a weakness. You know, the institution can be better off if it can build up more resources, and add staff, and add support. That can only make the place better. Because being able to do a lot with a little and being able to do a lot with a lot are two different things. Right?

[1:41:12]

AH: Overall, what experiences have been most memorable at Macalester so far?

[pause]

AH: Did you get the bagpipes when you got tenure?

CW: Yeah... Yeah, that's pretty fun. It—you know, actually, the bagpipes that I remember most, though, are at graduation. The—I don't know if students know about this before they go through it, and it probably depends on how close they are to people in classes ahead of them or whether they actually come for graduation. But you could go to graduation and not see it. The faculty process in and form two lines, right here. And then the students come behind who are graduating. And they walk through, basically, the gauntlet of professors standing on either side. And the tradition is that you stand and clap, as every single graduating senior comes through the line. And it's pretty cool. It's certainly memorable. So that—there's lots of things like that that are memorable here. But that's as good as any to put on the interview.

[1:42:35]

AH: And now that you've achieved tenure, what are you most looking forward [to] in the future, in terms of Macalester and your career in general?

CW: You know, tenure doesn't actually change very much, which is interesting. Academic milestones are anticlimactic, in many ways. Because by the time you get to any one of them, you're usually so far on to whatever the next thing is that, uh—I mean, the milestone matters. It's important; it marks something significant. But for the most part it's—you've kind of done everything. So it's not a big surprise. Now this is provided that you actually get over whatever the bar is that you're trying to get over. To try to miss is an altogether different kind of experience. But the biggest difference that I've felt since getting tenure is not having that decision looming anymore. You know, for almost seven years, I woke up every morning and, somewhere in the back of my head, the fact that I was coming up for tenure and that the job rested on the decision was somewhere back there. And especially when you're in the middle of trying [to] write something, especially when that something is really long and you can't just do it and be done, that can generate anxiety and stress, um, unhappiness. So, having it done and knowing that you can do it is awfully nice. But, in other ways, it's—in other ways, what tenure does is to ratify what you're doing anyway. So, I don't think anything's going to change. If it changed, it would be disappointing. So...

[1:44:50]

AH: Any big plans for sabbatical?

CW: Well, I'm working on these two books. Right? Which are the next thing, which is more of the same, in some ways. It's really exciting because it's new and the topics are different and everything's fresh. But, viewed from another angle, it's, you know, an academic historian writing another history book. Which is more of the same, right? So, it's great, it's fun, I'm really looking forward to it. It's exciting, but it's also...

AH: The publication of your book should be very exciting, too.

CW: Yes. That'll be fun. It'll be good to see it in print. I finished the manuscript—it will be almost exactly three years from the time I finished the manuscript and sent it in to when it actually appears in print—

AH: Oh, wow.

CW: So, it's a very, very, very slow process.

AH: A long process.

CW: So, it'll be, it'll be exciting [unclear].

AH: Great. Well, is there anything else you'd like to add to the record before we close?

CW: I think we've covered most of it.

AH: Great. Well, thank you so much.

CW: All right, thank you.

[End of Interview 1:45:56]