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History 590

Dr. Youngs

Without a Compass....

An Early History of Wilderness Management and Doctrine in America's First National Parks

The Players and the Poets

1872-1920

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*“Wilderness management rests on the assumption that uncontrolled wilderness recreation is just as much a threat to wilderness qualities as economic development. The history of this idea is not long, but then neither is the problem”<sup>2</sup> (Nash, 320-21).*

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<sup>1</sup> Early 20<sup>th</sup> century photo of Yellowstone Park. Date unknown.

<https://www.google.com/search?q=early+photos+of+yellowstone+management>

<sup>2</sup> Nash, Roderick. *Wilderness and the American Mind*. Yale University Press. 1967. Pg. 320-21.

Early 20<sup>th</sup> century environmental scientist and author Margaret Mead (1901-1978) said, “never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”<sup>3</sup> As idealistic as it may seem, her sentiments have proven a true method for real change in our American democracy. One person and one idea could alter the social and political landscape, transforming the game for everyone. From the creation of unions and the liberation of women and slaves, to the invention of the lightbulb and the internet, America has been a nation where big change begins on the grassroots level, often with little support at first, riddled with questions, problems, and flaws. But amidst the flaws, there is hope, and with hope, the possibility for something great.

It takes times to work out the details of new ideas. The visionaries and stakeholders who accept the challenge often carry a tremendous responsibility and obligation to make it work, to succeed against all odds. Call them revolutionaries if you will but their ingenuity paired with progressiveness and passion has always pushed us to reach farther in our democracy, no matter how great the struggle. In the end, we are all left with a stronger democracy and a richer cultural landscape. The establishment of America’s National Parks was no exception to the rule. At first there was a fair amount of conflict regarding the best ways to orchestrate, manage, protect, and ultimately pay for the National Parks. Would the parks be private or funded by the federal government? Would hunting, animal grazing and camping be aloud? Who would protect the parks and safely guide tourists through them since many wilderness areas represented grave danger for the unexperienced traveler looking for adventure. Particularly in places like Yellowstone where apex predators roamed free and water reached boiling temperatures.

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<sup>3</sup> “Margaret Mead.” BrainyQuote.com. Xplore Inc., 2017.  
<https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/m/margaretme100502.html>.

For Americans to fully appreciate these vast wilderness landscapes, they had to first see the beauty for themselves. But how could they do so safely, and without causing any harm to the fragile ecosystems they encountered? When Yellowstone was established in 1872, it was clear that reliable management and well established regulations in the park were needed if park wildlife and natural wonders were to be saved. It was a revolutionary idea to appreciate wilderness in this way and through this appreciation, environmentalism was born.

At first, there was very little consensus about how or more importantly *who* would manage the world's first national parks. As early as 1832, we were experimenting with the idea of preservation at Arkansas Hot Springs, set aside that year as a national reservation. This was a great first step but "far more important" to the history of wilderness preservation was the federal grant of 1864 that established the Yosemite Valley in California at the time as a park "for public use, resort and recreation."<sup>4</sup>

Even though the protected area at Arkansas Hot Springs was small, a mere "ten square miles" the park ultimately failed in terms of preservation and management. For whatever it is worth, the balance between use and conservation had yet to be found. Despite a prosperous tourist business threatening to "alter its wild character" the grant that established this small tract of land would ultimately set a precedent, a trend for the future management and preservation of other natural areas. Left alone, unmanaged, vulnerable areas could be lost to farming, poaching and industrialization.

Like Democracy itself, the early management of public lands was a great experiment. No one really knew how it would turn out or if it would work but they were willing to try. The story of our National Parks is really a story about the democratic process. It is a story of finding out just what

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<sup>4</sup> Nash, 106.

freedom is really made of and how best to self-govern and protect what is sacred to us all. It is the story of us. And to this day, we are still figuring it out.

During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century an ethical debate that sparked just the right amount of public controversy and support to create an entire nation of believers in the value of the wilderness. It is important to remember that wilderness preservation began with wilderness admiration. Once admiration was in place, that is, people began to really care about the landscape, the story of our early wilderness laws and management began. Many laws were inspired through the art, poetry, and literature of influential early devotees of nature, whose perspectives radically influenced political power as well as the hearts and minds of Americans. Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Frederick Law Olmsted, Ralph Waldo Emerson, William Wordsworth, and many other Victorian era poets, authors, photographers, philosophers, song writers and lovers of wild places all created space for a shift in the collective consciousness of the western world and their previously held dogmatic notions of wilderness management.

Gradually, an understanding was born of how to properly care for and manage the wilderness. As the National Parks were created during the final decades of the 1900s, the push for better management (especially through organizations like the Sierra Club) was inspired by this wilderness literature and art. The human industrial complex that once lamented the wilderness, now had a new appreciation for the delicacy and use of wild spaces. This appreciation was needed for the ultimate preservation and sustainability of wilderness areas and the proper management that followed. It was a doctrine that carried the early environmental movement into the next century and ultimately ensured its survival. The idea was catching on that “our lives” as Thoreau suggested in 1849, “need the relief of (the wilderness) where the pine flourishes and the jay still screams.”<sup>5</sup> Perhaps after two centuries of

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<sup>5</sup> Nash, Roderick. *Wilderness and the American Mind*. Yale University Press. 2014. Pg, 87.

wilderness exploitation, humans were longing for a new doctrine. “In contrast to the city,” the wilderness was a place “where spiritual truths were less blunted.”<sup>6</sup> But it wasn’t always this way.

Prior to the Victorian era, early European folk lore about the wilderness was riddled with fear and mystery. Stories of “demons and cohorts of the devil...supernatural beings” led many people in early American history to believe that wilderness was a useless and senseless waste of land.<sup>7</sup> How easy it was to cut down entire forests filled with living creatures and natural wonders in the name of prosperity. To be a lover of wilderness in the early years of our history was to be “unsophisticated” and in the dark ages. As a nod to what was to come, Estwick Evans observed in 1818 that there were great “advantages to solitude” and to the wilderness in general. “There is something in the very name of wilderness” he said, “which charms the ear, and soothes the spirit of man. There is religion in it.” As John Muir led the movement for proper wilderness protection and management, it was clear that humanity and its relationship with the natural world had come a very long way.

By 1890, four National Parks had been created and more were being considered. At first, the logical answer was to have the Army manage the parks. Although trained military personnel had experience with survival skills and had spent time in the wilderness, they really were not equipped or trained in proper wilderness management. In addition, preservation and environmentalism were radically new concepts. Many people, politicians and poets alike disagreed about the proper way to manage wildlife and public lands. Without proper regulations in place, park wildlife were “routinely killed; livestock over-grazed park meadows; ancient forests were still under threat (and) tourists carved their names on rocks and trees”<sup>8</sup> A nation busy with conquering the West had a mentality that proved dangerous to the natural world.

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<sup>6</sup> Nash, 86.

<sup>7</sup> Nash, 13.

<sup>8</sup> Burns, Ken. The National Parks. America’s Best Idea. 2009.

One of the first pioneer protectors of the parks were the Buffalo Soldiers in Yellowstone. Sent by Washington to control and manage the land and its wildlife, they were given the absolute freedom to protect and preserve the area in whatever way they saw fit. Comprised of African American men at a time when America was still recovering from the Civil War meant these men faced even greater adversity than other rangers and overseers in the three other national parks. The American west was still a relatively lawless place where many Americans did not accept blacks, especially in authoritarian roles. But the Buffalo Soldiers did the job they came to do, championing early park regulations. One of the very first experiments or regulations the “rangers” came up with was to confiscate weapons at the park’s entrance. This simple act cut the numbers of wildlife poaching in the park significantly.

Protecting and managing the parks was perilous work especially without proper supplies or knowledge of the landscape. It was a “mammoth task for the army to patrol the park’s 2 million acres on horseback.”<sup>9</sup> Despite groups like the Buffalo Soldiers doing “their best to stop poachers and vandals, the soldiers had no recourse to punish offenders. No laws had been defined and so the wrongdoers were only issued warnings or, in severe cases, expelled from the park.”<sup>10</sup> These atrocities against nature brought about proper park management. But they also brought about the sympathy needed from voters to bring about change and much of the doctrine surrounding such sympathy came from early wilderness advocates.

The threat was always there and in this way, the management of parks was an absolute necessity. In the Spring of 1894, a poacher named Edgar Howell gave Congress a reason to get stricter about punishing crimes committed in the National Parks. A treasured wilderness champion and early promoter of the parks, George Bird Grinnell, editor of Field and Stream magazine, also a renowned ornithologist, caught Howell “skinning the carcasses of buffaloes” that he had recently killed in

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<sup>9</sup> Burns, film.

<sup>10</sup> Burns, film.

Yellowstone. Howell bragged that “the worst punishment he could receive for his crime was expulsion from the park and the loss of equipment worth \$26.75.” Grinnell, with the full blessing of rising political star Theodore Roosevelt immediately ran a story in his magazine about the carnage being committed against these majestic animals. There was a “public outcry.” Not more than a month later, on May 7<sup>th</sup>, 1894, President Grover Cleveland signed the historic bill known as the “Act to Protect the Birds and Animals in Yellowstone National Park.” This simple piece of legislation would “finally protect the park, its geysers, and its wildlife.”<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps the greatest shift in the management of wilderness was the transfer of land from state controlled sanctioned areas to the property of the Federal government. As time progressed and Americans saw the true importance and value of having a time capsule of the American frontier, the lands were transferred into the hands of the government, who would oversee, manage and fund the parks. Today, public parks and park management are run by the Secretary of the Interior, a coveted and esteemed position in our nation’s capital. Today, there are 58 National Parks in America spearheaded by the Federal government.

As artists and wilderness advocates helped create a sense of pride, nostalgia, and doctrine around America’s first National Parks, few held as much power as the politicians in Washington. Notably, Abraham Lincoln, who signed the Yosemite Act of 1864 and Theodore Roosevelt who signed the Antiquities Act of 1906 and whom personally spent time in Yosemite with John Muir, championing the cause of park preservation and wilderness ideologies. Lesser known historic leaders with strokes of pen also helped push public parks from great idea to policy. March 1<sup>st</sup>, 1872 may not be well known in American history but it is a day that nonetheless might be worthy of its own place among National holidays. This is the day that “the world’s first instance of large-scale wilderness preservation”

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<sup>11</sup> Burns, film.

occurred.<sup>12</sup> This is the day Ulysses S. Grant signed the act that designated Yellowstone, all 2.2 million acres of it, a park for the people. The world and our experience of it had suddenly changed forever. If ever there was a moment where poetic sentiment became absolute religious doctrine, this was it.

Before the preservation of Yellowstone, Frederick Law Olmsted in his groundbreaking report of 1865 lobbied Congress for consideration of the vast wilderness of Yosemite to be protected for the future enjoyment of people. With the preservation of Yellowstone on the table by 1872, other lands and wilderness areas, including Yosemite were now also candidates for federal wilderness protection. Documents like the Olmsted Report beamed with sentimental statements about the grandeur and beneficial properties of the wilderness upon the human being and this made a strong impression on leaders in Washington. Frederick Law Olmsted's reflections about the fragile state of the Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Big Tree Grove in California spoke directly to a government that was just rebuilding itself in the wake of the Civil War. Feelings and concerns about the future were running deep in the heart of the nation.

It was during one of the darkest hours, before Sherman had begun the march upon Atlanta or Grant his terrible movement through the Wilderness, when the paintings of Bierstadt and the photographs of Watkins, both productions of the War time, had given to the people on the Atlantic some idea of the sublimity of the Yosemite, and of the stateliness of the neighboring Sequoia grove, that consideration was first given to the danger that such scenes might become private property and through the false taste, the caprice or requirements of some industrial speculation of their holders; their value to posterity be injured.<sup>13</sup>

Even after Yellowstone was set aside, there was debate among congress over the necessity of such an appropriation by the government. Politicians like Senator John J. Ingalls of Kansas "attacked Yellowstone as an expensive irrelevancy" while other politicians like George G. Vest of Missouri defended the park as a "mountain wilderness" and argued the land was "esthetically important in

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<sup>12</sup> Nash, Roderick Frazier. *Wilderness and the American Mind*. Yale University Press. 2001.

<sup>13</sup> Olmsted, Frederick Law. The Olmsted Report. 1865.

counteracting America's materialistic tendencies."<sup>14</sup> By the time Yellowstone was created, congress had already considered legislation of Yosemite. Arguments in favor of Yellowstone had little to do with wilderness preservation. Instead they echoed previously held notions about wilderness where "curiosities," "decorations" and "rare wonders" might be enjoyed by tourists. The parks were not set aside for wilderness, but for people, and it was people that the parks both needed and needed to be protected from. Olmsted's report challenged the presumption that ALL people felt this way, giving us an early example of a document that *was* for the sanctity of wilderness preservation and an example of the value of keeping the environment just as it was.<sup>15</sup> It was up to politicians to know the difference. To this day, the report remains an important early example of the environmental and conservation movements in the United States and it helped shape our understanding of proper wilderness preservation.

The debate between the opposing political sides about the actual rules and purposes of the public park continued well into the end of the 19th century. When a railroad was proposed in Yellowstone in the late 1880's, political tempers got heated. Representative Lewis E. Payson of Illinois reassured Congress that "no harm could come to the geysers and hot springs" if the Cinnabar and Clark's Fork Railroad were to run through the park but Samuel S. Cox of New York dismissed Payson's assumptions, using the Olmsted Report as a guide in his address to the House of Representatives. Cox stated that his overwhelming support of the wilderness area remaining undisturbed was a "matter of keeping inviolate 'all that gives elevation and grace to human nature, by the observation of the works of physical nature.'" The vote for the denial of the railroad's plans to intersect the park were turned down 107 to 65. In 1886 anyway, wilderness won in the White House.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Nash, 113.

<sup>15</sup> Nash, 112.

<sup>16</sup> Nash, 115

By 1897, 350 members established the Sierra Club.<sup>17</sup> With a focus on responsible land management and ethical timber practices, as well as a club to provide a safe outlet for those who wanted to immerse themselves in nature, the Sierra Club changed America's relationship to its natural areas and became the poster child of the environmental movement that grew from a few hundred members to a staggering 2.7 million members and growing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Poetry and politics were finally merging. The group named Muir their first President on May 28, 1892 and The Sierra Club became the world's first "large-scale environmental preservation organization in the world"<sup>18</sup> Its mission statement was to "explore, enjoy, and protect the wild places of the earth. To practice and promote the responsible use of the earth's ecosystems and resources. To educate and enlist humanity, to protect and restore the quality of the natural and human environment, and to use all lawful means to carry out these objectives."<sup>19</sup>

Within the first year, the Sierra Club had established an office space in San Francisco's business district and began circulating their first publication, The Sierra Club Bulletin. The popularity of environmental literature was growing in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and with publications like the Sierra Club Bulletin, which published stories, art, photographs, maps, and good science about places like the Sierra Nevada region. The bulletin also helped expose other prospective preserves as well such as the Grand Canyon, which wouldn't become a park until much later in 1919. Politicians in Washington began taking note.

Although few Americans remember our 23rd U.S. President Benjamin Harrison (1833-1901) who served office from 1888-1892, he was a key player in the early history of the national parks since he supported the preservation of the Sierra Forest Reserve. At 13 million acres, it was the largest piece of

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<sup>17</sup> Sierra Club website. History timeline. <http://vault.sierraclub.org/history/timeline.aspx>

<sup>18</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sierra\\_Club](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sierra_Club)

<sup>19</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sierra\\_Club](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sierra_Club)

preserved natural real estate in the world and much of the land would eventually be incorporated into Yosemite National Park.<sup>20</sup> President Harris may not have won a second term but he was far more fortunate than his Grandfather, William Henry Harris, who served as the Nation's 9<sup>th</sup> President for just one month before succumbing to pneumonia while in office in 1840.

The Sierra Forest Reserve was set aside under section 24 of the Forest Reserve Act of 1891, which GLO Commissioner Thomas H. Carter considered in 1891 to "do much in the way of caring for portions of the public lands bearing forest which it is needful to preserve from spoliation"<sup>21</sup> As an idea, the Sierra Forest Reserve set the bar for other parks and preservation projects to follow. There was little doubt that the environmental movement had taken hold as a real idea and the Sierra Club was to thank for its continual promotion of natural areas as well as its demand from politicians that they uphold laws such as the Forest Reserve Act and be accountable to them. The Sierra Forest Reserve was an important piece of the early history of the Sierra Club and a personal victory for John Muir, whose primary "attention in the 1890's" had been on Yosemite and the Sierra Club itself. But Muir was also very interested in "the beginnings of federal forest protection" and the Sierra Forest Reserve represented just that.<sup>22</sup> What was once an experiment was now an organized and government funded project that had far reaching goals for preserving many more natural areas beyond the American West. In 1913, however, when Congress allowed the flooding of the Hetch Hetchy Valley, the Sierra Club felt the loss to their core. Their commander in chief, John Muir, would die just one year later, on Christmas Eve, in 1914. Perhaps the poet Robert Frost was thinking of Muir when he wrote this poem in 1922.

*Whose woods these are I think I know.*

*His house is in the village though;*

*He will not see me stopping here*

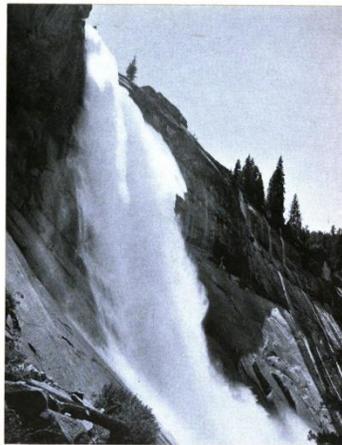
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<sup>20</sup> Sierra Club website. History timeline. <http://vault.sierraclub.org/history/timeline.aspx>

<sup>21</sup> [http://www.foresthistory.org/Publications/Books/Origins\\_National\\_Forests/sec17.htm](http://www.foresthistory.org/Publications/Books/Origins_National_Forests/sec17.htm).

<sup>22</sup> Nash, 133.

*To watch his woods fill up with snow.  
My little horse muse think it queer  
To stop without a farmhouse near  
Between the woods and frozen lake  
The darkest evening of the year.  
He gives his harness bells a shake  
To ask if there is some mistake.  
The only other sound's the sweep  
Of easy wind and downy flake.  
The woods are lovely, dark and deep,  
But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep. – Robert Frost, 1922.*



NEVADA FALLS

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If “appreciation of wilderness began in cities,” it was the actual experience of nature followed by the account of that experience through poetry and art that turned wilderness into a church of its

own.<sup>23</sup> It was the “literary gentleman wielding a pen, not the pioneer with his axe” who “made the first gestures of resistance against the strong currents of antipathy.”<sup>24</sup>

In 1911, poet Harold Symmes published and included amongst the great works of wilderness poetry his collection titled “Songs of Yosemite.” It was a piece of work that told of one man’s adventure with the wilderness and the serious spiritual awakening that followed while visiting the holiest sites he could find at Yosemite. Although Harold Symmes was just a young man when he died (1878-1910) his poetry was a direct testament to the spiritual maturity that he gained as a student of the early poets. Just one year after his death “Songs of Yosemite” was published. Some of his poems “In Gray-Souled Mystery (Half Dome), A King Thou Art (El Capitan), Gods of the Hills, and The Bride of the Silver Mist (Bridal Veil Falls), read like a hymnal.

*Now over the glacier-carved walls, From heights that my wild soul entralls, In midair outleaping, With cloud mists outsweeping, and rainbows that halo my falls. The lush mountain meadows I love, Their emerald with crystal I pave, As laughingly swirling I’m fretting and purling Their marge with my white-lapping wave. On, on through a granite-walled gorge, In anger its boulders I scourge, Now grinding and churning Its bed at my turning, I lash and I leap and I surge. What spirit impetuous fills my wild being? What god ever wills this crashing and bounding, this endless resounding, that rings through the great granite hills? Ever down to an unknown home, From heavens unknown I come. Ah, why this mad seething, Eternally wreathing These flowers of silvery foam? Why I go, what I am or shall be? For a river there’s naught but the sea. Some master is calling, and I, every falling, Knowing only my soul would be free.<sup>i</sup>*

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<sup>23</sup> Nash, Roderick Frazier. *Wilderness and the American Mind*. Yale University Press. 2014. Pg., 44.

<sup>24</sup> Nash. Pg. 44.

It was this very sentiment and others like it before Symmes that helped gain approval of the parks in congress and ultimately saved the great places we know and love today. Without poets like Harold, politicians may never have seen the value in such environments or had the support of the public. Wilderness leaders, poets, and dreamers during 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century created a new dialogue around wilderness and gave the world a new reason to renew their faith in both the land *and* God. Nature poetry was not meant to persuade believers from the church but to enhance their relationship to God through it. For many, John Muir included, the wilderness really *did* become their church and God became a living breathing thing, in the form of a mountain, placid lake, pebble in the sand.

*A reach of shadowed splendor in the silence of the dawn, of purity transcendent, holding earth and heaven pendent Within mystic mirror as breathless as the morn. Vision of mountain beauty, deep-shadowed, motionless, a jewel in granite setting, a soul in dream forgetting its power of enchantment, its depths of loveliness; Spirit of sleeping waters, how like a man's soul thou art! Touched of earth about thee, colored of life without thee, Yet holding this gleam of heaven within thine inner heart.* <sup>25</sup>

When new *romantic ideas* about wilderness surfaced during the Victorian era, Americans fell in love with landscape and used the landscape as a metaphor for freedom and democracy. The shift in mentality from one of disdain and hierarchy over the natural world to one of protection and admiration combined in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to create the world's first national parks. At the time, literature was shaping our thoughts and changing us as a river might have molded the landscape. We were carving out space and making room for a philosophy of simplicity. These concepts defined the early preservation movement.

In 1684 a revolutionary novel "The Sacred Theory of Earth," was published by Thomas Burn who regarded nature as a sacred thing and not an afterthought or banal experience in our existence. Nature

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<sup>25</sup> Symmes. *Shadowed Splendor. Mirror Lake.* Pg. 19-20.

might even be capable of hastening our own spiritual development and inner evolution. If Burnet were correct then preserving the national parks would not only be good for nature but good for us as well. The parks were a radical idea that suggested to invest in the future.

Burnet expressed his feelings about nature within a familiar biblical agenda. After all, "'Tis the Sacred writings of Scripture that are the best monuments of Antiquity, and to those we are chiefly beholden for the History of the first Ages, whether Natural History or Civil" that we must first gain understanding from and pledge allegiance to.<sup>26</sup> However subtle, Burnet's work managed to challenge the church assumption that the natural world was a nuisance or a place to be feared. The story of Adam and Eve helped inspire and solidify the romantic age. As it turned out, nature itself was a prose and a song after our own hearts.

Burnet called this mentality a "paradisiacal state" and believed, in his premise, that most people were suffering from it. But, he surmised, "the great change of the World since the Flood from what it was in the first Ages (and) the Earth under its present Form could not be Paradisiacal, nor any part of it."<sup>27</sup> We could not return, could not be perfect, and so began the lamentation that provided substance for Victorian poetry, inspiring the works of many authors and artists in early park history.

Inspired by the works of authors like Burnet, poets like Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1805), Percy Blythe Shelley (1792), Emily Dickenson (1830), William Wordsworth (1850) and Henry David Thoreau (1862) then paved the way for the most beloved wilderness advocate of the time, John Muir. The split from religious doctrine to poetry was in part due to the lamentation (poets) felt over lost forests and streams but also the insatiable curiosity to know the inner workings of the soul, to return through nature to the archaic origins of our shared human experience. In poetry, one could ask the eternal

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<sup>26</sup> Burnet, Thomas. *The Sacred Theory of the Earth*. 1684. pg. 25.

<sup>27</sup> Burnet, 25.

questions of life through rhyme and prose, be engaged and entertained by the great mysteries in life all at once. Poetry was feminine, asking for surrender, softness, and understanding from the reader.

Poetry “points away from itself and toward another signified – eternal and unchanging truth about the poet’s inner nature. At this point, landscape has pointed back to the original beholder and therefore formulates an expression of his soul. Thus, the natural world stands as a material script that can be ‘read’ studied, and meditated on for its hidden spiritual significance. In another sense, landscape becomes the language spoken – not only by the poet’s inner nature, but more importantly by the divine source from which this inner nature is derived. Indeed, this presence ‘within (the poet) that already and forever exists”<sup>28</sup>

In other words, it is not *just* nature we are after but *our* nature. We seek the understanding of our inner selves to find out what makes us human. In each of us, there is a poet embellishing upon his or her experience of the natural world.

“In looking at objects of nature while I am thinking, as at yonder moon dim-glimmering through the dewy window-pane, I seem rather to be seeking, as it were asking for, a symbolic language for something within me that already and forever exists, rather than observing anything new. Even when the latter is the case, yet still I have always an obscure feeling as if the new phenomena were the dim awakening of a forgotten or hidden truth of my inner nature.” Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1805)

As Coleridge viewed the “objects of nature” around him in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century he thus became “intimately (re)connected to a more meaningful truth about his inner nature, which transcends the surface characteristics and biographical determinants that make up his finite personality” Coleridge needed a symbolic language to articulate his “obscure feeling” about the “hidden truth” of his “inner nature.”<sup>29</sup> Similar sentiments would carry on in the hearts of men like John Muir, and even Ken Burns, whose passion for the written word and the landscape would go hand in hand as the fight for wilderness rights went public. Poetry influenced, directly and indirectly the policies that would ultimately manage and govern the national parks.

As a youth, beloved Victorian poet William Wordsworth experienced the natural world in an emotionally distressing way. Plagued by a sensation that nature was both a “mixture of ecstasy and

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<sup>28</sup> Wong, Lisa Marie. *Visions of Landscape in Romantic and Victorian Poetry*. Wesleyan University, 2008.

<sup>29</sup> Wong, 25.

danger,” he roamed about the Wye (childhood home)” more like a man Flying from something that he dreads, than one Who sought the thing he loved.<sup>30</sup> Wordsworth contemplated his feelings toward nature, “from a passionate, sensuous exhilaration to a more substantial and intellectual pleasure; from an aesthetic appreciation of nature to a spiritual participation in it. Wordsworth conceived of landscape not as a projection, or even a reflection of his soul, but as a direct expression of his soul”<sup>31</sup> Nature then was becoming an unswerving metaphor for the human experience. And since we would not conceive of burning a church, how then could we conceive of destroying a forest or meadow. Each was significant to our understanding of place and soul.

“For oft, when on my couch I lie  
In vacant or in pensive mood,  
They flash upon that inward eye  
Which is the voice of solitude;  
And then my heart with pleasure fills  
And dances with the daffodils.” William Wordsworth, 1888.

Henry David Thoreau similarly emerged himself in the landscape, attempting to define his connection to nature through poetry. If humans have a conscience, why not pine trees and flowers too? Thoreau, like Wordsworth developed an angst in his relationship to nature through his poetry. To understand it was to relate to his own imperfections. Sometimes in Thoreau’s poetry he recalled his desire to be in nature as an “aching joy.”

*“How could the patient pine have known  
The morning breeze would come,  
Or humble flowers anticipate  
The insect’s noonday hum--  
-Henry David Thoreau*

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<sup>30</sup> Wong, 17.

<sup>31</sup> Wong, 16.

By the time the world knew of John Muir, poetry was a common thread of hope shared by many Americans, rich and poor alike. Poets were nature's greatest advocates. A concept that began with a romantic idea and ended with an historic action, that of land preservation. Through poetry, Muir saved a wilderness and in doing so, he gave the world its first National Park.

Thoreau said "my life has been the poem I would have writ, but I could not both live and utter it." Man's relationship to nature has always been a personal one, a journey towards understanding that sometimes cannot linguistically be defined. Poetry then serves as a tool for gripping the mystery, putting it in a neat arrangement of lines, and inspiring movements in the process. It is no coincidence that the protection of wilderness areas coincided with the greatest poetic movement in history, that of the Victorians. Without them and the efforts they made at understanding their place in the natural world, our story of the National Parks might not be the same.

*To stand at the edge of the sea, to sense the ebb and flow of the tides, to feel the breath of a mist moving over a great salt marsh, to watch the flight of shore birds that have swept up and down the surf lines of the continents for untold thousands of years, to see the running of the old eels and the young shad to the sea, is to have knowledge of things that are as nearly eternal as any earthly life can be."*

*Rachel Carson*

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