An Open Field
Author(s): Char Miller
Source: *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 70, No. 1 (February 2001), pp. 69-76
Published by: University of California Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/phr.2001.70.1.69
Accessed: 13-06-2018 17:51 UTC

An Open Field

CHAR MILLER

The author is a member of the history department at Trinity University.

Perhaps only a poet could capture the bewildering shifts in the climate of south Texas. Sidney Lanier, convalescing there in 1873, sketched out a tale about "those remarkable meteorological phenomena called 'northers'" that sweep across the region with peculiar fury. Imagine "riding along the undulating plains around San Antonio on a splendid day in April," he wrote in an evocative essay first published in *Southern Magazine*, for that is "when the flowers, the birds, and the sunshine seem to be playing a wild game of which can be maddest with delight, and the tender spring-sky looks on like a mother laughing at the antics of her darlings." This tranquil moment seemed to stretch on, even as the day heated up. "Presently you observe that it is very warm. An hour later you cannot endure your coat; you throw it off and hang it around your saddle," but this brings scant relief. "Soon the heat is stifling, thermometer at ninety degrees, which on the windless prairie with the Gulf moisture in the air, is greatly relaxing," especially for consumptives such as Lanier. Then, while standing "on an elevation in the hope of getting some breath of air, suddenly you observe a bluish haze in the north," and within a "few moments a great roar advances . . . and presently the wind strikes you, blows your moist garment against your skin with a mortal chill." Illness lurked for any who did not quickly mount up and "make for a house as fast as your horse can carry you," or, failing that, seek

Pacific Historical Review, Vol. 70, No. 1, pages 69–76. ISSN 0030-8684

shelter in "some thicket of mesquite in a ravine under the lee of a hill, for within an hour the temperature may plummet 40 to 50 degrees." There would be a calm after the storm. In its energetic wake, the tempest would spin off succeeding days of bracing temperatures and crystalline skies, a fair return for a thermometer that "cuts such capers."[1]

It should have been during a similarly punishing and mercurial moment in late twentieth-century San Antonio, enveloped in a "furious storm of rain, of hail, or of snow," that I initially encountered Richard White's seminal historiographical essay. Such a convergence of art, life, and weather pattern might have defied reality, but it would have made for a fabulous narrative opening. That said, like the norther's rush, his article, which I read shortly after its publication in the August 1985 issue of the *Pacific Historical Review*, blew me away.

Trained as an intellectual and social historian, and backing into environmental studies as a result of research into the life and activism of Gifford Pinchot, I read White's careful dissection of the emerging field and discovered (not for the last time) just how much I did not know. The contours of this new academic landscape were as unfamiliar as its language was confusing and its signifiers obscure. Like a naive Lanier, who had trotted out onto the plains thinking that one spring day was just like another, I did not have a clue what I had come upon.

This disorientation was also alluring. As it probed the broad range of topics that made up environmental history in the mid-1980s, from the biographical to the urban, from the ecological and the aesthetic to the hydrological and the wild—only some of which I knew in passing—White's survey proved a beguiling guide for the perplexed. Most immediately understandable (and thus comforting, I suppose) was its deft sketch of the discipline's evolution, beginning with the varied influence of writers as diverse as Frederick Jackson Turner, Walter Prescott Webb, and James Malin on the development of modern environmental history in the late 1960s. This new stage of scholarship, a result of the pioneering work of a second generation of historians, including Samuel P. Hays and Roderick Nash, had co-

1. Sidney Lanier, "San Antonio de Bexar," *Southern Magazine*, 13 (July 1873), 83–99; *ibid.* (Aug. 1873), 138–152.

incided with and drawn strength from the "contemporaneous rise of the environmental movement." Here, White introduced a theme central to his article (and, as it has turned out, to the discipline's development): the powerful, animating connection between scholarly analyses of the environment and a force then gaining strength in American politics—the environmental movement. In this academic field, the grass *was* greener; it had a compelling sense of social relevance, no small consequence to those who were mapping this new terrain or who had simply stumbled upon it.[2]

But while White, then at the University of Utah, acknowledged the excitement and urgency that advocacy could bring to stolid academic agendas, he also understood the associated costs. When historians conflated the past and present, when they probed other times in search of representative arguments for which they felt considerable affinity, they perforce blurred fundamental distinctions between historical moments and missed the shifts in context that defined past environments and the human conceptions of them. "The past may be another country," he cautioned, "but for some authors a transcendent nature can wash away the boundaries that time creates" so as to locate "a universal language shared by author and subject."[3]

About wilderness this was especially true. It "has become the highway to the American psyche most favored by intellectual historians," White observed. "Whether hated and feared, loved, or best of all, beheld with tortured ambivalence, wilderness has become the mythic core of the American experience." So it remains, although perhaps it is more accurate to say that our response to wilderness has intensified in the intervening years. This intensification has something to do with the apparent diminution of acreage defined as wilderness, the shrinking of intellectual horizons, and the hardening of political rhetoric. Now ever more fraught with cultural meaning, more embedded with psychological value, more infused with spiritual sensibility, wilderness has become the national raw nerve. Raw enough, in any event, that those who have probed our manifold connec-

2. Richard White, "American Environmental History: The Development of a New Historical Field," *Pacific Historical Review*, 54 (1985), 297–304.

3. *Ibid.*, 305–306.

tions to wilderness, or who have wondered about its alleged sanctity, have come in for a touch of partisan mugging. So William Cronon discovered (and surely anticipated) when he delivered "The Trouble with Wilderness: Or Getting Back to the Wrong Nature" at the 1995 meeting of the American Society for Environmental History (ASEH). His essay was subsequently published in a variety of venues, most provocatively as the centerpiece of a forum in *Environmental History*.[4]

Fascinated by the American impulse to deify wilderness, Cronon argued that this long-standing sanctification—with its roots reaching deep into nineteenth-century Romanticism—reinforced an artificial and politically dangerous distinction between the natural and the human. "Idealizing a distant wilderness too often means not idealizing the environment in which we actually live, the landscape that for better and worse we call home." Rather than continuing to embrace what he called a "set of bipolar moral scales in which the human and the nonhuman, the unnatural and natural, the fallen and unfallen, serve as our conceptual map for understanding and valuing the world," he proposed that we accept instead the "full continuum of a natural landscape that is also cultural, in which the city, the suburb, the pastoral, and the wild each has its proper place." Only through such an inclusive perception would we be able to "recollect the nature, the culture, and the history to make the world as we know it," a knitting together that would have important policy implications. If wilderness "can start being as humane as it is natural, then perhaps we can get on with the unending struggle to live rightly in the world—not just in the garden, not just in the wilderness, but in the home that encompasses them both."[5]

Cronon's considered search for a resolution to what White sardonically dubbed Americans' "tortured ambivalence" about

4. William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in William Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature* (New York, 1995), 69–90; see also *Environmental History*, 1 (Jan. 1996), 7–28; Char Miller and Hal K. Rothman, eds., *Out of the Woods: Essays in Environmental History* (Pittsburgh, 1997), 28–50; a condensed version appeared under the same title in the *New York Times*, Aug. 13, 1995, p. 42.

5. Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," *Environmental History*, 1 (Jan. 1996), 20–25.

wilderness provoked decidedly unambivalent responses (thereby underscoring White's original insight about our tormented state). Many environmental historians—including Samuel Hays and Michael P. Cohen who rebutted Cronon in the *Environmental History* forum—took him to task for a series of sins, real and imagined. Some angrily dismissed his analysis of the cult of wilderness, suggesting that he had confused the physical place with its mental representation; others took offense at the polemical nature of his argument even as they questioned his environmentalist credentials. Still others were appalled, in the wake of the 1994 Republican ascendancy in the state and national legislatures, that his words would give succor to the then-looming anti-environmental conservative backlash embodied in the so-called "Wise Use" movement. In a careful formulation of this challenge, Cohen inquired how "is it possible to offer a constructive critique of environmentalism . . . especially its 'save the wilderness' version, without damaging valuable parts of the movement, and without offering an argument largely usable by the opponents of environmentalism who are motivated by narrow economic gain?" About wilderness, one must choose sides and select one's words with care.[6]

But that timorousness begs this question: Why must environmental historians operate under a form of prior restraint, and why must we take into account how some people *might* read our work and perhaps use our conclusions for their own ends? That for some self-censorship is a preferred alternative

6. Samuel P. Hays, "The Trouble with Bill Cronon's Wilderness," *Environmental History*, 1 (Jan. 1996), 29–32; Michael P. Cohen, "Resistance to Wilderness," *ibid.*, 33–42; Thomas R. Dunlap, "But What Did You Go Out to Wilderness to See," *ibid.*, 43–47; less cautious than these published reactions to Cronon's arguments were some of those posted on the American Society of Environmental History listserve (H-Environment: http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/logsearch/). Historian Paul Hirt, for one, argued that "Cronon does not understand the wilderness movement. There is some interesting history in the essay, but when he turns to his critique of wilderness, his argument becomes essentially linguistic. He plays with terms and teases his readers with ironies, but in the end offers little more than a straw dog representation of the movement that is neither informative nor helpful as far as conservation is concerned." To environmentalist Dave Foreman's charge that the worst thing Cronon had done was to give fuel "to the traditional enemies of conservation," Hirt could only add "Amen." Religious sensibilities are ever present in the politics of wilderness. Paul Hirt, "Cronon vs. Foreman," Feb. 3 1997 H-Environment listserve posting.

to searching evaluations of the cultural wellsprings of our fascination with wilderness is precisely why debates over the significance of old-growth forests, national parks, or riparian ecosystems will continue to energize and trouble environmental historiography well into the new century.

Just as tumultuous has been (and will remain) efforts to assess the interior landscape of those engaged in environmental matters. Part of what makes biography such a tangled and difficult enterprise, as Richard White recognized, is that its practitioners must meld with their subjects (how else know them?) and simultaneously be detached observers of those particular lives (how else evaluate their import?). It only adds to the tension should the biographers themselves hold "strong environmentalist sympathies." The resulting books may be "more deeply felt than most conventional academic works"; although "this identification with their subjects gives the books real power, it also presents significant pitfalls." One of these is the manner in which writers then reconstruct the cultural and physical worlds in which their subjects operated. "Nature is at once a physical setting where living beings exist in complex relationships with each other, and a human invention," White noted. "Humans create a shifting set of cultural concepts about the physical world and identify these concepts as nature. When they act, humans do so on the basis of these cultural formulations, but their actions redound on the physical world." Identifying and analyzing these variables immensely complicates the biographical agenda.[7]

The work must be done nonetheless, and a recent example of the benefits that can flow from rigorous contextual analysis is Steven J. Holmes's *The Young John Muir*. Debunking many of the myths that Muir wrapped around himself and peeling away the layers of legend in which subsequent writers had swaddled him, Holmes places these "traditional images of Muir" in what he denotes as Muir's "environmental biography." This term, and the enterprise it launches, leads Holmes to offer an oft-nuanced account of Muir's "patterns of relationship with the specific environments—natural, domestic, and built—in which he lived and moved . . . over the course of his lifetime." These patterns reflect an essential reciprocity: In Holmes's recounting, Muir is

7. White, "American Environmental History," 305–307.

as much an active agent, whose "apprehensions of the larger forces and powers of the universe" allow him to "respond creatively and spontaneously to each encounter with a new environment," as he is a reactive figure. Nature's power to require or evoke "new patterns of imagery, feeling, and behavior on the part of humans" constitutes an "independent actor" in the life of a man whom an earlier biographer had anointed "Son of the Wilderness."[8]

The theoretical underpinning to Holmes's claims depends heavily on his reading of Jean Piaget, Erik Erikson, and other developmental psychologists. Their emphasis on identity formation, when combined with arguments gleaned from environmental psychology, are at the heart of an "Object Relations Approach" that Holmes develops to define Muir's evolving emotional response to nature. The affective bonds he felt for Yosemite, for example, allowed Muir to assimilate this environment "into himself," however incompletely. "Despite his own attempts to portray them as static, Muir's relationships to the natural world were . . . as complex and changing as his relationships with family, friends, human society, and his own self-image—all of which were themselves intimately interrelated with each other, in dynamic and unexpected ways, over the course of his entire life."[9]

Less indebted to psychological models, Curt Meine nevertheless reaches similar conclusions about the demands and requirements of environmental biography. In his essay "Wallace Stegner: Geobiographer," he notes that "our lives are never entirely 'interior' or 'exterior' but always a dynamic interpenetration of both," which leads him to urge greater attention to "the environmental context of biographical studies—the places a subject shapes and is shaped by." This approach has become all the more necessary, for as "psychology has revolutionized our perception of the inner world, advances in the natural sciences have revolutionized our perception of the world around us. Biographies—of some subjects at least—can never be the same."

8. Steven J. Holmes, *The Young John Muir: An Environmental History*, (Madison, Wisc., 1999), 3–9; Linnie Marsh Wolfe, *Son of the Wilderness: The Life of John Muir* (Madison, Wisc., 1978).

9. Holmes, *The Young John Muir*, 243, and Appendix C, 265–287.

The changes are already evident in a clutch of recent life studies of naturalists and scientists. With varying degrees of success, work on the Bartrams (father and son), George Perkins Marsh, and Rachel Carson have paid attention to the interplay between individual, landscape, and the imagination that binds them together. "We selectively perceive what we are accustomed to seeing," once wrote David Lowenthal, who has updated and revised his prize-winning 1958 biography of Marsh. "[F]eatures and patterns in the landscape make sense to us because we share a history with them." Without those associations, without "the past as tangible or remembered evidence[,] we could not function."[10]

That is equally true for those environmental historians more comfortable with the methodologies of cultural or political analysis, ecology, or geosciences. This pursuit of complexity, fueled by interdisciplinary explorations and a grudging acceptance of the chaotic nature of nature (human and otherwise), is impelling us to thicken our analyses, even as we doubt our capacity to understand fully what we are analyzing. That is as it should be. "Humans may *think* what they want," Richard White concluded with a laugh, but "they cannot always *do* what they want, and not all they do turns out as planned." Need confirmation? Recall that in a split second Sidney Lanier, while frolicking in Nature's sunny beneficence, was caught out in the open by an ominous and lowering sky and was left a baffled, buffeted, and very wet man.[11]

10. Curt Meine, "Wallace Stegner: Geobiographer," in Curt Meine, ed., *Wallace Stegner and the Continental Vision: Essays on Literature, History, and Landscape* (Washington, D.C., 1997), 121–139; Thomas P. Slaughter, *The Natures of John and William Bartram* (New York, 1996); Linda Lear, *Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature* (New York, 1998); David Lowenthal, *George Perkins Marsh: Prophet for Conservation* (Seattle, 2000); David Lowenthal, "Past Time, Present Place: Landscape and Memory," *Geographical Review*, 65 (Jan. 1975), 5–6.

11. Donald Worster, "The Ecology of Order and Chaos," reprinted in Miller and Rothman, eds., *Out of the Woods*, 3–17; see also the sharp debates over the moral mission, political focus, and historiographical future of environmental history in "A Round Table: Environmental History," *Journal of American History*, 76 (1990), 1087–1147; White, "American Environmental History," 335.