Early California Nature Writers: King, Muir, Austin, Jeffers

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Beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century, early California nature writers drew upon and transformed a wide range of cultural sources in service of addressing a variety of societal needs. Authors such as Clarence King, John Muir, Mary Austin, and Robinson Jeffers combined scientific observation and theory, religious and philosophical concepts, imagery from artists and poets, local color and folk tales, and dramatic stories of adventurers and mountaineers in creating compelling descriptions of the state's varied natural features—mountains, deserts, and coast. In so doing, they created a literary tradition that expressed the simultaneously ethical and political goal of helping to cultivate an appreciative, meaningful, and respectful relationship with the natural environment on its own terms, apart from the dictates of human use.

Beginnings: Tourism, Art, and Politics in Yosemite Valley

Although Spanish, French, Russian, and English explorers, surveyors, military leaders, and others had been writing about the geography, resources, and natural features of California for hundreds of years, literary nature writing about California emerged in association with a more specific time and place: Yosemite Valley and the High Sierra in the third quarter of the nineteenth century. Yosemite Valley first became known to white Americans in 1851, when it was "discovered" by a military battalion commissioned by Mariposa County as part of a

statewide effort to make the Sierra Nevada safe for gold mines and other settlers by pacifying or eliminating the Native inhabitants. In the case of Yosemite, those inhabitants were the Ahwahneechee, who had lived in the valley (which they called "Ahwahnee") for some four thousand years, managing their environment in part through the use of periodic burning to keep down underbrush and facilitate hunting. Disease and military action soon decimated the Ahwahneechee, leaving a park-like valley open and accessible to the imaginations and lifestyles of newly-arrived Americans—primarily, as it turned out, not miners but tourists.

In 1855, James Mason Hutchings of San Francisco visited the valley with friends and immediately began a multilayered effort to create a tourist mecca. Hutchings arranged transport from the city, started a hotel, led tours of the valley, and spread information and images of the valley through publications such as *Hutchings' California Magazine* (1856-1861) and a series of popular guidebooks. The first article of the first issue of the magazine made clear Hutchings' interest in promoting Yosemite (identified by an alternate spelling of the name): "There are but few lands that possess more of the beautiful and picturesque than California.... Among the most remarkable [of California scenes] may be classed the Yo-Ham-i-te Valley."[1]

Hutchings' immediate use of the term "picturesque" in association with California and Yosemite is significant. On a basic level, the phrase signaled the importance of visual artists in creating a powerful and enduring image of the valley as a centerpiece of California identity and of American culture. The article was accompanied by a sketch of the valley as first viewed from the trail by one of Hutchings' companions on that first visit, the artist Thomas Ayres, an iconic view that became a model for countless subsequent artists, including photographers Charles Weed (also an associate of Hutchings) in 1859 and, more important, Carleton Watkins in 1861. Watkins' large-format photographs and stereoscopic views soon made their way East, to the

parlour of Oliver Wendell Holmes (where they were viewed by Emerson and others) as well as Goupil's gallery in New York, providing visual confirmation of the descriptions that Unitarian minister Thomas Starr King (a transplanted New Englander) had written as letters to the *Boston Evening Transcript* in December 1860 and January 1861. Starr King and Watkins brought Yosemite to the attention of the nation and attracted even more prominent artists and writers, including the German painter Albert Bierstadt (already famous for his views of the Rockies) and the writer Fitz Hugh Ludlow. Writing in the *Atlantic Monthly* in June 1864, Ludlow reported himself profoundly moved by the very same scene that had captivated (and been captured by) Ayres, Watkins, and others: "Our dense leafy surrounding hid from us the fact of our approach to the Valley's tremendous battlement, till our trail turned at a sharp angle and we stood on Inspiration Point. That name had appeared pedantic, but we found it only the spontaneous expression of our own feelings on the spot. We did not so much seem to be seeing from that crag of vision a new scene on the old familiar globe as a new heaven and a new earth into which the creative spirit had just been breathed."[2]

Along with the emphasis on visual scenes, Ludlow's prose reminds us of the deeper meanings of the term "picturesque" in nineteenth-century American culture—often associated with a companion term, the "sublime." The ideals of the picturesque and the sublime—originally developed by European artists and writers in depicting the scenery of the Alps and elsewhere, before being transferred to America by Thomas Cole and the Hudson River school painters—emphasized aesthetic composition and balance as a means of unifying contrasting themes of beauty and awe, comfort and danger, intimacy and grandeur, approachability and remoteness, humanity and divinity. Thus, for a scene in Switzerland, the Catskills, or Yosemite to be termed "picturesque" or “sublime” meant that it was more than just a pretty picture—it was a scene that

moved you emotionally and intellectually, that simultaneously humbled and exalted you, that made you feel alive in the present yet with some touch of eternity. At the same time, Ludlow's narrative also includes humorous passages on camping and food, tales of strenuous travel, local color–style sketches of stereotypic Westerners (akin to Gold Rush tales of Harte and Twain), and practical recommendations for tourists—all *de rigueur* for Eastern audiences. With its combination of art and practicality, adventure and philosophy, high-brow description and low-brow tales, Ludlow's article illustrates the basic elements of countless other traveler's accounts and guidebook descriptions of Yosemite popularized throughout the 1860s and 1870s, many of which reached national and international audiences in illustrated contributions to magazines such as the *Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper's* and to publishing projects such as the two-volume *Picturesque America* (1872-74).

However, tourist popularity came at an environmental cost. As early as 1860, Starr King decried the adverse impact of thoughtless visitors and commercial exploitation on scenery, concerns echoed by prominent figures such as Horace Greeley, editor of the *New York Tribune*, and the landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, famous for the creation of Central Park and other urban parks but brought west to manage the Mariposa estate of John C. Fremont. Under such influences, in 1864 California Senator John Conness brought forth a bill setting aside more than sixty square miles of federal land to be cared for by the state of California for purposes of "public use, resort, and recreation"—a bill that was signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln that year, the first federal act protecting wilderness. It is important to realize that although observers such as Olmsted and Starr King were aware of the ecological destruction being wrought by gold mining on Sierra streams and forests, the concern over Yosemite was different, focusing on protecting a certain sort of human experience rather than the natural

environment itself. Thus, Olmsted and others offered cultural and psychological arguments for governmental action to protect and manage natural scenery for the public good—an idea that over the next fifty years would go on to form the core of the movement for national parks, and contribute to other forms of environmental protection as well.

Clarence King: Romantic Geologist

In the midst of these varied cultural and historical streams, however, it took a mountain-climber and geologist, Clarence King, to produce the first real classic of California nature writing, *Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada* (1872, revised ed. 1874). The book grew directly out of King's work as part of the California Geological Survey, which emerged during the Gold Rush as a means of gathering scientific information to aid mining development. After a fitful start, in 1860 the legislature named as State Geologist Josiah D. Whitney, a Massachusetts native and Yale graduate who had participated in a number of scientific surveys in the East and Midwest. Whitney first enlisted the prominent botanist William Henry Brewer, another Yale graduate (whose letters about his travels were published in 1930 as *Up and Down in California, 1860-64*) and then over the next few years added King (a Yale student at the time) and other scientists. The Survey undertook fieldwork until 1870, and although state funding ended in 1874, various members (with help from other scientists at Yale and Harvard) published a variety of reports on geology, paleontology, botany, and ornithology through 1880. For a more popular audience, in 1868 Whitney published *The Yosemite Book,* a scientifically-informed guidebook that included photographs by Carleton Watkins (replaced by wood-cut illustrations in later editions).

King, from a prominent and wealthy New England family, had cultural as well as scientific interests, and the Alpine writings of John Tyndall and John Ruskin were as important as the geological insights of Louis Agassiz in sparking his interest in the mountains of California. Combining Eastern culture with Western adventurousness, he was known to occasionally lounge around the campfire in immaculate white linen dinner jackets, and this breadth of background, interest, talent, and connections is part of what made *Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada* such a breakthrough book at the time. Along with the standard elements of travelogue, picturesque description, and Western local color stories (the latter alone making up four full chapters and parts of others), the book was distinctive both for its scientific perspective and for its compelling account of daring exploits of Alpine-style mountain climbing. The first chapters offer a broad geological overview of the Sierra, explicitly acknowledging the work of Whitney and the California Survey, while later chapters are full of more specific descriptions of landscape and botany. Geological analysis flows into picturesque fancy, as when King describes Mt. Tyndall as "purely Gothic": "A thousand upspringing spires and pinnacles pierce the sky in every direction, the cliffs and mountain-ridges are everywhere ornamented with countless needle-like turrets."[3]

As suggested by the title, however, the dramatic core of the book comes in a series of accounts of mountaineering adventures, modeled after those of the English Alpinists, dramatizing the human encounter with the mountains on physical as well as mental levels. King and companions test their strength, skill and fortitude against the highest peaks in the Sierra—Tyndall, Shasta, Whitney, and others—and are rewarded at the summit with sublime scenery. At times, the intense relationship of trust and dependence between King and his companion takes center stage. On their descent from Mt. Tyndall, King and his friend Dick Cotter found themselves on a narrow ledge, facing a sheer rock wall on one side and a precipitous drop on the

other; the only way out was up. Tied by a rope to his friend in case he should fall, Cotter made his way up to another narrow ledge, which they thought would provide a stable base from which Cotter could help King by taking some of his weight on the rope. After a pause, Cotter called down that he was ready; strengthened by his friend's encouraging voice and example, King found that he was able to make the ascent on his own. As he pulled himself up over the ledge, however, King was shocked to find Cotter sitting calmly on a sloping and smooth ledge that offered no support or any kind; had King put any of his weight on the rope, both men would have fallen to their deaths in the yawning chasm below.

The dramatic high point of the book comes in the penultimate chapter, with what King believed to be the first-ever ascent of Mt. Whitney, already understood to be the highest peak in the continental United States. After the book's publication, however, it was discovered that King had climbed not Mt. Whitney but the next peak over, Mt. Langley; accordingly, in 1873 he went back and corrected his mistake (though only after others had reached the peak first). The controversy occasioned a new edition of the book in which King recounted the successful ascent and reflected further on the human meanings of contact with the mountains:

> I entered for a moment deeply and intimately into that strange realm where admiration blends with superstition, that condition in which the savage feels within him the greatness of a natural object, and forever after endows it with consciousness and power. ... These peculiar moments, rare enough in the life of a scientific man, when one trembles on the edge of myth-making, are of interest … as awakening the unperishing germ of primitive manhood which is buried within us all under so much culture and science.[4]

Anticipating the interest in primal human consciousness explored a generation later by D. H. Lawrence and others—and later in the twentieth century by pioneering California-based ecopsychologists such as Paul Shepard and Theodore Roszak—King's own career seemed to embody the union of culture, science, and elemental encounters with nature, making him a captivating public figure though the 1870s and 1880s. After leaving the California survey, he went on to participate in various other Western explorations before being named the first director of the U.S. Geological Survey in 1879, producing noted scientific publications along the way. In later years, he withdrew from public sight to pursue more personal passions—including a double life in which he passed for an African-American Pullman porter in order to marry a former slave named Ada Copeland, with whom he lived for thirteen years and had five children before his death in 1901.

John Muir: Wilderness Prophet

A very different—though more enduring—public persona associated with Yosemite and the Sierra was that of a young Scots immigrant, John Muir. Born in Scotland, raised on the Wisconsin frontier, with only a few years of schooling at the University of Wisconsin, Muir brought none of the cultural background, formal scientific training, or social and professional connections of King. When he arrived unknown in Yosemite in 1868, he made money the best way he knew, working as a mechanic at a sawmill. Over the next five years he taught himself geology, met Emerson in Yosemite, collected plant specimens for Harvard botanist Asa Gray, and collaborated with University of California scientist Joseph LeConte, whose *Ramblings in the High Sierra* (1875) describes some of their early encounters in Yosemite. Muir soon published

original studies arguing for the glacial origins of Sierra valleys such as Yosemite, conflicting with Josiah Whitney's adherence to the view that the valley was created by an ancient catastrophe; the established scientist mocked the young upstart, but in the end Muir was proved correct, and the controversy ended up enhancing his reputation.

Muir also had a literary turn, reading Milton and Thoreau and writing nature and travel essays alongside his scientific work. Wintering in the Bay Area, he met fellow-contributors to the *Overland Monthly* such as editor Bret Harte and the poet Joaquin Miller, a "frontier original" of yet another stamp. Born Cincinnatus Heine Miller in Indiana, he moved with his family to Oregon as a child, and played up his frontier origins in self-consciously creating a popular persona as a rough-and-ready outlaw poet; his *Songs of the Sierra* (1871) and *Songs of the Sun-Lands* (1873), epic ballads of stereotypic Western characters and scenes, made him a minor celebrity in California and England. In 1887 he contributed four essays to a descriptive travelogue edited by Muir entitled *Picturesque California* (modeled explicitly upon the earlier *Picturesque America*). Even more important to Muir were his friendships with poets Charles Warren Stoddard and especially Ina Coolbrith, the first Poet Laureate of California, whose presence as librarian in Oakland and San Francisco for many years provided stability to the Bay Area literary scene. Her own poetry, lyrical ballads and short pieces that imported classical styles into local scenes, presented natural beauty as central to a more cultured and spiritual California character than Miller's frontier identity. Her 1895 *Songs from the Golden Gate* included engravings of paintings by another of Muir's close friends, the landscape painter William Keith. Thus, as did the painters and photographers of the 1860s, the California poets and artists of the 1870s, '80s, and '90s helped shape the nature writing of the day—including that of John Muir.

Most of Muir's first book, *The Mountains of California,* was written (and published as magazine articles) in the 1870s and early '80s, although it didn't appear in book form until 1894. The book is very different than King's, in ways suggested by the title's explicit focus on the mountains themselves rather than on the human act of mountaineering. Muir's *Mountains* includes no local color stories and places much less emphasis on the narrator, offering instead a fuller geological and biological description of the Sierra as an ecological whole. After an introductory chapter, the book is structured not with respect to narrative incidents (as in King) but rather landscape features considered in the light of geological evolution: beginning with the formative power of the glaciers, the book in effect proceeds downhill to passes, lakes, meadows, forests, and the lowlands beyond, including chapters on animal inhabitants as well. Within this naturalistically-structured presentation, the authorial persona makes regular appearances as a human lens through which the reader may better experience the deeper meanings of the mountains. This happens most famously in the dramatic mountaineering adventure narrated in the third chapter, "A New View of the High Sierra," where Muir explicitly contrasts his artist-companions' quest for "picturesque views" with his own more intense spiritual and bodily contact with the dangers and glories of Mt. Ritter. More often, though, Muir portrays a right relationship with the mountains not through manly adventure but rather a more contemplative and receptive stance reminiscent of Emerson, Thoreau, and poets such as Coolbrith, as when he leads the reader into the sunshine and flowers of a typical glacial meadow: “With inexpressible delight you wade out into the grassy sun-lake, feeling yourself contained in one of Nature's most sacred chambers, withdrawn from the sterner influences of the mountains, secure from all intrusion, secure from yourself, free in the universal beauty. And notwithstanding the scene is so

impressively spiritual, and you seem dissolved in it, yet everything about you is beating with warm, terrestrial, human love and life delightfully substantial and familiar."[5]

Although *Mountains* is not an overtly political book, certain passages suggest the origins of Muir's conservationism, especially his observations (from fieldwork in the 1870s) on the range and health of the sequoia forests. Outside of the text, however, the time at which the book was published was one of emerging activism: In 1890 a series of articles in *Century Magazine* had helped shape public and political opinion in support of the creation of Yosemite National Park, and two years later Muir and others founded the Sierra Club to help consolidate and extend the conservation message. In this context, the appreciation of nature expressed in *Mountains* was immediately understood as having political implications, and the popular and financial success of the book contributed to increased activism both by Muir himself and the Sierra Club as well.

Accordingly, Muir's second book, *Our National Parks* (1901), was his most explicitly political. The book begins in an Olmstedian mode, noting the public interest in the spiritual, health, and social benefits on nature that characterized the broader "back-to-nature" movement of recent years, and taking this as a mandate for political action to protect the forests from increasing destruction at the hands of loggers, tourists, and others. To address these threats, Muir's literary range grew to include biting political sarcasm:

> Any fool can destroy trees. They cannot run away; and if they could, they would still be destroyed—chased and hunted down as long as fun or a dollar could be got out of their bark hides, branching horns, or magnificent bole backbones. ... Through all the wonderful, eventful centuries since Christ's time—and long before that—God has cared for these trees, saved them from drought, disease, avalanches, and a thousand straining,

leveling tempests and floods; but he cannot save them from fools—only Uncle Sam can do that.[6]

Muir's pen and persona contributed much to the emergence of conservation as a political force both in California and nationally, typified by the famous 1903 photograph of Muir and President Theodore Roosevelt standing atop Glacier Point, with Yosemite Valley stretching out behind them; in a few years Roosevelt would increase federal control of the valley, one of many federal acts extending protection to national parks and forests throughout the country.

Even as he continued to engage in political activism, Muir struggled to find time and focus to write. His later books were more autobiographical and less explicitly political, including *My First Summer in the Sierra* (1911), a revised version of his early Yosemite journals and one of his most-read works today. Combining (as did King) elements of travelogue, scientific observation, and local color, the most memorable passages evoke a youthful transcendentalist encounter with the mountains: "We are now in the mountains and they are in us, kindling enthusiasm, making every nerve quiver, filling every pore and cell of us."[7] Reaching back further in his life, *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth* (1913) explores Muir's formative experiences in Scotland and Wisconsin. Others of his reminiscences were only published posthumously, including the edited journals of his trip through the South in 1867-68, *A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf* (1916), containing philosophical passages that have powerfully influenced environmental thinkers throughout the twentieth century: "Why should man value himself as more than a small part of the one great unit of creation? And what creature of all that the Lord has taken the pains to make is not essential to the completeness of that unit—the cosmos?"[8]

Other reminiscences included *Stickeen* (1909) and another posthumous collection of edited journals, *Travels in Alaska* (1915).

Muir's career was not without defeats, of course, most memorably the unsuccessful movement to stop the flooding of Hetch Hetchy Valley to create a reservoir for San Francisco. The struggle brought out some of his most powerful language, as in an essay on Hetch Hetchy in *The Yosemite* (1912): "These temple destroyers, devotees of ravaging commercialism, seem to have a perfect contempt for Nature, and, instead of lifting their eyes to the God of the mountains, lift them to the Almighty Dollar. Dam Hetch Hetchy! As well dam for water-tanks the people's cathedrals and churches, for no holier temple has ever been consecrated by the heart of man."[9] Even in defeat, such rhetoric became part of the enduring myth of Muir as a wilderness prophet, combining science, ethics, and ecstasy in the service of political action.

Mary Austin: Voice of the Desert

Another early-century urban water project—this time involving the flooding of Owens Valley, on the east side of the Sierra, to feed an aqueduct carrying mountain water to Los Angles—was a pivotal event in the career of the next great California nature writer, Mary Hunter Austin. Born in Illinois in 1868, Mary Hunter moved with her family to the San Joaquin Valley in 1888, marrying Stafford Wallace Austin three years later. The couple moved frequently in search of work, and during a stint in San Francisco Mary met Ina Coolbrith, who helped the novice writer publish her first story in the *Overland Monthly* in 1892; other stories, poems, and essays appeared in various venues, including the *Atlantic Monthly.* That same year, the Austins moved again, this time to the town of Lone Pine in the Owens Valley. Over the next seven

years—despite (or perhaps because of) the pressures of chronic poverty, marital difficulties, and a developmentally disabled daughter—Austin made close observations of the geography, animals, and Native inhabitants of the desert around her, which became the subject of her first and best known book, *The Land of Little Rain* (1903).

Before Austin, the desert was not a favored subject in American literature, as suggested by the complete absence of desert settings in *Picturesque America* or *Picturesque California*. The only significant literary writing about deserts before Austin, the art critic John C. Van Dyke's *The Desert* (1901), approaches the Arizona desert primarily from an aesthetic perspective (as suggested by the book's subtitle, *Further Studies in Natural Appearances*). By contrast, Austin's intimate experience of the desert led her to an ecocentric perspective, placing the land itself rather than human consciousness or concern at the center of the text. Combining the cadences of the King James Bible with Transcendentalist imagery, Native and Mexican-era folk tales, local color characters, and her own observations and experiences, Austin produced an allusive and evocative book, as hard to pin down as the desert itself.

In contrast to the relatively straightforward personas of nature writers such as King and Muir, Austin's narrative voice is guarded, even secretive—telling other people's stories more than her own, blurring fact and fiction, always emphasizing that second-hand reports (including her own) can't be completely trusted, yet still might contain some grains of truth. All such assertions must be brought to the test of the desert itself, where humans don't have the luxury of either mountaineering-style conquest or mere aesthetic contemplation; rather, knowledge and action must always be keyed to survival—on the desert's own terms, which can only be divined slowly, by long experience in specific surroundings: "The manner of the country makes the usage of life there, and the land will not be lived in except in its own fashion." At the same time,

for all its uncertainties and dangers, the desert can be an object of beauty and even love: “None other than this long brown land lays such a hold on the affections. ... For all the toll the desert takes of a man it gives compensations, deep breaths, deep sleep, and the communion of the stars.”[10] Austin goes on to describe the land and its inhabitants—plants, animals, and humans—all of whose lives are shaped and constrained by the presence or absence of water. In "Jimville—A Bret Harte Town" she shows the baleful results of the typical American prospector's refusal to take the land on its own terms; by contrast, the final chapter presents a semi-mythical Old Mexican town, The Little Town of the Grape Vines, as having achieved a more convivial culture and a more workable, productive (if still tenuous) relation to the land.

It was around the time of the publication of *The Land of Little Rain* that the Owens Valley water project brought controversy to Austin's desert. With none of the cultural prominence or political associations of Muir's Hetch Hetchy campaign, opposition to the project took the form of local farmers and grazers banding together to keep control of their water by establishing their own cooperative, in which cause Wallace and Mary Austin both took an active role. They stood little chance against the economic and political power of Los Angeles, however, and by 1905 the debate was over. Pushed by the controversy and pulled by the fame of *Little Rain,* Austin left the valley with a clearer sense of its fragility at human hands. Separating from her husband and placing her daughter in a sanitorium, she moved to Carmel, where she completed her next nonfiction book, *The Flock* (1906). In line with her and Wallace's response to the Owens Valley water project, in *The Flock* Austin explores the possibilities for appropriate, sustainable use of arid landscapes by surveying the history of sheepherding in the region, portraying traditional shepherds (many of them, at least) as dignified, responsible stewards, attuned by experience to the subtle rhythms of the land. The book thus offers a sharp contrast to

Muir's *My First Summer in the Sierra,* which portrays shepherds as slow and dim-witted and sheep as "hoofed locusts," inherently destructive to the land, as part of Muir's overall campaign to prohibit all such economic activity from national parks and other wild places. For Austin, the experience helped sharpen her social justice vision and her interest in traditional peoples and societies in their relation to the land, concerns which would guide her later writings about Native Americans and which made her a forerunner of the environmental justice movement that emerged later in the century.

Austin found a congenial home amongst the artists and writers of Carmel, and would return there periodically for the rest of her life, but after a diagnosis of breast cancer she chose to travel in Europe for a few years, returning to the U.S. in 1910 to settle in New York. Despite her wanderings, the desert remained central to her writing. In *Lost Borders* (1909), Austin explores the lives of people trying—and usually failing—to impose some external order or purpose on their lives in the trackless desert. Austin, more than King or Muir, was aware of the potential negative forms of dissolving the boundaries between self and nature: "Out there, then where the law and the landmarks fail together, the souls of little men fade out at the edges, leak from them as water from wooden pails warped asunder."[11] For Austin, it was women who were most likely to have the strength to accept the unbounded existence the desert offered and demanded, as typified in the final story of the collection, "The Walking Woman." Clearly inspired in part by the stresses and dreams of Austin's own life, the Walking Woman "had begun by walking off an illness. There had been an invalid to be taken care of for years, leaving her at last broken in body, and with no recourse but her own feet to carry her out of that predicament. " An enigmatic figure, flawed yet powerful, the Walking Woman embodies the elemental human needs and desires—work, love, a child—that life in the desert unveils: "She had walked off all sense of

society-made values, and, knowing the best when the best came to her, was able to take it. Work—as I believed; love—as the Walking Woman had proved it; a child—as you subscribe to it. But look you: it was the naked thing the Walking Woman grasped, not dressed and tricked out, for instance, by prejudices in favor of certain occupations."[12]

A prolific and varied writer, Austin also explored the California environment in fiction such as *Isidro* (1905) and *The Ford* (1917) and a nonfiction collaboration with the artist Sutton Palmer, *California, Land of the Sun* (published in England in 1914 and in the U.S. in 1927). She also wrote novels, plays, and essays on topics including women's capacities and rights, religion and spirituality, Native Americans, politics, and (after moving to New Mexico in the 1920s) the land and peoples of the desert Southwest. Her autobiography, *Earth Horizon* (1932), confirms the lifelong importance of the natural world in her life and work.

Robinson Jeffers: Mythopoetic Inhumanist

Mary Austin was not alone in her strong associations with Carmel, for in the few decades after the San Francisco earthquake of 1906 the town served as the unofficial artistic and literary capital of California. "Discovered" by the poet Charles Warren Stoddard, Carmel was brought to cultural and social prominence through the presence and energy of another minor poet, George Sterling, who was part of San Francisco's Bohemian Club and who brought visitors such as Jack London, Sinclair Lewis, Upton Sinclair, and others to the beautiful town in its dramatic seaside setting. The Carmel Arts and Crafts Club promoted literature, theater, handicrafts, and painting; later and more important, the town attracted prominent photographers such as Edward Weston and his friend Ansel Adams, both of whom moved there (in 1929 and 1962, respectively). Of the

poets associated with Carmel, by far the most enduring and influential was Robinson Jeffers, who lived there from 1914 until his death in 1962.

Jeffers was born in 1887 in Pittsburgh (where his father was a seminary professor of the Old Testament) and educated as a child in a series of boarding schools in Europe, all of which gave him a deep grounding in classical literature and in languages. After the family moved to Pasadena in 1903, Jeffers graduated from Occidental College at age 17, followed by graduate study in comparative literature and in medicine at the University of Southern California and in forestry at the University of Washington; his engagement with modern science was deepened further by contact with his brother Hamilton, a prominent astronomer who spent much of his career at the Lick Observatory (including collaboration with luminaries such as Edwin Hubble). In 1913, after a complex personal odyssey, Jeffers married Una Call Kuster, and the following year the two settled in Carmel, where Jeffers famously used local stone to build a home, Tor House, and an accompanying tower (in evocation of one of his poetic influences, William Butler Yeats). Integrating his immersions in classical poetics and myth and in modern science, Jeffers's work is characterized by concrete and accurate description of the coast around Carmel within a philosophical perspective of humanity's embeddedness in the natural world.

Much of Jeffers' early literary output—and the basis of his initial fame—was not nature poetry but long narrative works based on ancient mythological themes. This was not without an environmental perspective, however, especially given the common assumption (still alive today) that past cultures were "closer to nature" than is the modern world. For example, the novels of Sir Walter Scott depicted medieval Scotland in terms of timeless allegiance to the land, cultural images reflected in Muir's memories of the “inherited wildness” that characterized his own childhood in Scotland. Later in the nineteenth century, William Morris and others lauded the

social, spiritual, and environmental virtues of traditional economic systems and local handicrafts over the modern machine-based economy, ideas that informed Austin's positive interpretation of the sheepherders of the Owens Valley. For Jeffers (as for others of his generation), such antimodernist ideas were amplified by the catastrophe of the First World War, which seemed to signal a final judgment on the path taken by modern Europe (and America).

Influenced further (as was Austin) by new theories of primitive mythology and mentalities such as Frazier's *The Golden Bough*, and of the powerful patterns of the unconscious offered by Freud and Jung, Jeffers's early long poems reworked Greek mythology in contemporary settings, often emphasizing darker aspects of primal human existence. Poems such as *Tamar* (1924), *Roan Stallion* (1925), and *Cawdor* (1928) explored the inchoate forces of death, sex, spirit, law, and violence in the lives of isolated, rural inhabitants of the Carmel coast. Jeffers's characters attain understanding or authority only when their humanness has been sheared away by struggle or violence, as the protagonist of *Tamar* rising to her feet on a beach between cliff and sea at night:

> She in the starlight
> And little noises of the rising tide
> Naked and not ashamed bore a third part
> With the ocean and keen stars in the consistence
> And dignity of the world. She was white stone ...

And underlying the human story is the foundational, timeless strength and beauty of the coast itself:

Old cypresses

The sailor wind works into deep-sea knots

A thousand years; age-reddened granite

That was the world's cradle …[13]

Such ideas and imagery—but without the mythopoetic narrative—appear also in his shorter poems, which are more easily recognizable as nature poetry and which, after a slump in his critical reception in the middle of the century, have formed the basis of his more recent popularity. Many of the poems offer exquisite descriptions of the Carmel coast along with explicit statements of his belief in the inherent beauty and worth of nature, apart from human presence or interpretation. In "Hawk and Rock" (1935), he rejects all ideologies, from Christianity ("the cross") to collectivisms such as communism ("the hive"), taking instead as his "emblem" a falcon sitting on a gray rock:

bright power, dark peace;

Fierce consciousness joined with final

Disinterestedness;

Life with calm death; the falcon's

Realist eyes and act

Married to the massive

Mysticism of stone.[14]

His outlook put him in opposition to many accepted currents of modern American life, and he suited his actions to his words by (for example) taking a strong stand against U.S. entry into World War II and publicly decrying the consumerism and suburban expansion that he saw as defacing his beloved Carmel coastline—positions that contributed to the mid-century decline in his reputation but also set the stage for a resurgence of interest in his work beginning in the 1960s, when such stances became more popular. Later in his career he described this outlook as "inhumanism," which in 1947 he described as "based in a recognition of the astonishing beauty of things and their living wholeness, and on a rational acceptance of the fact that mankind is neither central nor important in the universe."[15] Note that while this definition includes the core of the late-century concept of ecocentrism—the denial of human *centrality* in the universe—Jeffers goes further than most in refusing to accord any fundamental *importance* to human existence as well. As a purely philosophical doctrine, such assertions can seem nihilistic and contradictory, but Jeffers's genius lay in his poetic expression of the power and beauty of nature on its own terms—implicitly granting humans the importance of recognizing and celebrating such beauty and power, with a detached but ultimately religious sense of awe.

For much of his career, Jeffers was friends with the photographer Ansel Adams, and—as if in payback for the importance of visual artists in sparking and shaping early California nature writing in the mid-nineteenth century—Adams's work reflects the legacy and influence of all the major authors explored above. In 1927, Adams (an avid mountaineer) included in his first published portfolio an image of Mt. Clarence King; three years later he collaborated with Mary

Austin, whom he had met in Carmel, on his first book project, *Taos Pueblo*; in 1938, he contributed to the Sierra Club's effort to create Sequoia and Kings Canyon national parks through the photographic book *Sierra Nevada: The John Muir Trail* (whose cover featured the earlier image of Mt. Clarence King); and in 1948 he published some of his most famous images in *Yosemite and the Sierra Nevada*, with words drawn from Muir's writings. In 1965, Adams participated in another landmark Sierra Club publishing project, *Not Man Apart*, which paired lines from Jeffers's poetry with stunning images of the Big Sur coastline contributed by a number of prominent photographers. The title came from Jeffers's poem "The Answer" (1937):

> Integrity is wholeness, the greatest beauty is
> Organic wholeness, the wholeness of life and things, the divine beauty of the universe.
> Love that, not man
> Apart from that, or else you will share man's pitiful confusions, or drown in despair
> when his days darken.[16]

King, Muir, and Austin surely would have agreed.

Notes

[1]James M. Hutchings, “The Yo-Ham-i-te Valley, and its Water-falls,” *Hutchings’ California Magazine* 1, no. 1 (July, 1856), p. 2.

[2]Fitz Hugh Ludlow, “Seven Weeks in the Great Yo-Semite,” *Atlantic Monthly* 13, no. 80 (June 1864), p. 746.

[3]Clarence King, *Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada* (rev. ed., 1874; New York: Norton, 1935), pp. 67-68.

[4]Ibid., p. 305.

[5]John Muir, *The Mountains of California* (1894), in *Nature Writings,* ed. William Cronon (New York: Library of America, 1997), p. 395.

[6]John Muir, *Our National Parks* (1901), in ibid., p. 720.

[7]John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra* (1911), in ibid., p. 161.

[8]John Muir, *A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf* (1916), in ibid., p. 826.

[9]John Muir, *The Yosemite* (1912), in ibid., p. 817.

[10]Mary Austin, *The Land of Little Rain* (1903), in *Stories from the Country of Lost Borders*, ed. Marjorie Pryse (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987), pp. 57, 15, 17.

[11]Mary Austin, *Lost Borders* (1909), in ibid., p. 156.

[12]Ibid., pp. 257, 261.

[13]Robinson Jeffers, *Tamar* (1924), in *The Selected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers,* ed. Tim Hunt (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 56-57, 80.

[14]Robinson Jeffers, "Rock and Hawk" (1935), in ibid., p. 502.

[15]Robinson Jeffers, preface to *The Double Ax and Other Poems* (1947), in ibid., p. 719.

[16]Robinson Jeffers, "The Answer" (1937), in ibid., p. 522.

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