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Preface: Beginning with Rome

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George Perkins Marsh chose to open *Man and Nature*, his magnum opus, with a discussion of the environmental decline and fall of the Roman Empire. The choice was no accident. Rome was for Marsh a case study that epitomised his thesis and was intended to serve as a preface to the entire volume, introducing each of the themes that would appear in the following chapters.

Marsh begins his section on the Roman Empire by pointing out the natural advantages of the Mediterranean region, including its healthfulness, equable climate, fertile soil, plentiful natural resources, and waterways available for transportation. All of these invited the intelligent labour of humans ('man', in Marsh's dated prose) to expel the wilderness and enable the soil to produce more abundantly for their sustenance. The poets of Greece and Rome, he notes, became so enamoured of the landscape transformed by 'picturesque improvement' that they lost a feeling for the beauty of untamed nature.

Then Marsh launches forth on one of the most appalling and encyclopaedic descriptions of landscape degradation ever written. It is too long to repeat here in its entirety, unfortunately, but it catalogues the scores of ways in which the originally advantageous territory of the Roman Empire had been reduced to various degrees of desolation by Marsh's own time. Forests have disappeared, rich soils have washed away, water supplies have been disrupted, streams dry up in summer and become torrents in winter, and harbours are blocked by erosive deposits. Much of what remains is 'no longer capable of affording sustenance to civilised man' (p. 10).

What was the cause of this decay? While there were some natural causes, he concludes that for the most part it was 'the result of man's ignorant disregard of the laws of nature' (p. 11), along with war, tyranny and misrule, which contributed to that disregard. The cause of causes, *causa causarum*, was the despotism of Rome and her successors, which saddled the peasantry with agricultural taxes, military conscription, forced labour on public works, and onerous regulations. The land abandoned as a result was deprived of 'those protections by which nature originally guarded it, and for which, in well-ordered husbandry, human ingenuity has contrived more or less efficient substitutes', so that 'the fields

[man] has won from the primeval wood relapse into their original state of wild and luxuriant, but unprofitable forest growth, or fall into that of a dry and barren wilderness' (p. 12).

Marsh knew the Roman Empire well; indeed, like a number of well-read and well-travelled gentlemen of his time, he was as close to being a citizen of it as was then possible. He was born on the Ides of March, 1801. He graduated at the head of his class in Classics and Scripture at Dartmouth at the age of nineteen, and later taught Greek and Latin. Appointed United States minister to Turkey by President Zachary Taylor, he was also sent on a mission to Greece and travelled widely in the Near East. He did not limit his attention to diplomatic matters, but studied agriculture and natural phenomena, making biological collections. Abraham Lincoln made him ambassador to Italy in 1861, and by the time he had finished the first edition of *Man and Nature*, he was almost three years into the longest term ever served by a US ambassador in one assignment – twenty-one years that would end only with his death and burial in Rome in 1882. In that period he had ample time and opportunity to revise and to publish new editions of *Man and Nature*, but he made no major changes to the section on the Roman Empire, which continued to serve as its introductory argument.

Since he is so eloquent in portraying human destruction of the natural environment, it is all too easy to mistake him as a defender of untrammelled nature, but that is not his purpose. As he states it, 'all that I can hope is to excite an interest in a topic of much economical importance, by pointing out the directions and illustrating the modes in which human action has been or may be most injurious or most beneficial in its influence upon the physical conditions of the earth we inhabit' (p. 15). Humankind may have waged ruthless war 'on all the tribes of animated nature', but also has ennobled many of them through domestication. Wilderness for Marsh is either luxuriant but difficult to use, or dry and barren. He wishes for a world that contains a vigorous, thriving human community engaged in agriculture and all the civilised arts, and such a community cannot exist without transforming the landscape. Much of what Rome did in these constructive ways meets with his approval.

Marsh's most trenchant point is that many of the changes humans make in the natural environment, whether accompanied by good intentions or by disregard of the consequences, damage the environment's usefulness to humans. A forest on a mountainside should be maintained in a relatively pristine condition not for the forest's sake, but in order to prevent erosion and to assure a dependable year-round supply of fresh water. It is true that the forest and mountain are also beautiful, and Marsh wishes that the Romans had appreciated natural scenery more, but aesthetics also represents a human value. One can discern in Marsh's approach a desideratum: a balance between man and nature in which man's needs are met and nature's harmonies are preserved. He believes that is possible: man, as in the Roman Empire, destroys, but man can also be a co-worker with nature, a restorer of disturbed harmonies.

Marsh was many things in his long life: a sheep-breeder, a builder of roads and bridges, a lumber merchant, a newspaper editor, a developer of quarries and real estate. Several of these businesses gave him direct knowledge of land use, and he undoubtedly committed his own share of disturbances of nature's harmonies. He made little profit in any of these ventures, but he succeeded as a politician, winning election three times as a representative in the United States Congress. His critique of Roman tyranny as the major cause of environmental neglect and decay in the empire can be seen as springing in part from his Lincolnian populism. Distrustful of empires per se, he had his diplomatic scuffles with the Ottoman and French varieties of empire. His sympathy for Roman farmers and industrialists sprang from his own roots in Vermont. It is surprising that writing as he did just at the time of the Emancipation Proclamation, he did not include slavery among the evils of Roman oppression that led to abuse of nature, especially since he was an outspoken opponent of American slavery. But he certainly knew that the economy of the Roman Empire was organised primarily to benefit the upper strata of society, and that his desired balance of humankind's economy with nature's harmonies could only be achieved by considering the needs of every social stratum. He portrayed the ordinary people of the Roman Empire as forced to 'struggle at once against crushing oppression and the destructive forces of inorganic nature', and judged that a struggle against both those opponents at once would result in defeat and the devastation of the natural environment (pp. 11–12). Since inorganic nature will always be a force to contend with, the force that could be removed, it stands to reason, is crushing oppression. His critique and his programme may have been more revolutionary than he was willing to admit.

