'On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic' in Environmental History

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ABSTRACT

George Perkins Marsh is both the hero and the foil of this paper. His well-known book, *Man and Nature*, and his reputation as the fountainhead of the conservation movement lie at the very centre of the story offered here. But this account also casts some doubt upon the precedence generally attributed to some of Marsh's ecological claims, and questions the wisdom of placing Marsh and other historical figures on pedestals that elevate them too readily and too markedly above their peers. It does this by probing the reception of Marsh's ideas in New Zealand in the 1870s, by considering the ideas of largely-forgotten Titus Smith about human impacts upon the vegetation of Nova Scotia in the nineteenth century, and by wondering about the implications of these tales of environmental understanding from two colonial realms for the practice of environmental history in the twenty-first century. This is thus both an engagement with Marsh and a story about stories, about how they are constructed, about how they travel and about how they influence the ways in which historians present the past and speak to the future.

KEYWORDS

George Perkins Marsh, Titus Smith, Nova Scotia, New Zealand, Historiography, Origins of Conservation

This is a story about stories, about how they are constructed, about how they travel, and about how they influence the ways in which historians present the past and speak to the future. It is, like all stories, partial and personal. At one level it is little more than a reflection upon my own contingent, serendipitous, even implausible academic progress. At another, it seeks to connect personal

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experience with questions of some importance to understanding the roots of current environmental discourse. Beyond this, it offers a springboard for thinking about how information is presented, and about how fragments of historical evidence are given shape by contexts and cultural assumptions, even as they are assembled into narratives about the world. Finally, it invites rumination upon the implications of some of the narratives so assembled, by suggesting that the ways in which historical stories are constructed can play a powerful role in shaping contemporary attitudes and actions in popular and political arenas. Because George Perkins Marsh – one of the great figures of nineteenth-century American letters and, by Lewis Mumford's account, 'the fountainhead of the conservation movement' – is in one way and another at the very centre of this discussion, I adapt my title unabashedly (but not without some sense of irony), from Thomas Carlyle, who claimed (as David Lowenthal pointed out in his recent life of Marsh) that 'History is … the biography of great men'.[1]

Two research ventures form the heart of this account. In an attempt to provoke questions and encourage reflection, I present them, in part, as ghost stories, rendering them, at least in outline, as a couple of spectral encounters, widely separated in space and time. The first sighting occurred a quarter-century ago, the second in the late 1990s. The former took place on the old 'town site' of the University of Canterbury, in Christchurch, New Zealand, the latter in the Radcliffe Science Library in Oxford, England. The wraiths that haunted me then (and now), are configurations of words, each evocative of a 'dead-white male', and each putting me in mind of George Perkins Marsh. Both pointed to incorporeal connections and influences, and each proved difficult to grasp and interrogate, though the second was tantalisingly more elusive than the first. Considered alone, neither apparition seemed (or seems) especially shocking. Mildly arresting, locally interesting, vaguely curious, these are the coins by which each in its particular setting might be described. But brought together, juxtaposed and compared, they assume a more disconcerting mien. To my mind, at least, they rouse intriguing, perhaps even disturbing, possibilities.

PROPHETIC GLIMPSES

Newly-minted Ph.D. in hand, and several years of work on the New Brunswick forest behind me, I joined the Department of Geography in the University of Canterbury. Recognising the limits of my expertise, and seeking new contributors to his journal, the editor of the *New Zealand Geographer* soon asked me to review Thomas Simpson's *Kauri to Radiata*, a history of the New Zealand forest industry. In the pages of this book, I found a passing reference that brought me, quickly, to confront the first of my ghosts. In 1874, I learned, New Zealand had passed legislation to establish State forests and to check heedless use of timber. Occurring less than thirty-five years after the official establishment of

the colony, and barely a quarter century after the beginnings of organised settlement there, this struck me as a prescient and unusual action, and one worthy of further investigation.[2]

Indeed it was. The road to the Forests Bill of 1874 had been paved, since 1868, by a series of impassioned, even exuberant, speeches in the New Zealand House of Representatives and elsewhere. Together, the authors of these remarks claimed that the impacts of human disturbance on the local environment were both evident and worrisome. So lawyer and parliamentarian W.T.L Travers lectured members of the New Zealand Institute almost interminably 'on the changes effected in the Natural Features of a New Country by the Introduction of Civilized Races'. New Zealand, he said, offered a fine example of ' the equilibrium arrived at [by nature being] disturbed with more or less violence when man appears as an actor in the scene…'. Echoing South Island naturalist Thomas Potts, who had used the much-noted increase in flooding in the Hutt valley near Wellington as a reason to rail at the 'mischievous' and widespread results of wholesale land-clearing in the colony, Travers argued that large rivers that once ran placidly through the countryside had been turned into raging torrents by the destruction of forests:

> moisture long stored up in …[the forest] mould is evaporated, and returns in deluges of rain, which wash away the dried soil into which the accumulated mass of mould has been converted. The water courses become choked and encumbered with the debris, and the country which had previously presented an appearance of rich vegetation is converted into bald hills and dessicated (sic) plains….[3]

The colony, Travers told his listeners in 1870,was 'fast becoming an unfit home for its noblest inhabitant'. The country was embarked on the same course as Asia Minor, North Africa, Greece and parts of Alpine Europe; was it also going to be converted from a land of milk and honey into a 'howling desolation'? A few years later Charles O'Neill, parliamentary representative of the environmentally-ravaged goldfields district of Thames, suggested that historians would conclude that New Zealanders had 'received a fertile country, but by criminal want of foresight, transmitted to posterity a desert.'[4]

Many of these fine phrases tripped from Antipodean tongues without specific attribution. As I read them, they seemed eerily familiar. Years before, I had learned that a part of Europe, once among 'the fairest and fruitfulest provinces of the Roman Empire,' was 'completely exhausted of its fertility, or so diminished in productiveness' by the mid-nineteenth century that it was 'no longer capable of affording sustenance to civilized man'. Had I not read, also, that many areas 'first trodden by the *homo sapiens Europae* within the last two centuries…show signs of that melancholy dilapidation which is now driving so many of the peasantry of Europe from their native hearths'? Surely New Zealand arguments for 'the increased violence of river inundations…, and the devastations of torrents, in countries improvidently derived of their woods,' were not new.[5]

It was not difficult to identify the source of these echoes. Some speakers provided firm clues by which to identify the revenant in my mind: he was an 'American author of great research and intelligence'; he was an 'American writer on physical geography as modified by human action'. He was George Perkins Marsh. In exploring the apparent paradox posed by recently-settled New Zealand's unusual commitment to forest conservation, it seemed all too obvious that acquaintance with *Man and Nature* (published in 1864) had allowed at least a small cadre of educated New Zealanders to see their environment with sharp new eyes. 'The cogency of Marsh's illustrations, the irresistible weight of his conclusions and the sweep of his geographical insights,' I wrote in 1979, underpinned the arguments of those who brought the forests question to attention in early New Zealand. By my reckoning, the impetus that had carried *Man and Nature* along the slopes of the Hindu Kush had brought it, in short order, to New Zealand where, it had induced a virtual paradigmatic shift in the way that some colonists regarded their environment.[6]

PHILOSOPHICAL SHADES

While conducting research on nineteenth-century Nova Scotia in 1998, I thought to explore the work of Titus Smith Jr.. Known to a small band of regional historians as the author of a manuscript map and accompanying report on the resources of the colony, prepared on the basis of some 150 days of arduous travel through the little known interior of the colony in 1801 and 1802, Smith had come to Nova Scotia as a youth, in the company of his parents, who left the Thirteen Colonies for Halifax after the American War of Independence. A prodigious child – at twelve, recalled his brother, he 'could translate the most difficult Latin authors and had also made good progress in Greek' – Titus Smith spent most of his life as a farmer and occasional minor office holder (overseer of roads, secretary to the Central Board of Agriculture) on the outskirts of Halifax. By 1828, he was known locally as 'the Rural Philosopher of the Dutch Village [the settlement in which he lived from 1796]'. In the 1830s and 1840s he was active in the Halifax Mechanics Institute (of which he was a founder) and in the 1840s he contributed articles to several Nova Scotia newspapers. Something of an oracle among his contemporaries – one obituary suggested that he possessed 'one of those giant intellects which…capacitates its possessor to figure prominently in the world's history,' while recognising that circumstances in Nova Scotia had dealt him 'a different lot' in life – Smith has been largely forgotten by later generations. But one among his publications, an address delivered before the Mechanics' Institute and published in the London *Magazine of Natural History*, riveted my attention and revived memories of the ghost that I had encountered, years before, in the so-called Antipodes of the library in which I then sat.[7]

Marshalling his thoughts under the most cumbersome and unpromising of titles – 'Conclusions on the Results on the Vegetation of Nova Scotia, and on Vegetation in general, and on Man in general, of certain Natural and Artificial causes deemed to actuate and affect them' – Smith began his analysis from a position in Natural Theology, but thoroughly leavened his belief in Providential wisdom with his botanical learning, his practical experience as a colonial farmer, and his years spent in close observation of the flora (and fauna) of Nova Scotia. The result was remarkable. In an essay significantly different from his earlier writings, Smith sought to explore the inter-relations among soils and plants, and to sketch the intricate mechanisms that bound biotic communities together, in elaboration of several of his earlier field observations. [8]

Noting the existence of two great vegetation zones in Nova Scotia, he observed that deciduous hardwood trees and succulent shrubs were typically found on fertile soils. This was something that almost any attentive settler knew. But it was no mere co-incidence, insisted Smith. Soil and vegetation shaped each other. Falling leaves, 'trees overthrown by… autumnal storms, or dying of age', and dead twigs and branches accumulated on the forest floor. This large quantity of dead vegetable matter was then changed into mould 'by the operations of the Fungi, insects, and the succeeding process of putrefaction'. Year upon year the cycle was repeated. Fires rarely disrupted the process, and the mould built up to form a soil enriched by the movement of nutrients from 'the greatest depth to which the roots of a tree can reach' through the vegetation, to the dead and decaying matter on the surface.

On barren soils, by contrast, evergreen trees and shrubs with tough scaly bark grew relatively slowly. The vegetable matter that accumulated beneath them was strongly resistant to decay. As the forest thickened, the understory died away and covered the surface with various kinds of dry moss. These forests were very susceptible to fire, which exposed the turf to sun and rain, then putrefaction quickened, and long-dormant seeds of a dozen species germinated. Suddenly the face of the country was transformed by raspberries, blueberries, French willow and elderberry. But this prodigious flowering was short-lived. Within a few years the land became hard and cold. New species seized the ground. They were then overtopped in turn by alder, followed by firs mixed with white birch and poplars. Mayflower, and other species formed a new understory, and mosses took hold again. Within thirty or forty years, the thicket had 'resume[d] nearly its former appearance….'

Fire induced other modifications. In an undisturbed evergreen forest, even on barren upland, there was little superficial erosion. Even where spruce grew so thickly as to suffocate shrubs and perennial plants, the surface was entirely covered 'with a fleece of dry moss, which, like a strainer retains everything that can form turf.'

> The brooks on this soil, however rapid they may be, have low banks, and are hardly perceived to wear away any portion of the earth. They run on beds of stones, which

> are themselves prevented from attrition by the water moss and byssus which cover them.

Burn the forest and expose the ground to rain, and all this changed. With heavy rains water rushed over the surface, carrying with it 'considerable quantities of charcoal, fragments of turf, spruce cones, pieces of the outer bark of trees and shrubs and other light substances.' All of this material, and the mud in which it was borne, accumulated amid the water grasses, water lilies and other plants that grew in lakes and ponds. As storm followed storm, these small bodies of water gradually filled up, until the mud was nearly bare in a dry season. Then *Andromeda calyculata* [Round-leaved Andromeda, now *Chamaedaphne calyculata*] took root, to be followed by bog moss, and other bog plants. When tough-rooted cotton grasses and sedges moved in, a strong turf formed; depending upon the wetness (or otherwise) of the season, this either floated on water or rested on mud. These were the 'quaking bogs' so common in many parts of the interior of the province. Where they dried sufficiently to become natural meadows, alders and firs would soon grow from the damp sward; where they remained wet and marsh-like, peat formed in some quantity. Within this dynamic complex, Smith made it plain, each plant had a niche to fill and a part to play. In other words, Smith's disquisition on 'The Natural History of Nova Scotia' brims with ecological understanding and is full of insight into the patterns and processes of vegetation development. In less than 22 pages he anticipated the work of many prominent, twentieth-century botanists, ecologists and foresters. [9]

This was not all. Smith also argued, forcefully, that the settlement of Nova Scotia had produced serious ecological consequences. By his account, human imprints upon the flora (and fauna) of the colony were slight before 1783. Here he strategically ignored the effects of earlier settlement to argue that the region's indigenous inhabitants trod lightly upon the land, and that the natural processes of forest regeneration were 'favoured by the habits of the Indians, who carefully avoided setting the woods on fire.' All of this was disturbed by the great influx of Loyal Refugees from the American Revolution, who flooded into Nova Scotia in the early 1780s. New settlements were established. Clearing fires ran out of control. Extensive tracts of forest were destroyed. Cattle were then pastured on the rich herbiage that sprang up, until after three or four years it lost its initial luxuriance. Then it was burned again, this time deliberately, to renew growth. Inferior raspberries, French willows and other plants regenerated in the ash. Dead trees fell to ground, and those that had survived the fires ere long tumbled before the wind, their roots loosened by the sinking of the exposed turf. All of this furnished more fuel for successive fires 'rekindled every dry season by design or negligence, till, the combustible matter being consumed, with the exception of that portion which is washed by rains into the swamps, the ground becomes so much exhausted, that it produces only a growth of heathy shrubs….'

Through a combination of clearing for agriculture, destruction of the forest by burning, and the cutting of trees for domestic fuel, it was not long before wood

became scarce in the immediate vicinity of settlements. Then swamp-forests (those seed-beds so important to the re-vegetation of adjoining areas in Smith's view of vegetation succession) were attacked by settlers' axes. In time they too were reduced to naught, and prospects for natural regeneration were undermined. At the same time, farmers controverted nature's design by maintaining a portion of their cleared land in fallow. These actions had consequences and Smith considered them serious. To drive home this point he drew a telling comparison between his newly-settled territory and some of the longest-inhabited parts of the old world. Smith looked to the desiccated landscapes of the eastern Mediterranean to warn his North American compatriots of the potentially deleterious consequences of their spendthrift attitudes toward the environment. There was no doubt, he wrote, 'that man has, by mismanagement, impoverished some of the finest countries on earth'.

> Ancient Syria and the neighbouring countries, we are informed by modern travellers, present such an appearance of sterility, that, were it not for the magnificent ruins that remain, it would be almost impossible to credit the accounts that historians have given of their population in former ages.

Indeed, the argument for care and caution was only strengthened by the continued existence, within these ravaged districts, of small areas that continued to exhibit the fertility of former days. 'The plains of Jericho and Hauran', wrote Smith, still produced 'an hundred fold'; but, he continued

> the foot of man has not passed over what was once the kingdom of Idumea for ages. A few fishermen's huts are all that remain of ancient Tyre; and large districts, once thickly inhabited, present an appearance which seems to say, they will be cultivated no more.

There was a clear lesson in all of this: 'whenever man neglects the dictates of nature, he is sure to be the sufferer.'

PHANTOM CLAIMS

This tune begins to resonate. Its tempo is recognisable, its melody easily recalled, its tone not unlike that discerned, earlier, in the words of those urging forest conservation in New Zealand. Comparisons of new world lands with Asia Minor, portents of desiccation and disaster, indictments of human mischievousness and mismanagement, all reverberate through these environmental jeremiads from Australasia and eastern North America. Contemplating Titus Smith's largely unnoticed essay, we might presume to guess at its provenance. Like those who claim to know the regiment of the ghostly subalterns who are said to march the streets of Halifax, with only their uniformed torsos visible because their former paths now lie a metre below the ground, we might be tempted to espy

its author's 'Man and Nature' epaulettes, and place him firmly in the battalion of Marsh followers. But history bids us pause before we do so. This phantom is not so easily classified. The ground upon which he stands is neither as firm nor as easily mapped as the bedrock beneath the Nova Scotia capital. Far from beating time in the celebrated global march of George Perkins Marsh's ecological insights – to which my New Zealand musings added substance – Titus Smith's lonely refrain offers a haunting challenge to those who would deify Marsh, the prophet of conservation, for the unique and extraordinary clarity of his vision.

Smith's lecture on the 'Natural History of Nova Scotia,' was delivered before his local Mechanics' Institute in January 1835 and published in London later that year, almost three full decades before Scribner's released *Man and Nature*. This is disconcerting. If nothing else it surely begs qualification of the claim that Marsh was a lonely prophet, far ahead of his time, in 'rethink[ing] the long sweep of human history,' and 'cautioning against the risks of careless growth'. More than this, Smith's ecological perspective, his recognition of the anthropogenic origin of heathland, and his insistence that 'a long period of cultivation' inattentive to the 'natural tenants' of the earth meant 'the fertility of the soil … disappeared with the cultivators' surely calls into question David Lowenthal's assertion that '[a]nyone with a hoe or an ax knows what he is doing, but before Marsh no one had seen the total effects of all axes and hoes.' By my reckoning, Titus Smith substantially adumbrated many of the insights and images employed in now well-known ways by George Perkins Marsh thirty years later.[10]

What to make of this? Is it simply a case of new evidence undermining old understandings, of Marsh's proclaimed primacy being pre-empted by the hitherto overlooked work of a somewhat retiring colonial scholar raised in the unprepossessing town of Halifax? Such an argument might be made. But what would it serve? Those who promote tourism in Atlantic Canada might seize upon Smith's prescience as an opportunity to attract visitors to the area, take it upon themselves to spruce up his gravesite 'overlooking the calm waters of Bedford Basin', proclaim Nova Scotia the 'cradle of ecological understanding' in North America, and enjoin people to share a moment in recollection of a man who, 'by a kindly disposition manifested to those around him gained the good will of all'. But this would likely be the end of it. What more could be said? Smith – and here the contrast with Marsh is stark – had scant impact upon others. His work and ideas lay buried for better than a century, essentially ignored until brought to notice briefly in the 1950s. Meanwhile, *Man and Nature* exercised a powerful and indubitable influence upon late nineteenth-century attitudes toward forests, and today stands ranked with Aldo Leopold's *Sand County Almanac* and Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* as one of the most influential American contributions to 'the struggle to build more responsible human relations with the natural world'.[11]

Besides, David Lowenthal has already mustered a defence against such pre-emption claims. Concluding his new and impressive biography of Marsh,

he observes that, 'It has become fashionable to dismiss Marsh in favor … of unsung hoi polloi on the mainstream's margins.' In this view, recent years have seen the appearance of a number of 'Marsh put-down[s]' by authors who would diminish the reputation of 'the prophet of conservation' by suggesting that he has received too much credit and was derivative rather than original. Here Lowenthal is taking issue, most directly, with Richard Judd and Richard Grove, for their arguments that 'ordinary rural folk' in northern New England 'anticipated and nourished Marsh's insights', and that 'modern environmentalism emerged' long before 1864, 'as a direct response to the destructive social and ecological conditions of colonial rule' in small Atlantic islands and in subtropical India and Africa. By maintaining that Smith's 1835 reflections present a haunting challenge to Lowenthal's claims (contra Judd) that 'only the most scanty ecological awareness antedates Marsh's own writings', and (contra Groves' view that early foresters and colonial administrators possessed ecological insight) that 'the importance of tree cover in retaining moisture and preventing excessive runoff – the crux of Marsh's cognition – is mentioned nowhere else', I am clearly at some risk of being counted a detractor. There is after all no question that Titus Smith is 'unsung', and no doubt that he lived on the mainstream's margins. But I am not inclined to join battle on this ground. Indeed, I would insist that a war of words over claims to primacy in these debates is misconceived and largely irrelevant.[12]

When Alexander Pope wrote his epitaph for Sir Isaac Newton ('Nature and Nature's laws lay hid in night: / God said, Let Newton be! and all was light.') his allegorical intent was apparent. Similar assertions proclaiming the stunning originality and uniqueness of Marsh's insights are surely equally transparent rhetorical flourishes. When, for example, US Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall declared *Man and Nature* 'the beginning of land wisdom in this country,' he wrote as a politician not a historian. When David Lowenthal declares that 'Realisation of human impact on Earth stems from Marsh's *Man and Nature*', he over-reaches. Both a growing body of evidence and common sense make all such claims suspect. [13]

There was a good deal of reflection upon the 'action and reaction between humanity and the material world around it,' in Britain, in Europe, in North America, and in Australia in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This took numerous forms, and not all have borne the test of time and evolving understanding. Keith Thomas's survey of changing attitudes to nature in England between 1500 and 1800 nonetheless convincingly reveals that 'the confident anthropomorphism of Tudor England' had been undermined by the end of the eighteenth century. By 1800, Thomas writes, 'the world could no longer be regarded as having been made for man alone'. William Gilpin may have had his eye on the aesthetic rather than the ecological when he wrote that 'wherever man appears with his tools, deformity follows his steps'. The vicar of Selborne, Gilbert White, may not have divined the scientific intricacies of

biological interdependencies when he observed that even 'the most insignificant insects and reptiles are of much more consequence, and have much more influence in the oeconomy of Nature, than the incurious are aware of'. But poet Henry Baker certainly aimed to 'Restrain the Pride of Man' when he wrote: 'Each hated toad, each crawling worm we see,/ Is needful to the whole as well as he.' Such ideas as these were, surely, precursors to both the conception and reception of later arguments over 'whether man is of nature or above her'. Indeed, John Evelyn's *Silva: or, A Discourse of Forest-Trees* (1664) has been seen (with the *French Forest Ordinance of 1669*) by one authority as marking 'the beginning of a more reserved attitude to the modification of nature by man in the history of Western thought'.[14]

In Europe, as Clarence Glacken recounted in his *Traces on the Rhodian Shore*, debate over the relations between humans and nature was equally vigorous. Indeed, Immanuel Kant's 'Physische Geographie' had insisted that humankind be included among the natural phenomena producing environmental change, and growing enthusiasm for natural history 'brought the activity of man into bold relief'. Montesquieu held that the physical environments of Europe and China had been transformed by human industry. And in 1797, the French engineer Jean Antoine Fabré published his investigations into river torrents in the Departement du Var and other parts of the lower Rhone. These, he concluded, were attributable to the removal of woods from mountain slopes. As the text of *Man and Nature* makes clear, Marsh was well aware of much of this work, although by and large his references to it have been overlooked as the uniqueness of his contribution has been proclaimed. In this context, it is worth recall that the Comte de Buffon wrote, long before Marsh, in *Des Epoques de la Nature*, (volume 5 of his *Histoire Naturelle, Générale et Particulière*) that 'the state in which we see nature today is as much our work as it is hers. We have learned to temper her, to modify her, to fit her to our needs and our desires.'[15]

In the Americas, likewise, curiosity and new ideas about the human relationship with nature abounded. Richard Judd details many of these elsewhere in this issue, so suffice it to note but a single example, Benjamin Franklin's comment, from 1753, upon human disturbance of 'nature's harmonies'. In New England, he wrote,

> they once thought *blackbirds* useless, and mischievous to the corn. They made efforts to destroy them. The consequence was, the blackbirds were diminished; but a kind of worm which devoured their grass, and which the blackbirds used to feed on, increased prodigiously; then finding their loss in grass much greater than their savings in corn, they wished again for their blackbirds.

And so too in Australia, where – as Tim Bonyhady has shown – European settlement after 1788 constituted 'a form of colonialism alive to the importance of environmental protection and planning'.[16]

By the same token, however, Marsh's impact upon late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century environmental thought should neither be denied nor diminished. Whether his ideas were derivative or no, he clearly put them together in a more cogent and compelling manner than most of his contemporaries. His arguments, claimed a writer in the *Nation*, on publication of the second edition of *Man and Nature* in 1874, had 'come with the force of a revelation'. It was Marsh, not Titus Smith or the settlers of New South Wales and Northern New England, who influenced the thinking of those important nineteenth-century scientists Elisée Reclus and Charles Lyell. Whether by accident of timing, connection, promotion, good fortune or whatever, it was *Man and Nature*, not *The Natural History of Selborne* or 'Conclusions on the Results on the Vegetation of Nova Scotia, and on Vegetation in general, and on Man in general, of certain Natural and Artificial causes deemed to actuate and affect them' that Gifford Pinchot described as 'epoch-making' in his *Breaking New Ground*. It was Marsh's formulation of the idea that 'Man' is a 'Disturber of Nature's Harmonies', that caught the public imagination and most significantly influenced later environmental politics.[17]

OF HEROES, HISTORIES AND POPPIES

In the end, debates over primacy are less important than the recognition that the central place accorded George Perkins Marsh in conservation discourse has shaped – and has the potential to shape – interpretations of the past. Consider the New Zealand and Oxford/ Nova Scotia stories outlined above. Although the fundamental tenets of my New Zealand arguments remain unchallenged, I have to consider myself fortunate that this is so. Only with hindsight sharpened by my discoveries in the Radcliffe Science Library, did I recognise that I had (with due deference to the American geographer J.K. Wright who aptly named such behaviour) committed 'foolrushery' in 1975. Thanks to New Zealand speakers on the forest question – who plagiarised Marsh word for word, and in some cases provided clear clues as to the attribution of their ideas – it was a simple matter to shout 'eureka' and to declare the displacement of Marsh's ideas to New Zealand the reason for rising concern about environmental disturbance in that colony. Fully familiar with *Man and Nature* and David Lowenthal's *Versatile Vermonter*, I found allure, coherence and satisfaction in this tale of diffusion, and barely paused to wonder whether there might be other shades in the frame, or whether those New Zealanders might have built their understanding, at least in part, on grounds other than Marsh.[18]

In recent years, however, I have begun to wonder whether I gave Marsh too much credit. In considering this possibility, I discern several tantalising fragments of evidence worthy of further investigation. As debate on the forest question unfolded through the early 1870s, members of the Wellington Philosophical

Society heard a paper forwarded to Colonial Secretary James Hector by its author, 'Dr. A. Wojeikof.' This was presumably Alexander Ivanovich Woiekof, author thirty years later of 'De l'influence de l'homme sur la terre'. In 1871, his focus was less sweeping and confined to 'The Results of the destruction of Forests upon the River Wolga at Astracan.' At much the same time, Provincial Engineer A. D. Dobson spoke before the Nelson Association for the Promotion of Science and Industry 'on the Destruction of Land by Shingle-bearing Rivers, and suggestions for Protection and Prevention.' He alluded to *Man and Nature* in his address, but drew more fully on local understanding of the processes involved. In addition, the work of his German-trained brother-in-law, geologist and explorer Julius Von Haast, and his own experience as an engineer and surveyor, were incorporated into his reflections on the role of natural vegetation in shaping the detritus load of South Island rivers, which he regarded (perhaps with work on the Var in mind) as mountain torrents. Even more intriguingly, Prime Minister Julius Vogel spoke eloquently of 'the mischief already done' to the landscapes and livelihoods, to the soils, the climate, and the hydrology of Mauritius, various West Indian Islands, and Ceylon (which Richard Grove might incline to call tropical island Edens). Colonial Governors, the English Secretary of State for the Colonies, and botanist J.D. Hooker were the sources of Vogel's information on these matters. Graphic descriptions of desiccation in the Mediterranean littoral also furthered the Prime Minister's arguments, but these were drawn in substantial part from debates in the French Chambre des Députés in the 1850s, as reported by the Scottish forester James Brown. Was *Man and Nature*, then, really the *source* of colonial New Zealanders' awareness of the power of humans to change the face of the earth? Might the book have served simply, albeit effectively, as a catalyst of pre-suppositions? Might its rhetorical prominence owe less to its originality than to its utility; was Marsh no more than a convenient 'authority', to whom orators appealed in an effort to impart shape and significance to somewhat inchoate lay understandings? Did I, in making Marsh the hero of my piece, short-circuit the possibilities of other narrative forms, and deny life to other histories? Robust and useful answers to such questions must depend upon further research in the records of nineteenth-century New Zealand (and there might well be vigorous debate about interpretations new and old).[19]

Until that work is done – and debate resolved – I can only fret over the possibility that evidence and interpretation fell too neatly and easily into place in my account of the roles of pioneers and politicians in the conservation of New Zealand forests. Yet there is a larger point to be drawn from all of this, regardless of the ways in which understandings of mid-nineteenth-century New Zealand developments evolve. Put simply, it is that hero-worship has its dangers. In the writing of (environmental) history, as in everyday life, it may obscure as much as it reveals, and distort as much as it clarifies. By providing a ready framework for the organisation of disparate information, it may lead the eye and the mind

to alight on those pieces of the puzzle that fit the heroic story, and to pass over those with the potential to subvert it. By offering form and focus to the scholarly narrative, the heroic mode holds the allure of coherence and intelligibility as it conspires to erase the complexities of character and circumstance in the past. Heroes certainly have their uses. They capture imaginations, unveil possibilities, and rally sympathies. They inspire. They chart routes through the difficulties of existence. They map the possibilities of living in the world. But when the brilliance of their aura blinds observers to their context, when they draw the inquiring gaze to themselves and leave others to be ignored, they can also stand in the way of full and clear understanding. Heroes are, almost by definition, 'larger-than-life'; they transcend the mundane and deflect attention from the ordinary and the everyday. They distil particular conceptions of the world and of those in it. They are complicated simplifications, and there are pitfalls – in mistaking the essence for the substance or the map for the world – in too-ready acceptance of their influence. Whether adopted as an explicit coda – as by Carlyle – or taken up as a subliminal assumption – as perhaps in my early foray into New Zealand – the heroic mode bears the risk of deflecting attention from the actions of ordinary people acting in accord with common understandings, and of condemning them, collectively, to 'the enormous condescension of posterity'. Insofar as it does this, it narrows the scope of environmental histories.[20]

Hero-worship may also distort the shape, significance, and ultimately the utility, of our representations of the past. Consider by way of illustration how Marsh's disdain for the 'improvident habits' of American backwoodsmen, and the 'slovenly husbandry' of frontier settlers has helped sustain a particular view of colonisation. In parallel with these judgements – if not entirely attributable to them – a standard narrative has come to dominate the environmental histories of new world societies. Reduced to its essence, it is that early settlers were plunderers. Time and again the story has been repeated, and elaborated. Struggling to survive, aggressive, individualistic, capitalistic newcomers displaced indigenous peoples (who are often, in these accounts, possessed of an 'ecological' land ethic), ravaged the land, exploited its resources, left havoc in their wake, and moved on to repeat the process on another frontier, until, with time, emerging prosperity, and the insights derived from a handful of mid-nineteenth-century thinkers, they realised and accepted the error of their ways and moved to mitigate the worst effects of their actions. There are few more powerful declensionist narratives. In Australia, in New Zealand, in Canada and the United States, much literature insists, settlers destroyed new-found Edens. Terrified by the unknown, rejoicing in their capacity to decimate nature, alienated from all about them and eager to turn these territories to new uses – to subdue, tame, and make them productive – they chopped and burned and clubbed and shot and ploughed and drained with abandon. In these new lands, there was no sense of limits. Sustained by the conviction that resources were superabundant, settlers lived for the moment and paid no heed to the morrow – at least until Marsh's stentorian warning that

'we are breaking up the floor and wainscoting and doors and window frames of our dwelling, for fuel to warm our bodies and seethe our pottage' met the reality of timber shortages and shrinking opportunities for a new start. Only then did wisdom dawn, only then did new world settlers begin to realise that prudence was a virtue, only then did they appreciate that it was past time for caution and good sense in their use of the earth. [21]

Political capital has been made from this story – and political purpose may have helped to shape it. Karl Jacoby has argued recently, for example, that turn-of-the-twentieth-century conservationists in the United States gained purchase for their movement, and for an authoritarian approach to land management, by insisting that settlers had a negative impact on the earth. If, as Marsh maintained, untouched nature existed in a stable, but fragile, state, if 'the harmonies of nature' were 'turned to discords' wherever humans set foot, and if people in general lacked the wisdom to moderate their impacts on the natural world, then restrictions, regulations and controls on human use of the earth could be justified by the pressing need for wise stewardship. By the same token, rising environmental concern (in the developed world, in particular) during the last decades of the twentieth century has brought an increasing number of citizens to recognise, and worry about, human impacts on nature. By and large, the back-story here has reprised the standard account of nineteenth-century colonial development. Voracious resource appetites have led people to pillage the earth. It is time for more judicious behaviour (and the introduction of regulatory incentives and strictures as necessary). Of course the magnitude and complexities of current environmental concerns are vastly different from those that prevailed a hundred and fifty years ago. Present day activists – the heroes of the twenty-first-century environmentalist story – speak and write of the need for 'sustainability' rather than of wainscoting burned to seethe pottage, but at its most fundamental level their message is the same as that promulgated by Marsh and others in the nineteenth century. We cannot be wise too soon.[22]

To be sure, the struggle against ignorance and self-interest is long and hard. The media remind us, every day, that anxiety and expert entreaties translate only with difficulty into policy and action. Ratify the Kyoto protocol? Not today in North America, thank you. Of course, those concerned about environmental sustainability tell themselves, such initiatives as the Kyoto accord run counter to a long history of societal disregard of environmental values. It will take time to turn the tide. Looked at in the long view, nineteenth-century New Zealand was an exception, an inspiring example of what was and is possible, but an anomaly nonetheless. Even there, the landmark achievement of the 1874 Forests Bill was quickly undermined. Marsh was not everywhere a prophet in his lifetime. His efforts were far more effective in opening the eyes of his fellow Americans to the consequences of their actions than were policy reforms, implemented in response to heightened nineteenth-century concerns, in arresting the ransacking of American resources. Still, the rise of the conservation

movement a century or so ago suggests reasons for hope today. The battle can be won. When knowledge and circumstances are brought into proper alignment, when ignorance is banished and people have achieved a modicum of material comfort, when the need for management and restraint is acknowledged, the long view can succeed the short, the commonweal can take precedence over individual interest. Just as 'Marsh urged the New World to heed evils endured and reforms instituted in the Old', so the modern day environmentalists might learn from history, 'from the triumphs and setbacks of those who ravished and later sought to restore nature…'. The symmetry is compelling and sustaining. In the present as in the past, the words of the prophets will bring us back from the abyss of heedless consumption.[23]

The shadows who have flittered through this essay – Titus Smith, W.T. L. Travers, Thomas Potts, Julius Vogel, and even George Perkins Marsh himself – were certainly unusual in making intellectual connections and articulating far-reaching arguments as effectively as they did. But were they sui generis? Perhaps we honour to mislead in thinking of them as oases of visionary insight in a desert of environmental concern – aesthetic, ecological and sentimental. Work on the Adirondacks, Yellowstone and the Grand Canyon, in northern New England, in Australia, and on a range of Canadian sources suggests as much. By these accounts, the long history of European engagement with new world territories was less a long dark night of disregard for the environment, than a babel of conflicting views of, and attitudes toward, the natural world? In locale after locale, close attention to the historical record reveals that abhorrence at forbidding wilderness was matched by enjoyment of its sublimity, delight in destruction by concern about degradation, wanton destruction by efforts at protection, alienation by attachment, and so on. The history being revealed here is less a tale of wisdom imparted by visionary individuals, than a record of continuing contestation and conflict, in a great range of settings, between those embracing a broad spectrum of environmental ideals and those opposed to them. What, then, if Smith and Marsh and others were in some fundamental (and ultimately unsurprising) sense, products of their times, places, and societies? What if they were really no more extraordinary, so to speak, than tall poppies in fields supporting less spectacular examples of the genus *Papaver,* as well as a range of other species?[24]

The past prefigured by such a question is a lot more complicated than that implied by stories built on the capacity of prescient figures to increase public awareness of their circumstances. It fits ill within the heroic frame. Once it is recognised that many settler societies developed their own 'moral ecologies' – that 'country people fashioned a variety of arrangements designed to safeguard the ecological bases of their way of life' – and that these were eventually over-ridden by expanding state and bureaucratic authority, the echoes of Pope's epitaph for Newton found in heroic histories of environmental thought sound less convincing. Once it is acknowledged that claims for the protection of fish

habitat, for the creation of parks and reserves, and for the preservation of areas of particular natural beauty were not infrequent in new settled territories in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, that arguments against degradation had their passionate supporters in these times and places, and that all of these efforts yielded relatively few hard-won gains, it becomes harder to accept the optimism implied by the claim that modern day environmentalists will lead society to a sustainable nirvana by heightening awareness.[25]

To move from the heroic mode is, then, to open space for new stories, stories that work simultaneously to re-present the past and to re-imagine the future. To recognise that both advocacy for the environment and resistance to such claims have long existed side-by-side, and to acknowledge the recurrent failure of earlier environmentally-minded individuals to win significant, lasting victories is not only to be faithful to the historical record. It is also to point to the prospect of seeing current debates about the desirability or otherwise of environmental protection more clearly for what they are – the latest manifestations of a continuing struggle, in which opposition to environmental ideals has often won the day. This may dampen facile hopes of a swift and radical transformation in society's attitudes toward the environment. But if it serves to shift the focus of contemporary calls to action away from a dependence on heroic leadership toward recognition of the importance of peoples' everyday concerns, struggles and efforts as they make their ways in the world, it may serve, in the end, to foster rather than hinder change. In looking back to see forward, in short, we do well to remember that Marsh himself found 'the cumulative lives of the humble more revealing' than the exploits of great men. So might we consider ordering the wraiths and spectres and fragments from which our stories about the past and the future are composed.[26]

NOTES

[1] Marcus Hall sparked this paper by inviting me to participate in a session on George Perkins Marsh at the American Society for Environmental History meetings in Durham, North Carolina in March 2001; I have since reflected further on the import of the experiences that were the focus of my brief conference remarks. Lewis Mumford is credited with bringing Marsh, author of *Man and Nature; or Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1864), back into public consciousness in the 1920s and 1930s. His quoted comment is in *The Brown Decades: A Study of the Arts in America, 1865–1895* (New York: Dover, 1955, originally published 1931), 78. Thomas Carlyle's phrase is noted in David Lowenthal, *George Perkins Marsh: Prophet of Conservation* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2000), xxi (see also 430); as Lowenthal points out it is inscribed on the west corridor of the great hall of the US Library of Congress. It can also be found in 'The Hero as Divinity', in Carlyle's *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, & the Heroic in History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 26.

[2] Thomas E. Simpson, *Kauri to Radiata: Origin and Expansion of the Timber Industry in New Zealand* (1973); review in *New Zealand Geographer*, 31 (1975), 92–3. My New Brunswick work was: The Assault on the New Brunswick Forest, 1780–1850, PhD dissertation, University of Toronto, 1974, subsequently published in much revised form as *Timber Colony: A Historical Geography of Early Nineteenth Century New Brunswick* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981).

[3] W.T.L. Travers, 'On the changes effected in the natural features of a new country by the introduction of civilized races', *Transactions and Proceedings*, New Zealand Institute, 2 (1869), 306–30 (and continued in *T and P*, NZI, 3 (1870), 326–36), quotes at 326 and, 327 of Vol 3. Thomas Potts in *New Zealand Parliamentary Debates*, 4 (1868), 188–9.

[4] Travers, 'On the changes effected…', (1870), 328. Charles O'Neill in *New Zealand Parliamentary Debates*, 15 (1873), 1545.

[5] These quotations are from Marsh, *Man and Nature*, 10, 46, 325

[6] Graeme Wynn, 'Pioneers, Politicians and the Conservation of Forests in Early New Zealand', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 5, 2 (1979), 171–88; see also Graeme Wynn, 'Conservation and Society in late nineteenth century New Zealand', *New Zealand Journal of History*, 11 (1977), 49–65

[7] On Titus Smith see: Terrence M. Punch, 'Smith, Titus', *Dictionary of Canadian Biography, VII 1836–1850* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 814–16 ; Andrew H. Clark, 'Titus Smith Junior, and the geography of Nova Scotia in 1801 and 1802', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 44 (1954), 291–314; Harry Piers, *Titus Smith, 'The Dutch Village Philosopher,' pioneer naturalist of Nova Scotia, 1768–1850* (Halifax: 1938); William Smith, 'Some account of the life of Titus Smith', Nova Scotia Institute of Natural Science, *Transactions* I , 4 1866), 149–52. Obituary in *Acadian Recorder* (Halifax), 12 January 1850.

[8] Titus Smith, 'Conclusions on the Results on the Vegetation of Nova Scotia, and on Vegetation in general, and on Man in general, of certain Natural and Artificial Causes deemed to actuate and affect them', *The Magazine of Natural History & Journal of Zoology, Botany, Mineralogy, Geology and Meteorology*, VIII (December 1835), 641–62. The quotations that follow are all derived from this article. 'Byssus' was already a somewhat dated term for 'filamentous fungoid growths'.

[9] Some commentary on Smith's grasp of the ecological matters he discusses here can be found in Eville Gorham, 'Titus Smith, a pioneer of plant ecology in North America', *Ecology*, 36 (1955), 116–23

[10] The 'rethinking' and 'cautioning' and 'hoe and ax' claims are in William Cronon, 'Foreword: Look Back to Look Forward', in David Lowenthal, *George Perkins Marsh: Prophet of Conservation* (London and Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), x, xii–xiii, and in David Lowenthal, 'Introduction', *Man and Nature*, xxvii, respectively. Gorham, 'Titus Smith…', 121 argues that the 1835 paper 'may well comprise the first major contribution to plant ecology in North America'.

[11] The 'Bedford Basin' and 'kindly disposition' quotations are from Smith, 'Some Account of the Life', 149–50; the 'cradle of ecological understanding' is my own coinage. *Man and Nature* is ranked alongside Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* and Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* in Cronon, 'Foreword…', in Lowenthal, *Marsh*, ix

[12] Lowenthal, *Marsh*, 419–22. He engages here with Richard W. Judd, *Common Lands, Common People: The Origins of Conservation in Northern New England* (Cambridge,

Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997) and Richard H. Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995)

[13] Alexander Pope, 'Epitaph Intended for Sir Isaac Newton,' *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* 16th Edition (Boston, Toronto, London: Little, Brown and Company, 1992), 303: 17; Stewart L. Udall, *The Quiet Crisis* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1963), 82; David Lowenthal, 'Environmental History: From Genesis to Apocalypse,' *History Today* 51, 4 (April 2001), 40

[14] Marsh, *Man and Nature*, 465; Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World. Changing Attitudes in England 1500–1800* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1984), 301,285,169; Gilbert White, 'Letter XXXV', Selborne, May 20, 1777, in John White (ed.) *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne* 3rd edition, (1813); Clarence Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 485

[15] Glacken, *Traces*, 568–75, 658–9, 666, 698–702

[16] B. Franklin to R. Jackson, 5 May 1753, in Franklin, *Writings*, III, 133 cited in David Lowenthal, *George Perkins Marsh, Versatile Vermonter* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), 372–3 (note 8); Tim Bonyhady, *The Colonial Earth* (Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press, 2000), 5

[17] Lowenthal, *Man and Nature,* xxii

[18] J.K. Wright,'Introduction,' in *Human Nature in Geography* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), 10

[19] Dr. A. Wojeikof, 'The Results of the Destruction of Forests upon the River Wolga at Astracan', Abstract in *Transactions and Proceedings*, New Zealand Institute, 4 (1871), 374–6; A. I. Woiekof, 'De l'influence de l'homme sur la terre', *Annales de Geographie*, 50(1901), 97–114 and 51 (1901), 193–215; A. D. Dobson, 'On the Destruction of Land by Shingle-bearing Rivers and Suggestions for Protection and Prevention', *Transactions and Proceedings*, New Zealand Institute, 4 (1871), 153–7; Vogel in *New Zealand Parliamentary Debates*, 16 (1874), 79–94, and New Zealand General Assembly. House of Representatives. *Appendices to the Journals* H-5, H-5A, H-5B, H-25; James Brown, *The Forester* (Edinburgh, 1961)

[20] The 'condescension of posterity' phrase, perhaps his most famous, is from the preface to E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1968), 13

[21] Marsh, *Man and* Nature, pp 233, 257. There are of course many and various foundations to this standard narrative. Many European visitors to new world territories commented on the disheveled appearance of the landscape, the incidence of burning and so on and concluded that settlers had little concern for their territories. So for example James Anthony Froude, *Oceana or England and Her Colonies* (London: Longmans, Green, 1886), 242 judged colonial societies devoid of environmental sentiment 'because sentiment belongs to leisure, and in the colonies, just now, they have none of either.' Similarly, James Inglis, on seeing settlers carving homes 'out of the primeval bush,' in New Zealand, noting 'everywhere the fire completing the work begun by the axe' and lamenting: 'The whole thing – waste, waste! Want of capital, want of knowledge want of foresight, want of proper labour, and facilities for marketing. Verily, 'the greater haste

which in the end may prove the lesser speed." *Our New Zealand Cousins* (London: Sampson, Low, Marston, Searle, and Rivington, 1887), 103–4; Inglis did continue his musings, to reflect that perhaps he was mistaken, that perhaps 'the game' might be 'worth the candle in the long run'. These arguments might be compared with that in Roderick Nash, 'The Exporting and Importing of Nature: Nature-Appreciation as a Commodity, 1850–1980', *Perspectives in American History*, XII (1979), 517–60. For some examples of declensionist narratives see: Tim Flannery, *The Future Eaters; An Ecological History of the Australasian Lands and Peoples*(Chatswood: Reed, 1994). William Lines, *Taming the Great South Land. A History of the Conquest of Nature in Australia* (North Sydney, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 1991) and note also the foreword by David Suzuki, and Geoff Park's otherwise remarkable and arresting *Nga Uruora: The Groves of Life. Ecology and History in a New Zealand Landscape* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1995)

[22] Karl Jacoby, *Crimes Against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). The final sentence of this paragraph was used by Captain Inches Campbell Walker, First Conservator of Forests in New Zealand – see New Zealand, General Assembly. House of Representatives. *Appendices to the Journals*, 1877, C-3. See also L. Brown and A. D. McKinnon, *Captain Inches Campbell-Walker, New Zealand's First Conservator of Forests* (Wellington, 1966)

[23] Lowenthal, *Marsh…*, 406.

[24] Work found in, among others, Jacoby, *Crimes…*, Judd, *Common Lands…*, and Bonyhady, *Colonial Earth…*.

[25] The 'country people' quote is from Jacoby, *Crimes…*, 193, but it echoes the arguments in Judd, *Common Lands…*, and other works. See for example, Sean Cadigan, 'The Moral Economy of the Commons: Ecology and Equity in the Newfoundland Cod Fishery, 1815–1855,' *Labour/La Travail* , XLIII (Spring 1999), 9–42

[26] Lowenthal, Marsh…,430; 'looking back to see forward', echoes the sub-title of William Cronon's 'Foreword' to this volume. Or as Helen Ingram has it in 'Place Humanists at the Headgates', in Hal K. Rothman (ed.), *Re-opening the American West* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1998), 156: 'The way in which nature is treated in public policy…is determined by the dominant models and associated images that organize our thinking'.