

## **The Space on the Page:**

### **National Parks and Other Reserved Lands in Western American Literature**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in English at UC Los Angeles

by  
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#### **Introduction**

Previous scholarship on the history of the national parks tends to ascribe Americans' growing interest in land preservation to the changing attitude towards nature and outdoor recreation, increasing urbanization, increased leisure time, and fashion. Lee Clark Mitchell traces, in Witnesses to a Vanishing America, the nineteenth century precedents for twentieth century interest in conservation. He says that growing consternation over the destruction of wilderness that accompanied westward expansion inspired the impulse to "fix a record," to preserve in art the peoples, animals, and scenes that were fast disappearing. He finds the efforts late in the nineteenth century to establish parks (of all kinds) responsible for a shift from the desire to document to a desire to preserve, though interest in wilderness preservation (as opposed to simply the protection of scenic wonders) came significantly later. Hans Huth and Roderick Nash have also traced the development of American attitudes towards nature or wilderness. Huth sees American attitudes towards national parks deriving from an increasing enthusiasm for outdoor recreation and the institution of the summer vacation. Nash says that the national park idea offered a vehicle for moving from ambivalence or regret over the disappearance of wilderness to active interest in its preservation.

Mitchell, Huth, and Nash, along with Alfred Runte, John Ise, Stewart Udall, and Dyan Zaslowsky, regard the conflict between proponents of utilitarian and non-utilitarian (or idealist) conservation as the most important debate informing the national parks movement from about 1890 onward. Non-utilitarian conservation stems from Romantic and Transcendentalist conceptions of nature as having moral and spiritual values; utilitarian conservation comes out of the older and more dominant strain of American attitude towards wilderness, that man has a duty to subdue and make use of wild lands. Roderick Nash explains that a non-utilitarian or aesthetic appreciation of nature could emerge only in an urban population, long removed from the experience of pioneering: "Enthusiasm for wilderness based on romanticism, deism, and the sense of the sublime developed among sophisticated Europeans surrounded by cities and books. So too in America the beginnings of appreciation are found among writers, artists, scientists, vacationers, gentlemen – people, in short, who did not face wilderness from the pioneer's perspective."<sup>1</sup> Utilitarian conservation, on the other hand, grew directly out of a pioneer ethic; only by controlling and managing the country's natural resources could Americans "stabilize their environment by manipulating natural cycles to achieve greater industrial and agricultural efficiency. Only then would mankind's historical dependence on the whims of nature be

overcome.”<sup>2</sup> Under Theodore Roosevelt, the struggle to define the meaning and goal of conservation came to a head; historians credit Roosevelt with advocating both kinds of conservation, at different times and for different places. This split between utilitarian and non-utilitarian conservation is now typified by the different goals of the Forest Service and the National Park Service, the former primarily dedicated to sustainable use of natural resources, and the latter dedicated to preservation of natural beauty.

The Yellowstone Act of 1872 dedicated the reserved land “as a public park or pleasuring ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people.” The legislation setting aside Yosemite Valley and ceding it to the state of California in 1864 designated the valley for “public use, resort, and recreation,” and the 1890 act establishing Yosemite National Park said that it was the duty of the government “to preserve the wonders and beauties of our country from injury and destruction, in order that they may afford pleasure as well as instruction to the people.” None of this wording specifies *how* people should use, enjoy, benefit from, or be instructed by the parks. Despite confusing and often conflicting ideas regarding the purpose and best use of the parks, the movement to establish parks gained tremendous momentum in the first decade of the twentieth century. Eighteen years passed between the establishment of Yellowstone and the establishment of the next national parks (Yosemite, Sequoia, and General Grant); then another nine years passed before the opening of the next park. However, between 1899 and 1916 eleven more parks and twenty-one national monuments were established.<sup>3</sup>

Statements such as, “Yellowstone was the first unqualified embodiment of the national park idea – the world’s premier example of large-scale natural preservation for all the people,” imply that “the national park idea” is a unified and well-understood concept.<sup>4</sup> Histories and pamphlets about the parks frequently express satisfaction in the U.S. having invented the idea of national parks. In his testimony before Congress in favor of establishing a National Park Service in 1916, Horace McFarland argued for the uniqueness of the concept as a reason for supporting the parks, saying, “The national parks, Mr. Chairman, are an American idea; it is one thing we have that has not been imported. . . . The great parks are, in the highest degree, as they stand today, a sheer expression of democracy.”<sup>5</sup> In fact, both the idea and the system of national parks in the United States have been long in evolving and their present form and goal bear little resemblance to their inception. Five years earlier than his argument for a National Park Service, Horace McFarland opened the first National Park Conference, held at Yellowstone Park in 1911, with the observation that the parks had “grown up like Topsy, and no one has been particularly concerned with them.”<sup>6</sup> Much of the content of these conferences was the expression of the need for not only centralized administration of parks and national monuments, but also for an idea or system governing that administration. The history of all the various reserved lands in this country consists of many different National Park Ideas.

One of the most pervasive and powerful of those ideas is the notion that in preserving particular landscapes the nation thus preserves a crucial source of American identity and national character. Some of the most influential statements regarding the crucial link between the American environment and American character were voiced by Frederick Jackson Turner and Theodore Roosevelt, occasioned by what Turner termed the closing of the frontier.

Richard Slotkin begins his *Gunfighter Nation* by examining Turner’s and Roosevelt’s theories regarding the significance of the frontier, because theirs were the most influential and well known of such ideas. He says that while the two historians shared a basic assumption – “a belief that the Frontier was a vital element in shaping American institutions and national character, and a concern that the passing of the agrarian frontier marked the beginning of crisis in

American history” – that their theories present antithetical paradigms for social action that would perpetuate frontier values.<sup>7</sup> In pursuing this argument, Slotkin focuses on the character from the Frontier Myth that each man promotes, Turner’s farming indicating the economic and Roosevelt’s hunter the political aspects of that myth. While differing in implication, both theories point to an interaction between human and wilderness as essential to frontier experience.

In Turner’s hypothesis he argues that “the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development,” on both national and individual levels.<sup>8</sup> In calling the frontier “the line of most rapid and effective Americanization,” Turner demonstrates the process of Americanization as reciprocal between the individual and the land; at first “the wilderness masters the colonist,” but later “little by little he transforms the wilderness,” and the result is “a new product that is American.”<sup>9</sup> This “new product” presumably encompasses both the colonist and the land, as they have both been transformed (the choice of language suggests that both become commodity). Inherent in Turner’s hypothesis is the assumption that Americanization is positive, that frontier history shows a process of betterment; the wilderness turns the colonist into a man of American Values, and the colonist turns the wilderness into productive land. The process moves beyond the colonist to the nation as a whole. What the frontier experience effects in the individual, the existence of the frontier effects in the national character. Turner elaborates the characteristics of the American intellect as

That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom.<sup>10</sup>

Roosevelt also defined the American character as a product of the frontier. In *The Winning of the West* he gives a characterization of The Backwoodsmen as “a peculiar and characteristically American people.”<sup>11</sup> Roosevelt felt that only certain persons had temperament, abilities, and values that made them “fitted to be Americans from the start;” the Backwoodsman is one of these persons but is not American until he has been transformed by contact with the American wilderness.<sup>12</sup> Roosevelt’s depiction is again of both a national and an individual character. In his program of the strenuous life, Roosevelt advocates cultivating American character (synonymous with manliness and moral stature) by replicating the backwoodsman’s “primitive” contact with the land. In “The American Boy,” the boys from the prairie or backwoods, “who live under such fortunate conditions that they have to do either a good deal of outdoor work or a good deal of what one might call natural outdoor play,” are better suited than their city-bred counterparts to become soldiers and American men.<sup>13</sup> As in Turner’s thesis, it is contact with wilderness that is essentially responsible for the formation of American character and ideals.

If American character, if all that was essentially American, derived from the frontier, as these theories suggest, then the closing of the frontier was cause for apprehension. Turner acknowledges that the “expansive character of American life” created by the frontier will in turn continue to create a frontier, to “demand a wider field for its exercise.”<sup>14</sup> This demand took the form of reclaiming the possibility of the frontier experience if not the physical frontier, and that reclamation took many forms. One form was the preservation of wilderness, that most important component of the frontier experience. However, parks and other reserved lands clearly could not exactly replicate the frontier – the settlement and cultivation of wilderness is not consistent with

its preservation. Nevertheless, in preserving areas of wild land one essential component of frontier experience was preserved. As president, Roosevelt set aside huge tracts of land as National Forests and established numerous National Monuments, as well as seeing legislation for several National Parks pass through Congress. Although he certainly had several interests or motivations in establishing land reserves, his belief in the impact of the frontier is certainly significant. In preserving lands he sought to extend the frontier into the future, to insure access to one component of the frontier process to all Americans. However, the experience of that land had to differ from the experience of frontier settlement, and it is the terms of that experience, the questions regarding the use to be made of reserved lands and purposes of that use, that still occupy the nation today.

It is unfashionable now to ascribe a causal role to the closing of the frontier. I do not pretend to argue the existence of an American frontier nor its disappearance in either geography or time. Rather I find it fascinating that the concerns sparked by a belief in the end of a frontier – that the disappearance of wilderness fundamentally threatened the definitive character of the nation itself – are the concerns so consistently voiced in the preservation and conservation movements over the past century. *The Vail Agenda*, a management plan resulting from a symposium on the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the National Park Service, identifies the common value of the park system's diverse units as constituting "the sights, the scenery, the environments, the people, the places, the events, the conflicts that have contributed elements of shared national experience, values, and identity to build a national character out of the diversity from which we come."<sup>15</sup> We still credit the American landscape with the ability to create national character.

Patricia Nelson Limerick, who prides herself on collapsing the notion of the frontier ending in 1890, offers an alternative paradigm in which to locate the emergent interest in preservation and conservation. She proposes

a model of first drafts, second drafts, and third drafts. In a shift that registered considerably short of a major watershed, toward the end of the nineteenth century, various Americans (by no means a majority) looked over the process of westward expansion and economic development, and the physical and social results of that process. Their response was one very familiar to writers: the feeling that the outcome needed rethinking. The first draft, produced by several decades of intensive Anglo-American colonization, needed tinkering. The depletion of forests in the Midwest, the aimlessness of Indian reservations, the stubborn distinctiveness of the Mormons, the difficulty of agriculture in semi-arid territory: these were not the optimal outcomes for westward expansion. So a variety of reformers undertook to revise the results, using federal laws as editors use blue pencils. At this stage, however, they were still the kind of editors who think that a few fairly minor changes to the manuscript will take care of its problem . . . . Throughout the twentieth century, intoxicated with the various romances of the bureaucrats' frontier, federal land management agencies tried to oversee the writing of a better second draft of the American West. But the second draft was finally not all that different from the first draft. The profit motive, economic ambition, and commodity-consciousness were allowed – one might even say, had to be allowed – to carry over, nearly unchallenged, from the first draft to the second draft . . . . Midway through the twentieth century, discontent with this second draft began to gather force. From the wilderness campaign to Earth Day, a number of movements showed the growth of a conviction that a much more searching third draft of the West was in order. This third

draft would rest on a fundamental revising of values – away from use, commodity, and profit, and toward a greater loyalty to nature and to a distant posterity.<sup>16</sup>

Limerick's alternative model offers a lovely way into the project that follows. If it was federal land management agencies that oversaw the writing of a second draft, nevertheless an enormous diversity of pens tried to participate in that rewriting. The popular press, concerned individuals, big business interests, and many fledgling grassroots organizations contributed to the effort. Not surprisingly, so did professional writers.

In the chapters that follow I propose readings of the works of Owen Wister, John Muir, Mary Austin, and Willa Cather that place them in the context of the national debate regarding preservation and conservation of wilderness and natural resources. In each case the author saw with remarkable acuity the implications of the "second draft" well before they became clear to the rest of the country, and each sought to revise that draft even as it emerged. Their visions of land policy in the West called for the kind of fundamental reordering of priorities that has become familiar only in the last two decades. If they each wrote out of concern for a specific landscape of particular personal significance, they nevertheless addressed the issues involved on the larger scale.

I have chosen to link each of the four authors with one of the key legislative attempts at remaking land policy in the West. Having known the landscape of Yellowstone before it became a national park, Owen Wister watched with chagrin the changes wrought on that landscape by its park status. While supportive of the impulse to preserve, Wister exposed the delusion that federal protection maintained unimpaired more than it irreparably altered the landscape. In participating in the process of determining the purpose of forest reserves, John Muir sought to broaden his method for personal enlightenment into a model for political activism and government policy making. He knew that any policy made with the concerns of man paramount would jeopardize the integrity of American forest wilderness and strip the country of one of its greatest national treasures. I include Mary Austin and legislation regarding the reclamation of arid lands because reclamation was considered a key part of land management policy and the conservation of resources. Austin saw communities based on small-scale irrigated farming as a unique and ideal social organization, so she regarded federal reclamation as a singular opportunity to effect social reform. Willa Cather's interest in ancient cliff dwellings suggests a connection with national monument legislation. Over the course of her career she shifted from seeing the presence of ancient dwellings in the West as a marvelous force for "Americanizing" the European immigrant to questioning the propriety of preservation of such dwellings. Preservation, particularly under the guise of a national monument, involves appropriation not only of artifacts but also the history that inheres in them; that appropriation compromises both the ancient people and the modern nation.

I have attempted to show that these authors can profitably be seen in an historical context, and participating in an historical process, where they may not have previously been placed. But more importantly, my main goal has been to use the historical context of environmental concerns as an avenue into a new reading of their work. My emphasis is therefore more literary than historical. The research and writing of this project has given me the profound pleasure that the study of literature always gives me – the realization that words written in radically different times and places still offer me, and my time, compelling ways to think about the challenges we face now.

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<sup>1</sup> Nash 51.

<sup>2</sup> Runte 69.

<sup>3</sup> It is difficult to get exact numbers here, as many parks and monuments changed status during these years. For example, in 1913 there were thirteen national parks and twenty-eight national monuments, more than would be counted three years later. Eleven parks and twenty-one national monuments were established that would retain their park or monument status.

<sup>4</sup> Mackintosh 10.

<sup>5</sup> Qtd. in Mackintosh.

<sup>6</sup> *Proceedings* 3. Odd as this remark is, McFarland apparently thought it apt, as he opened the second National Park Conference the following year with the same remark.

<sup>7</sup> Slotkin 30.

<sup>8</sup> Turner 1.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid* 4.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid* 37.

<sup>11</sup> *West* 8.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid* 10.

<sup>13</sup> *Life* 129.

<sup>14</sup> Turner 37.

<sup>15</sup> *Vail Agenda* 14.

<sup>16</sup> Limerick 13-16.