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THE
UNTAMED GARDEN
AND OTHER PERSONAL ESSAYS

COLLIER BOOKS
Macmillan Publishing Company
New York

1984

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The Nature of Nature Writing

1784

NATURE writing is a historically recent literary genre, and, in a quiet way, one of the most revolutionary. It's like a woodland stream that sometimes runs out of sight, buried in sand, but overflows into waterfalls farther downstream. It can be easy to ignore, but it keeps eroding the bedrock.

There is some confusion as to exactly what nature writing is. It usually is associated with essays such as *Walden*, but there is nature fiction, nature poetry, nature reporting, even nature drama, if television documentary narrations are literature. All these have something in common: they are appreciative aesthetic responses to a scientific view of nature, and I think this trait defines the genre. Of course, there was much writing that concerned nature before Linnaeus developed scientific classification in the mid-eighteenth century, but the fascination with nature *itself* that science evoked was new.

Before Linnaeus there were hunting stories, fables, herbals, bestiaries, pastorals, lyrics, and traveler's tales, but nature generally was seen in only two dimensions. It was a backdrop to a historical cosmos, or a veneer over a religious one. Whether it was admired or scorned, the human figure stood in strong relief against it. After Linnaeus began to give even insects impressive Greco-Latin names, nature rapidly acquired a new substantiality and became a subject as well as a setting. By the 1790s an

English country clergyman who a century or two before might have been writing theological treatises or metaphysical poems produced a book (Gilbert White's *The Natural History of Selborne*) wherein history and religion were interwoven with, sometimes overshadowed by, beech trees and earthworms.

Nature writing has been particularly prevalent in America, for an obvious reason. European colonists found here a world that was for them (if not for the Indians they displaced) empty of historical or religious association. In this world they ignored nature itself at their own risk. The early Jamestown and Boston colonists succeeded in ignoring it to some degree, which perhaps is one reason they clung precariously to the coast for the first hundred years; but by Linnaeus's time, Americans had begun to observe nature closely, and to venture into the wilderness with appreciation.

They observed in a piecemeal fashion at first, and ventured without too much appreciation. Early naturalists, such as Cadwallader Colden and John Bartram, were more interested in extracting rare, valuable plants and animals from the wilderness than in perceiving it as a whole, an attitude in keeping with the Linnaean bias for individual organisms over ecological systems (ecology not having been invented yet). Bartram, a Philadelphia Quaker who collected Venus's-flytraps and other curiosities for wealthy English patrons' gardens, saw the wolves and swamps of the wilderness as uncomfortable obstacles, and his descriptions of Florida and upstate New York in the 1750s and 1760s reflect this. They are robust and accurate, but utilitarian. They are not quite nature writing as we understand it today because an element of poetic sensibility is lacking from their genuine scientific interest.

John's son, William Bartram, supplied the missing element. An artist and dreamer who failed several times at storekeeping and farming, he spent four years alone in the American wilderness and brought poetry to it as decisively as a rather similar figure, Johnny Appleseed, brought fruit. His account of Florida and the southern Appalachians in his book, the *Travels*, is a subtropical escarpment dividing dry Enlightenment from moist Romanticism. William's father had described the waters of one

of Florida's celebrated limestone sinkhole springs as smelling "like bilge," tasting "sweetish and loathsome," and boiling up from the bottom "like a pot." Williams saw "an enchanting and amazing crystal fountain, which incessantly threw up, from dark, rocky caverns below, tons of water every minute . . . the blue ether of another world."

If William's effusions have a familiar ring to even the most urban sensibility, there is good reason. After its publication in 1791, Bartram's *Travels* was devoured by the generation of young European poets that included the author of "Kubla Khan." Bartram supplied Coleridge, Wordsworth, Chateaubriand, and others with genuine examples of exotic, Rousseauesque wonders they hungered for—not only "caverns measureless to man," but noble Creek warriors, lovely Cherokee maidens, flowery savannas, fragrant groves, brilliant birds. The wonders seem a little overblown to us today, but they were real, honestly observed, and vividly described. Fragments of their splendor still linger in today's condominium-laden Florida. The "magnificent plains of Alachuah," where Bartram saw "the thundering alligator" and "the sonorous savanna cranes," are now a state preserve, although there's an interstate freeway through one corner of them.

The *Travels* didn't evoke as much interest in America as it did in Europe. Most Americans were unprepared for its glowing picture of wilds that lay only a few days' travel to the west. One reviewer found its subject interesting but its style "disgustingly pompous." As the romantic sensibility filtered westward across the Atlantic, however, Bartram's poetic wilderness followed it. "Do you know Bartram's *Travels*?" Carlyle wrote to Emerson. "Treats of Florida generally, has a wonderful kind of floundering eloquence in it; and has grown immeasurably old. All American libraries ought to provide themselves with that kind of book; and keep them as a future *biblical* article."

If the more flowery passages in Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales are to be believed, American pioneers were beginning to sound more like William than his father. In fact, early nineteenth-century frontier letters contain quite a few effusive descriptions of flowery prairies and soaring forests along with more prosaic matters, suggesting that nature-loving in the Romantic mode had caught on.

Nature writing changed as Romanticism evolved into Victorian pragmatic optimism. Its scientific orientation deepened, and at the same time it began to question the directions in which economic applications of science were leading civilization. It became increasingly aware of ecology, in other words. William Bartram hadn't given too much thought to the relationship of civilization and wilderness. (His patron had sent him to scout the Southeast's agricultural and industrial potential as well as to study its natural history.) But Henry Thoreau did, and John Muir after him. Pragmatic, optimistic men (both were mechanically skilled inventors as well as naturalists), they saw wilderness as a remedy for the enervations and constraints of growing industrial towns. They hauled it down from the garret of Romanticism to the Victorian parlor and kitchen. "We require an infusion of hemlock, spruce, or arbor vitae in our tea," wrote Thoreau, with characteristic pungency (and hyperbole). "Hope and the future for me are not in lawns and cultivated fields, not in towns and cities, but in the impervious and quaking swamp."

Although they often are seen as opposed to nineteenth-century expansionism, Thoreau and Muir were men of their time, inhabiting a planet with about a quarter of today's population. Land speculators saw hope and future in quaking swamps too, although they differed from Thoreau in wanting to see them drained after they bought them cheap. One might say that Thoreau and Muir liked the expansive quality of the frontier so much that they wanted to make it permanent, to integrate its challenges and exhilarations with civilization. From this desire, expressed in Thoreau's New England swamp ruminations and Muir's California mountaintop raptures, arose the concept of the wilderness park, America's unique contribution to global culture.

As Victorian optimism ripened into Edwardian euphoria, the words of Thoreau and Muir struck increasingly responsive chords with the public. Expansion of the frontier was making America rich, but it was gobbling up natural resources so fast that the idea of preserving some wilderness for recreation, or at least for future use, had become respectable. Nature writing had a heyday at the turn of the century, especially during the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt, himself a nature writer of sorts. It

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would be hard to imagine John Muir going camping in Yosemite with the present Republican incumbent, but he did with Teddy Roosevelt. John Burroughs, a less acerbic writer than Thoreau or Muir, enjoyed tremendous popularity with books about countryside wildlife, and went camping with Henry Ford and Thomas Edison as well as Roosevelt.

The heyday didn't survive Muir and Roosevelt. The scientifically conducted carnage of World War I revealed the rot at the Edwardian core, and pragmatic optimism became a mark of naive boosterism. Many American writers were overtaken by a wave of nostalgia for the prescientific, for the nobility in which religion and history can clothe humanity. Muir and Thoreau had complained eloquently of human conceit and destructiveness, but they still had taken for granted a high degree of human significance. It was harder to do this after a generation of young men had been slaughtered in the trenches. The pragmatic remedies of progressives seemed inadequate to modernists, who sought utopias.

The modernist flight of American writers to Europe was a frontier in reverse. Nature writing meant little to its pioneers Pound and Eliot, who turned their backs on Idaho and Missouri to embrace medieval Europe. Even the outdoorsman Ernest Hemingway had a medieval attitude toward wilderness. It was a place for hunting, fishing, or war, not for seeking knowledge, transcendent or otherwise. Knowledge was for priests. D. H. Lawrence excluded Thoreau from his canon of American classics, regarding him as a coldhearted detailer of biotic mechanisms.

But nostalgia for the prescientific degenerated into fascism, helping bring about World War II and even more murderous applications of science. As though seeking an antidote in the serpent that had stung it, the postwar world turned back to pragmatic optimism of a sort, with much talk of new frontiers in the Arctic, the tropics, the oceans, space. Nature writing underwent a resurgence, partly as a result of renewed public uneasiness about its applications. The popularity of Rachel Carson's best-seller *The Sea Around Us*, which eloquently introduced the public to many new discoveries about the biosphere, gave her

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the time and authority to write *Silent Spring*, which eloquently introduced the public to the many new dangers of pesticides and herbicides.

Carson and other outstanding postwar nature writers, such as Aldo Leopold and Loren Eiseley, were somewhat different from their predecessors, reflecting American society's growing dependence on expert knowledge. Bartram, Thoreau, and Muir were amateurs, but Carson, Leopold, and Eiseley were institutionally trained and employed scientists. There were advantages and disadvantages to this. Carson and her colleagues could appeal to vastly expanded knowledge of the biosphere's interdependence when advocating wilderness preservation, whereas Muir and Thoreau worked more from intuition. On the other hand, professional positions may have inhibited postwar writers from the robust partisanship that let John Muir lobby unabashedly for birds and flowers in nineteenth-century Sacramento.

There's no doubt that Carson, Eiseley, and Leopold contributed greatly to the wave of environmental partisanship in the 1960s and 1970s. That surge has encouraged a new crop of nature writers; despite continuing shrinkage of wilderness, there probably are more nature writers today than ever. It remains to be seen whether we'll be as influential as our predecessors. At times the prospects look dim. Since land development became a major industry, there has been an expectation in some quarters that wilderness simply will disappear eventually, replaced by artifice. Some writers seem to have accepted this. They write like undertakers: an elegy on every page. A new book about this or that last wilderness comes out at least once a year.

It's important for us to know how bad things are, but to me there's something unimaginative about the elegists. As dealers in myth, writers ought to know better than to let technocrats and salesmen mesmerize them into believing that civilization can conquer nature. They should understand that this is a myth too, what one might call the myth of nature as loser. But nature is not a loser because it is not a competitor. The nature-as-loser myth was useful when humanity was small and wilderness large; it encouraged the growth of civilization, and of knowledge. It's of doubtful utility to us, who are capable of reducing the bio-

sphere to dust. It is not nature that will have lost in that event.

There's a lot of work for nature writers to do. It's not quite the same work that William Bartram faced. Adventure is a luxury commodity today, packaged by tour agencies. The old, romantic, exotic nature writing is of declining relevance. I wonder how many people have gone to the library to read about something in their local woods and found books about the Arctic, the tropics, the oceans and space, but nothing much about their local woods. I certainly have: it's one more reason I started writing nature books.

Carson, Leopold, and Eiseley did much of their exploring in their studies. The most daunting challenge facing nature writers today is not travel but data. Somebody has to translate information into feelings and visions. This is not to say that nature writers now must spend all their time at computer terminals. Collecting mosquito bites always will go with the job, and there are still more places to do so, even in America, than some people think. They're generally the worse for wear, these places, but they're still alive, still holding up the biosphere, still part of what Wallace Stegner calls "the geography of hope."

Wetlands in America

WETLANDS are subtle things, hard to measure and define. Official estimates of the original wetland acreage in the conterminous United States (the lower forty-eight, that is) have ranged from 127 million to 215 million, or from roughly five to ten percent of wilderness America. That's a very rough estimate indeed, but then the pioneers weren't counting swamps and bogs as they slashed their way west. (Survey marker trees have provided some records, but many species such as elm and ash grow both in swamps and drier places.) Even if they had been counting, they would have had problems because wetlands can change size significantly over relatively short periods, and can be hard to even recognize, as anyone will agree who has started to walk across a meadow and ended up in a bog.

Most people can recognize baldcypress swamps, cattail ponds, or tidal cordgrass marshes, but prairie potholes, sedge meadows, riverbottom forests, vernal pools, pocosins, and fens can be deceptive in dry years, or dry times of year, although they are well-documented wetland types. To the casual eye, most wetland trees, shrubs, and herbs aren't markedly different from dryland counterparts, and even such wetland peculiarities as the carnivorous sundews and bladderworts aren't particularly eye-catching. What's more, many places that aren't well-documented as wetland can get pretty wet at times.