

Going Wild

The First American Ecologists

by Matthieu Calame

By studying key concepts of such as frontier, wilderness and rewilding in the United States, William Cronon shows that human history unfolds within a geographical framework, using natural resources that profoundly shape it. This serves as a reminder that ecology is a humanism.

Reviewed: William Cronon, *Nature et Récits. Essais d'histoire environnementale*, Paris, Éditions Dehors, 2016, 288 pp.

The purpose of environmental history is to “introduce nature into the flow of human history”. In his collection of essays translated into French under the title *Nature et Récits. Essais d'histoire environnementale*, William Cronon, one of the field’s leading figures in the United States, made an epistemological reflection on environmental history and its creation since the end of the nineteenth century. That creation centres around three key notions of the American narrative and environmental thought: frontier, wilderness and rewilding.

Turner and the frontier

In 1893 a short essay was published by the historian Frederick Jackson Turner (1861-1932), and today it remains the work that has most influenced the American historical narrative: *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*. Turner’s theory established a link between the particular socio-political nature of Euro-American society ¹ – democracy and

¹ I have borrowed the term “Euro-American” here as used by the author; it distinguishes not only the non-European native migrants but also the Amerindians.

egalitarianism – with the existence of a frontier, in the ancient sense of “margin”: virgin, unowned lands that were ripe for conquering.

Over two generations, the trajectory of civilisation was repeated: virgin land, hunting, grazing, agriculture, founding of towns, industrial expansion. Despite the wide range of criticisms launched against Turner’s theory – his overlooking of Indians, women and minorities; the dependence of this frontier economy on capitalist urban expansion on the East Coast; the link between democracy and the Enlightenment, which did not make it a strictly American event – its strength lay in its proposal of a coherent narrative that gave meaning to American history.

No other work has managed to take its place, and the stages of the conquest of the West continue to mark the rhythm of current narratives. Turner, a great historian who influenced generations of students, recognised the limitations of what he believed to be the necessarily circumstantial theory behind an essay that was intended as part of a series, even though in the end posterity only immortalised the one piece.

Despite the generally progressive tone used in the book, Turner questioned the future of Euro-American society after the completion of internal colonisation and the end of the “frontier”, an event that was contemporary with the book’s publication (the Indian wars ended in 1890 with the murder of Sitting Bull and the Wounded Knee Massacre).

Muir and the wilderness

Turner’s uncertainty with regard to the future echoed the development of the conservation movement, whose emblematic figure was John Muir (1838-1914), and its key notion of safeguarding the wilderness. Muir took a different perspective but shared with Turner his belief in a fact that could hardly be disputed: the expansion of the agricultural front at the expense of “wild” spaces. Like Turner, he entirely overlooked the Amerindians.

Muir was concerned by the risk of total destruction of a virgin, “sublime” nature, in the strongest sense of the term. Muir’s environmental concerns were in keeping with the times, and matched those of a conservative American aristocracy – embodied by Theodore Roosevelt – that also considered contact and confrontation with the wilderness to be the only means of shaping a person’s character, and feared that the disappearance of the wilderness would lead to the moral weakening of the American man, by which they were referring to the Anglo-American Protestant white male.

In 1890 Congress passed a law establishing Yosemite National Park, the first national park in the United States. By an irony of history, the country created its first national park in the same year that the Indian Wars ended in a massacre. The Amerindians were not considered

part of the wilderness. Since then, the protection of the wilderness as an un-anthropised space formed the core of American conservation policy led by the National Park Service (NPS).

The ideology of an intact wilderness led the NPS to erase all traces of previous human occupation from the land entrusted to it, destroying buildings and developments where necessary. William Cronon, however, uses two examples – the Apostle Islands in northern Wisconsin and the ghost town of Kennecott in Alaska – to show both the ubiquity of past human activity in North America, even when that activity has ended, and the connection between local history and global history.

Both these sites were occupied for centuries by Amerindians, and Kennecott was also the site of the richest copper mines in the world (70% of copper in the ore). The town was built from scratch in response to the rapid development of electricity. The magnificent “wild” Apostle Islands were the site of the furthest fur trading post of French traders at the end of the 17th century. They were colonised in the 19th century by German and Scandinavian farmers and were exploited as stone quarries, becoming almost entirely deforested in places. Whatever Kennecott and the Apostle Islands might celebrate, it is certainly not the wilderness but rather the extraordinary resilience of ecosystems after human beings withdraw.

Leopold and rewilding

Aldo Leopold (1887-1948) offered an alternative vision of the wilderness, focusing on ordinary, invisible nature, which is ubiquitous if one only takes the time to look at it and give it a space of its own. Leopold and his family became “gardeners of the wild”, which Leopold summarised as follows:

“The most ancient task of human history is to live on a piece of land without ruining it.”

This idea led to a more flexible and variable concept of wilderness, with less interest in a static nature in a permanent state of equilibrium and more focus on a dynamic nature capable of rebuilding itself when given the space or when supported – which, in the 1990s, would lead to the concept of rewilding. A “policy for nature” became not a one-off conservation policy with the aim of preserving a passive wilderness, but a general policy that promoted rewilding everywhere. In Europe, that movement could be seen in cities’ efforts to demineralise through the “Incredible Edible” networks, or “guerrilla gardening”.

William Cronon’s work as an environmental historian and his commitment to ecology are directly connected to Leopold’s thought. The history of humanity and nature are closely intertwined. Regardless of the criticisms made of Turner, William Cronon accepted his idea – which was not new but was generally overlooked at the turn of the 20th century – that human

history evolves within a geographical framework and thanks to natural resources that profoundly shape it.

In return, the myth of wild nature that should be preserved as isolated areas of wilderness (which were, in addition, usually determined by their exceptional landscapes) prevents us from contemplating our real link with the otherness of nature or observing the reality of an independent life that is constantly unfolding around us. The philosophy of wilderness hinders the development of a truly ecological society, according to Leopold's definition.

The moral meaning of environmental history

William Cronon had a passionate interest in documenting the closely-linked history between human beings and nature, including its dramas, successes and redemptions. As an ecologist, he supported historians' social function: "The special task of environmental history is to assert that stories about the past are better, all other things being equal, if they increase our attention to nature and the place of people within it." Rejecting any form of polarisation requiring that one should diminish in order for the other to grow, his work instead argued for a profitable coexistence. His ecology was humanist in the sense that, without denying the destructive nature of certain forms of society and relations with nature, he did not believe it to be inevitable.

Muir, Turner, Leopold and Cronon were united by Wisconsin. All four men had spent time in the state at some point in their lives. It was a state with no outstanding natural landmarks, a somewhat rural area where tourism had taken off at an early stage, a phenomenon that Cronon considered "one of the most potent cultural forces reshaping landscapes all over the world." It was this inseparability between human history and the environment, in which spaces bear the mark of human beings and where human history is linked to the resources available in that space, that led Cronon to assert that "history is what we see no matter where we look."

Nature et Récits is not a single text; rather, it is a collection of several of William Cronon's short essays on subjects such as wilderness, the importance of Turner and the function of environmental history. William Cronon loves nature, even ordinary nature. He also loves human beings and puts himself forward as the narrator of the sometimes troubled history of the relations between the Euro-Americans and the land where they practically wiped out the Amerindian peoples. It is a dramatic history by any account.

At the end of one teaching course, however, after receiving feedback from his students, Cronon read of their confusion, even despair. That was not the message he wished to pass on. He therefore devoted his last course to making an impassioned plea for a possible and desirable coexistence. His vision of humanity's relationship with nature sounds oddly familiar to a

European, living on a small, saturated piece of continent where, year after year, communities are forced to find a balance by establishing what the French would call a *territoire*.

Just as the term “wilderness” is difficult to render well in French, so the French word “*territoire*” is not quite the same as “territory” in English. And yet Cronon indeed speaks of a *territoire* when describing Wisconsin. In that sense, Turner’s prophetic vision seems confirmed. In finishing their conquest, removing all frontiers and exhausting the plethoric natural resources available to them, the Euro-Americans have completed the first chapter of their history. Deprived of all wilderness, they will now have to “invent” their *territoire*. Let us hope that Turner’s second prophecy turns out to be wrong: that democracy is linked to the existence of a frontier!

In short, this book makes for pleasant reading, much like a Wisconsin landscape, and provides a response to authors who had asserted that ecology was an anti-humanism.

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