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*Mountains Without Handrails*





*Mountains*  
*Without* *Reflections on the*  
*Handrails* *National Parks*

*Joseph L. Sax*

Ann Arbor

The University of Michigan Press



*For Mary Sax*

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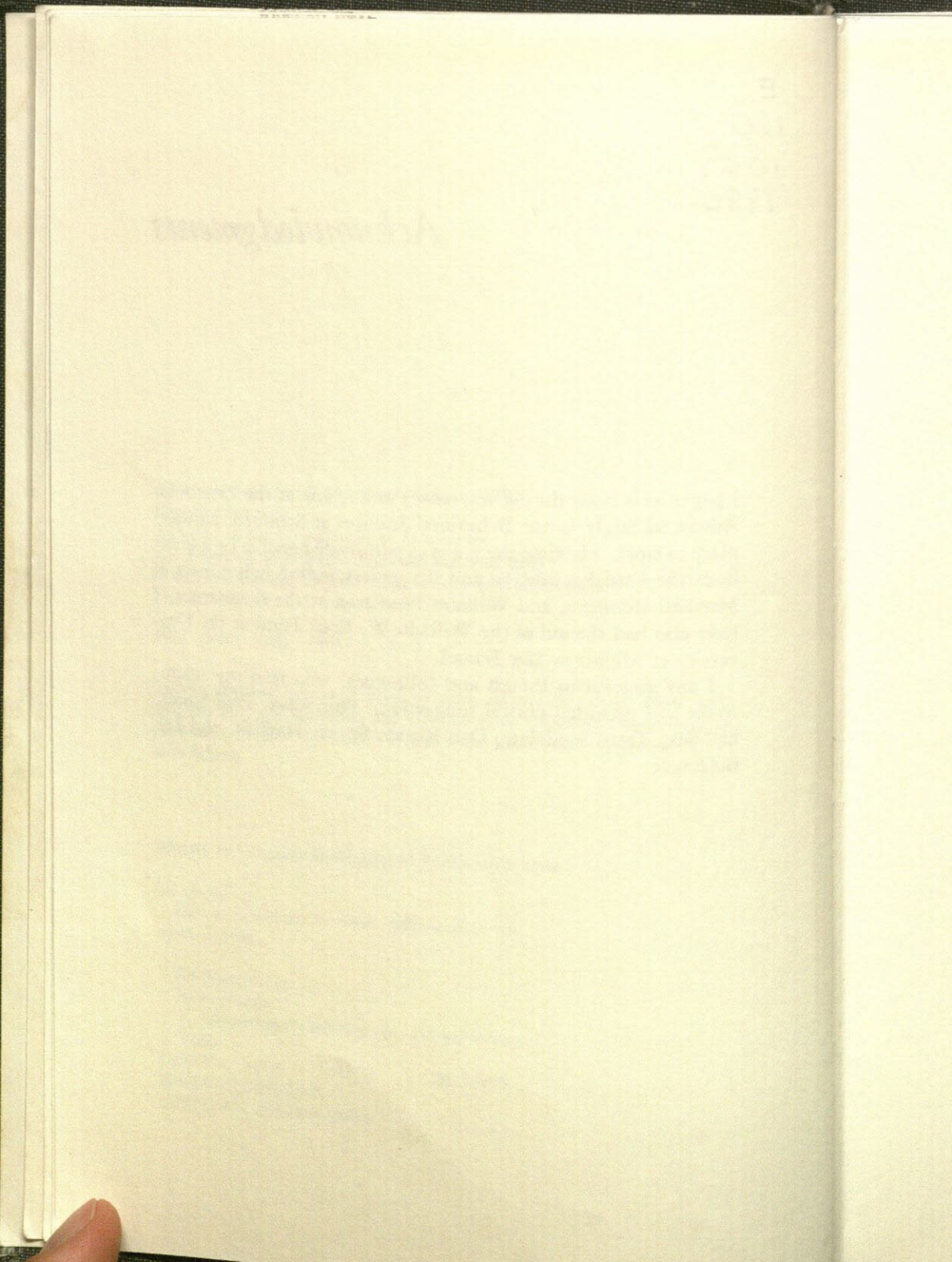
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## *Introduction*

I have long been fascinated by the political influence of that small minority who—for lack of a more exact term—are generally known as preservationists.<sup>1</sup> In good times and bad, for over a century, they have regularly persuaded the Congress to establish and maintain national parks, insulating millions of acres of public land not only from most commercial and industrial use, but even from much of the development that popular tourism demands. During the heyday of utilitarian forestry eighty years ago, they were called “nature fakirs,” a cruel joke that expresses almost perfectly the ambivalence of the majority toward the politics of preservation.

The public greatly admires splendid scenery and untrammelled nature, as frequent television specials, magazine articles, and large sales of coffee table picture books attest; and it nods in agreement at a steady flow of press reports, all more or less entitled “Are We Loving Our National Parks to Death?” At the same time there is widespread frustration and resentment when—at the behest of the “nature fakirs”—government refuses to build roads into the wilderness, to accommodate more recreational vehicles in the parks, or to approve an elegant ski resort in an alpine valley.

The preservationist is in rather the same position as the scientist who comes to the government seeking research funds. He speaks for something most people admire without understanding, receives unstinting support for a while, only suddenly to be



turned upon by a wave of popular reaction against alleged elitism and arrogance.

Whatever the problems of scientific researchers, it is at least recognized that they know something beyond the ken of most of us, and that somehow what they are doing is important. The preservationist is not quite so fortunate. It isn't at all obvious that he knows anything special. Attitudes toward nature and recreational preferences seem purely matters of private taste. The auto tourist sees himself as every bit as virtuous as the backpacker. The preservationist often appears as nothing more than the voice of effete affluence, trying to save a disproportionate share of the public domain for his own minoritarian pleasures.

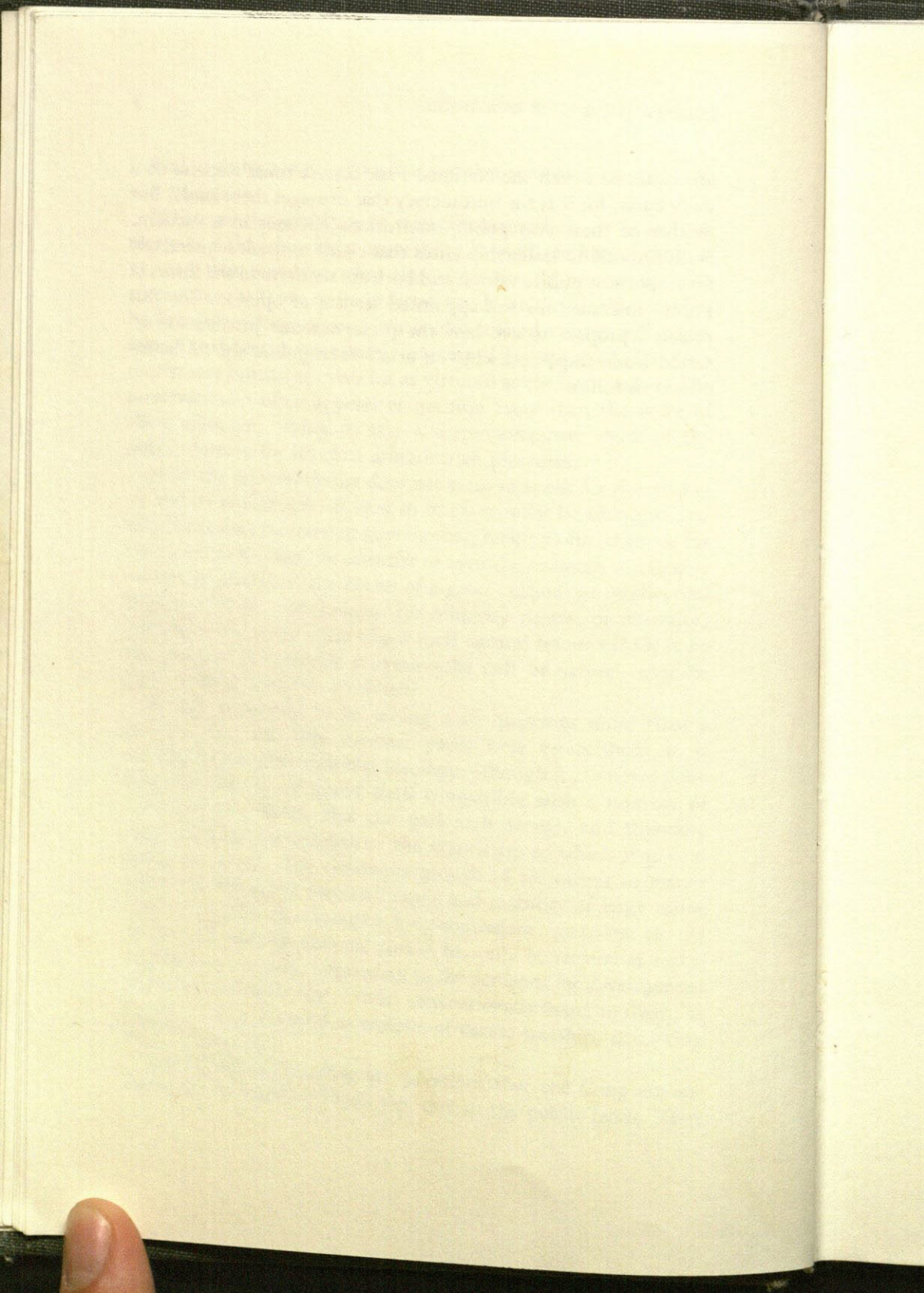
Since the preservationist does not seem to speak for the majority and its preferences, at least in much of what he advocates, on what basis does he come to government, seeking official status for his views? Is he, like the scientist or even the museum director or university professor, the bearer of a great cultural or intellectual tradition? Is he a spokesman for minority rights, or diversity, seeking only a small share of our total natural resources? Or is he the prophet of a secular religion—the cult of nature—that he seeks to have Congress establish?

It may seem odd to be raising such questions more than a century after the first national parks were established. It is my thesis that preservationist ideology—though it has never gone unquestioned—long found itself compatible with a number of other popular desires that our parklands served, and therefore never received the scrutiny or the skepticism to which it is now being subjected. The enormous growth of recreation in recent years and the vastly increased range and mobility of large numbers of tourists has brought long-somnolent questions to the surface. Should the national parks<sup>2</sup> basically be treated as recreational commodities, responding to the demands for development and urban comforts that visitors conventionally bring to them; or should they be reserved as temples of nature worship, admitting only the faithful?

Strictly speaking, these are questions that the Congress answers, for it makes the laws that govern the public lands. They

are issues to which the National Park Service must respond on a daily basis, for it is the bureaucracy that manages these lands. But neither of these two public institutions operates in a vacuum. Both respond to leadership elites that claim to speak legitimately for important public values; and both are sensitive to the limits of public tolerance for self-appointed leaders of opinion. For this reason I propose to ask how the preservationist justifies his asserted leadership, and why—if at all—the public should be inclined to follow.







In the last decades of the nineteenth century the federal government began to set aside—out of the vast public domain it was giving away to settlers, railroad companies, and the states—large areas of remote and scenic land to be held permanently in public ownership and known as national parks.<sup>1</sup> What exactly was meant to be accomplished by these unprecedented reservations is a mystery that will never be fully solved. There was at the time no tradition of rural nature parks anywhere in the world.<sup>2</sup> Neither was there a popular movement calling for the establishment of such places,<sup>3</sup> and the first park—the Yosemite Valley and the nearby Mariposa Grove of big trees in California—was created during the Civil War without fanfare, with hardly any congressional debate, and with a minimum of public notice.<sup>4</sup>

The quiet genesis of the national park system is hardly surprising, for the western mountain lands were then virtually unknown. To reach Yosemite Valley in the 1860s, it was necessary to take a boat from San Francisco to Stockton, followed by a sixteen-hour stagecoach ride to Coulterville, and finally a fifty-seven-mile, thirty-seven-hour trek by horse and pack mule into the valley.<sup>5</sup> Yellowstone, established in 1872, was even less accessible. Except to a handful of pioneers, it was unexplored territory, and reports of its spectacular thermal features were widely disbelieved as the inventions of mountain tale spinners.<sup>6</sup> Nor were those who urged the Congress to reserve these places celebrated figures in American life. The Yosemite bill was introduced



on the basis of a letter to a California senator from a man named Israel Ward Raymond, described only as a gentleman "of fortune, of taste and of refinement," and of whom all that is known is that he was the California representative of the Central American Steamship Transit Company.<sup>7</sup> The popular account of Yellowstone's founding holds that the idea for a park was conceived by one of the early exploratory parties in the area at an after-dinner campfire in 1870 which decided that so wonderful a region ought never to be allowed to fall into private ownership. Scholarly research has turned up a more plausible, if less romantic, story.<sup>8</sup> One A. B. Nettleton, an agent for the Northern Pacific Railroad Company, passed on to Washington a suggestion which struck him "as being an excellent one. . . . Let Congress pass a bill reserving the Great Geyser Basin as a public park forever. . . ."<sup>8</sup> Subsequently the Northern Pacific became the principal means of access to Yellowstone and its first concessioner providing services for tourists.

The statutes setting aside the first national parks were as cryptic as their histories. Yosemite was turned over to the state of California, to be withdrawn from settlement and held "for public use, resort and recreation."<sup>9</sup> Years later, it was returned to the United States and added to the much larger surrounding lands that comprise most of the present national park. Eight years after the Yosemite grant, Congress similarly withdrew Yellowstone from settlement and dedicated it "as a public park or pleasuring ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people."<sup>10</sup> In the decades that followed, using a similar verbal formula, Congress set aside Sequoia and Kings Canyon (originally known as General Grant Park) in the high mountains of California, Crater Lake in Oregon, Washington's glacier-capped Mount Rainier, the Indian ruins at Mesa Verde in Colorado, and a number of other remarkable places.<sup>11</sup> It even made Michigan's Mackinac Island a national park in 1875, only to repent and relinquish it three years later. In the first years of the twentieth century it added obscurity to magnificence by adding Wind Cave and Sully's Hill national parks in the Dakotas and Platt National Park in Oklahoma.

If the government had a plan for the parks it was establishing,



it was certainly casual about it. No bureau existed to manage these places until 1916, forty-four years after the Yellowstone reservation.<sup>12</sup> Yellowstone, in fact, was run by the United States Cavalry, and the others were pretty much left to themselves and to a few hardy innkeepers and adventurous tourists.<sup>13</sup> The modern desire to view the parks as the product of a prophetic public ecological conscience has little history to support it. The early parks were reserved for their scenery and their curiosities, and they reflect a fascination with monumentalism as well as biological ignorance or indifference.<sup>14</sup>

The ability of a national park system to come into being and to persist most likely grew out of the happy convergence of a number of very diverse, but compatible, forces. Proposals to preserve scenic places followed a period of romantic idealism that had swept the country—the religious naturalism of Thoreau and Emerson, romanticism in the arts, and early nostalgia for what was obviously the end of the untamed wilderness, already in submission to the ax, the railroads, and the last campaigns against the Indians.

The rapidity and relentlessness of settlement also gave weight to efforts to reserve these remarkable sites. When the first Yosemite bill was put before Congress in 1864, the principal claim made was that reservation was necessary to prevent occupation of the valley by homesteaders and to preserve its trees from destruction.<sup>15</sup> Not many years later, John Muir worked for an enlargement of the park to protect the high valleys from the destructive grazing of sheep which he called "hoofed locusts."<sup>16</sup>

Spectacular scenery brought out curiosity seekers eager to turn wonders into profits. As early as 1853 some promoters denuded a number of large sequoia trees of portions of their bark, which were shipped to London to be exhibited for a fee. Ironically, the size of the trees from which the bark came was, to Europeans, so large as to be beyond belief, and the exhibition, thought to be a fraud, was a financial failure.<sup>17</sup> Souvenir hunters were also on the scene, and even early reports from Yellowstone remarked that "visitors prowled around with shovel and ax, chopping and hacking and prying up great pieces of the most ornamental work they



could find; women and men alike joining in the barbarous pastime."<sup>18</sup>

Ruthless exploitation of natural marvels stimulated an uneasiness that was felt more generally about the burgeoning spirit of enterprise in the country. Houses were going up, and trees coming down, with such unbridled energy that it was easy to wonder whether Americans valued anything but the prospect of increased wealth. Thoreau's metaphor of lumbermen murdering trees was invoked repeatedly.<sup>19</sup> Andrew Hill, who led the effort to establish the Big Basin Redwood Park in California, is said to have formed his resolve when the private owner boasted that he planned to fell ancient redwoods on his land for railroad ties and firewood. An article in the *Overland Monthly* magazine, urging establishment of a Big Basin park, described the principal enemy of the redwoods not as fire, but as "the greed, the rapacity, the vandalism that would hack and cut and mutilate the grandest, the most magnificent forest that can be found on the face of the earth."<sup>20</sup>

The idea of publicly held parks was not only a predictable response to despoliation and avarice, it also harmonized with a principle that was then at the very crest of its influence in American land policy. The Yellowstone-Yosemite era was also the time of Homestead and Desert Land acts, when every American family was to have its share of the public domain free of monopolization by the rich.<sup>21</sup> The application of that principle to the great scenic wonders could not be realized by granting a sequoia grove or Grand Canyon to each citizen. But it was possible to preserve spectacular sites for the average citizen by holding them as public places to be used and enjoyed by everyone. The fear of private appropriation was far from hypothetical. In 1872, the same year that Yellowstone was established, an English nobleman named Windham Thomas Wyndam-Quin, the fourth earl of Dunraven, came to Colorado on a hunting trip, visiting the area where Rocky Mountain National Park is now located. He casually announced that he wanted to acquire the whole region as a private hunting preserve, and by enlisting a cadre of drifters to file homestead claims for him he was able to gain control of more



than fifteen thousand acres. Fortunately, as it happened, the Wild-West style was still in force, and local people, under the leadership of a colorful character known as Rocky Mountain Jim, made things more than a little uncomfortable for Dunraven, who thought he could transpose the style of the European aristocrat to the Colorado mountains. By 1907, Lord Dunraven wrote in his memoirs, he had "sold what [I] could get and cleared out, and I have never been there since."<sup>22</sup>

The park concept also fitted neatly with the nationalistic needs of the time. It appealed to a tenacious American desire to measure up to European civilization. What little discussion one finds in early congressional debates is full of suggestions that our scenery compares favorably to the Swiss Alps and that we can provide even more dazzling attractions for world travelers.<sup>23</sup> In the awesome scenery of the mountain West, America had at last a way to compete on an equal plane with the Old World. This prospect was not lost on the railroads, then the most important element in the growing tourist industry, and their support for national parks was never far beneath the surface.<sup>24</sup>

The remoteness of the parks also assured, by and large, that they had little economic value, which dissipated industrial resistance to their establishment. Indeed, Congress regularly sought and received assurances that proposed parklands were "worthless,"<sup>25</sup> and some places that did have important commercial value—such as the coastal redwoods of California—were kept out of the system for more than half a century.<sup>26</sup> Only rarely did conflict become bitter in the old days, as when San Francisco and the Sierra Club battled over the damming of Hetch Hetchy Valley in Yosemite Park for municipal water supply.<sup>27</sup> In 1913 the city won and the Sierra Club still bears scars from that fight, but Hetch Hetchy was an exceptional case. By the time major battles began to be fought over industrialization versus preservation, as in the struggle to keep dams out of Yellowstone in the 1920s,<sup>28</sup> the national parks were already a solidly entrenched feature of American life.<sup>29</sup>

The happy convergence of many disparate interests permitted Congress and the public to sustain the contradictory, but compat-



ible, beliefs that permitted a park system to flourish: on one side a repugnance at the seemingly boundless materialism that infused American life, a spiritual attachment to untrammelled nature, and a self-congratulatory attitude toward preservation of nature's bounty; and on the other a commitment to economic progress wherever it could be exacted, nationalistic pride, and the practical use of nature as a commodity supportive of tourism and commercial recreation.

For a good many years, this fragile ideological coalition held together with only modest conflict. The preservationists (as they are now called), who always comprised the most active and interested constituency in favor of national parks, had little to complain about. The parks were there, but they were so little used and so little developed—Congress was always grudging with appropriations: "Not one cent for scenery" was its long-standing motto<sup>30</sup>—that those who wanted to maintain the parks as they were, both for their own use and as a symbol of man's appropriate relationship to nature, had what they wanted.

The professional park managers, organized as the National Park Service in 1916, also found circumstances generally to their liking. Like all bureaucrats they had certain imperial ambitions. But the park system was steadily growing, and that was satisfying. Some of their gains were made at the expense of the national forests, housed in another federal department, and while inter-bureau infighting was at times intense, the general public was indifferent to such matters.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, in its early years, and particularly before the full blossoming of the automobile era, the Park Service was able to take an actively promotional posture, encouraging increasing tourism, road building, and hotel development without losing the support of its preservationist constituency.<sup>32</sup> It was then in everyone's interest to create greater public support for the parks. If more people came to the national parks, more people would approve the establishment of new parks and would approve funding for management needed to protect and preserve them. Even the most ardent wilderness advocate complained little about the Park Service as a promotional agency.



The adverse effects tourism might have were long viewed as trivial.

The tourists who came to the parks in the early days were in general not much different from those who come today.<sup>33</sup> They arrived in carriages, slept in hotels, and spent a good deal of their time sitting on verandas. But of course they came in much smaller numbers, their impact on the resources was much less, and, despite the comforts they provided themselves, the setting in which they lived in the parks was fairly primitive and marked a sharp contrast with life at home. A visit to a national park was still an adventure, quite unlike any ordinary vacation. The alliance of preservationists (whose interest in parks was essentially symbolic and spiritual) and vacationers (to whom the parks were a commodity for recreational use) was not threatened by the low intensity use the parks received for many decades. The contradiction Congress had enacted into law in the 1916 general management act, ordering the National Park Service at once to promote use and to conserve the resources so as to leave them unimpaired, was actually a workable mandate.<sup>34</sup>

The recreation explosion of recent years has unraveled that alliance and brought to the fore questions we have not previously had to answer: For whom and for what are the parks most important? Which of the faithful national park constituencies will have to be disappointed so that the parks can serve their "true" purpose? The adverse impact on natural resources generated by increased numbers is only the most visible sign of a cleavage that goes much deeper. The preservationist constituency is disturbed not only—and not even most importantly—by the physical deterioration of the parks, but by a sense that the style of modern tourism is depriving the parks of their central symbolism, their message about the relationship between man and nature, and man and industrial society.

When the tourist of an earlier time came to the parks he inevitably left the city far behind him. He may not have been a backpacker or a mountain climber, but he was genuinely immersed in a natural setting. He may only have strolled around the



area near his hotel, but he was in a place where the sound of birds ruled rather than the sound of motors, where the urban crowds gave way to rural densities, and where planned entertainments disappeared in favor of a place with nothing to do but what the visitor discovered for himself.

Tourism in the parks today, by contrast, is often little more than an extension of the city and its life-style transposed onto a scenic background. At its extreme, in Yosemite Valley or at the South Rim of Grand Canyon, for example, one finds all the artifacts of urban life: traffic jams, long lines waiting in restaurants, supermarkets, taverns, fashionable shops, night life, prepared entertainments, and the unending drone of motors.<sup>35</sup> The recreational vehicle user comes incased in a rolling version of his home, complete with television to amuse himself when the scenery ceases to engage him. The snowmobiler brings speed and power, Detroit transplanted, imposing the city's pace in the remotest backcountry.

The modern concessioner, more and more a national recreation conglomerate corporation, has often displaced the local innkeeper who adapted to a limited and seasonal business. There are modernized units identical to conventional motels, air conditioning, packaged foods, business conventions, and efforts to bring year-round commercial tourism to places where previously silent, languid winters began with the first snowfall.<sup>36</sup>

All these changes have made the preservationist, to whom the park is essentially a symbol of nature and *its* pace and power, an adversary of the conventional tourist. The clearest evidence that the preservationist and the tourist are not simply fighting over the destruction of resources or the allocation of a limited resource that each wishes to use in different, and conflicting, ways, but are rather at odds over the symbolism of the parks, is revealed by the battles that they fight. One such recent controversy has arisen over the use of motors on concessioner-run boat trips down the Colorado River in Grand Canyon.<sup>37</sup> In fact, motorized boats don't measurably affect the Canyon ecosystem, nor do they significantly intrude upon those who want to go down the river in oar-powered boats. Reduced to essentials, the preservationist claim is simply



that motors don't belong in this remote and wild place; that they betray the idea of man immersed in nature and bring industrialization to a place whose meaning inheres in its isolation from, and contrast to, life in society.

Much the same observation may be made about the intense controversy over highly developed places like Yosemite Valley. Many of those who are most opposed to the claimed overdevelopment of the valley do not themselves use it much. Wilderness lovers go into the wilderness, and Yosemite, like most national parks, has an abundance of undeveloped wilderness. What offends is not the unavailability of the valley as wild country, but the meaning national parks come to have when they are represented by places like Yosemite City, as the valley has been unkindly called.

What's wrong with the parks, says Edward Abbey—one of the most prominent contemporary spokesmen for the preservationist position—is that they have been too much given over to the clientele of "industrial tourism," people who visit from their cars and whose three standard questions are: "Where's the john? How long's it take to see this place? and Where's the Coke machine?"<sup>38</sup> Perhaps serving vacationers who have questions like these on their minds would require the construction of some additional roads and the installation of a few more Coke machines, but those intrusions need hardly interfere with Abbey's own recreational preferences, particularly in the vast Utah parks he most admires. His complaint is of quite a different kind. Industrial tourism debases the significance that national parks have for him, and he is troubled to see people using the parks as they use Disneyland, simply as places to be entertained while they are on vacation.

Traditional approaches to conflicting uses in the parks are not responsive to the issue that really divides the preservationist and the tourist. It will not do simply to separate incompatible uses, or to mitigate the damage done by the most resource-consuming visitors. For the preservationist is at least as much interested in changing the attitudes of other park users as in changing their activities. And he is as much concerned about what others do in



X places remote from him as when they are vying for the same space he wants to occupy. The preservationist is like the patriot who objects when someone tramples on the American flag. It is not the physical act that offends, but the symbolic act. Nor is the offense mitigated if the trampler points out that the flag belongs to him, or that flag trampling is simply a matter of taste, no different from flag waving.

The preservationist is not an elitist who wants to exclude others, notwithstanding popular opinion to the contrary; he is a moralist who wants to convert them. He is concerned about what other people do in the parks not because he is unaware of the diversity of taste in the society, but because he views certain kinds of activity as calculated to undermine the attitudes he believes the parks can, and should, encourage. He sees mountain climbing as promoting self-reliance, for example, whereas "climbing" in an electrified tramway is perceived as a passive and dependent activity. He finds a park full of planned entertainments and standardized activities a deterrent to independence, whereas an undeveloped park leaves the visitor to set his own agenda and learn how to amuse himself. He associates the motorcyclist roaring across the desert with aspirations to power and domination, while the fly-fisherman is engaged in reducing his technological advantage in order to immerse himself in the natural system and reach out for what lessons it has to offer him. The validity of these distinctions is not self-evident, and I shall have a good deal more to say about them in the following chapters. They are, however, what lies at the heart of the preservationist position.

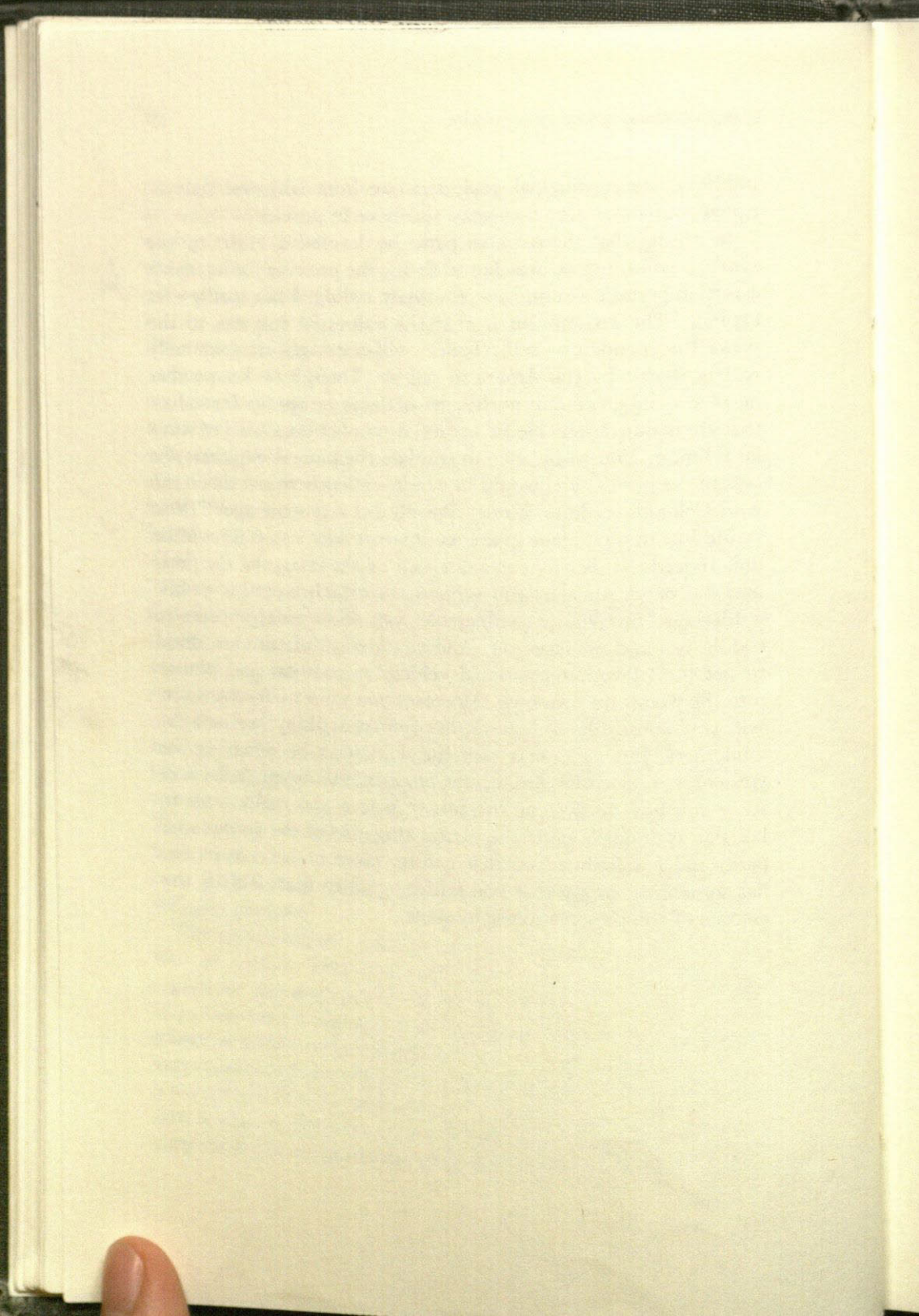
The preservationist does not condemn the activities he would like to exclude from the park. He considers them perfectly legitimate and appropriate—if not admirable—and believes that opportunities for conventional tourism are amply provided elsewhere: at resorts and amusement parks, on private lands, and on a very considerable portion of the public domain too. He only urges a recognition that the parks have a distinctive function to perform that is separate from the service of conventional tourism, and that they should be managed explicitly to present that function to the



public as their principal goal, separate from whatever conventional tourist services they may also have to provide.

In urging that the national parks be devoted to affirming the symbolic meaning he attaches to them, the preservationist makes a very important assumption, routinely indulged but hardly ever explicit. The assumption is that the values he imputes to the parks (independence, self-reliance, self-restraint) are extremely widely shared by the American public. Though he knows that he is a member of a minority, he believes he speaks for values that are majoritarian. He is, in fact, a prophet for a kind of secular religion. You would like to emulate the pioneer explorers, he says to the public; you would like independently to raft down the wild Colorado as John Wesley Powell did a century ago.<sup>39</sup> You would like to go it alone in the mountain wilderness as John Muir did. Indeed that is why you are stirred by the images of the great national parks and why you support the establishment of public wilderness. But you are vulnerable; you allow entrepreneurs to coddle you and manage you. And you are fearful; you are afraid to get out of your recreational vehicle or your car and plunge into the woods on your own. Moreover you want to deceive yourself; you would like to believe that you are striking out into the wilderness, but you insist that the wilderness be tamed before you enter it. So, says the secular prophet, follow me and I will show you how to become the sort of person you really want to be. Put aside for a while the plastic alligators of the amusement park, and I will show you that nature, taken on its own terms, has something to say that you will be glad to hear. This is the essence of the preservationist message.





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## *An Ideal in Search of Itself*

The early preservationists and park advocates assumed, without ever explaining, that personal engagement with nature could build in the individual those qualities of character that the existence of the parks symbolized for us collectively. Perhaps the point was made most explicitly by the celebrated wilderness pioneer Aldo Leopold in his essay, "Wildlife in American Culture." "No one can weigh or measure culture," Leopold observed.

Suffice it to say that by common consent of thinking people, there are cultural values in the sports, customs and experiences that renew contacts with wild things. . . . For example, a boy scout has tanned a coonskin cap, and goes Daniel-Booning in the willow thicket below the tracks. He is reenacting American history. . . . Again, a farmer boy arrives in the schoolroom reeking of muskrat; he has tended his traps before breakfast. He is reenacting the romance of the fur trade.<sup>1</sup>

Certainly it would seem eccentric to hold national parks simply so that people could go muskrat trapping. Like Aldo Leopold, John Muir and most other early park supporters had an idea in their minds about the importance to people of encounters with nature, but they seemed at a loss when it came to formulating their intuitions into any coherent recreational plan. To a substantial extent the presumption seems to have been that if only people would come into the parks, as John Muir put it, they would find "everything here is marching to music, and the harmonies are all so simple and young they are easily apprehended by those who will keep still and listen and look. . . ." <sup>2</sup>



But it wasn't simple at all, as Muir himself soon realized. Many came and looked, but they didn't see what he had seen, just as they listened without hearing what he had heard. National park admirers have frequently ignored the fact that nature has commended itself to people in very different ways at different times. The awesome grandeur of the parks has at times been thought fearsome rather than beautiful. It is perfectly possible to conceive of wilderness as something to be conquered rather than worshipped; people can, and have, shunned rather than climbed mountains. And it is quite as possible to respond to parks as pleasant sites for picnics and hotel resorts as to view them as fragile museums of nature or history.

Aside from scattered hints here and there, there is little serious or sustained writing to which we might turn for guidance in seeking to understand how those who conceived of parks as culturally important recreational resources meant them to be used. There is, however, at least one document that seeks explicitly to address itself to this question, a report entitled "The Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Big Trees," written in 1865 by Frederick Law Olmsted.<sup>3</sup> Olmsted is not a name that leaps immediately to mind when one thinks of the national parks. He was of course America's premier landscape architect, and though he was a man of many remarkable accomplishments—including the authorship of a fine series of books on the pre-Civil War South, leadership in the United States Sanitary Commission which was the predecessor to the Red Cross, and innovative work in the design of suburban communities—he is known to most Americans only as the designer of Central Park in New York.

For a brief period, however, during 1864 and 1865, Olmsted left New York to become the manager of the troubled Mariposa mining properties in northern California. While there is no conclusive evidence, it is highly likely that he was one of a small band of Californians who urged the federal government to preserve Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa grove of giant sequoias from settlement and destruction.<sup>4</sup> Olmsted was appointed the first chairman of the board of commissioners that California established to manage the Yosemite Park; and during his brief chair-



manship he wrote a report that was intended as a basis for future management. In it he also set out to explain why it was desirable to have a place like Yosemite as a public park, and in those observations lie the report's great interest.

Olmsted read his report to his fellow commissioners in August, 1865, but it was not published, and it then simply disappeared. It has been suggested that the report was suppressed by those in the California Geological Survey who feared that Olmsted's plan for Yosemite might create competition for legislative appropriations. Whatever the case, it was not until nearly ninety years later, in 1952, that diligent searching by Laura Wood Roper, Olmsted's biographer, turned up a virtually complete copy in the still-extant Olmsted firm's office in Brookline, Massachusetts.<sup>5</sup> Roper published the report in the magazine *Landscape Architecture*, where it remains largely unknown, though in it, as she justly remarks, "Olmsted formulated a philosophic base for the creation of state and national parks."<sup>6</sup>

The failure of Olmsted's report to command modern attention is less surprising than might at first appear.<sup>7</sup> Unlike much popular nature writing, the report lacks rapturous descriptions of self-discovery, and it is marred by a certain archaic nineteenth-century style of expression. Olmsted talks about the advance of civilization and speaks of "scientific facts," among which he numbers mental disabilities like softening of the brain and melancholy.<sup>8</sup> Some effort is required to penetrate these passages, but it is well worth making.

Olmsted begins at the beginning. The park was established for the preservation of its scenery. He does not, however, treat this as a self-justifying observation. The question is why government should take upon itself the burden of scenic preservation. His answer at one level is largely descriptive. Striking scenery has a capacity to stimulate powerful, searching responses in people. "Few persons can see such scenery as that of the Yosemite," he notes, "and not be impressed by it in some slight degree. All not alike, all not perhaps consciously, . . . but there can be no doubt that all have this susceptibility, though with some it is much more dull and confused than with others."<sup>9</sup> He does not claim to



be making some universally true claim, good for all time, but certainly it was a claim that was true enough for his own time, and for ours. As Olmsted observed, Yosemite had become a popular subject for artists and photographers, and their widely reproduced works had induced a great interest in, and admiration for, the place. Moreover, in the Old World, it had long been a tradition to reserve the choicest natural scenes in the country for the use of the rich and powerful. Apparently people able to do whatever they wanted found great satisfaction could be elicited from engagement with striking scenery.

At this point, Olmsted offers his distinctive hypothesis—the basis of his prescription for the national parks. In most of our activities we are busy accomplishing things to satisfy the demands and expectations of other people, and dealing with petty details that are uninteresting in themselves and only engage our attention because they are a means to some other goal we are trying to reach. Olmsted does not suggest that gainful activity is a bad thing by any means; only that it offers no opportunity for the mind to disengage from getting tasks done, and to engage instead on thoughts removed from the confinement of duty and achievement. He calls this the invocation of the contemplative faculty.

For Olmsted the preservation of scenery is justified precisely because it provides a stimulus to engage the contemplative faculty. "In the interest which natural scenery inspires . . . the attention is aroused and the mind occupied without purpose, without a continuation of the common process of relating the present action, thought or perception to some future end. There is little else that has this quality so purely."<sup>10</sup>

Olmsted does not purport to explain why scenery has this effect on us, though doubtless the modern attraction to the idea of God-in-nature is a plausible explanation. He is content to observe that there is something that moves us to appreciate natural beauty and to be moved by it, and "intimately and mysteriously" to engage "the moral perceptions and intuitions."<sup>11</sup> He recognized that not everyone responds in this way, thus anticipating the



objection that nature parks established for their scenery would not likely be as popular as amusement parks. But he attributed this to a lack of cultivation. It is unquestionably true, but it is not inevitable, he said, "that excessive devotion to sordid interests," to the constant and degrading work upon which most people are engaged, dulls the aesthetic and contemplative faculties.<sup>12</sup> It is precisely to give the ordinary citizen an opportunity to exercise and educate the contemplative faculty that establishment of nature parks as public places is "justified and enforced as a political duty."<sup>13</sup>

No one, he thought, was more relentlessly tied to unreflective activity than the ordinary working citizen. The worker spends his life in almost constant labor, and he has done so traditionally because the ruling classes of the Old World had nothing but contempt for him. They thought "the large mass of all human communities should spend their lives in almost constant labor and that the power of enjoying beauty either of nature or art in any high degree, require[d] a cultivation of certain faculties, which [are] impossible to these humble toilers."<sup>14</sup> Olmsted rejects this belief categorically. Behind his rather archaic vocabulary, and his pseudoscientific proofs, lies a prescription for parks as an important institution in a society unwilling to write off the ordinary citizen as an automaton.

Olmsted, as a practical man, set out a number of specific suggestions for the management of parks. He had an idea about the "thing" that should be made available to the public as a park, just as the curator has an idea of the collection to be presented in a museum.

The first point, he said, is to keep in mind that the park was reserved because of its scenery, and therefore the first task

is the preservation and maintenance as exactly as is possible of the natural scenery; the restriction, that is to say, within the narrowest limits consistent with the necessary accommodation of visitors, of all constructions markedly inharmonious with the scenery or which would unnecessarily obscure, distort or detract from the dignity of the scenery.<sup>15</sup>



To read this formula in isolation is to have the impression that Olmsted was advocating a pure wilderness status for the parks or that he was interested only in an aesthetic or visual experience, but plainly this is not at all what he had in mind. His principal goal in seeking preservation of the scenery was to assure that there would be no distractions to impede an independent and personal response to experience. Olmsted did not have an ideological opposition to the presence of any particular structure, such as roads or hotels in the park, for, as we shall see, he found such developments perfectly acceptable. His concern was with the installation of facilities or entertainments where "care for the opinion of others"<sup>16</sup> might dominate, or where prepared activities would occupy the visitor without engaging him.

Thus, for example, Olmsted would have found the modern ski resort an anomaly in the parks, not because it intrudes upon the scenery, or impairs the indigenous ecosystem, or because of the skiing itself, but because of the crowding, commercialism, obtrusive social pressures, and the inducements to participate in entertainments planned and structured by others.

While he did not spell out his management theory in detail in the Yosemite report, he returned to the problem twenty years later in a report for a state park at Niagara Falls. Niagara had been the most popular tourist attraction in America during the later nineteenth century, but all the land had been sold into private ownership and commercial enterprises had taken over. Tourists were importuned and harassed, led around like trained animals and hurried from one "scenic site" to the next.<sup>17</sup>

As early as 1869, Olmsted began a campaign to establish a public park around Niagara Falls, and to combat the desecration of the area that had taken place.<sup>18</sup> The park was finally established in 1886; in 1879 Olmsted prepared a study proposing a management scheme for the Niagara Park,<sup>19</sup> and eight years later he drew up a detailed planning report.<sup>20</sup>

The Niagara report contains a passage almost identical to that quoted earlier from the Yosemite work, asserting that nothing of an artificial character should be allowed to interfere with the visitor's response to the scenery. But in the Niagara report,

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Olmsted set out his views about park management in much more detail. Again, he made clear that a wilderness park need not be established. It would be quite appropriate to provide, near the entrance, toilets, shelters, picnic facilities, and the like. He also recommended the construction of walkways, as well as restorative efforts to combat erosion and revegetate barren areas.

He opposed fancy landscaping, however, because it is calculated to draw off and dissipate regard for natural scenery. For the same reasons he opposed a plan to build a fine restaurant on Goat Island, a wild place just above Niagara Falls. Neither, he said, ought sculpture or monuments to be placed within the park, worthy as they are.

Probably the most revealing expression of Olmsted's approach was his opposition to a proposal to permit people to see the falls without having to leave their carriages. This was not an obvious issue for him, for in the Yosemite report he had advocated the construction of a carriage road in the valley. But Yosemite, at that time, was a very remote place, with few visitors and difficult access. Niagara was entirely different, and Olmsted's response—based on different circumstances—tells a great deal about his conception of a rewarding park experience.

He began with the observation that as many as ten thousand people a day visited Niagara, and that to permit the scenic grandeur of the place to engage the visitor it was necessary to see the falls at length and at leisure. If the scenic viewing areas were designed to accommodate large numbers of carriages, it would "interpose an urban, artificial element plainly in conflict with the purpose for which the Reservation has been made." The purpose of the park was to encourage people to experience Niagara "in an absorbed and contemplative way." A profusion of carriages, with crowds of people, would intrude upon the opportunity for an independent experience.

He sought to restore the setting of an earlier Niagara, where a visit to the Falls was a series of expeditions, and in each expedition hours were occupied in wandering slowly among the trees, going from place to place, with many intervals of rest. . . . There was not only a



much greater degree of enjoyment, there was a different kind of enjoyment. . . . People were then loath to leave the place; many lingered on from day to day . . . revisiting ground they had gone over before, turning and returning.<sup>21</sup>

It is striking to see how far removed Olmsted's views are from the sterility of current battles over riding versus walking, or wilderness versus development. Olmsted believed that the essence of the park is not determined by the details of the visitors' activities, by whether they see the park from a sitting rather than a standing position, or sleep in a tent rather than a hotel bed. His attention was focused on the attitude that the visitor brought to the park, and upon the atmosphere that park managers provided for the visitor. He thought it perfectly possible to have an appropriate park experience using a vehicle in a remote enough place; just as he would, without doubt, have condemned the relentless backpacker whose principal concern is to prove that he can "do" so many miles a day, or climb more peaks than any of his predecessors. His goal was to get the visitor outside the usual influences where his agenda was preset, and to leave him on his own, to react distinctively in his own way and at his own pace.

To understand Olmsted's views it is essential to keep in mind that he was a republican idealist. He held, that is to say, to what we generally call democratic values. He believed in the possibility of a nation where every individual counted for something and could explore and act upon his own potential capacities. He feared, and he condemned, the nation of unquestioning, mute, and passive followers. The destruction of Niagara's scenery appalled him, not simply because the place was ugly, but because old Niagara was a symbol and a means for the visitor freely to respond to his experience. The trouble with the new Niagara was that it had returned, with its leading and hurrying of visitors and with its commercial entertainments, in the guise of free enterprise, to the same contemptuous disregard of the individuality of the visitor that had characterized the aristocratic, condescending spirit of Europe.

Olmsted was criticized on the ground that his plan for Niagara constituted an attack upon a place that was—for all its tawdry development—extraordinarily popular. The charge was, as



Olmsted rephrased it, that "whatever has been done to the injury of the scenery has been done . . . with the motive of profit, and the profit realized is the public's verdict of acquittal."<sup>22</sup>

He, of course, conceded Niagara's popularity, but it was his conviction that the best use of highly scenic areas was not to serve popular taste but to elevate it. The new Niagara was a modern version of precisely what he had condemned in the Yosemite report: the belief of the governing classes of Europe that the masses were incapable of cultivation. Hence, they had thought "so far as the recreation of the masses receives attention from their rulers, to provide artificial pleasures for them, such as theatres, parades, and promenades where they will be amused by the equipages of the rich and the animation of the crowds."<sup>23</sup> "The great body of visitors to Niagara come as strangers. Their movements are necessarily controlled by the arrangements made for them. They take what is offered, and pay what is required with little exercise of choice."<sup>24</sup>

The commercialized Niagara was enjoyable, it provided a service for the leisure time that citizens had to spend. Olmsted's Niagara plan called for some sacrifice of that service in order to provide a place designed to engage the contemplative faculty and to encourage the visitor to set his own agenda. He believed these were opportunities that citizens of a democratic society ought to want to provide themselves.

Olmsted's distinctive conception of a park is not easily captured in a phrase. He repeatedly uses the word "contemplative," but plainly it is not an intellectual experience he has in mind. He also talks about "cultivation" and "refinement," faintly archaic terms, that are probably nearest to our notion of the conscious development of aesthetic appreciation. Though he speaks principally of the visual experience of scenic inspiration—understandably enough in light of his professional work as a landscape architect—his Yosemite report also contains approving references to hunting and mountaineering. And there is a strong element in his writing of republican idealism, a distaste for the mass man unreflectively doing what he is told to do and thinking what he is told to think.

Of course Olmsted was himself a man of the nineteenth century,

PARTICIPATE  
AND YOU ARE  
SAYING  
O.K.?



and his writing reveals a confident belief, characteristic of the time, in the progress of the human spirit. The attitude he evinces is reminiscent of the famous passage in Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay, "Nature":

Adam called his house, heaven and earth; Ceasar called his house, Rome; you perhaps call yours, a cobbler's trade. . . . Yet . . . your dominion is as great as theirs, though without fine names. Build therefore your own world, As fast as you conform your life to the pure idea in your mind, that will unfold its great proportions.<sup>25</sup>

Olmsted's dedication to a spirit of independence also echoes Emerson. "The spirit of the American freeman is already suspected to be timid, imitative, tame," Emerson wrote in "The American Scholar."<sup>26</sup> Indeed, Olmsted's views draw on a pastoral, moral, and aesthetic tradition with even deeper roots.<sup>27</sup> The distinctiveness of his contribution lies in the application of these ideas to the public institution of a nature park, and therein lie some puzzling questions. What special activities and attitudes, for example, would be called for on the part of visitors to such parks; and how does one deal with the claim that as public facilities parks also have a responsibility to meet the demands of conventional tourism? Olmsted's work only hints at answers to such questions.



# 3

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## *The Ideal in Practice*

An extensive and largely ignored body of literature—produced not by scholars, but by the participants themselves—captures the essence of the reflective, independent qualities Olmsted sought to describe as the ideal for recreation in the national parks.<sup>1</sup> With rare exceptions, these writings have been treated as popular entertainment intended for an audience of fellow sportsmen. They deserve wider and more serious attention.

Probably no recreation has produced a larger body of books and articles than fishing.<sup>2</sup> On first consideration, the point seems obvious enough: People go fishing in order to catch fish. Yet the single theme that dominates the fishing literature is a disavowal of precisely this proposition. Arnold Gingrich, a well-known writer on the subject, opens his book *The Joys of Trout* with the recollection that “if a careful count were kept, it would show that over the last five years my evenings have been just a little more often fishless than not.” Yet, he adds, “since I never keep the fish I catch anyway, a realist might well ask what difference it makes.”<sup>3</sup> That is the question to which scores of fishing books have addressed themselves.

Certainly it would be misleading to suggest that catching fish is a matter of indifference to the serious fisherman. What is clear, though, is that fishing at its best is not *about* catching fish. Roderick Haig-Brown, a celebrated fly-fishing writer, captured the spirit of the literature when he wrote: “I do not fish for fish to eat . . . I do fish to catch fish . . . at least that is an idea not too far



from the back of my mind while I am fishing; but I have fished through fishless days that I remember happily and without regret. . . ."<sup>4</sup> Albert Miller, who writes under the name Sparse Grey Hackle, picks up the same verbal formulation in the title to his best known book, *Fishless Days, Angling Nights*. Miller's book opens with the statement, "Fortunately, I learned long ago that although fish do make a difference—the difference—in angling, catching them does not"; the secret of fishing is to be "content to not-catch fish in the most skillful and refined manner. . . ."<sup>5</sup> It is no coincidence that Miller adopts one of Olmsted's favorite nineteenth century words, refinement. Fishing is most satisfying, not when it results in accomplishment of a set task, but in refining us.

In the greatest of all fishing books, Walton and Cotton's *The Compleat Angler*, the narrator Piscator replies to those who pity the ardent fisherman, comparing him unfavorably to purposeful, serious men of affairs.

Men who are taken to be grave . . . money-getting men, men that spend all their time, first in getting it, and next in anxious care to keep it; . . . we Anglers pity them perfectly . . . and stand in no need to borrow their thought to think ourselves so happy.<sup>6</sup>

If fishing were only the getting of fish, Piscator says, it would be nothing but an outdoor version of what "these poor-rich-men" do. And when his companion notes in frustration that he has followed Piscator for two hours and not even seen a fish stir, he is told that he has not yet learned what angling is all about. "There is more pleasure in hunting the hare than in eating her. . . . As well content no prize to take / As use of taken prize to make."<sup>7</sup>

The subtitle of *The Compleat Angler* is *The Contemplative Man's Recreation*, and here again the verbal similarity with Olmsted's definition of the park, as a place designed to stir the contemplative faculty, is revealing. Angling is an art, and fishing is simply the raw material of that art, whereby the mind is engaged; a good angler must bring to his recreation "an inquiring, searching, observing, wit."<sup>8</sup> One of the most famous passages in Walton and Cotton's book compares angling to mathe-



— BIBLE  
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matics: "It can never be fully learned . . . an art worthy the knowledge and practice of a wise man."<sup>9</sup> In the charming autobiographical story, "A River Runs Through It," Norman MacLean says "it is not fly fishing if you are not looking for answers to questions."<sup>10</sup> And Roderick Haig-Brown speaks of fly-fishing as an activity calculated to evoke "the subtle and difficult things."<sup>11</sup>

I can lie for hours at a time and watch the flow of a little stream . . . the secret vagaries of current are clearly revealed here. . . . A fold or break of current, a burst of bubbles or the ripple of a stone . . . releases in me a flood of satisfaction that must, I think, be akin to that which a philosopher feels as his mind is opened to a profound truth. I feel larger, and better and stronger for it in ways that have nothing to do with any common gain in practical knowledge.<sup>12</sup>

These descriptions raise a question to which the fishing literature gives no direct answer. Is it simply the setting, the fascinating stream or the grand scenery? Or is there something about the activity itself essential to production of the profound satisfaction he describes? Neither the setting nor the activity *in itself* seems to be decisive; rather, it is the presence of something capable of engaging, rather than merely occupying, the individual—a stimulus for intensity of experience, for the full involvement of the senses and the mind.

The setting may be important because of its complexity or its unfamiliarity. A trout in a trout stream is more provocative than a trout in a fishbowl; an undeveloped forest is more likely to engage our concentration than the cornfield we see every day. Of course there are no absolutes here. To a scientist, a common cornfield may be endlessly fascinating and puzzling, and to the artistic eye the most common events may be dazzling. For Proust nothing more was required than the routine of a mother's good-night kiss, the tedious salons of Paris, and the daily events of a banal seaside resort. Most of us are not so discerning; for us setting counts.

The activity counts too. Fishing for the wily trout in its natural habitat forces us to be attentive to the smallest detail in a way that driving by at a high speed, or a casual walk, may not. It's



not only what we do, but what we refrain from doing. The installation of snack stands and souvenir shops at Niagara were a distraction calculated to divert the visitor from intense concentration upon anything, while the majestic grandeur of the falls has a capacity to focus our attention. The presence of concessioners offering preplanned pony or boat rides can be an impediment to intensity of experience, diverting us from coming at the experience in our own way and at our own pace.

The facilities we provide for ourselves also affect our responses. To drive through the desert in an air-conditioned car is an insulating experience. The increasingly popular recreation of backpacking offers a revealing counterexample.<sup>13</sup> Hiking with a pack on one's back appears superficially to be a strangely unappealing activity. The hiker, vulnerable to insects and bad weather, carries a heavy load over rough terrain, only to end up in the most primitive sort of shelter, where he or she eats basic foods prepared in the simplest fashion. Certainly there are often attractive rewards, such as a beautiful alpine lake with especially good fishing. But these are not sufficient explanations for such extraordinary exertions, for there are few places indeed that could not be easily made more accessible, and by much more comfortable means.

To the uninitiated backpacker a day in the woods can be, and often is, an experience of unrelieved misery. The pack is overloaded; tender feet stumble and are blistered. It is alternately too hot or too cold. The backpacker has the wrong gear for the weather or has packed it in the wrong place; the tent attracts every gust of wind and rivulet of water. The fire won't start, or the stove fails just when it's needed. And the turns that seemed so clear on the map have now become utterly confusing.

Such experiences, familiar in one form or another to all beginners, are truly unforgiving; and when things go wrong, they do so in cascading fashion. Yet others camping nearby suffer no such miseries. Though their packs are lighter, they have an endless supply of exactly the things that are needed. Their tents go up quickly, they have solved the mystery of wet wood, and they sit under a deceptively simple rain shelter, eating their dinner in



serene comfort. What is more, they are having a good time. The woods, for the beginner an endless succession of indistinguishable trees apparently designed to bewilder the hapless walker, conceal a patch of berries or an edible mushroom. Nearby, but unseen, are beautiful grazing deer or, overhead, a soaring eagle.

With time, patience, and effort one recognizes that these things are available to everyone; it is possible to get in control of the experience, to make it our own. The pack lightens as tricks are learned: how to substitute and how to improvise quickly, out of available materials, the things previously lugged. The more known, the less needed. Everything put in the head lessens what has to be carried on the shoulders. The sense of frustration falls away and with it the fear that things will break down. One knows how to adapt. The pleasure of adaptation is considerable in itself because it is liberating.

Nor is it merely a lifting of burdens. The backpacker, like the fisherman, discovers that the positive quality of the voyage is directly related to his or her own knowledge and resources. There is often a dramatic revelation that the woods are full of things to see—for those who know how to see them.

The kind of encounter that routinely takes place in the modern motorized vehicle, or in the managed, prepackaged resort, is calculated to diminish such intensity of experience. Nothing distinctive about us as individuals is crucial. The margin of error permitted is great enough to neutralize the importance of what we know. If we roar off in the wrong direction, we can easily roar back again, for none of our energy is expended. It isn't important to pay close attention to the weather; we are insulated from it. We need not notice a small spring; we are not at the margin where water counts. The opportunity for intensity of experience is drained away.

It is not that the motorized tourist or the visitor at a highly developed site must necessarily lose intensity, or that he is compelled to experience his surroundings at a remove, just as it is not inevitable that backpacking or fly-fishing will produce profound, individual responses. It is rather that the circumstances we impose on ourselves have the power to shape our experience.



The contrast between insulation and intensity is also demonstrated by the tools we use. Fishermen are probably more interested in equipment than are the devotees of any other leisure activity, and fishing books are full of endless discussion of flies, lines, rods, and leaders. Yet that interest is not at all directed to technological advance leading to increased efficiency in catching fish. Indeed, in one respect, it has exactly the opposite purpose: it is designed to maintain and even to increase the difficulty of success. At the same time, intricacy for its own sake is not sought. The goal is to raise to a maximum the importance of the participant's understanding, to play the game from the trout's point of view, so as to draw, as Haig-Brown puts it, upon "imagination, curiosity, bold experiment and intense observation."<sup>14</sup> This distinction between technology and technique is perhaps the most familiar common element in the recreational literature.

The hunting literature is very explicit in this respect though, like fishing, it at first seems wholly built around the conquest of a prey. One of the most provocative books ever written about that sport is the *Meditations on Hunting* of the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset.<sup>15</sup> Ortega's book was begun as a preface to another writer's conventional book about hunting, but it expanded into a full volume as he pondered the question, Why do we hunt? He was impressed by the fact that people have hunted over many centuries, and that the essence of the activity has not changed. A principal premise of the book is that rather than using every technological advantage available to him, the hunter has self-consciously neutralized his technological advantage in favor of the opportunity to develop what Ortega called technique:

For hunting is not simply casting blows right and left in order to kill animals or to catch them. The hunt is a series of technical operations, and for an activity to become technical it has to matter that it works in one particular way and not in another. . . . It involves a complete set of ethics of the most distinguished design.<sup>16</sup>

To describe the hunting of animals as an ethical activity at first seems highly eccentric. Yet the recreation literature gives powerful support to Ortega's cryptic statement. The proposition that



accomplishment is not of the essence is substantiated by a uniform view that the game gets better the more the player is able to intensify the experience. One practical application of this hypothesis is to disembarass oneself of equipment whose purpose is simply to increase the ability to prevail.

The celebrated American wilderness advocate, Aldo Leopold, wrote about hunting in terms quite similar to those of the Spaniard Ortega. "There is," Leopold said, "a value in any experience that exercises those ethical restraints collectively called 'sportsmanship'. Our tools for the pursuit of wildlife improve faster than we do, and sportsmanship is a voluntary limitation in the use of those armaments."<sup>17</sup>

Leopold goes on to say something about hunting that is reminiscent of Olmsted's perception of recreation as a contrast to achievement. In the Yosemite report Olmsted not only spoke of accomplishment, but used the phrase "accomplishing something in the mind of another," that is, doing something because it wins the admiration of others. The fishing writers respond by observing that they are engaged in an activity that is judged only by the standard the fisherman sets for himself. And Leopold notes, "a peculiar virtue of wildlife ethics is that the hunter ordinarily has no gallery to applaud or disapprove of his conduct. Whatever his acts, they are dictated by his own conscience rather than by a mob of onlookers. It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of this fact."<sup>18</sup>

The attitudes associated with an activity may be more important than either the activity itself or its setting. To the extent that we infuse the parks with symbolic meaning by the way in which we use them, the symbolism attached to particular uses itself becomes a critical factor in the meaning that parks have for us. Consider, for example, the controversial question of off-road motorized vehicles (ORVs).<sup>19</sup> While ORVs have sometimes caused great and long-lasting damage, the vehicle itself is not the crucial factor in the controversy its use has created, for it is possible to imagine the lonely cyclist exploring the backcountry in quite the same fashion as the hiker or the horseman.<sup>20</sup>

Yet, in fact, the ORV has associated itself in our minds with a



style of use that is quite at odds with Leopold's description of the ethical hunter, Olmsted's contemplative visitor, or Walton's pensive fisherman. The ORV has become a symbol of speed, power, and spectacle. The best-known ORV event on the public lands is the Barstow-Las Vegas motorcycle race that occurs on the California desert. Pictures of as many as three thousand cycles lined up to make the 150-mile crosscountry course have been widely published, both in books and on television.<sup>21</sup> This mass event, infamous for its destruction of the desert ecosystem, its rowdiness, and its vandalism, has become an emblem of the ORV. Commercial advertising has reinforced this picture, as publicity for off-road vehicles demonstrates: "Just put your gang on Suzuki's DS trail bikes. And head for the boonies. . . . Peaks or valleys, it's all the same to these rugged off-road machines. Tractoring up a hillside or going flat-out on a dry lake is no sweat."<sup>22</sup>

The descriptive literature provides a parallel image. In Lee Gutkind's book, *Bike Fever*, a day's expedition is reported as follows:

The [motorcycle] bellowed as it bounced over the sage, and folded down the yellow grass on either side of the wheels. . . . He jetted off across the prairie for a while, breathing in the red dust that the wind and his wheels were kicking up. . . . He trampled the sagebrush . . . he had run into some "whoop-de-do" jumps—a series of brief hills, about 25 feet apart. He cranked on, climbed the hill, and disconnected from the ground. . . . Each time he hit the top of a hill, his wheels left the ground and his stomach ricocheted into his throat. . . .<sup>23</sup>

The picture here is all exhilaration and excitement—speed, danger, and domination. As a book entitled *The Snowmobiler's Companion* puts it,

the snowmobile has brought back some of that edge-of-danger excitement, those feelings of man-against-the-elements adventure and man-over-machinery mastery that have been lost in every other form of modern transportation. . . . Why? To win. . . . To put on a spectacle. . . . To risk a life to the unending delight of hundreds of faces jammed up against the fences, mad for action, for crashes and beer.



Why? To prove that the machine is faster, the racer braver, better than the rest. To prove to whom? To Harry down the road. To yourself. To the faces at the fence.<sup>24</sup>

The ORV has become an extreme example of one kind of symbol, just as the motor-home recreational vehicle has of another—that of the passive visitor, unable to leave home and its comforts behind, sitting watching TV in the midst of the nation's most magnificent country. Other controversial uses—hang gliding, for example—emit a much less clear message, and to that extent engender much more ambivalent feelings. To some extent there is uneasiness because the activity seems a sort of spectacle of thrill seeking, rather like going over the falls in a barrel or riding a roller coaster. Conversely, the skills it requires, such as close attention to and understanding of complex wind patterns, make it seem rather like the activity of the hunter or fisherman who has minimized his tools and put himself as close to the margin of experience as possible.

These wide-ranging examples suggest an issue of subtlety and sophistication barely hinted at in Olmsted's writings. He asserted that activities removed from mere will to accomplishment and achievement in the eyes of others was important as a contrast to the values that so often dominate our daily lives. The fishing and hunting books clearly affirm that proposition. The cycling writings also speak to a kind of contrast—the passive twentieth-century citizen getting into active control of something and mastering it. While each seems to respond to similar longings, in practice they diverge sharply. The hunting and fishing writers are drawn to activities that transcend, without denying, the raw impulsion to exhibit power, win the game, pile up a score, and exercise dominion—treating the will to prevail as something natural, but at the same time dealing with it as something to be faced and measured, rather than yielded to.

Nowhere in the literature is this insight more explicit than in the rich stock of books on mountaineering.<sup>25</sup> There is a special intrigue in turning to this source, for among those who have comprised the national parks constituency over the years there is probably no recreation that has been more amply represented than



mountain climbing. The Sierra Club, to take but one example, was for many years, in many ways, largely a mountaineering club; and John Muir, its patron saint, was, of course, John of the mountains.

It is impossible to read the climbing books without a certain mixture of attraction and repulsion. Particularly if one comes to them in the light of Olmsted's gentility, and his aesthetic sensibility, it is slightly shocking to read the tales of dogged determination, competitive striving to be first to the top, and unattractive infighting among members of climbing parties. The literature spans a wide spectrum from individual hiking to expedition climbing of the Mount Everest type. The latter is, obviously, quite a limited genre in terms of the numbers of people involved, but it has nonetheless been a primary source of published, and widely read, books. It has set the standard of style and rules of the game for those attracted to the mountains, just as Walton and Cotton or Haig-Brown have for fishermen.

What is one to make of these extraordinary books, with their reports of multimillion dollar expeditions, multitudes of hired porters, and diplomatic negotiations to assure primacy in reaching some remote summit? Thoreau said that only daring and insolent men climb mountains,<sup>26</sup> and one need not read very deeply in this literature to understand what he meant. Even the titles of the books are revealing. Among recent and popular publications, two of the best known are *Everest the Hard Way* (with the emphasis on *hard*),<sup>27</sup> and *In the Throne Room of the Mountain Gods*.<sup>28</sup> While the latter of these titles was probably sardonically chosen, the book being a rare effort to avoid the conventional glorifying style of the genre, it nonetheless conveys an accurate sense of what mountaineers think they are getting at—or getting to.

In many respects, mountain climbing books present a restatement of familiar themes. It is repeatedly observed that climbing at its best eschews the presence of an audience, and the longing is often expressed that "expeditions would go secretly and come back secretly, and no one would ever know."<sup>29</sup> The technique/technology distinction is sharply drawn, with much condemnation of the gadgetry that promotes success at the expense of the



climber's opportunity to respond to the distinctive challenge each mountain presents.<sup>30</sup> There is understandable disdain for such astonishing decisions as the use of helicopters to negotiate the most difficult parts of Mount Everest, of which the famous English climber Chris Bonington said gently, it "seemed an unpleasant erosion of the climbing ethic."<sup>31</sup> More generally, the literature affirms the proposition that "climbing with a few classic tools that become extensions of the body is quite conducive to the sought-after feeling; using a plethora of gadgets is not."<sup>32</sup>

Likewise it is repeatedly observed that the essence of mountaineering is not reaching the summit, but the climb itself. "Reaching the summit of a mountain is not all it is cracked up to be," Galen Rowell says, "the summit is merely the curtain falling on a grand play."<sup>33</sup> Some years ago, the English alpinist Geoffrey Winthrop Young said, "in great mountaineering, the result, the reaching of a summit, is of minor importance . . . the whole merit of the climb depend[s] upon the way it was done, that is the method, behavior and mental attitude of the climbers. . . ."<sup>34</sup>

At the same time, there is a quality in mountaineering books of drive and competition, of a will to achievement, self-testing, and supremacy. Competitive drive is a quality far removed from what Olmsted was describing and from the attitude of America's greatest mountain explorer, John Muir. The struggle that is so central to most of this literature is, with a single exception—the night on Mount Shasta, recounted with great drama in *Steep Trails*—wholly absent in Muir's writing.<sup>35</sup> One of the lovely stories told about Muir is that after reading a magazine article in which a climber described his exciting perils in the ascent of Mount Tyndal, Muir remarked that the author "must have given himself a lot of trouble. When I climbed Mount Tyndal," he said, "I ran up and back before breakfast."<sup>36</sup>

At the heart of most writing about mountain climbing there is something very different from the experience of attunement that Muir and most other popular nature writers describe. At one level, it *is* the competitive striving that Olmsted sought to put aside, the "work hard, play hard" ethic associated with the ORV



by which the standards and practices of the day-to-day world are imported whole into recreational activity. To this extent the climbing literature seems anomalous.

But there is another, and fascinating, element in these books. It is a picture of mountaineering as attractive to those who are strongly inclined to competition and striving, but serving as a means to come to terms with those intuitions in an activity whose traditions and style are calculated to transcend them. Galen Rowell's book, *In the Throne Room of the Mountain Gods*, contains numerous passages directed to just this point:

All of us by now were aware that the approach march was turning into a contest and that we were being judged in part by our pack weights and hiking times. . . . [M]y pack was frequently hefted by [others]. One would say, "Wow, that's light." . . . I'd like to be able to say that I wasn't bothered by these taunts. . . . Other things were more important to me. Or were they? One part of me longed to prove myself. . . . I, whether I admitted it to myself or not, was definitely competing when I matched my pace to that of the front-runners.<sup>37</sup>

In an entry in his diary, Rowell returned to this theme:

Most Western people, like dogs chasing their tails, devote their lives to a conscious pursuit of happiness. . . . Those of us hoping to climb K-2 have widened the circle of the chase. We are after a tangible goal—the summit of a mountain—which will function in our lives exactly as a material possession would, except that it will be nontransferable, theft-proof, and inflation-proof. Our society will register the achievement on an equal level with other, less abstract rewards of Western living. "I'd like you to meet Mr. Jones, the president of our local bank. And this is Mr. Dunham; he climbed the second highest mountain in the world."<sup>38</sup>

This, of course, is the same author who says that getting to the top is not the important thing, and that climbing is best when climbing alone or with a few quiet companions, not trying to follow someone else's standards for a climb. The impressive feature of Rowell's book is its rare openness, not only about the brutality of expedition climbing at its worst, but about the difficulty of achieving the sublime pleasures of a self-defining experience to which most such books are almost exclusively devoted.



The climbing experience at its best—"enjoyed purely for itself,"<sup>39</sup> as Rowell puts it, adopting almost the identical words Olmsted used in the Yosemite report—requires a detachment from the pressure of conventional expectations that is extremely difficult to achieve. The interest of climbing is not simply that it tends to attract those who feel these external pressures sharply, but that it induces the participant to confront this inner conflict rather than conceal it. Mountain climbing is a particularly interesting model because it draws together elements of skill development, tension between achievement and contemplation, independence, physical setting, and an established ethic. In an article entitled "Games Climbers Play,"<sup>40</sup> Lito Tejada-Flores notes that informal rules have evolved for various kinds of climbing experiences, set out as a series of negative injunctions: Don't use fixed ropes, belays, pitons, etc. The purpose of these rules is to build an ethical structure for the climbing game. "[T]hey are designed to conserve the climber's feeling of personal (moral) accomplishment against the meaninglessness of a success which represents merely technological victory."<sup>41</sup> Moreover, based on one's own level of skill and ability, each individual can select a kind of climbing game that is challenging for him. The idea is *not* that some games are better, harder, or more worthwhile in themselves than others, Tejada-Flores notes. Indeed, the very purpose of the game's structure is "to equalize such value connotations from game to game so that the climber who plays any of these games by its proper set of rules should have at least a similar feeling of personal accomplishment."<sup>42</sup>

At the same time, the climb is not simply a physical challenge or a series of dangerous moments. Its setting and pace provide an opportunity and incentive for intensity of experience beyond the physical. It is, the climber Doug Robinson suggests, "seeing the objects and actions of ordinary experience with greater intensity, penetrating them further, seeing their marvels and mysteries, their forms, moods, and motions . . . it amounts to bringing a fresh vision to the familiar things of the world."<sup>43</sup> A concentrated immersion in the natural scene, growing out of the pace of the climb and its demand for intense concentration, produces a



special kind of observation. Here, for example is a description of a climb in Yosemite by Yvon Chouinard:

Each individual crystal in the granite stood out in bold relief. The varied shape of the clouds. . . . For the first time we noticed tiny bugs that were all over the walls, so tiny they were barely noticeable. While belaying, I stared at one for 15 minutes, watching him move and admiring his brilliant red color.<sup>44</sup>

To be sure, not every climbing experience, or every climber, ascends either to such physical or mental peaks. Recent reports of a commercial enterprise devoted to getting beginners to the top of Mount Rainier, even if they have to be pulled up, make clear that no activity in itself has magic.<sup>45</sup> But mountaineering seems a particularly vivid example of the ideals and struggles with inner conflict that have fueled the recreational symbolism of the national parks.

The interlocking themes of the climbing literature—domination mediated by self-conscious restraint—are also powerfully reflected in the American literary tradition. Nowhere are they more fully realized than in Faulkner's "The Bear," the mythic hunting story of a yearly rendezvous with the great bear—symbol of the wilderness—"which they did not even intend to kill," not because it could not be vanquished but because the *mere* act of conquest would be merely an act of destruction.<sup>46</sup> The wilderness could be conquered, was being conquered, not by true hunters but by destroyers, "men with plows and axes who feared it because it was wilderness, men myriad and nameless even to one another," for whom wilderness had never "loomed and towered" in their dreams. The hunter's appointment with the bear is an inner rendezvous, a test of "the will and hardihood to endure and the humility and skill to survive,"<sup>47</sup> of men not yet tamed and not needful of taming the world around them.

A parallel theme runs through Hemingway's writing, even in the early "Big Two-Hearted River."<sup>48</sup> Everything in the previously described fishing literature is present there—the gentle day, the timelessness, the deep pleasures of getting intensely into the flow of the river, the unimportance to the fishing trip of



catching fish. But the story obtains its power from the clearly felt but unstated fact that Nick Adams is not just whiling away a day on the river. He is exorcising a demon deep inside him.

The feeling of being at home and in harmony with things, the satisfying fatigue after a hard day of self-imposed labor, the pleasures of elemental truths intensely felt, the movement of the trout, the color of the grasshopper, the form of the landscape, the smell of food, are fully realized. But all this is overlain with an ominous sense of the pressures and perils in the world to which he will soon return. "He felt he had left everything behind, the need for thinking, the need to write, other needs. It was all back of him. . . . Nothing could touch him."<sup>49</sup> But these are not statements, they are questions. Sandwiched in the collection of stories entitled *In Our Time*, between two vivid descriptions of man's inhumanity to man, the final impression is of Nick's inevitable return to the conventional, and brutal, world outside. This is the literature of struggle.<sup>50</sup>

In Hemingway's late story, *The Old Man and the Sea*, the question of the hunt is posed in its starkest form.<sup>51</sup> Man strives for mastery and yet finds triumph only when he recognizes that he is not master. The desire to prevail is treated as natural: Santiago was born to be a fisherman just as the fish was born to be a fish.<sup>52</sup> But just as surely we know that victory alone is hollow; indeed, as has often been remarked in noting images of the crucifixion in the book, there can be victory in defeat where success is something other than conquest. The old man is beyond sentiment, as he is beyond proving himself to anyone, and this is what rescues the venture from meaningless sacrifice or wanton slaughter. It is the fisherman's ability to accept the inevitability of the struggle, without sentiment and without moralizing, that invests the venture with nobility. "Fish," he said, "I love you and respect you very much. But I will kill you dead before this day ends."<sup>53</sup>

From Olmsted to Faulkner and Hemingway by way of mountain climbers seems a tortuous route, but it is not nearly so indirect as first appearances suggest. The first step is detachment from conventional expectations and imposed obligation, for which the natural setting is a stimulus and a context. The sense of



detachment that engagement with nature stimulates brings to the surface atavistic longings, while the "ethical" structure of activities like fishing and mountaineering constrains that atavism from becoming a mere will to conquer. The strong attraction of nature for denizens of modern industrial society draws its power from these elements. Engagement with nature provides an opportunity for detachment from the submissiveness, conformity, and mass behavior that dog us in our daily lives; it offers a chance to express distinctiveness and to explore our deeper longings. At the same time, the setting—by exposing us to the awesomeness of the natural world in the context of "ethical" recreation—moderates the urge to prevail without destroying the vitality that gives rise to it: to face what is wild in us and yet not revert to savagery.

From this perspective, what distinguishes a national park idea from a merely generalized interest in nature may be the special role that the nature park plays as an institution *within* a developed and industrialized society, in contrast to those traditions in which nature is offered as an alternative to society. The setting of the national park provides an opportunity for respite, contrast, contemplation, and affirmation of values for those who live most of their lives in the workaday world.

Unlike the pure pastoral tradition, the park does not proffer a utopian community of escape to a life of perfect harmony, forever free of conflict and besetting human passions.<sup>54</sup> Neither does it resemble what Henry Nash Smith, in his fine book *Virgin Land*, calls the myth of the West, an image of life beyond the frontier of civilization.<sup>55</sup> The failed western hero in American literature, as Smith makes clear, was an anarchic figure, a symbol of freedom beyond law and beyond constraint, modeled on an antithesis between nature and civilization. Conversely, the preservationist tradition in the national parks movement proposes no permanent escape from society to a utopian wilderness. Olmsted certainly was a civilized man, and much of his professional work was devoted to the design of urban parks for urban people. "We want," he said, "a ground to which people may easily go after their day's work is done . . . the greatest possible contrast with the streets and the shops and the rooms of the town. . . . We



want, especially, the greatest possible contrast with the restraining and confining conditions of the town. . . ."56 The same is true of the American nature writers. John Muir sought to build no communities in the mountains he tramped.<sup>57</sup> Just as Hemingway's fictional Nick Adams must come back from his idyllic fishing trip, so, characteristically, the modern wilderness pioneer, Bob Marshall, says in his Alaska journal: "In a week [I shall be back] in Seattle and the great thumping world. I should be living once more among the accumulated accomplishments of man. The world . . . cannot live on wilderness, except incidentally and sporadically."<sup>58</sup>

Engagement with nature as a prescription for man in society, rather than as a rejection of society, is nowhere more evident than in the work of Henry David Thoreau. Tameness and wildness are the terms Thoreau uses to express the tension between submissiveness and dominance that has emerged as a central motif in the preceding pages.

"Once or twice," Thoreau says in *Walden*, "while I lived at the pond, I found myself ranging the woods, like a half-starved hound, with a strange abandonment, seeking some kind of venison which I might devour, and no morsel could have been too savage for me. The wildest scenes had become unaccountably familiar."<sup>59</sup>

There is something primitive and frightening in these feelings, and yet something even more frightening in repressing them. When civilized attitudes tame us to the point that the instinct to prevail no longer weighs upon us, when we only think of animals as sides of beef to be eaten, we may do something worse than killing animals; we obliterate the problem of the kill from our consciousness. The hunter recognizes the problem because he is in touch with it; the ethical dilemma is still real for him because he knows the objects of his hunt face to face.<sup>60</sup> It is therefore not surprising to find Thoreau, though he himself ultimately abstained from hunting and fishing, saying that "perhaps the hunter is the greatest friend of the animals hunted, not excepting the Humane Society."<sup>61</sup> When Thoreau speaks of leaving the gun and fish pole behind, it is with a hope that we will, having



struggled with the deepest forces in us, ultimately resolve the savage longing. He recognizes that the satisfaction of fishless days is not something easily or obviously come by, but is the product—at best—of a lifetime of reaching out for understanding. Those who came to fish at Walden during his residence, he says, commonly did not think they were lucky or well paid for their time unless they got a string of fish,

though they had the opportunity of seeing the pond all the while. They might go there a thousand times before the sediment of fishing would sink to the bottom and leave their purpose pure; but no doubt such a clarifying process would be going on all the while.<sup>62</sup>

Thoreau's favorite word is wildness, and perhaps his most famous phrase "in wildness is the preservation of the world."<sup>63</sup> But plainly wildness does not mean the unthinking savage to Thoreau, as his revulsion at the primitivism he encountered in *The Maine Woods*,<sup>64</sup> or his uneasiness about the wholly uncultivated woodchopper he describes in *Walden*,<sup>65</sup> makes clear. Nor does it mean a world of untrammelled wilderness, as his attraction to agricultural pursuits demonstrates. Thoreau never left Concord society behind him, for he was always—both before and after Walden—a Concord man. He rather escaped the social values and conventions that dominated the town. He saw the people of Concord bored and boring, because they have been tamed.<sup>66</sup> And he sees in the woods around him a world which is characterized by nothing so much as its resistance to taming.

To be tamed is to be what someone else wants you to be, to be managed by their expectation of your behavior, to accept their agenda, to submit to their will, and to be dependent on their knowledge or largess. Dominance and submissiveness are only two versions of the same instinct. In "Walking," Thoreau is at his most explicit in setting out the philosophical thesis that underlies what he says elsewhere:

I love even to see the domestic animals reassert their native rights—any evidence that they have not wholly lost their original wild habits and vigor; as when my neighbor's cow breaks out of her pasture. . . . I rejoice that horses and steers have to be broken before they can be made the slaves of men.<sup>67</sup>



Thoreau, unlike the "nature writers" with whom he is usually associated, conceives his response to nature in a form that is distinctively applicable to the situation of civilized society. We are at our best when we have not been tamed into the passivity of stock responses, of dependency, of insulation from intensity of experience.<sup>68</sup> To be willing to fish or climb without an audience; to be able to draw satisfaction from a walk in the woods, without calling on others for entertainment; to be content with a fishless day, demanding no string of fish to be counted and displayed; These are the characteristics of an individual who has "refined" wildness without taming it into the personality of the mass man. What the fisherman feels lying at the side of the brook watching the bubbles, or the mountain climber experiences as "purity of consciousness," are each versions of what psychologists describe in terms of personality as a "wonderful capacity to appreciate again and again, freshly and naively the basic goods of life, with awe, pleasure, wonder, and even ecstasy, however stale these experiences may have become to others."<sup>69</sup> Thoreau's writings—directed to his neighbors, living lives of "quiet desperation"—reveal the experience of one who pursues his own style, unencumbered by the preconceptions or expectations of others, finding the world, even in its most mundane elements, endlessly interesting because he approaches it intensely and searchingly.

The fundamental claim for what may be called reflective or contemplative recreation, then, is as an experimental test of an ethical proposition. Such recreation tests the will to dominate and the inclination to submissiveness, and repays their transcendence with profound gratification. Plainly such activities are not limited by any specific forms. They range from the purely contemplative wanderer in the woods who, like Thoreau or John Muir, has the capacity to detach himself from social convention and structured activity, to the agile climber arduously working his way to the meaning of the summit. Nor is the setting of nature an indispensable precondition. There is, for example, a strong commonality between the writings examined here and that of the Zen approach to sports. That literature too emphasizes intensity, skill development as an intermediate end, introspection, and—most significantly—a focus on the battle within. The classic work on



the subject is Eugen Herrigel's *Zen in the Art of Archery*, and it parallels the nature literature quite closely.<sup>70</sup> Herrigel's work is devoted to the compelling proposition that "the art of archery means a profound and far-reaching contest of the archer with himself."<sup>71</sup> The author describes the culmination of his training as that moment when he finally understood the artless art of feeling "so secure in ourselves" that neither the score, nor the spectators, nor any external element remained important to him.<sup>72</sup>

While nature is not a uniquely suitable setting, it seems to have a peculiar power to stimulate us to reflectiveness by its awesomeness and grandeur, its complexity, the unfamiliarity of untrammelled ecosystems to urban residents, and the absence of distractions. The special additional claim for nature as a setting is that it not only promotes self-understanding, but also an understanding of the world in which we live. Our initial response to nature is often awe and wonderment: trees that have survived for millenia; a profusion of flowers in the seeming sterility of the desert; predator and prey living in equilibrium. These marvels are intriguing, but their appeal is not merely aesthetic. Nature is also a successful model of many things that human communities seek: continuity, stability and sustenance, adaptation, sustained productivity, diversity, and evolutionary change. The frequent observations that natural systems renew themselves without exhaustion of resources, that they thrive on tolerance for diversity, and they resist the arrogance of the conqueror all seem to give confirmation to the intuitions of the contemplative recreationist.

Wow

Boo!  
Flycatching  
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# 4

## *Making a Choice*

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Fly Fishing  
Reviews

Everything said up to this point implies that we can choose our recreation as freely as we choose our clothes. But there is a strong strain of contrary opinion that is rarely made explicit in debate over the national parks. Recreation fills needs created by the style of our daily lives, this view holds; and one need only know how someone works to know how he will play. The much-discussed problem of elitism arises from this perspective. For if certain styles of recreation are inevitably the preserve of a certain class of people in the society—fly-fishing for the professional and business executive, for example, and snowmobiling for the blue-collar factory worker—then to embody one style of recreation in public policy, and to commit our parklands significantly to it, is to yield a valuable and significant public resource to a very limited segment of the population (limited not just by numbers, but by class as well).

The determinist view has been stated most strongly by those whose interest is in humanizing work. "What are we to expect?" the psychiatrist Erich Fromm asks, "If a man works without genuine relatedness to what he is doing . . . how can he make use of his leisure time in an active and meaningful way? He always remains the passive and alienated consumer."<sup>1</sup> Sometimes the point has been put even more strongly: A certain kind of leisure activity is not only to be expected from the alienated worker, but is psychologically necessary for him.