

The Environmental Imagination

Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the
Formation of American Culture

LAWRENCE BUELL



The Belknap Press of
Harvard University Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England

1995

What Is an Environmental Text?

This book ranges freely through the canons of western literature and occasionally even beyond, into the literature of Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean. But I shall concentrate especially on the literary history of the United States, in ways that will often seem odd from an orthodox standpoint. In my version of the history of the western hemisphere, the ecological colonization of the Americas by disease and invasive plant forms is as crucial as the subjugation of their indigenous peoples by political and military means.¹⁵ William Bartram's botanical conquest of Florida is as notable an event of the American Revolutionary era as Patriot resistance to Britain. Although I broadly agree (while differing on specifics) with the many other Americanists who have seen pastoral ideology as central to American cultural self-understanding, I argue that American cultural distinctiveness in this respect must be understood in light of parallels to the conditions of other former colonies remote from Europe, whence Anglophone pastoral emanated. The key figure of the so-called American literary renaissance of the mid-nineteenth century is not Ralph Waldo Emerson, in this book's scheme of things, but Thoreau. The writings of Susan Fenimore Cooper are as significant as those of her more famous father. Darwin's *Origin of Species* was as catalytic an event for American thought as John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry the same year (1859). Among the achievements of late nineteenth-century realism, the environmental nonfiction of Celia Thaxter, Mary Austin, and John Burroughs counts for as much as the novels of William Dean Howells and Mark Twain. Among intellectual developments during the Depression

and World War II, Aldo Leopold's formation of a 'biocentric environmental ethics was as important as any. In the Cold War era, ecocide was always a more serious threat than nuclear destruction. In literary history since World War II, the resurgence of environmental writing is as important as the rise of magical realist fiction.

The combination of broad sweep and cranky hyperfocus of which I have just forewarned is, I think, in keeping with the nature of environmental representation, which is at least faintly present in most texts but salient in few. This we immediately see from a rough checklist of some of the ingredients that might be said to comprise an environmentally oriented work.

1. *The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history.* To take a couple of borderline cases, the American sequence of Charles Dickens' *Martin Chuzzlewit* barely qualifies, since the American West is little more than a backdrop for Martin's picaresque misadventures; but E. M. Forster's *Passage to India* clearly would, for it reflects at every level a version of the theory of determinism by climate posited by discredited police commissioner MacBryde: Forster seems seriously to consider that difference in latitude shapes emotions, behavior, art. But both novels seem peripheral cases compared with almost any novel by Thomas Hardy—or with the travel books Dickens and Forster quarried from the biographical experiences that underlay their two novels: Dickens's *American Notes* and Forster's *The Hill of Devi*.

2. *The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest.* By this criterion, the boy's empathy for the bird's loss of its mate in Walt Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" stands out by contrast to the comparative self-absorption of Percy Bysshe Shelley's persona in "To a Skylark" and John Keats's in "Ode to a Nightingale." "Cradle" is more concerned with the composition of a specific place, and Whitman's symbolic bird is endowed with a habitat, a history, a story of its own.

3. *Human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation.* By this standard, William Wordsworth's "Nutting" comes closer to being an environmental text than his "Tintern Abbey," insofar as the function of landscape in the latter is chiefly to activate the speaker's subjective feelings of rejuvenation and anxiety, whereas the former remi-

niscence prompts him to retell a self-incriminating tale of his youthful violation of the hazel grove.

4. *Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text.* By this criterion, James Fenimore Cooper's *Pioneers* is a more faithful environmental text than the four ensuing Leatherstocking Tales because it never loses sight of the history of the community's development from wilderness to town, while his daughter Susan's *Rural Hours*, a literary daybook of Cooperstown natural and social history, is a more faithful environmental text than any of her father's romances.