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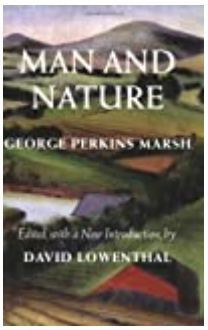

George Perkins Marsh. *Man and Nature: Or, Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action.* Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2003. xxxv + 472 pp. $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-295-98316-5.

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Honoring the "Prophet of Conservation": George Perkins Marsh's <cite>Man and Nature</cite>

Honoring the "Prophet of Conservation": George Perkins Marsh's *Man and Nature*

Reading George Perkins Marsh's famous *Man and Nature* is a bit like reading the Bible or Shakespeare. It has the feel of the familiar, even the shopworn–if you have never read it, you have still heard it before, and probably more than once. But any indifference you might feel turns quickly to respect as you realize that this is where the familiar got its start. *Man and Nature*'s litany of environmental destruction may sound like old news to modern ears, but when it was first published in 1864 it was unprecedented in its unflinching assessment of human impact on the natural world, backed up by veritable mountains of evidence and rock-solid logic. The result was a book that rivaled *The Origin of Species* for its ability to shake dearly held beliefs about human supremacy over nature. It also heralded the arrival of the conservation ideal, which would dominate American and European attitudes towards environmental management for the next century.

Surprisingly, Marsh's great opus has not been revamped in nearly forty years, since Harvard University Press reprinted it in 1965 with annotations and an introduction by David Lowenthal. But now the University of Washington Press has reissued it as a part of its Weyerhauser Environmental Classics series. Lowenthal has written a new introduction and updated his annotations, and series general editor William Cronon contributes a foreword. Thus cleaned and polished, *Man and Nature* is now poised to carry its influence into a third century.

Before discussing the book itself, however, a few words are in order about its famous author. Lowenthal is the leading expert on Marsh and his new introduction portrays an astonishingly sophisticated thinker, ambitious scholar, and author.[1] In many ways, Marsh was a late bloomer. Born in Vermont in 1801, he spent much of his life in relative obscurity as a small-town lawyer and businessman. As a capitalist he was dreadful, and by his sixties he was nearly bankrupt, the result of bad business choices and questionable partners.

But Marsh made up for his failings in many other ways as he grew older. He served Vermont in Congress and various state positions, and his nation as ambassador to Italy and envoy to Turkey. He mediated European bor-

der disputes, handled trade issues, and cultivated Italian support for the Union during the Civil War. Most of all, however, Marsh shone as a self-made intellectual. Fluent in twenty languages and blessed with a bottomless memory for detail, he was a devotee of great art, literature and, history, as well as a world-renowned philologist– the kind of man who could author a dictionary of Old Icelandic, pen articles for the *Nation*, and then write encyclopedia entries on medieval Catalan poetry and mulberry trees. Reading of Marsh's many skills in Lowenthal's enthralling introduction can be a little daunting, in fact. One gets the feeling that Marsh was not only jack of all trades, but master of an awful lot of them.

Nature, of course, was a subject in which Marsh excelled. He wrote copiously about it, on topics from camels to fishing, but his masterpiece was *Man and Nature*. The book's main thesis was simple and powerful. Contrary to the conventional wisdom of the time, Marsh argued that human activity has profound effects on the natural world, not all of them benign or short-lived. Indeed, he suggested the then-radical idea that humans were one of the most significant agents of change in nature, especially when they were armed with technology and devoted to economic growth. They could raze entire forests, reclaim land from the sea, and change the course of rivers, all in the name of progress and plenty. But too often the results were devastation and destruction of plants, animals, and natural resources, results which were usually unintended and unanticipated, and which inevitably circled back on their human instigators. "Man is everywhere a disturbing agent," Marsh noted in his introduction. "The ravages committed by man subvert the relations and destroy the balance which nature [has] established…, and she avenges herself upon the intruder by letting loose destructive energies hitherto kept in check by organic forces destined to be his best auxiliaries, but which he has unwisely dispersed and driven from the field of action" (pp. 36, 42). Diminished productivity, poverty and aesthetic blight were but the mildest effects of these ravages, Marsh warned. With time and increased intensity, environmental destruction might extinguish civilization, perhaps even the human race itself.

The bulk of *Man and Nature* illustrated this degradation in excruciating detail, with four main chapters dedicated to specific examples among plants and animals, forests, waters, and sands. The chapter on forests exemplified Marsh's approach, for to him their destruction was humanity's "first violation of the harmonies of inanimate nature" (p. 119), not just in time but in importance.

The chapter begins with a meticulous description of the forest's influence on everything from local temperature variations and regional climate patterns to electrical and chemical properties of the air. Most important, however, are its effects on precipitation and soil moisture. Forests, Marsh argued, perform invaluable services for humankind by their moderating effect on the hydrologic cycle. They shelter the soil from harsh rains, reducing erosion. Their detritus allows the ground to soak up tremendous amounts of moisture and release it slowly, which not only reduces flooding but also keeps streams and springs flowing during dry seasons. Their respiration cools the air and brings rainfall to lands that might otherwise lack it. But when humans remove the forests, those benefits cease. Soil washes to the sea, torrents roar down placid rivers, and well-watered lands become parched as the rains disappear. The human costs, Marsh continued, could be tremendous. In particular, the loss of agricultural productivity in eroded soils could render the land infertile for centuries, bringing sickness and starvation to residents and weakened power to the nation. Indeed, it was this very problem, Marsh argued famously, which helped bring the Roman Empire to its knees. But he offered a numbing list of additional historical examples to drive the point home.

Other chapters told a similar story about plants and animals, lakes, streams, rivers, and coastlines. There, as in the forest chapter, Marsh drew on a wide array of scientific studies to describe the forms and functions of each, and how human activity could easily bring them to ruin. Likewise, the list of historical catastrophes he offered as evidence filled page after unrelenting page.

But all was not lost. Marsh, for all his railing against humanity's "persecutions" of nature (p. 96), was not an environmental Jeremiah. Humans might be unique among animals in their power to affect the natural world, he noted, but they were also unique in their ability to learn from mistakes. And as it was to most Americans at the time, it was self-evident and incontestable to Marsh that humans were the lords of nature, that the world existed for man and not man for the world. He differed from most of his contemporaries in his belief that with lordship comes responsibility. For Marsh, the cure for human mismanagement of nature was not to cease managing, but to achieve more and better management. Armed with scientific expertise, reforming zeal, and a bit of humility, humans could not only cease their destruction of nature but also actually improve it. Dams, weirs, intensively managed forests–such things may give modern environmentalists pause, but Marsh embraced them,

so long as they were done with care. Here Marsh reflected the American antebellum reform culture in which he came of age, especially in his emphasis on the positive role of government. He also foreshadowed the Progressive conservation movement of the late-nineteenth century, when *Man and Nature*'s "enlightened management" ideas and reclamation sentiments became gospel to men like Gifford Pinchot and Teddy Roosevelt.

But why read *Man and Nature* today? After all, most of Marsh's criticisms and many of his cures are standard issue among environmentalists today, and our understanding of both the natural world and the threats to it surpasses anything he imagined. One of the great pleasures in reading the book, however, is discovering just how "modern" Marsh's environmental thinking really was. It is striking to see him touch on topics and ideas, often in passing, that later became major environmental issues. In his chapter on plants and animals, for example, Marsh writes at length on the role of birds and insects in controlling agricultural pests, sounding more than a little like an organic farmer, or even Rachel Carson in the final chapters of *Silent Spring*. His discussion of naturalized exotics not only sounds familiar to readers acquainted with zebra mussels or kudzu, but also brings to mind the work of scholars like Al Crosby. His discussion of economics and overhunting in post-Revolution France is reminiscent of the arguments of modern social justice environmentalists.

But *Man and Nature* is especially valuable for environmental historians, because even after a century and a half it still offers an admirable model for our discipline. Marsh's research skills, interdisciplinary approach, and historical vision made him a first-rate practitioner of what we now call environmental history, and *Man and Nature* can still suggest a thing or two about the fundamentals of good environmental scholarship.

First, Marsh's familiarity with and use of scientific literature was unsurpassed. He may not have been trained in science, but he recognized its value to his work and took pains to understand and absorb as much as he could. A look at his massive footnotes confirms Marsh's mastery of the relevant sources. Indeed, in some ways he was even on biology's cutting edge. Decades before the rise of scientific ecology, Marsh was acutely aware of the intricate connections between living things and their environment. "All nature is linked together with invisible bonds," he wrote, "and every organic creature, however low, however feeble, however dependent, is necessary to the well-being of some other" (p. 96). Most modern environmental historians may not be so prescient, or able to read scientific papers in twenty languages, but we would still do well to emulate Marsh as best we can. Our discipline requires us to think about nonhuman nature as well as the human, and science, although neither objective nor all-sufficient, is indispensable to that thinking.

Second, Marsh understood that both "man" and "nature" play a vital role in environmental history. If the discipline (paraphrasing Donald Worster) is the study of the interaction of humans and nonhuman nature over time, then Marsh had it nailed down. For him, the story of "man and nature" was not about one or the other. Both were indispensable to understanding the course of environmental change. Humans manipulated nature, pushed and pulled it with their technologies and material desires. But nature pushed and pulled back–it was an active force in its own right, with its own imperatives. Much ecological degradation, Marsh noted, resulted from humanity's failure to understand nature's reactions to human activity, or even to perceive that there might be reactions in the first place. In short, for Marsh the nonhuman world mattered in human history, and for critics who feel that current environmental history spends too much time talking about humans and too little about nonhumans, *Man and Nature* will come as a welcome respite.

Third, Marsh's approach was strongly multinational. In a recent article in *Environmental History*, Paul Sutter urges American historians to "pay more attention to George Perkins Marsh." It is good advice, because much of *Man and Nature*'s strength comes from the book's geographical sweep. Environmental historians in the United States have often been rather parochial in their subjects and interpretations, and scholars like Sutter have pointed to Marsh as an example of an American whose vision stretched beyond his own borders.[2]

Man and Nature is not without its faults, of course. Parts of it inevitably seem old-fashioned. Marsh's talk of the balance of nature, for example, seems quaint in an age of "chaos ecology," as does his discussion of the forest's ability to filter "malarious influences" (p. 135) from the air. Occasionally, Marsh also reveals his prejudices, as when he suggests that overfishing is at least partly the result of the dietary needs of the "fervent Catholic" (p. 106). The book's main weakness, though, is its language. The Victorian era was never known for literary simplicity, and *Man and Nature* is no exception. Many of Marsh's sentences are maddeningly long and complicated–one is no less than fifteen lines long (p. 50). Marsh often made matters worse with classical allusions and unneces-

sary rhetorical flourishes. Consider the following, from a paragraph in which he discusses the influence of forests on the local arrival of spring: "Flora is already plaiting her sylvan wreath before the corn flowers which are to deck the garland of Ceres have waked from their winter's sleep" (p. 157). Chopping through the thicket of Marsh's purple prose can be a chore, making *Man and Nature* a book best read in small doses, a little at a time.

But these are very minor criticisms of a truly classic work. *Man and Nature* was the work of a visionary, and in its pages you will see the first seeds of what is now a vigorous field. The University of Washington Press has done well in reprinting it.

Notes

[1]. The University of Washington Press published Lowenthal's most recent biography, *George Perkins Marsh: Prophet of Conservation*, in 2000.

[2]. Paul Sutter, "Reflections: What can U.S. Environmental Historians Learn from Non-U.S. Environmental Historiography?" *Environmental History* 8 (January 2003): p. 31.