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TALKING ABOUT THE LAND

PAUL J. LINDHOLDT

They have been called Cassandras, for the Greek prophetess cursed never to be heeded; the Boy Who Cried Wolf, whose repeated alarums caused people to cease to believe in the presence of the threat; and Chicken Little, for the comic strip bird who squawked, "The sky is falling!" Environmentalists have invited comparisons as well to those who prognosticate hellfire for human sinners at the hands of an angry god. Such parallels are meant to imply that sourceless warnings and exaggerated claims have become stock-in-trade of the environmental movement. Another charge, likewise intended to discredit conservationists, here from John McPhee's *Encounters with the Archdruid* (1971), calls those who want to regulate human development and progress and greed "modern druids"—who "worship trees and sacrifice people to those trees." The varieties of anticonservation rhetoric make edifying reading, and McPhee's book is central within the growing canon of "green" writing, but this is not the proper place for such a survey. The current spate of classroom readers does suggest that environmental literature has found a secure home in higher education today.

Reasons for this resurgent interest may be tough to trace, but the signs are unmistakable. Universities and colleges across the nation are implementing interdisciplinary courses in green studies, frequently team-taught and commonly integrating culture and science, philosophy and history, humanities and technology. In 1985, in its Options for Teaching series, the Modern Language Association published a collection of essays entitled *Teaching Environmental Literature*; that term has come to be accepted in the field. In 1992 the Western Literature Association formed the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE), which issues both *The American Nature Writing Newsletter* and *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, and which sponsored its first national conference in 1995. The keynote speaker for that conference was Lawrence Buell, the noted scholar of American

Chris Anderson and Lex Runciman, *A Forest of Voices: Reading and Writing the Environment*. Mayfield, 1995. xviii + 776 pages. $23.95 pb; Walter Levy and Christopher Hallowell, *Green Perspectives: Thinking and Writing about Nature and the Environment*. HarperCollins, 1994. xxii + 490 pages. Illustrated. $19.50 pb; Carolyn Ross, *Writing Nature: An Ecological Reader for Writers*. St. Martin's Press, 1995. xxii + 650 pages. $23.28 pb; Scott H. Slovic and Terrell F. Dixon, *Being in the World: An Environmental Reader for Writers*. Macmillan, 1993. xxvi + 726 pages. Illustrated. $30; Carl J. Verburg, *The Environmental Predicament: Four Issues for Critical Analysis*. Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1995. xvi + 352 pages. Illustrated. $30; Melissa Walker, ed., *Reading the Environment*. Norton, 1994. xxx + 598 pages. Illustrated. $21.95 pb.

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literature who is now a dean at Harvard and recently wrote *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (1995). At the conference Mr. Buell wisely implored ASLE members—many of whom are engaging in the formation of an emerging "ecocriticism"—to steer clear of the excesses of the worst of their poststructuralist predecessors.

Language and literary studies, as the present books attest, now recognize both nature writing and environmental issues as useful in the classroom. Belles lettres in all the ages have included a strain that is known fairly universally as nature writing—from Greek and Roman pastoralism, to effusions of the Romantics, to the microscopic insights of scientific observers like Lewis Thomas today. This emerging field of study, formerly banished to special-topics courses if admitted at all, typically contradicts the aphorism of Alexander Pope that "the proper study of mankind is man." As the ASLE motto has it, "When humans study nature, it is nature studying itself." For the writing teacher whose courses have risen in demand as literacy levels fall, the decision to teach environmental writing may be PC, a mere sop to liberal principles. Or so some commentators would portray it. The comic strip *Mallard Fillmore* in today's newspaper depicts a bespectacled teacher promising her charges they will "learn about diversity, recycling, and safe sex" to the exclusion of math and science, history and literature—a gag that reduces the varied disciplines of environmentalism to the single issue of recycling. English teachers may choose environmental literature because it lends contemporary relevance to interdisciplinary approaches and rhetorical modeling. The science and history and philosophy of green studies combine with literary expression to generate fine writing that can be emulated or refuted, analyzed or absorbed.

To characterize this pedagogical interest as a resurgence is to suggest that the green revolution of recent decades has the staying power to transcend its trend. That revolution embraces organic farmers, alternative-medicine experts, master gardeners, forest-management specialists, geographers, planners, biologists, and people who would repopulate rural America. Most of the founders of that revolution, seen today, seem more sensible than trendy.

Wendell Berry is represented in five of the six books under review here. He is praised in *Green Perspectives*, the only collection of the bunch I have used to teach a class, for "his firm views on maintaining a spiritual relationship with the land." Berry would have us look inward, not outward; think locally, not globally. For better or worse he has also become a mouthpiece for a tribe of technophobes—those who fear and distrust technology and its adherents—for his refusal to buy and use a computer to write his books. Hence Berry is compared sometimes to the late Edward Abbey, whose negations were more vehement (he wrote his M.A. thesis on philosophical anarchy). What often seems to unsettle

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the traditional teacher and scholar about environmental literature is the fear that literary "texts" will become propaganda tools, that the literary genres will fall by the wayside, and that ideological issues will overshadow the art.

Conservation issues truly have become ideological issues, and the culture wars besetting American education have expanded now beyond the arts and to the sciences. Formerly stable ground is shifting beneath professors in all fields. In the summer 1995 issue of this magazine, Judith Weissman reviewed *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and Its Quarrels with Science*. The scientists who wrote that book, Paul R. Gross and Norman Levitt, she noted in an otherwise favorable review, wrongly reject warnings about the hazards of overpopulation and dioxins. They wrongly reject the message of so-called radicals. Blaming leftists for blowing the whistle on industrial polluters is peevish and partisan, for serious problems are facing us. Some scientists now have begun to realize that the spurious "counterscience" issued by right-wing ideologues has done as much to stymie truth in scholarship as have the academic leftists. Followers of the convicted tax-evader Lyndon LaRouche, for instance, routinely advance conspiratorial agendas in the widely circulated *21st Century Science and Technology*. The Unification Church, through its own lobbying organizations and publications, works avidly to eviscerate environmental laws. In June 1995 the New York Academy of Sciences sponsored a conference entitled "The Flight from Science and Reason." Faced by research funding cuts proposed in Congress, the two-hundred participants denounced the twin threats they blame for the diminishing credibility of the scientific enterprise: postmodernism and fundamentalism.

Postmodernism they characterized as a powerful intellectual shift in many of the humanities disciplines over the past few decades. In the postmodern world view, the unreliable filters of language and culture prevent us from seeing the natural world directly. And this assumption threatens the validity of the scientific method, with its reliance on empirical data and its claims of predictive capability. (It also threatens assumptions that underlie the validity of nature writing—namely that amateur observers are capable of original insights to the natural world.) More serious threats, scientists say, come from fundamentalists who are passing laws to enforce creationism as an equal classroom option to evolution. Religious conservatives are at the cutting edge of an assault on rationality and reason in science, speakers argued. Faculty members, faced increasingly by the prospect of teaching at disciplinary cross-purposes, can use environmental literature to provide a neutral common ground. Such courses can be team-taught to good effect, with scholars of religion or philosophy or science, to place scientific debates in a broader intellectual context. That context includes a traceable literary tradition.

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Regrettably for the many superb writers who have focused on the land, as Catharine Savage Brosman has noted in these pages, "this tradition, despite its rural association, lends itself to attack as elitist—not revolutionary, not proletarian, produced mainly by an educated few." Those who would attack it, in Mrs. Brosman's estimation, are cultural critics interested in "culture as defined . . . chiefly in what is behind and at the side of what I took to be its manifestations." To the degree Brosman is accurate in her assessment—that the tradition of writing about the land is apt to be dismissed as old-fashioned—environmental literature risks damnation at both ends of the academic spectrum. Neomarxist cultural critics can snub environmental literature as privileged and utopian, therefore "incorrect," while traditional scholars can reject the same writing as political hackwork. Just as the reputation of the Agrarians suffered in northern circles for the alleged political agendas in their work (as did Erskine Caldwell and John Steinbeck for different reasons), those today who focus their literary talent on matters of the land do so at the potential jeopardy of their candidacy in the academic canon.

Some of this jeopardy is owing to the fine distinction between "nature writing" and writing on "environmental issues." While not mutually exclusive, the two literary modes derive from different impulses, one introspective and reflective, adopting methods of meditation and praise, the other typically meant to advocate and persuade. Put another way, one entails a personal and the other a public mode of expression. The best environmental literature manages to employ both voices, giving rise to what I like to call advocacy belles lettres, a phrase that will seem contradictory to traditional readers who choose their art for its impartiality. The holy hush of woods and fields and streams, the rapt wonder over creation and its creatures, this is the site of traditional nature writing, a site that appeals to the milder emotions. Who is to say when that meditation lapses into advocacy? While some readers find Thoreau wrought best as a reflective nature writer, still others will insist he worked hardest, in his own words, to preserve wildness and thus effect the preservation of the world.

When we talk about the land today we have to talk about the writers who wrote about the land before us, whether regionally and concretely, or in an abstract manner of expression. That is the chief value of these textbooks—that they bring together, with generally intelligent commentary and headnotes, the great works of environmental literature. Most excerpts are confined to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—and for good reason. The Industrial Revolution and its aftermath, together with a burgeoning human population, has had physical and spiritual consequences for those who care about the natural world. The threadbare pastoral tradition is giving way to less carefree and less neutral tones. Still and all, the writers who appear most often in the present set of books are those who manage to nourish hope in the face

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of exhausting odds. When Annie Dillard encounters beverage cans and motorcycle tracks where turtles lay eggs at the edge of Hollins Pond, she does not pause to pitch a fit over these incongruities or analyze their threats to ecosystems. She looks for miracles. When Terry Tempest Williams discovers a dead swan beside the Great Salt Lake, her prayers and preparations over the bird anticipate her mother's death by cancer from nuclear radiation—sans commentary on the evils of industrial society. Writers from the 1800s represented in these pages include Wordsworth, Thoreau, Audubon, Whitman, Dickinson, Crane, Jewett, Hopkins, and Muir. Conspicuous omissions from earlier eras include John Josselyn, William Bartram, Izaak Walton, Timothy Dwight, and John Clare.

The greatest value of these anthologies will be for people who teach college composition. *Being in the World* is most useful for introductory writing courses. The headnotes about each author are thorough and well researched; the black-and-white and color copies of landscape art add a welcome visual dimension; and the three tables of contents arrange the readings alternately by theme and region and rhetorical mode. Better for argument-based composition classes would be Carol Verburg's *The Environmental Predicament*, a reader arranged in casebook fashion to allow students to research four issues systematically: species protection, garbage, global warming, and solutions to "our environmental predicament." Some selections respond directly to one another in the book. A brief Glossary of Environmental Terms complements the readings, as do the Suggestions for Further Reading, arranged by case.

Green Perspectives gives the best sense of historical sweep, although overmuch of it focuses on the eastern half of the nation. Each of its four parts begins with a useful introduction and chronology; the headnotes are interesting and apt; and the large type and compact size avoid the pitfalls of typical anthologies. Rare among these books, too, *Green Perspectives* includes poems.

The three remaining textbooks are useful in different ways. *A Forest of Voices* is the only one of these texts to include a full rhetoric. It opens with lessons on gathering and arranging information, also on composing journals, essays, summaries, and arguments. It balances pros and cons, polemics and belles lettres, and it includes some poems. *Writing Nature* is an excellent collection that interleaves pictures with rhetorical lessons and readings. This book focuses most on the western half of the nation, which may make it more pertinent for students in the West who have grown up amid public-lands debates.

Reading the Environment is a disappointing offering that features neither rhetorical apparatus nor historical depth, substituting journalistic pieces for artful or argumentative articles. For teachers of environmental literature who wish to treat issues and history in greater depth —without cluttering the readings with writing prompts and prods for

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further thought—these collections might work better: *This Incomparable Lande: A Book of American Nature Writing* (1989), *The Norton Book of Nature Writing* (1990), *American Environmentalism: Readings in Conservation History* (1990), *Sisters of the Earth: Women's Prose and Poetry about Nature* (1991), *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology* (1993), *Planet in Peril: Essays in Environmental Ethics* (1994), and *The Oxford Book of Nature Writing* (1995). The last book opens its two-thousand-year survey with Aristotle and Pliny.

Besides offering opportunities to teach critical thinking, environmental literature can reenfranchise Christian students alienated by standard college-course offerings and approaches. The master narrative of human harmony in the Garden of Eden can be taught as the earliest example of nature writing, before the machine entered the garden, before the virgin land of successive frontiers began to erode. That tale of a peaceable kingdom, embowered in bliss and lulled to sleep each evening by music from the spheres, can furnish symmetry to the injunctions of Genesis that humankind "have dominion" over other species, that we should "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it."

THE POETRY OF EARTH

SAM PICKERING

"Nature," Emerson wrote in his *Journals*, "is a language, and every new fact that we learn is a new word; but rightly seen, taken all together, it is not merely a language, but the language put together into a most significant and universal book. I wish to learn the language, not that I may learn a new set of nouns and verbs, but that I may read the great book which is written in that tongue." Across college campuses courses in "nature writers" and environmental studies have spread like hawkweed. In contrast enrollments in literature courses have dropped, in part because students want to read Emerson's great book. Much literary criticism douses texts with words that wilt enjoyment faster than dioxin

Janet Browne, *Voyaging*. Knopf, 1995. xiv + 606 pages. Illustrated. $35; Charles C. Mann and Mark L. Plummer, *Noah's Choice: The Future of Endangered Species*. Knopf, 1995. 302 pages. $24; Edward F. Stanton, *Road of Stars to Santiago*. University Press of Kentucky, 1994. 198 pages. Illustrated. $24.95; Jonathan Weiner, *The Beak of the Finch: A Story of Evolution in Our Time*. Knopf, 1994. xvi + 332 pages. Illustrated. $25.

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