

AHIS 310: Assignment 2
Word Count: 1059

William Cronon thoroughly examines the history and concept of wilderness in "The Trouble with Wilderness". Two earlier pieces of writing by different authors, from 1916 and 1971 respectively, add support to his argument that revering wild places as sacred, mystical places is actually harmful to the environment

Cronon wastes no time when he begins with this direct statement - "The time has come to rethink wilderness" (471) - and delves straight into the history of wilderness areas. He explains how wilderness is a "cultural invention" (Cronon 472) and describes how only it has been only within the last few hundred years that wilderness stopped being "places on the margin of civilization" full of "confusion and despair" (Cronon 473). Instead, it was transformed, through notions of the sublime and Romanticism (Cronon 474) into sacredness (Cronon 474). He uses one of William Wordsworth poems, "The Prelude" as an example of the "religious experience, akin to that of the Old Testament prophets" (Cronon 476) found in nature. Henry David Thoreau turned Mount Katahdin into "a symbol of God's presence on earth" (Cronon 477) through an emotional description of climbing it. Northrop Frye is far more succinct than Cronon, with a Canadian example - he describes the paintings of Tom Thomson as a show of "imaginative instability, the emotional unrest and dissatisfaction one feels about a country which has not been lived in (Frye 200). Thomson, with his colour schemes of "Shelleyan hectic decay" and "Keatsian opulence and glut" (Frye 200) also fits into this Romantic period.

Cronon's chapter in *The Great New Wilderness Debate* was published in 1989; fortunately a chapter titled "The Rockies" from Rupert Brooke's 1916 book *Letters from America* complements the modern message and adds a perspective of Canada. Written by the sort of person Cronon emphasizes as a typical national park visitor (481) - a white male, probably of

some wealth - Brooke had the privilege of being able to take a train trip through the Rockies. He vividly jots down his emotions and occasionally compares Canada to his travels in Europe. "The Rockies" is an amazing source of evidence for many of Cronon's claims. Brooke renders the "wilderness" as "empty" (153), "virginal" (156) and in some places, like Lake Louise, "Beauty herself" (151), or, for other places, "horrid and solitary" (148). Brooke's writing is loaded with Romantic keywords - "melancholy" (156), "other-worldly" (153) and "sublimity" (149) – to name a few.

Brooke waxes and wanes, describing how "the heart lifts to see" the Rockies (148), how "pines drooped and sobbed" (150) while rivers possess "aimless passion" (150). Brooke may have a kindred spirit in Northrop Frye when he declares that "[t]o love the country here - mountains are worshipped, not loved - is like embracing a wraith" (158). Both authors highlight the mysterious, sinister air of the supernatural that wilderness can invoke - Frye classifies this mysteriousness as a "sphinx" with a "riddle of unvisualized land" and seems to suggest that Tom Thomson was a victim of this creature as he did not "hide from it (201).

Cronon notes that "the myth of vanishing frontier", felt by the American historian Frederick Jackson Turner when he mourned the apparent passing of the wilderness, happens to coincide with the creation of national parks (479) and the removal of indigenous people (482). This is how wilderness, particularly "uninhabited" wilderness came to be invented; there is "nothing natural" about it (Cronon 482).

Exploring the duality of wilderness - that it is the "natural, unfallen antithesis of an unnatural civilization - that has lost its soul (Cronon 484), Cronon discovers that "the trouble with wilderness is that it quietly expresses and reproduces the very values its devotees seek to

reject" (484). Wilderness is either only affordable to the wealthy (489), a fantasy of "urban folk" (484) or an unintentional "form of cultural imperialism" (485).

One of Cronon's most interesting points is the idea of pristine wilderness. It is faulty thinking to assume that humans have not been "manipulating the natural world on various scales" (Cronon 487). He uses Bill McKibben's idea that our present world is "a biosphere completely altered by our own activity". Without wanting to sound like he is excusing human behaviour, Cronon instead further examines the duality of wilderness - that "a wilderness we cannot inhabit" (487) is part of the problem - a fatalistic view that "the only way to save nature is to kill ourselves" (487). This view has been popularly adopted and promoted, but it is simply a different version of the "frontier myth" with "wide open spaces and virgin land" (Cronon 488).

A particularly poignant part of Cronon's essay focuses on "[i]dealizing a distant wilderness" which often means "not idealizing the environment in which we actually live" (Cronon 490). The contemporary notions and definitions of wilderness may lead some to think that "nature" can only occur or exist in "wilderness" but "wilderness" can occur in "humble places" close to home (Cronon 491). In contrast to this, and Tom Thomson, Horatio Walker, a more popular contemporary of Thomson's, chose to paint scenes of humans interacting with the environment instead. Perhaps they are nothing more than "maudlin nostalgia" (Frye 202), but they are seemingly safe and pastoral compared to the larger visions that Thomson's wilderness presents. Reverence of wilderness has reached a fetishistic level where people have adopted a "too high a standard" for defining "natural" (Cronon 492). Cronon argues that separating people from the natural world is more "likely to reinforce environmentally irresponsible behavior" (492).

If much of Cronon's arguments and analysis seem too depressing as he shatters the common and often deeply held illusions of wilderness for many North Americans, he tries to reconcile

disappointment into hope by imbuing "wonder" back into everyday nature experiences (493). He leaves the reader with instructions to try and learn to "honor the wild" instead of worshipping it, wherever it may occur (Cronon 495). Everyday self-conscious action and thought better helps the environment instead of pretending it only exists somewhere far away.

It's easy to take the concept of wilderness for granted as it is something that seems to have always existed, but is actually a fairly recent construct. Cronon methodically strips away the mystical shroud surrounding wilderness to challenge readers to reconsider this romanticized concept, often depicted in art and writing, and broaden their definitions of wilderness and nature.

Works Cited

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