7. THE ECOLOGICAL WILDERNESS

In the preceding chapters I have tried to outline the idea of wilderness as it appears in the Bible and the Christian tradition. Here the wilderness is ambiguous. On the one hand it is presented in negative terms as a place of despair, deprivation and terror. On the other hand it is the place above all where the transcendent God is made known to God's people, saves them, cares for them, leads and provides for them. But wilderness does not belong only to Christians; it is part of the common human heritage. In much contemporary art and literature the negative aspects of wilderness have predominated: there, only by plumbing the depths of negativity can regeneration perhaps be found.

A more positive, secular evaluation of wilderness also exists within our culture. I have called it 'secular' because it is not explicitly connected with the Christian worldview, although a Christian view of creation may have contributed to it. The dawning of awareness about our ecological crises has produced a widespread concern about the ecosystem and the damage we are doing to it, and has encouraged a positive valuation of pristine nature. Wilderness here does not connote the disorientating, shifting sands of the pure desert, but the whole natural world in all its complexity and fecundity, viewed as an entity apart from human culture. Our examination of this positive, secular wilderness begins in America.

7.1. Revaluing Wilderness: The American Roots of the Positive View

The concept of wilderness has a reality in the American consciousness which it often lacks in Britain. A 'Wilderness Area' in the United States has a

legal status as a place where, as far as possible, natural processes operate without interference from human beings. Of course even in America nature is affected by human activity, for example through atmospheric pollution, but its vast natural areas have a better claim to the title of wilderness than, say, the English countryside. In this connection the fact that America contains territory not affected, or even seen, by non-indigenous people until within living memory, is significant; the mapping of parts of Alaska took place as late as the 1930s.[1] Perry Miller writes of a continuing conflict between nature and western civilization in American self-understanding. He quotes from a New York journal of 1847 an artistic review which refers to the 'axe of civilization', destroying or disfiguring primeval hills, forests and lakes.[2] Such a perspective is one aspect of the American consciousness.

According to the philosopher Max Oelschlaeger, the American idea of wilderness owes its rise especially to Henry David Thoreau (1817-62). Oelschlaeger notes that Thoreau was influenced by the 'transcendentalist' Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-82). Emerson's 'nature philosophy' was 'rooted in an abstract idealism where wild nature is reduced to a mirror of the human mind, thereby facilitating the discovery of Absolute Spirit or God.'[3] Thoreau differs from Emerson and the other transcendentalists in questioning the sharp boundary between wilderness and civilization.[4] Through primal living

[1] McKibben 1990, 48-49.
[2] Review of an exhibition at the National Academy of 'Two exciting landscapes of Staten Island painted by J.F. Copsey', quoted from Miller 1956, 205-206.
[3] Oelschlaeger 1991, 179.
[4] Oelschlaeger 1991, 134-139.

he came close to 'a Paleolithic awareness of living life within nature.'[5] Indeed he asserted that the future of the world depended on wilderness. John Muir (1838-1914), who was instrumental in the development of the national parks movement in America, also saw wildness as a necessity for human wellbeing. He gradually abandoned belief in a transcendent God, instead seeing God as a wholly immanent presence in nature.[6] Oelschlaeger characterises his philosophy as 'evolutionary pantheism'.[7] Nor was his philosophy merely intellectual: during a 'Thousand-Mile Walk' in the wilderness he experienced a mystic integration with the whole of nature.[8]

Aldo Leopold (1887-1948), styled by Oelschlaeger 'the third giant of wilderness philosophy,[9] in his *Sand County Almanac* claimed that wilderness was a necessity, the 'ontic foundation underlying culture.'[10] Leopold's key principle is that 'a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.[11] Initially Leopold worked as a 'forest assistant'; he possessed a forestry degree from Yale University.[12] He became aware of the tensions around the ecological, ethical and aesthetic views of nature and wished to reconcile them.[13] Judith N. Scoville has pointed out that Leopold's understanding of the land as a community, in which humans were members alongside all other creatures, was central to his thought.[14]

[5] Oelschlaeger 1991, 158.
[6] Oelschlaeger 1991, 172-204.
[7] Oelschlaeger 1991, 173.
[8] Oelschlaeger 1991, 188.
[9] Oelschlaeger 1991, 205.
[10] Quoted in Oelschlaeger 1991, 220.
[11] Quoted in Oelschlaeger 1991, 238.
[12] Oelschlaeger 1991, 205,210.
[13] Oelschlaeger 1991, 207, 213.
[14] Scoville 2000.

7.2. British Attitudes to Wild Nature – a Historical Perspective

In the British countryside even the most apparently 'natural' areas have a history of human shaping, sometimes benign and sometimes destructive. The valuing of wild nature for itself is a relative newcomer to British culture in the modern age. The Greco-Roman tradition, imbibed by educated people until a century ago, regarded untamed nature as uncouth and dreadful.[15] Keith Thomas confirms that in England during the seventeenth century rugged and uncultivated countryside was generally regarded as repulsive, whereas an inhabited and cultivated landscape was thought beautiful.[16] Yet these attitudes were reversed by the end of the eighteenth century. Even during the later seventeenth century a growth of nature mysticism among theologians and philosophers had coincided with a growing general enjoyment of mountain air and mountain views. Thomas suggests that the main reason for this change of attitudes was a reaction to the development of English agriculture, with its regular plans and straight lines.[17]

The new tastes were fed by 'a torrent of published tours and guides to the beauties of England.'[18] The way was therefore well prepared for Wordsworth and the other Romantics of the nineteenth century. For them uncultivated nature was 'an indispensable spiritual resource.'[19] Open spaces were a symbol of human freedom. Thomas considers that the attractiveness of wilderness arose partly as a result of a degree of alienation from the

[15] Cf. Passmore 1980, 107-109.
[16] Thomas 1984, 254-258.
[17] Thomas 1984, 261-3.
[18] Thomas 1984, 266.
[19] Thomas 1984, 267.

dominant spirit of the age; it was also exacerbated by continued population growth.[20]

7.3. Deep Ecology

'Deep Ecology' regards wilderness as an ideal. It acknowledges a debt to various sources including eastern philosophy and native American traditions. The term 'deep ecology' was coined by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess in an article published in 1973.[21] His views have been explicated and developed by others.[22] At the heart of deep ecology is the conviction that the present crisis demands not merely the introduction of reforms and limits within the current social and political system, but a new consciousness and world view. I have argued elsewhere that, while the radical approach of Deep Ecology is deeply attractive, its philosophical basis presents insuperable problems for Christians.[23]

Professor Barry Richardson agrees with Deep Ecology that extensive wilderness areas are necessary to maintain biodiversity and enable evolution to progress. He also regards the existence of untamed places, such as mountains and seacoasts, as essential for the maintenance of human identity. But in a move that is consistent with a Christian approach to non-human nature he argues for the application to other species of ‘enabling’ love, rather than seeking fusion with it as Deep Ecology does.[24]

[20] Thomas 1984, 268.
[21] Naess 1973, referred to by Devall and Sessions 1985.
[22] Devall and Sessions 1985; Sessions 1995.
[23] Innes 2007.
[24] Richardson 2003.

7.4. Environmentalism

Definitely distinct from Deep Ecology is 'shallow', reformist environmentalism which seeks merely to mitigate the damage caused to species and ecosystems by the prevailing, western worldview. Environmentalism clashes less sharply than Deep Ecology with the prevailing worldview which sees the riches of the natural world as 'resources' to be 'managed'. It is exemplified in Britain by organisations such as the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and the Wildlife Trusts, which purchase land for nature reserves, and campaign for better legislation and democratic action to secure favourable conditions for the flourishing of natural species. None can dispute the local success of some of these actions, but some critics would argue that they do not go far enough, and will be found in the end to have been merely a rearguard action of limited overall effectiveness.

7.5. The Green Movement

The contemporary Green movement spans the whole spectrum of ‘greenery’, from mild environmentalism to radical deep ecology. Popular ecological concern builds on scientific discoveries of the damage wrought and threatened against the whole natural world by modern industry and consumption. In the nineteen seventies The Club of Rome's *The Limits to Growth* sought to show the finiteness of the earth's 'resources' by means of a computer model;[25] two later volumes, published in 1992 and 2005, have found that the ecological limits to sustainable human activity have already been overshot.[26] As early as 1983 Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*

[25] Meadows *et al.* 1974.
[26] Meadows et al. 1992; Meadows et al. 2005.

demonstrated the harm done to natural species by artificial substances such as DDT.[27] More recently the damage to the stratospheric ozone layer, and the likely effects of global warming, have been accepted by all but a tiny minority of scientists. The Rio Earth Summit of 1992 brought to the consciousness of a growing number of people the value of *biodiversity* and the threat of extinction faced by growing numbers of species because of human activities. The 2002 Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development sought to unify concerns about ecology with considerations of world development.

From an ecological point of view the achievements of these conferences were limited. Nevertheless they served to underline the value of wild areas as a gene pool for the relief of species threatened by disease (hence as a possible remedy for famine), and as the habitat of threatened creatures. Wilderness areas are still threatened. For instance concern has been expressed that vast areas of Russia, previously set aside exclusively for scientific study, may be opened to tourism and industrial exploitation.[28]

7.6. A Christian View of Ecology

Relating responsibly to wild nature is an obligation for those who claim to belong to God who created it, and us as part of it, and who loves all that God has made, even to the extent of coming in the person of Jesus Christ to make possible its rescue from pollution and loss. Although I have no supporting statistics, I think it likely that many Christians belong to reformist environmental organisations and favour their aims. The Evangelical

[27] Carson 1983.

[28] *The Ecologist* 33:1 (February 2003)

organisation A Rocha has as its secondary title Christians in Conservation. Christians of a more radical bent are attracted to many features of deep ecology: for example, many would argue that the basic mindset and worldview of our consumption-driven society in itself militates against giving a high value to unhumanised wild places; when those in authority speak of striking a balance between economic and ecological interests, we may suspect that the economics will usually win when a conflict occurs. Christians, their ears ringing with their Master's warning that serving money and God are incompatible,[29] ought to be in the forefront of those who question the assumptions of large-scale capitalism. The Bible and Christian tradition contain a pronounced strand in favour of simplicity of living and modest consumption, which sits comfortably with the ecological ideal of 'living lightly on the earth', leaving as slight an ecological 'footprint' as possible.[30]

Andrew Linzey writes in *Animal Gospel* of the importance of the doctrine of the Fall, and the future redemption of all creation.[31] He thinks that Christian ethics must be 'eschatological' - informed by a belief in the final completion of God's work in the messianic kingdom.[32] The Bible speaks of the coming new heaven and new earth to be created by God in the Last Age.[33] What

[29] Matt 6:24.
[30] The term 'ecological footprint' is used by Mathis Wackernagel and his colleagues to denote the demand made by humanity on the earth's resources. Cited in Meadows et al. 2005, xiv.
[31] Linzey 1998, 33-34.
[32] Ibid., 17-19
[33] Isa 66:22-23; 2 Pet 3:13; Rev 21-22.

form the fulfilment of this promise will take is beyond our knowledge. We may expect that it will include the end of the conflict, predation and waste which are necessary to the present form of creation.[34]

My submission is that a sufficiently radical Christianity is the best and truest route to the necessary change. A belief in God's deep love for us and all creation, and the power of the Cross and Resurrection of Christ to change and redeem us and all things, will transform us and our surroundings if followed through in practical ways; a genuine love for God and for all that God has made, will lead us to minimise our disturbance of natural processes, respect natural fauna and flora, and value wildness.

[34] See Isa 11, Rom 8:18-22.