

Savage Sagebrush and Christian Orchards: Reassessing Wilderness and Civilization on the Harriman Alaska Expedition

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Introduction

In Seattle on May 31, 1899, 126 members of the Harriman Expedition boarded the *George W. Elder*, a luxury steamer bound for the Alaskan wilderness. Railroad tycoon Edward Harriman had organized the expedition after his doctor ordered him to take a vacation. Half of the party were hired sailors, while the rest included Harriman's family and preeminent scholars from universities, museums, and the government. With twenty-five scientists, three artists, two photographers, two taxidermists, and two stenographers, the group stimulated curiosity and intellectual discussion. Two months later, having explored the Alaskan coast, the Aleutian Islands, and the eastern tip of Siberia (Figure 1), the expedition returned. It had collected numerous fossils and Indian artifacts; painted and photographed the landscape, Alaskan Natives, and Siberians; and discovered a fjord, several glaciers, more than fifty genera, and almost six hundred species of plants and animals.¹ Over the next twelve years, with Harriman's sponsorship, expedition member C. Hart Merriam published the scientific and ethnographical findings in a thirteen-volume collection titled *Alaska*.²

The present obscurity of the Harriman Alaska Expedition is understandable. Leaving aside its scientific achievements and galvanization of Theodore Roosevelt to preserve the Alaskan wild, the expedition was not a dramatic historical event. It neither instigated international conflict, nor changed most of its participants' worldviews.³ The few historians who have written about it often assume that the members paid little attention to their society's destructiveness.⁴ However, writings and photographs from the expedition imply the opposite. They constitute a deeply conflicted reassessment of the meanings of wilderness and civilization in a post-frontier America. At the end of the pioneer era and the height of industrialization, the members of the expedition came face-to-face with their country's last large-

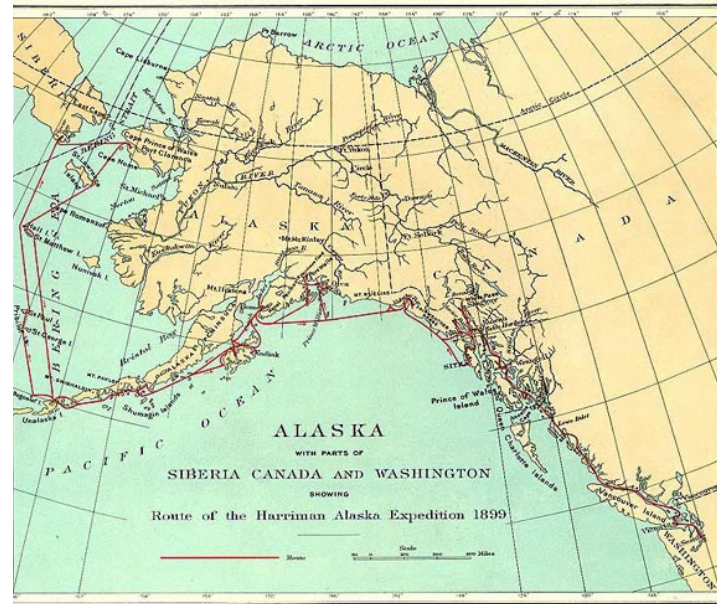


Figure 1. "Alaska with Parts of Siberia Canada and Washington Showing Route of the Harriman Alaska Expedition 1899," by Henry Gannett and the U.S. Geological Survey, c. 1899. The red line marks the route of the expedition. Courtesy of Library of Congress.

ly untouched territory. Their perceptions of it stemmed from an expansionist, Romantic, and Social Darwinist intellectual heritage striving to adapt to a post-frontier reality.

For many educated Americans in 1899, the words wilderness and civilization suggested both natural settings and human societies. Wilderness connoted an unimproved landscape, and it was also inseparable from popular notions of human "savagery." Similarly, civilization brought to mind images of a garden-like countryside just as often as it referred to a complex social configuration. Both entities contained an ambiguous mix of merits and shortcomings, and each was considered necessary for the survival and fulfillment of the other.⁵ Moreover, people were coming to regard savagery as an institution parallel, if not equal, to civilization. As ethnologist John Wesley Powell wrote in an 1878 government report, "Savagery is not inchoate civilization; it is a distinct status of society with its own institu-

1 William H. Goetzmann and Kay Sloan, *Looking Far North: The Harriman Expedition to Alaska, 1899* (New York: Viking, 1982), xiv, 3-5, 193, 200, 207.

2 Edward Henry Harriman, *Alaska* (New York: Doubleday, 1901).

3 Douglas Brinkley, *The Wilderness Warrior: Theodore Roosevelt and the Crusade for America, 1899* (New York: Viking, 1982), 385, 469-470; Goetzmann and Sloan, *Looking Far North*, xiv, xvii.

4 See Goetzmann and Sloan, *Looking Far North*, xii-xiii; also see Aaron Sachs, *The Humboldt Current: Nineteenth-Century Exploration and the Roots of American Environmentalism* (New York: Viking, 2006), 337.

5 Frederick J. Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (New York: Readex Microprint, 1947), 224; Gifford Pinchot, *The Fight for Conservation* (New York: Doubleday, 1910), 3-4.

tions, customs, philosophies, and religion.”⁶ Powell was not the only American at the time to voice a growing appreciation for the cultural richness of “savage” (i.e. Native) societies. At least among the American elite, there was a growing awareness that wilderness and civilization were not manifestations of a battle between devilry and godliness.^{78*}

Most historians who discuss nineteenth-century American perceptions of wilderness and civilization offer a narrow understanding of those opinions. Some focus exclusively on environmentalism, while others study the perspectives solely in the context of their relation to national heritage. However, it is impossible to fully grasp the Harriman Expedition members’ views on wilderness and civilization without exploring nineteenth-century concern for both nature and society, and for both the country’s past and future. This essay will attempt to synthesize the existing historiography in order to render more completely the tension and complexity of the expedition members’ ideas. Analyzing the work of the Harriman Expedition sheds light on the ideological trends that had hitherto shaped the United States and would propel it into the twentieth century.

The Harriman Expedition is worthy of study, because as employees of redoubtable institutions of learning and governance, its participants expressed ideas (often unconsciously) that either were or would become commonplace in American society. This paper will focus on the work of four expedition members who shaped public opinion and policy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: the naturalist John Burroughs, the conservationist and ethnologist George Bird Grinnell, the preservationist John Muir, and the photographer Edward Curtis.^{9*} Because their private writings from the expedition are archival, and therefore not easily accessible to undergraduate researchers, most of the primary sources in this essay will be drawn from edited or published materials. Granted, the edits made to these works risk obscuring their creators’ true opinions. The result, however, is that the material can reveal which ideas were deemed relatively uncontroversial and therefore palatable for an elite readership. This essay will also engage with

Curtis’ *The North American Indian*, a twenty-volume work published between 1907 and 1930 that included photographs of Natives, historical information, and tribal legends. Though Curtis’ views no doubt evolved after the Harriman Expedition returned in 1899, his experiences on the voyage contributed to the opinions he voiced in the collection. Grinnell, whom he befriended in Alaska, likely fueled his interest in the Natives, and the ideas embodied in Curtis’ expedition photographs resemble those of his later work. Thus, the expedition members’ writings and photographs reveal the disparate takes on wilderness and civilization that circulated on the decks of the *Elder* and within an influential segment of American society.

This essay will explore three nineteenth-century intellectual trends that influenced the Harriman Expedition. First, it will examine the expedition members’ expansionist conception of the utility of wilderness and their faith in civilization. It will then analyze the participants’ Romantic reverence for wilderness and troubled acknowledgement of civilization’s harmfulness. Finally, the paper will explore the men’s complex Social Darwinist view of the inevitable subjugation of wilderness and the fragility of civilization. The expedition members’ conflicted perspectives shed light on their uncertainty in confronting a rapidly changing national landscape. As they explored the glaciers and villages of Alaska, they struggled to comprehend their proper relationship with America’s natural and cultural features in the wake of the frontier.

The Expansionist Perspective

The Harriman Expedition occurred at the end of an age of pioneers, Indian wars, and unchecked industrialization. The Census of 1890 had declared the frontier officially closed, concluding nearly three centuries of white expansion across the continent. That same year, the massacre of hundreds of unarmed Lakota at Wounded Knee had subdued Indian resistance to American policies.¹⁰ In 1893, the historian Frederick Jackson Turner presented his Frontier Thesis, which argued that American democracy had relied on a continuously receding frontier — now gone — in which industrial civilization evolved from hunter-gatherer “savagery.” Turner concluded his influential essay with the prediction that although the West was no longer wilderness, the United States would “continue to demand a wider field for its exercise.”¹¹ To all extents and purposes, the continental frontier had passed.

Even so, in 1899 the desire to dominate the West and its soils was not yet extinguished.¹² Buffalo Bill still toured the country to wide acclaim, portraying Indians as violent and

6 Department of the Interior, J.W. Powell, “Report on the Methods of Surveying the Public Domain to the Secretary of the Interior, at the Request of the National Academy of Sciences” (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1878), 15, <https://ia700809.us.archive.org/30/items/reportonmethodso00geog/reportonmethodso00geog.pdf>.

7 Lee Clark Mitchell, *Witnesses to a Vanishing America: The Nineteenth Century Response* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), xiii-xiv.

8 * Due to the fluid connotations of wilderness and civilization, for clarity’s sake this essay will use the terms when referring to combinations of natural and social characteristics and not to those characteristics seen separately.

9 ** Conservationists believed that land and resources should be saved for long-term human use. Preservationists believed that the wilderness should be left untouched for aesthetic or quasi-spiritual reasons. (National Park Service, “Conservation vs Preservation and the National Park Service,” accessed April 29, 2014, <http://www.nps.gov/klgo/forteachers/classrooms/conservation-vs-preservation.htm>.)

10 Lori Liggett, “The Wounded Knee Massacre, December 29, 1890, An Introduction,” *1890’s America: A Chronology*, accessed April 29, 2014, http://clio.missouristate.edu/lburt/Resources510/WoundedKnee_2.htm.

11 Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier,” 227.

12 Mitchell, *Vanishing America*, 223.

sub-human.¹³ The wilderness's beauty could not mask its dangers, and most Americans considered industrialized, Christian society to be the wave of the future.¹⁴ As Richard Judd explains, this line of thinking reached back to the earliest days of American settlement, when colonists prized nature for its utility and regarded Indians with contempt. Until the Romantic era (roughly 1830-1860), most Americans believed that the land existed for the sole purpose of being tilled. In their view, untamed land was inherently corrupt, and humans completed the natural order by transforming wilderness into civilization.¹⁵ Thus, as the agent of agrarian republicanism and the pastoral ideal, the farmer enjoyed an exalted status in the expansionist national consciousness.¹⁶ Indians, on the other hand, were thought to lack both the will and the ability to cultivate the land.¹⁷ Judd writes that their seeming inseparability from the degenerate wilderness meant that they had internalized nature's depravity. The idea that wilderness cultivated barbaric savagery in its inhabitants remained potent well into the nineteenth-century.¹⁸ Americans, after all, were still settling a frontier under harsh and hostile conditions. As late as 1893, three years after the frontier had officially closed, Frederick Jackson Turner referred to nature's power over humans in his *Frontier Thesis*: "The wilderness masters the colonist...at the frontier the environment is at first too strong for the man."¹⁹ Many of Turner's contemporaries agreed. Like him, they embraced an expansionist intellectual heritage that considered wilderness to be a perilous commodity with practical value. Commoditizing wilderness necessarily designated civilization as its master.

The utility of nature was never far from the minds of the members of the Harriman Expedition. Though awed by the landscape, most of the scientists were preoccupied with plumbing Alaska's economic possibilities. W. B. Devereux was most interested in mining technologies that could help Americans access Alaska's mineral deposits. Bernhard E. Fernow investigated the region's lumbering potential. Ornithologist A. K. Fisher, to quote William Goetzmann and Kay Sloan, "was downright belligerent in his search for birds" to kill and study for the advancement of science. Edward Harriman, though hell-bent on shooting a Kodiak bear, was no less interested in Alaska's resources. In fact, he seems to have flirted with the idea of building a railroad line around the world. He may have used the expedition to determine whether building a railroad un-

derneath the Bering Strait from Alaska to Siberia was feasible.²⁰ Evidently, he decided it was not.

Utility was certainly at the core of George Bird Grinnell's agenda. Unlike many of his shipmates, however, he viewed the usefulness of nature through a conservationist lens. Grinnell was the editor of the sportsmen's magazine *Forest and Stream*, a co-founder with Theodore Roosevelt of the conservationist Boone and Crocket Club, the founder of the Audubon Society, and an expert on Indians. Following his death, the *New York Times* hailed him as "the father of American conservation."²¹ Richard Levine makes clear that Grinnell was not a romantic preservationist — that is, he was usually unconcerned with protecting nature for its own sake. Like his close conservationist friend and associate Gifford Pinchot, he held that nature should be used sparingly so as to ensure the survival and economic success of Americans in both the present and the future.²²

Even when Grinnell advocated leaving land untouched, he maintained that the total lack of exploitation would be the "highest possible use" of the area.²³ In his essay "The Salmon Industry," published in 1901, Grinnell decried the overfishing and wasteful canneries that were decimating Alaska's salmon populations. He warned that devastating the supply of fish would cause the canning industries to fail. According to Grinnell, canning industries worked "in a most wasteful and thoughtlessly selfish way, grasping for everything that is within their reach and thinking nothing of the future." Bankruptcy would ruin Alaska's prosperity and spell untold suffering for the people thrown out of work. Grinnell may have worried that they would meet the same fate as the luckless gold rushers who had flocked to Alaska and now lived with barely enough income to stay alive. What was worse, the canneries infringed upon Alaska Natives' fishing rights and destroyed the Indians' main source of food.²⁴ Grinnell wanted to save the salmon not because he thought they were aesthetically pleasing or that all life was sacred, but because he considered them essential to American prosperity and Native survival. Like the settlers and pioneers, Grinnell maintained that nature's primary purpose was to benefit humankind. He regarded the land as a commodity and thereby espoused the unsentimental pragmatism inherent in an expansionist understanding of wilderness.

Unlike Grinnell, expedition historian John Burroughs had mixed feelings about the natural component of wilderness. More ideologically transcendentalist than Grinnell, but less so than John Muir, the white-bearded naturalist had spent much

13 David Hamilton Murdoch, *The American West: The Invention of a Myth* (Wales: Welsh Academic Press, 2001), 42.

14 Mitchell, *Vanishing America*, 14-15, 217-219.

15 Richard W. Judd, *The Untilled Garden: Natural History and the Spirit of Conservation in America, 1740-1840*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 43, 47-48, 46, 12, 18, 182.

16 Kaye Adkins, "Serpents and Sheep: The Harriman Expedition, Alaska, and the Metaphoric Reconstruction of American Wilderness," *Technical Communication Quarterly* 12, no. 4 (Fall 2003): 429-430; Judd, *Untilled Garden*, 12.

17 Mitchell, *Vanishing America*, 16.

18 Judd, *Untilled Garden*, 47-48, 220.

19 Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier," 201.

20 Goetzmann and Sloan, *Looking Far North*, xiv-xv, 8.

21 Brinkley, *The Wilderness Warrior*, 186, 202-204.

22 Richard Levine, "Indians, Conservation, and George Bird Grinnell," *American Studies* 28, no. 2 (Fall 1987): 44, *Mid-America American Studies Association*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40642210>; Pinchot, *The Fight for Conservation*, 3-4.

23 Levine, "Indians, Conservation, and George Bird Grinnell," 45.

24 George Bird Grinnell, "The Salmon Industry" in *Alaska 1899: Essays from the Harriman Expedition* (Korea: University of Washington Press, 1995), 343, 345-346, 348.



Figure 2. "At Frazer Reach, British Columbia," photograph by Edward S. Curtis, c. 1899. Dark mountains loom under a stormy sky, evidence of nature's fearsome power. Courtesy of University of Washington Digital Collections.

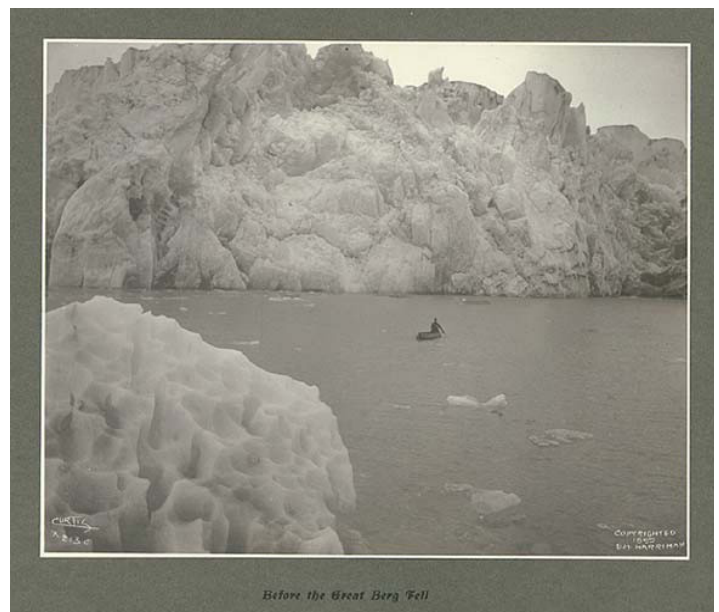


Figure 3. "Before the Great Berg Fell," photograph by Edward S. Curtis, c. 1899. A stark representation of the tenuousness of human existence. Courtesy of University of Washington Digital Collections.

of his life wandering through the green and subdued north-eastern landscape, and his nature books enjoyed a solid readership.²⁵ Despite his love of the outdoors, Burroughs had one foot firmly planted in civilization. Gazing out the window of Harriman's luxury Pullman car as it chugged toward Seattle, Burroughs "rejoiced in the endless vistas of beautiful fertile farms" that stretched across the prairie. The land's attractiveness lay not in the "picturesque," but in "the beauty of utility." In Idaho, an admiring Burroughs noted that the farmers' irrigation techniques "made the desert bloom as the rose."²⁶ Agriculture in arid regions deepened the connection between God and man. "Here," reflected the old naturalist, "may the dwellers well say with the Psalmist, 'I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help.'"²⁷ Like the pioneers, Burroughs compared the cultivation of land to a sacred duty: "Baptize the savage sagebrush plain with water and it becomes a christian [*sic*] orchard and wheat field." Baptism by irrigation "clothed" the wild earth in an appropriate suit of green.²⁸ For Burroughs, farmers were missionaries to the wilderness, transforming it into a pastoral civilization. In accordance with the expansionist perspective, the naturalist considered wilderness to be insufficient to man's needs and, to a certain extent, immoral. Civilizing it was a noble work.

Burroughs found some aspects of the western wilderness to be strangely repellent. To a certain extent, he seems to have

believed that nature could physically and spiritually imperil humans. He was struck by the poverty he witnessed west of the fertile Great Plains. "Forlorn" families dwelled in "pitiful" and "rude" homes against a backdrop of "bare, brown, and forbidding" mountains.²⁹ There, the wilderness appeared to be much stronger than civilization. Whereas Turner exuberantly thought that "[stripping] off the garments of civilization" was temporary and facilitated the "most rapid and effective Americanization," Burroughs recoiled from it.³⁰ In his view, living in a non-pastoral wilderness and being removed from civilization could cause untold misery. The dilapidated farmhouses of the West affected him "like a nightmare."³¹

Danger aside, the sheer majesty of the western landscape terrified Burroughs. Kaye Adkins notes that the naturalist often used violent language and death imagery to describe the wilderness.³² West of Wyoming, the land was "raw, turbulent, forbidding, almost chaotic." Utah's Badlands were "flayed alive," "gashed," and "red as butcher's meat," and the Price River was a "red and angry torrent."³³ Alaska was still more daunting. The sea alone was enough to cow anyone; Burroughs spent much of his time aboard the satirically nicknamed "*George W. Roller*" heaving in his cabin.³⁴ His forays above deck and on land, however, gave him ample opportunity to gape at Alaska's overbearing grandeur. At the gorge at White Pass "it was appalling to look up as to look down; chaos and death below us, impending avalanches of hanging rocks above

25 Goetzmann and Sloan, *Looking Far North*, 11.

26 John Burroughs, "Narrative of the Expedition," in *Narrative, Glaciers, Natives* vol. 1 *Alaska*, ed. C. Hart Merriam, (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1901), 1-2, 12.

27 Burroughs, "Narrative," 13.

28 Burroughs, "Narrative," 13.

29 Burroughs, "Narrative," 3.

30 Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier," 201. Burroughs, "Narrative," 3.

31 Burroughs, "Narrative," 3.

32 Adkins, "Serpents and Sheep," 425-426.

33 Burroughs, "Narrative," 4-6.

34 Goetzmann and Sloan, *Looking Far North*, 33.

us. How elemental and cataclysmal it all looked!" Muir Glacier was "ridged and contorted like an angry sea," while the Serpentine Glacier was "a great white serpent with its jaws set with glittering fangs." Burroughs' one favorable remark about Alaskan glaciers — that they were "Muir's mountain sheep" — did not compliment their wildness, but connected them with images of pastoral utility.³⁵ Burroughs had inherited an expansionist heritage that regarded wilderness as a primordial, satanic obstacle to human progress, and civilization as a divinely sanctioned conqueror. He believed that through cultivation, nature could shed its dangerous depravity, merge with civilization, and attain idyllic beauty. The naturalist surveyed the untilled western landscape with the same fear that many frontiersmen must have felt upon seeing the daunting expanse for the first time.

Like Burroughs, Edward Curtis was keenly aware of the menace of the wilderness. By contrast, however, the young photographer found it aesthetically appealing. Having spent most of his career photographing Seattle socialites, Curtis must have been elated at the opportunity to document the Alaskan wilderness under the uncanny midnight sun.³⁶ According to Aaron Sachs, his photographs are the most stirring and insightful of all the work produced on the Harriman Expedition. The historian rightly notes that they convey the power and harshness of nature, the tenuousness and perseverance of humanity, and the beauty of both. Sachs goes so far as to suggest that Curtis "rescued the Harriman Expedition" from a general lack of conscious introspection on the impact of American expansion.³⁷ Dark, looming mountains and turbulent skies frequently appear in Curtis' photographs of Alaska (Figure 2).³⁸ In a stroke of genius, he often juxtaposed striking landscapes with man (Figure 3), speaking to the fragility of human life within vast and uncontrollable spaces.³⁹ This theme would feature time and again in his later work with American Indians (Figure 4).⁴⁰ Curtis's photographs depart from the expansionist view of nature as commodity, but they conform to the pioneer perspective by portraying the wild as formidable. They indicate that at a time when fewer Americans were experiencing the harsh realities of pioneer life, the expansionist fear of wilderness was still prevalent.

The expedition members exhibited an expansionist atti-

tude not only toward nature, but also toward the Natives. As had the colonial and pioneer missionaries who preceded them, they generally held that it was in the Natives' best interest to assimilate into Christian, Euro-American culture. In this respect, the expedition members were typical of most other Americans at the turn of the twentieth century. One contemporary children's book, *A Peep at Buffalo Bill's Wild West*, hammered the idea of white superiority into the heads of its young readers: "And though some in the red men's homes may long/For wars that will never cease,/There are others we know who would gladly go/With the white men and be at peace."⁴¹ Many late-nineteenth-century Americans still regarded the Natives as backward and undisciplined. White society generally maintained that peace would elude Indians unless they abandoned their allegedly savage ways.

Not even Curtis was immune to this expansionist outlook. It is true that he was experienced and open-minded enough to recognize that a Euro-American lifestyle was not necessarily more ethical or fulfilling than were Native cultures. He regarded "Indianness" not simply as a race, but as a way of life that had evolved over time to enable Natives to thrive in a "harsh environment."⁴² Nonetheless, in *The North American Indian* he wrote that the Natives, with their "deep-rooted superstition, conservatism, and secretiveness" would inevitably fall before white civilization. The two societ-

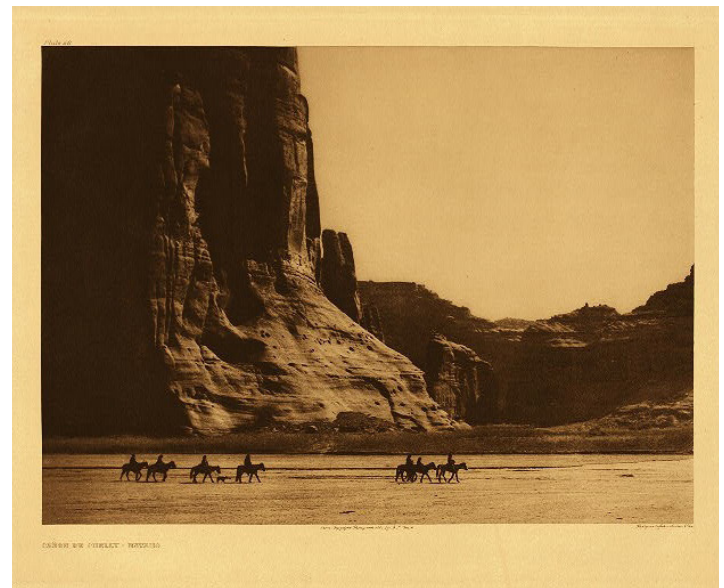


Figure 4. "Cañon de Chelly – Navaho," photograph by Edward S. Curtis, c. 1904. Navaho Indians on horseback are dwarfed by the imposing canyon wall. Courtesy of Northwestern University Digital Library Collections.

35 Burroughs, "Narrative," 32, 43, 72, 28.

36 Goetzmann and Sloan, *Looking Far North*, 29, 51.

37 Sachs, *The Humboldt Current*, 337.

38 Edward S. Curtis, "At Frazer Reach, British Columbia" in *New York to Cook Inlet* vol. 1 *A Souvenir of the Harriman Alaska Expedition, May – August, 1899*, 14, accessed March 3, 2014, <https://content.lib.washington.edu/u/?harriman,13>.

39 Edward S. Curtis, "Before the Great Berg Fell" in *New York to Cook Inlet* vol. 1 *A Souvenir of the Harriman Alaska Expedition, May – August, 1899*, 14, accessed March 3, 2014, <https://content.lib.washington.edu/u/?harriman,35>.

40 Edward S. Curtis, "Cañon de Chelly – Navaho" in *The Apache. The Jicarillas. The Navaho* vol.1 *The North American Indian*, ed. Frederick Webb Hodge (Cambridge, USA: University Press, 1907), plate no. 28, accessed March 3, 2014, <http://digital.library.northwestern.edu/curtis/>.

41 "A Peep at Buffalo Bill's Wild West," (McLoughlin Brothers, 1887), 12, accessed March 3, 2014, http://www.childrenslibrary.org/icdl/BookReader?bookid=__peep_00361524&twoPage=false&route=advanced&size=0&fullscreen=false&pnum=1&lang=English&ilang=English.

42 Edward Curtis, introduction to *The Teton Sioux. The Yanktonai. The Assiniboin*. in *The North American Indian*, ed. Frederick Webb Hodge (Cambridge, USA: University Press, 1908), 3: xi, accessed March 3, 2014, <http://curtis.library.northwestern.edu/>.

ies were so different that “to the workaday man of our own race the life of the Indian is just as incomprehensible as are the complexities of civilization to the mind of the untutored savage.”⁴³ Considering that Curtis wrote these words after living with Indians for nearly a decade, it is probable that he espoused even more racist views while on the Harriman Expedition. Almost ten years after the voyage, his writings betrayed his expansionist intellectual heritage. In them, he conveyed a conviction that “savagery” was weaker than “civilization” and destined to fail.

The Harriman Expedition most clearly expressed an expansionist view of Indians in their description of a Sunday visit to New Metlakahla, a colony of Christian Indians under the ministerial direction of William Duncan. Assuming that even small amounts of alcohol would destroy the Natives, Duncan had moved his congregation from the mainland to Annette Island, where the Episcopal Church could not force him to use wine during his services. To protect the Indians from the debauchery of gold prospectors, he usually did not allow other white people on the island; visiting it was a rare privilege. New Metlakahla was a religious and capitalist experiment. It contained a church, a town hall, a school, sawmills, and salmon canneries, resembling, in Grinnell’s view, “an old-fashioned New England hamlet in its peaceful quiet.”⁴⁴

Even the expedition members who appreciated Native cultures were deeply impressed with Duncan’s accomplishments. Grinnell commended the minister on transforming the Indians from “the wild men that they were...to the respectable and civilized people that they are now.” Burroughs thought that New Metlakahla was “one of the best object lessons to be found on the coast, showing what can be done with the Alaska Indians.” He observed that the Indians were dressed like rural north-eastern Americans and arrived at church “tastefully clad.” Under the minister’s “wonderful tutelage,” the Indians “had been brought from a low state of savagery to a really fair state of industrial civilization.” Burroughs entertained no doubts as to which society was superior. The praise he lavished on the New Metlakahla Natives was directed less at them than at the Euro-American civilization to which they had conformed. In Burroughs’ view, a white man had taught the “childish” Indians the true path; he was the master, they the docile disciples. This attitude was expansionist to the core. It asserted the enlightenment of white civilization and condescendingly maintained that with stern care, “savage” societies could approach such heights.

As much as Burroughs commended Duncan for Christianizing the New Metlakahla Indians, the naturalist also approved of the Natives’ willingness to accept the change in their lifestyle. The Alaskan Natives, wrote Burroughs, appeared more willing to integrate white habits and industrialism into their way of life than were the mainland Indians. The aging natural-

ist noted that they had lighter skin and “none of that look as of rocks and mountains, austere and relentless, that our Indians have.” For Burroughs, Indians were of the “rocks and mountains” just as sagebrush was “savage” and orchards “christian [sic].”⁴⁵ These characterizations illuminate the ways in which nature and humanity were linked in a late-nineteenth-century elite worldview. Wilderness was understood to be a way of life. Unless conquered, nature would lodge itself within man, making him “savage” and “wild.” They would live together in a symbiotic relationship that, to most white Americans was exotic, yet unsatisfactory in its “primitiveness.” In his introduction to the first volume of *The North American Indian* Curtis wrote, “The word-story of this primitive life, like the pictures, must be drawn direct from Nature...It is thus near to Nature that much of the life of the Indian still is...”⁴⁶ By contrast, civilization was Christian, industrialized, and capitalist. Its complexities often signified advancement and progress, and its very existence depended on exploiting, rather than coexisting with nature.

The Harriman Expedition members’ expansionist intellectual heritage — that is, their love of utility, fear of the wilderness, and disdain for “savagery” — was just one facet of their complex views on wilderness and civilization. In addition to expansionist beliefs, the Harriman Expedition inherited a boisterous Romantic tradition. Many of the members were conscious of the sublimity of the western landscape and the perceived admirable qualities of “savagery.” Accordingly, they were also cognizant of civilization’s darker side. They questioned what it meant to be civilized and even doubted that Euro-American society was worthy of the term.

The Romantic Perspective

The Romantic conception of wilderness and civilization was a complex fusion of pioneer and post-frontier ideology. On the one hand, the years between the 1830s and the 1860s were perhaps the apex of American expansionism; these decades witnessed the Mexican War, the creation of the term “Manifest Destiny,” and the annexation of Alaska and all the territory from Texas to Oregon Country into the United States. To a certain extent, Americans still regarded the wilderness as something to be distrusted and exploited. They believed that the pioneers who cultivated the earth were completing a divinely mandated natural order.⁴⁷ On the other hand, this period also saw the stirrings of preservationist and anti-imperialist sentiment. The Industrial Revolution was in full swing. Smokestacks belched sooty clouds that settled in a haze over increasingly crowded and unhealthy cities.⁴⁸ Outside urban centers, overhunting reduced animal populations to shadows of what

43 Curtis, introduction to *The Apache. The Jicarillas. The Navaho.*, xiii-xv.

44 Goetzmann and Sloan, *Looking Far North*, 38-43. George Bird Grinnell, “The Natives of the Alaska Coast Region,” in *Narrative, Glaciers, Natives* vol. 1 *Alaska*, ed. C. Hart Merriam (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1901), 155.

45 Burroughs, “Narrative,” 24-26, 13.

46 Curtis, introduction to *The Apache. The Jicarillas. The Navaho.*, xiv.

47 Judd, *Untilled Garden*, 182, 220.

48 Robert E. Bieder, “From Thoreau to Muir: Changes in Nineteenth-Century American Conceptions of the Environment,” *Americana* 7, no. 2 (September 1, 2011).



Figure 5. "The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak," painted by Albert Bierstadt, c. 1863. A sentimentalized scene of peaceful "savages" harmoniously living in a pristine, majestic landscape. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

they once were. Many Americans regarded these changes with unease.⁴⁹

The disturbing effects of technology and national progress softened the prevailing view of wilderness.⁵⁰ Richard Judd explains that nature came to be valued not just as a commodity, but also as a spiritual force that benefited humans even in its untilled state. All of its components were thought to be connected in accordance with a divine plan that gave them a rational and moral quality. According to Judd, the idea that the pioneer and industrialist movements were desecrating God's handiwork filled many Romantics with anxiety. They began to see civilization as corrupt and the wilderness as simple and pure.⁵¹ In their view, the wilderness had the power to rejuvenate Americans both individually and collectively. Mary Lawlor suggests that this notion served to justify westward expansion, and, indeed, her theory is borne out in Turner's Frontier Thesis.⁵² In the thesis, Turner quotes a delegate of Virginia's 1830 constitutional convention on the regenerative powers of the wilderness and its ability to improve even politicians: "This gives [the statesman] bone and muscle...and preserves

his republican principles pure and uncontaminated."⁵³ The Romantic perception of nature undoubtedly influenced Turner's belief in the necessity of wilderness for American progress and democracy. Even so, the same conception of a regenerative wilderness that appears in Turner's work is also present in Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, the preeminent paean to the divinity of nature. In Judd's opinion, the growing appreciation for nature's beauty led to a desire for harmonious existence with the land that laid the groundwork for preservationism.⁵⁴

The shift in opinion regarding nature also applied to Romantic views of the Natives. Since the Indians were considered inseparable from the natural wilderness, some Americans began to believe that they embodied its "primitive virtue."⁵⁵ "Savagery" came to be seen as simpler and more ethical than white society. Of the displacement of the Sioux, Mary Eastman wrote in 1849, "We should be better reconciled with this manifest destiny of the aborigines, if the inroads of civilizations were worthy of it."⁵⁶ Thoreau expressed similar sentiments a decade

49 Judd, *Untilled Garden*, 212-213, 240.

50 Mitchell, *Vanishing America*, 11.

51 Judd, *Untilled Garden*, 183-184, 202-204, 208, 212-213, 247-248, 46.

52 Lawlor, *Recalling the Wild*, 18-19.

53 Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier," 222-223.

54 Judd, *Untilled Garden*, 244, 247-248.

55 Judd, *Untilled Garden*, 46.

56 Mary H. Eastman, *Dahcotah; or, Life and Legends of the Sioux Around Fort Snelling* (Minneapolis: Ross and Haines, 1962), xvi, quoted in Mitchell, *Vanishing America*, 126.

later, observing, "I have much to learn of the Indian, nothing of the missionary."⁵⁷ Before and after the Civil War, Romantic painters created sentimental images of Native life before its perceived contamination through white encroachment.⁵⁸ In 1863, Albert Bierstadt produced his famous work "They Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak," an idealized depiction of an Indian tribe camping tranquilly in an unadulterated landscape (Figure 5). In the painting, the Natives are living off the land, but they are also living with it. Some are returning from a successful hunting trip, while others sit by the shores of a lake, admiring a waterfall and being watched, in turn, by a prairie dog. Saddle-less horses graze and dogs prance the meadow. The shapes of the tepees mirror those of the jagged mountains in the background, bathed in heavenly light.⁵⁹ Bierstadt's painting portrays nature as sublime, even godly, and the Indians as a serene and integral component of the landscape. The Romantic conception of the wilderness that he espoused persisted at the end of the nineteenth century, manifesting itself in the writings and photographs of the Harriman Expedition.

Though members of the Harriman Expedition often conveyed a Romantic perception of wilderness' worth, their underlying philosophies were different. John Muir and Burroughs were a case in point. Of all the members of the expedition, Muir perhaps best embodies the transcendentalist side of romanticism. He founded the preservationist Sierra Club and tirelessly fought corporate and governmental projects that threatened the Sierra Nevada, Yosemite Valley, and redwood forests. His writings and lectures on the environment instilled in many Americans an appreciation for the wild and for the need to protect it.⁶⁰ Muir's preservationism was based on the premise that nature was a fellow being. He loved it as he would a friend and exulted in its wild beauty. Burroughs, on the other hand, regarded nature and humanity as two distinct elements. At odds with his expansionist perspective was a Romantic conception of wilderness as innocent and pure, and civilization as ugly and tainted. For Burroughs, nature was simultaneously in need of human protection and exalted above mankind. This paradox typified his complex views of wilderness, and like Muir, he expressed them in his expedition writings.

Muir's descriptions of the Alaskan landscape are nothing short of ecstatic. The Harriman Expedition was Muir's fourth trip to Alaska, and the scenery awed him as it had on his previous visits.⁶¹ Whereas Burroughs regarded glaciers with fearful ambivalence, Muir beheld them in thrilled wonder. The icy expanses were "magnificent," "grand," "beautiful," and "superb;" at Disenchantment Bay, the Hubbard was "a truly

noble glacier." The language Muir used when discussing the glaciers at Port Wells Fjord exuded delight. They were "the finest and wildest of their kind, looking, as they [came] bounding down a smooth mountain side through the midst of lush flowery gardens and goat pastures, like tremendous leaping, dancing cataracts in prime of flood."⁶² It is no wonder that, according to Burroughs, the Indians called Muir the "Great Ice Chief."⁶³ The Scottish adventurer was in his element on the icy mountain slopes. He loved them not because he thought they benefited mankind in any material way, but because their wild ethereality resonated with his Romantic personality. He connected personally with the scenery around him. Harriman Fjord, with "nature's best and choicest alpine treasures purely wild" was, he wrote, "a place after my own heart."⁶⁴

Muir's letters from the expedition reveal his deep kinship with nature, which he tried to share with his correspondents. In a letter to the Harriman girls one month after the expedition, Muir advised, "Kill as few of your fellow beings as possible and pursue some branch of natural history at least far enough to see Nature's harmony."⁶⁵ For Muir, plants, animals, and humans all deserved to live, and each filled some role in the balance of nature. The sight of hunted animals repulsed "the old man of the mountains." He simply could not understand his shipmates' enthusiasm for the "ruthless business" of hunting. Likewise, he could not enjoy the expedition's excursion to a hot springs near Sitka, where the caretaker had "murdered a mother deer and threw her over the ridge-pole of his shanty, then caught her pitiful baby fawn and tied it beneath its dead mother."⁶⁶ To Muir, killing an animal could be equivalent to murder. His account of the dead deer and its fawn indicates that he considered animal life to be as sacred as human existence. Thus, Muir seems to have regarded wilderness and civilization as vital organisms that had as much a right to life as the other. This lack of differentiation was radically Romantic and set Muir apart from his shipmates.

Unlike Muir, Burroughs saw no similarity between wilderness and civilization. As a result, Burroughs faced the challenge of determining whether one was more worthy than the other. The aging naturalist approved of development and material progress, but he also shared Muir's Romantic appreciation of wildness. Despite his preference for pastoral scenery, he reviled humanity's encroachments on wild landscapes that he considered wholesome and helpless. His conception of nature's innocence made him less certain of civilization's superiority. After passing Omaha on the train to Seattle, Burroughs surveyed the untilled prairie, noting that the "gentle slopes and dimpled val-

57 Henry David Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, ed. J.J. Moldenhauer, quoted in Mitchell, *Vanishing America*, 243. [Edition unknown.]

58 Mitchell, *Vanishing America*, 131.

59 Albert Bierstadt, "The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak," database online, ARTstor, accessed March 9, 2014.

60 Bieder, "From Thoreau to Muir;" Goetzmann and Sloan, *Looking Far North*, 27.

61 Goetzmann and Sloan, *Looking Far North*, 4.

62 John Muir, "Notes on the Pacific Coast Glaciers," in *Narrative, Glaciers, Natives* vol. 1 *Alaska*, ed. C. Hart Merriam, (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1901), 122, 125-126.

63 Burroughs, "Narrative," 18.

64 Muir, "Pacific Coast Glaciers," 132.

65 John Muir to Mary and Cornelia Harriman, Elizabeth Averell, and Dorothea Draper, August 30, 1899, in *The Life and Letters of John Muir*, ed. William Frederic Bade (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1924), 2: 333.

66 Goetzmann and Sloan, *Looking Far North*, 4, 119, 90.

leys are innocent of the plow.” Wild nature was childlike, not yet forced into maturity by the plow’s defiling touch (although, considering Burroughs’ fascination with the “youthfulness” and sensual femininity of the western landscape, deflowering might be the more appropriate word).⁶⁷ Burroughs seems to have struggled with his belief in the pastoral ideal partly because he considered wilderness and civilization to be two distinct entities. Whereas Muir’s Romanticism regarded wilderness and civilization as fundamentally the same, Burroughs’ Romanticism maintained that the former was superior to the latter. As delightful as he imagined Arcadian civilization to be, he recognized that it was contrary to the land’s natural state. This understanding clashed with his expansionist perspective, but the naturalist could not ignore the sinister side of subduing nature.

Burroughs expressed his Romantic differentiation between wild purity and civilized degeneracy more than once. On the journey to Seattle, the plow was the least of his worries. The train tracks that sliced through the countryside filled him with horror even as he benefited from them. Rather than allowing the “great god Erosion” to shape the plains, the naturalist wrote, humans “surprise his forces with shovels and picks... and the spectacle is strange indeed and in many ways repellant. In places the country looks as if all the railroad forces of the world might have been turned loose to delve and rend and pile in some mad, insane folly and debauch.”⁶⁸ Rapid industrialization disrupted the natural order. Civilization could be destructive, insane, even debauched, and it was ruining the pristine innocence of the wilderness. As shall be discussed later, Burroughs used similar language to describe white Americans’ devastation of Native life. His characterization of the Snake River Canyon as “wild and aboriginal, yet with such beauty and winsome gentleness and delicacy” suggests that Romantic conceptions of the virtue of nature and “savagery” — that is, wilderness — and the corruption of civilization were influential even at the turn of the twentieth century.⁶⁹

Muir and Burroughs’ diverging Romantic outlooks extended to their perceptions of wilderness’ spirituality. In Muir’s view, nature was more than just an aesthetic gift; it was a friendly manifestation of divinity that smiled upon humankind. Conversely, Burroughs trembled before it as he would before an aloof and omnipotent God. This terror was not of the land’s depravity, but of its transcendence. Though both men agreed that the wild was sublime, they understood its sublimity in different ways.

Muir regarded the land not as a lofty and inaccessible Other, but rather as a sacred being that desired close association with humankind. For him, nature was a religious experience that was as instructive as it was spiritual. When he hiked through a forest at Wrangell that he had visited two decades ago, and he

wrote home mystically, “I had many questions to answer.”⁷⁰ At Glacier Bay, he observed that the earth-shaping glacial activity was “teaching lessons so plain that he who runs may read.”⁷¹ Muir was truly a disciple of the wilderness, which taught him to see God’s hand everywhere in nature. After mentioning the dark clouds that obscured the mountains until the Expedition reached Yakutat Bay, Muir waxed lyrical: “Then the heavens opened and [Mount] St. Elias, gloriously arrayed, bade us welcome...”⁷² This description rivals the prophetic visions from the Bible, with Mount St. Elias the heavenly being ushering his followers into paradise. The mountain range at Prince William Sound was no less spiritual to the “Great Ice Chief.” Bathed in “celestial light,” it was “one of the richest, most glorious” landscapes Muir had ever seen. The Fairweather Range, too, was “transfigured in divine light,” and the sight of it was “the crowning grace and glory of the trip.”⁷³ Like many of his Romantic contemporaries, Muir considered nature to be a sacred manifestation of God’s will. However, he did not perceive the wild as austere. Instead, it was kindly and welcoming even to comparatively insignificant members of civilization. Such grace, Muir believed, deserved preservation.

While Muir experienced the wild with delighted veneration, Burroughs confronted it with half-fearful awe. The aging naturalist felt dwarfed by nature’s otherworldly majesty. When he climbed Mount Wright overlooking Muir Glacier, he encountered a breathtaking view. “Glory and inspiration” were at the mountain’s peak. Exhilarated, Burroughs meditated that “It was indeed a day with the gods, strange gods, the gods of the foreworld, but they had great power over us.”⁷⁴ Mountains proved to be a source of endless wonder for the naturalist. He regarded Mount St. Elias as intensely spiritual, with its “lift heavenward” and the “aspiration of the insensate rocks...to carry one peak into heights where all may not go...till it stands there in a kind of serene astronomic solitude and remoteness.”⁷⁵ This description brings to mind a heavenly court where God reigns in splendor and, in contrast to Muir’s view, at a distance. Destroying the wilderness was therefore tantamount to an assault against the unapproachable Divine. For both Muir and Burroughs, nature was holy, but they conceived of its spirituality differently. Muir spoke with nature face-to-face; it was exalted, but also a friend. Burroughs, on the other hand, regarded the wild as transcending human experience. The men’s diverging viewpoints demonstrate the sheer complexity of American perceptions of wilderness. Not even Romantic conceptions were uniform.

Burroughs’ perspective not only differed from Muir’s under-

67 Burroughs, “Narrative,” 3-4, 16-17.

68 Burroughs, “Narrative,” 6.

69 Burroughs, “Narrative,” 108.

70 John Muir to Louie, Wanda, and Helen, June 6, 1899, in *The Life and Letters of John Muir*, ed. William Frederic Bade (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1924), 2: 324.

71 Muir, “Pacific Coast Glaciers,” 128.

72 Muir, “Pacific Coast Glaciers,” 130.

73 Muir, “Pacific Coast Glaciers,” 135.

74 Burroughs, “Narrative,” 46.

75 Burroughs, “Narrative,” 55.

standing of nature, but was also at variance with the expansionist belief that agriculture conformed to God's will. The tension between obeying and offending God through interacting with the land is prevalent throughout the naturalist's writings. As was the case with many of his contemporaries, his faith in material progress and love of nature collided. Moreover, he was not the only member of the Harriman Expedition who felt conflicted about humankind's proper relationship with wilderness. Curtis appears to have been no less aware of the destruction that civilization wreaked on the landscape. His photographs from the Harriman Expedition seem to doubt the worth and purpose of development. Figure 6 depicts the clapboard Episcopal church and school house of New Metlakahla standing in a field of mangled tree stumps. A gloomy sky deepens the bleakness of the scene.⁷⁶ Figure 7 presents a similar picture: to the left is the town of Wrangell surrounded by the stubby remains of trees; to the right is a rich, dense forest threatened by urban encroachment.⁷⁷ The juxtaposition of civilization, destruction, and the vibrancy of nature seems to question the value of America's march to material progress. Curtis's photographs remind the viewer that civilization comes at a cost, and they imply that the cost is too high.

The Harriman Expedition members' Romantic conceptions of nature's innocence mirrored their notions of the purity of



Figure 6. "Episcopal Church and School House, New Metlakahla, Annette Island, Alaska, June 1899," photograph by Edward S. Curtis, c. 1899. The trappings of civilization stand in a field of mangled tree stumps at New Metlakahla. Courtesy of University of Washington Digital Collections.

⁷⁶ Edward S. Curtis, "Episcopal Church and Schoolhouse, New Metlakahla, Annette Island, Alaska, June 1899," in *New York to Cook Inlet vol. 1 A Souvenir of the Harriman Alaska Expedition, May – August, 1899*, 16, accessed March 13, 2014, <https://content.lib.washington.edu/u/?harriman,19>.

⁷⁷ Edward S. Curtis, "Episcopal Church and Schoolhouse, New Metlakahla, Annette Island, Alaska, June 1899," in *New York to Cook Inlet vol. 1 A Souvenir of the Harriman Alaska Expedition, May – August, 1899*, 16, accessed March 13, 2014, <https://content.lib.washington.edu/u/?harriman,22>.

"savagery." Undoubtedly, they viewed Natives with condescension and believed that white society was altogether superior. Even so, the members of the expedition thought that in many respects, Indians were more ethical than Euro-Americans. The writings from the trip contend that by forcing material progress on the Indians, the United States had corrupted them. White civilization's greed had ruined the idealized simplicity of Native culture. Indians represented a way of life that many expedition members admired, but regarded as irretrievable.

The expedition members' views of the Indians epitomized the tension between patronizing and respectful attitudes toward the Natives. They condescendingly thought that the Alaskan Natives possessed a virtuous simplicity that white civilization had lost. Burroughs, for instance, believed that the Alaskan Natives, like nature, were as ingenuous as children. At Lowe Inlet, he commented on "large, round, stolid innocent faces" of the Indians. The first Eskimo he met at Virgin Bay, meanwhile, had "an amused childish look." In Siberia, other Eskimos stood with their hands inside their sleeves "after the manner of children on a cold morning."⁷⁸ Grinnell also attributed simple innocence to Indians, and immorality to whites. The Alaska Indians were "a hardy race," Grinnell wrote — "they fish, they hunt, they feast, they dance; and until the white man came and changed all their life, they lived well." These supercilious observations, on the one hand, reinforced the notion that whites needed to take charge of the supposedly inexperienced Indians. On the other hand, the remarks implied a certain fondness for the Natives that conflicted with the expedition members' general disdain for "savagery" and was a far cry from expansionist mistrust.

Since Burroughs and Grinnell equated Indians with children, it follows that they considered them in need of the same protection as youngsters. Though they favored white society overall, the two men held that "savagery" had been an unnecessary victim of civilization's unscrupulous practices. They regarded the former's simplicity as far superior to the latter's contamination. In Siberia, Burroughs despaired at the treatment that whites accorded the Natives, writing that whalers "[corrupted] them with bad morals and villainous whiskey." The naturalist was similarly shocked at the destruction of the Indians on St. Lawrence Island. He claimed that whalers had given the Natives liquor and, in so doing, had "debauched and demoralized them" until the Indians died of starvation.⁷⁹ Grinnell, too was highly cognizant of Euro-American civilization's failings. Selfish Americans, particularly gold miners, had brought untold misery on the Natives. Contact with "the contaminating touch of the civilized" had decimated the Indians:⁸⁰

White men, uncontrolled and uncontrollable, already swarm over the Alaska coast, and are overwhelming the Eskimo. They have taken away their women, and debauched their men with liquor. They have brought them strange new diseases that they

⁷⁸ Burroughs, "Narrative," 23, 68, 100.

⁷⁹ Burroughs, "Narrative," 100-101, 108.

⁸⁰ Grinnell, "Natives," 137-138, 183.

never knew before, and in a very short time they will ruin and disperse the wholesome, hearty, merry people whom we saw at Port Clarence and at Plover Bay.⁸¹

“The civilized” were not limited to independent gold rushers. Industry, too, was killing the Natives. Salmon canneries depleted Indians’ food supplies, appropriated their fishing rights, and stole their historical territory.⁸² Grinnell’s vivid portrayal of Alaskan Indian life both before and after white encroachment was a sharp critique of a nation that considered itself advanced. “Primitiveness” was “wholesome” and had once been “merry,” but civilization could be scheming and violent. Grinnell was no Romantic, but like Burroughs, he nonetheless entertained Romantic doubts about the value of Euro-American progress and society. Amid the complexities of an industrial age, the seeming simplicity of Native life was greatly appealing, and the ruinous drive of the United States, appalling.

Grinnell’s wrath no doubt had an impact on his friend Curtis. Throughout *The North American Indian*, Curtis denounced white civilization for its arrogance toward the Natives. In so doing, he challenged the notion that Euro-Americans were more “civilized” than the peoples they were oppressing. Curtis admired the Indians for their “elaborate religious system,” piety, and “beautiful” artistic creations. He asserted that his countrymen’s denial that the Natives possessed faith, ethical codes, and art was simply wrong.⁸³ American civilization, implied the photographer, would do well to examine its own hypocrisy before scoffing at the lifestyles of other peoples. The first volume of Curtis’s work opens with an indictment of white society: “The treatment accorded the Indians by those who lay claim to civilization and Christianity has in many cases been worse than criminal.”⁸⁴ According to Curtis, Americans claimed civilization, but did not actually practice the values that they associated with it. The photographer was not afraid to speculate that his own society might be less civilized than the one it oppressed.

Curtis even suspected that civilization itself inherently possessed negative traits. His doubts reflected a Romantic disenchantment with Manifest Destiny and American aspirations to material progress. Above all, he considered civilization to be avaricious. He raged that the California Natives “fell easy prey to the greed of civilization” and that the change wrought on Indians in general had “been made many-fold harder by the white man’s cupidity.”⁸⁵ The photographer may have been suggesting that white American society was, by nature, selfish and competitive. Through sheer greed, it had ravaged “primit-



Figure 7. “Wrangell, Alaska, June 1899,” photograph by Edward S. Curtis, c. 1899. On the left, the town of Wrangell is surrounded by tree stumps; on the right is a rich forest not yet fallen before man’s axe. Courtesy of University of Washington Digital Collections.

ive” and perhaps more fulfilling cultures. Returning to Alaska in 1927 must have been especially poignant for Curtis. White intrusion had left its mark on the Natives he had photographed in his youth thirty years before. “As among so many primitive people,” he wearily observed, “contact with whites and the acquirement of diseases have worked a tragic change during this period.”

Amid the onslaught of industrialization, Romantically-inclined Americans had begun to question the foundation of material progress on which their civilization was built. Living among the Natives for three decades made Curtis see clearly the cracks in that foundation. Like his fellow expedition members, he believed that in many ways, “wilderness” was preferable to American civilization. This understanding formed part of the basis of the conservation and preservation movements at the turn of the twentieth century.

The Social Darwinist Perspective

In 1899, many Americans faced the end of the pioneering era with a profound sense of loss. As perhaps nothing else could, the closing of the frontier brought into sharp relief the fact that wilderness was finite. Rapidly growing settlements dotted a Western expanse that had once seemed endless. Plows raked the earth, railroads slashed through mountainsides, the bison were on the verge of extinction, and the remaining Native tribes were thoroughly demoralized. The wilderness, with all of its Romantic connotations, appeared to be vanishing. Such destruction caused more Americans than ever before to wonder whether the promises of Manifest Destiny had been worth the price after all.⁸⁶

81 Grinnell, “Natives,” 183.

82 Grinnell, “The Salmon Industry,” 348.

83 Curtis, introduction to *The Apache. The Jicarillas. The Navaho.*, xvi.

84 Curtis, introduction to *The Apache. The Jicarillas. The Navaho.*, xv.

85 Edward Curtis, introduction to *The Kato. The Wailaki. The Yuki. The Pomo. The Wintun. The Maidu. The Miwok. The Yokuts.* in *The North American Indian*, ed. Frederick Webb Hodge (Cambridge, USA: University Press, 1924), 14: xi, accessed March 14, 2014, <http://curtis.library.northwestern.edu/>; Curtis, introduction to *The Teton Sioux. The Yanktonai. The Assiniboin*, xi.

86 Mitchell, *Vanishing America*, xiii.

This doubt informed many of the late-nineteenth-century efforts to preserve nature and Indian cultures. Lee Clark Mitchell contends that what most alarmed the preservationists was a disappearing American heritage. He suggests that the surge of nationalism after the War of 1812 gave rise to the notion that the United States' landscape, Native tribes, and pioneering past comprised a glorious national inheritance. By the twentieth century, anxiety for this endangered heritage escalated to the extent that many Americans joined initiatives to protect natural spaces, collect Indian artifacts, and document Native cultures.⁸⁷ Mitchell's analysis is insightful, but it overlooks preservationism's future-oriented focus. Though undoubtedly nostalgic, the movement owed much to the spread of Social Darwinist fears of the rise and fall of nations. The expansionist and Romantic understandings of wilderness and civilization focused on the two entities' relative value and characterized their struggle as a conflict between right and wrong. By contrast, the Social Darwinist standpoint regarded the tension between wilderness and civilization as a natural manifestation of survival of the fittest. At its worst, Social Darwinism arrogantly asserted the inevitable ascendancy of white society over nature and other peoples. At its best, Social Darwinism compelled its proponents to reassess their views of wilderness, civilization, and the tenability of their own society. It galvanized many Americans to work toward ensuring that both would still exist in the future.

In his *Frontier Thesis*, Frederick Jackson Turner clearly articulated the post-Darwinian concern with the rise and fall of civilizations. The wilderness, he declared, was the lifeblood of American advancement and democracy. Chasing the receding edge of the frontier westward had distanced the nation from European influence and nurtured rugged individualism in Americans. The country's success was the result of a unique "recurrence of the process of evolution" that could occur only through colonizing a vast wilderness. Turner detailed the "record of social evolution" that was scribbled across "this continental page from west to east." It originated with the "savagery" of Indians and hunters. The trader, "the pathfinder of civilization" displaced these early peoples and was in turn supplanted by ranches. Subsistence farmers followed, then commercial farms, until finally industrialized cities completed the process. The frontier necessary for this Americanizing progression, however, was "gone, and with its going [had] closed the first period of American history."⁸⁸

Turner's theory of the natural process of national evolution may have resonated with his countrymen in part because it was not new. The idea that "primitive" societies inevitably evolved into "civilized" nations reached as far back as the eighteenth century. In 1794, Yale President Timothy Dwight's description of the allegedly natural transformation of hunters and trappers into farmers and townspeople was strikingly similar to

Turner's.⁸⁹ Furthermore, Judd contends that many mid-nineteenth-century Americans thought that human improvement of nature corresponded to the earth's scientific, evolutionary trajectory. Some, for instance, argued that draining marsh and cutting down trees speeded up the land's natural tendency to dry over time. According to this view, the pioneer and industrialists' alteration of the landscape eased the course of both natural and national evolution.⁹⁰

By the 1870s, however, many Americans were becoming cognizant of the ominous side of collective evolution. As Judd observes, they worried that unchecked industrialization would bankrupt the United States of its resources, causing American civilization to fail like the ancient European empires that preceded it. Scientists were growing aware of humanity's capacity to wreak disastrous change on the climate. In 1873, Franklin B. Hough asserted that "stately ruins in solitary deserts" were the products of environmental transformations resulting from "the improvement acts of man, in destroying the trees and plants which once clothed the surface, and sheltered it from the sun and the winds."⁹¹ Those who had not already internalized the Romantic conception of the spirituality of an unsullied landscape were now becoming convinced that nature was necessary for their country's survival. Once the frontier had closed, the dire warnings about the land's exhaustibility assumed greater urgency. More Americans began calling for the preservation of nature for their descendants before it succumbed to the onslaught of modernity.⁹²

The seeming disappearance of the Indians compounded the anxiety over the fate of American civilization. Turner's thesis had voiced commonly held Social Darwinist notions that "primitive" societies would inevitably succumb to more advanced cultures. This idea justified white expansion; displacing and exterminating millions of Natives seemed less criminal if the victims were destined to die out anyway.⁹³ Mitchell writes that even Americans who considered themselves supporters of Indian rights believed that the only way the Natives could avoid extinction would be if they assimilated into the dominant white society.⁹⁴ Nevertheless, especially after the closing of the frontier, the influence of Social Darwinism raised unsettling questions. If once-populous Indian tribes were decimated and driven from their homelands, who was to say that American society could not meet the same end? It was a melancholy prospect.⁹⁵ When Americans flocked west to document Indian ways of life and collect Native artifacts, they may have done so not only to preserve a threatened national heritage, but also to

87 Mitchell, *Vanishing America*, xiii-xiv, 8-9.

88 Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier," 221, 201, 200, 207, 227.

89 Mitchell, *Vanishing America*, 271; Judd, *Untilled Garden*, 219.

90 Judd, *Untilled Garden*, 239-240.

91 Franklin Hough, "On the Duty of Governments in the Preservation of Forests," *American Association for the Advancement of Science Proceedings* (August 1873): 1-2, quoted in Judd, *Untilled Garden*, 305.

92 Mitchell, *Vanishing America*, 54, 58.

93 Mitchell, *Vanishing America*, 16.

94 Mitchell, *Vanishing America*, 217-219.

95 Mitchell, *Vanishing America*, 5-6.

save themselves. Mary Lawlor writes that Curtis's photographs "record the somewhat displaced self-pity of a vanishing white culture (that of the frontier) which depended on the presence of Indians for its own romance."⁹⁶ Documenting Indian cultures enabled many Americans to cling to a bygone age. Uncertain of their country's trajectory after the closing of the frontier, they sought to transfer remnants of its past into the future to dispel the feeling that they were nearing the end of their nation's evolutionary path.

The members of the Harriman Expedition regarded the "vanishing" wilderness with a Social Darwinist mixture of complacency and apprehension. Some maintained that man's modifications of the land conformed to scientific norms, while others disagreed. Burroughs, for one, implied in his writings that manmade adjustments to the landscape were simply rapid evolutionary processes. The naturalist was amazed at how similar the earth-shaping power of Muir Glacier was to that of man. "It is so rare to find nature working with such measure and precision," he marveled. One moraine resembled "a railroad embankment...about the width of a single-track road." Another was "more suggestive of a wagon road," and Burroughs wondered that the gravel had not "been sifted out from some moving vehicle."⁹⁷ This striking comparison of glacial and human creative activities hearkened back to the idea that artificially altering the landscape corresponded to the natural stages of evolution. Men laying track was equivalent, in effect, to glaciers digging furrows in the ground. Despite his love of nature and abhorrence of unrestrained railroad development, Burroughs was not a radical preservationist; he believed that humans ought to work the land. The naturalist appears to have held that improving the landscape to make way for civilization was not only a fulfillment of God's wishes, as previously shown, but also the culmination of evolutionary progress.

Other members of the expedition expressed a gloomier perspective on the evolution of civilization. Witnessing American devastation of the Alaskan landscape made some of the scientists focus on the potential for national decline, rather than ascension. Grinnell was most vocal about the dangers that could spring from destroying nature. As a leading conservationist, he fretted that industrialization would leave successive generations with fewer resources. He predicted that the effects would be economically disastrous for the United States. In his article "The Salmon Industry," Grinnell lambasted Alaskan canneries for their wasteful slaughter of local fish populations. So many salmon were being killed, he warned, that "before long the canning industry must cease to be profitable." When he considered the businesses' unscrupulousness, Grinnell was incensed: "The canners work in a most wasteful and thoughtlessly selfish way, grasping for everything that is within their reach and thinking nothing of the future."⁹⁸ The future of both the industry and the nation's prosperity dominated Grinnell's

thinking. At the end of his essay, he made sure to mention that in 1900 Alaska's salmon canneries produced over six million dollars' worth of fish — nearly double the amount produced the year before. "Certainly such a resource is worth saving and making perpetual," the conservationist scolded.⁹⁹ Like other Social Darwinists, Grinnell believed that diminishing resources jeopardized civilization. In his view, nature was meant not only to be worked, but also to be spared for generations to come. The success of the United States depended on it.

The members of the Harriman Expedition were more resigned to the perceived disappearance of Native cultures than they were to the destruction of nature. They regarded the "vanishing Indian" as an unavoidable byproduct of the progress of civilization. The only safeguards against Indian extinction were assimilating the Natives into white society and documenting their existing ways of life before it became too late to do so. At the same time, the "disappearance" of tribal society led some on the expedition to worry about the fate of civilization in general. In a world where nations naturally rose and fell, civilization seemed inescapably tenuous.

The Social Darwinist belief in the inevitability of Native decline influenced even staunch Indian supporters like Grinnell and Curtis. They considered white and Indian societies to be locked in a battle of survival of the fittest. Neither man expected the latter to win. "There is an inevitable conflict between civilization and savagery," Grinnell mused after witnessing the deterioration of Alaskan Native culture, "and wherever the two touch each other, the weaker people must be destroyed."¹⁰⁰ Grinnell was clearly implying that the "weaker people" were the Natives. Curtis took his theory a step further in *The North American Indian*. According to the photographer, the alteration of Indian ways of life were not only "inevitable," but also "a necessity created by the expansion of the white population." Indeed, "civilization [demanded] the abandonment of aboriginal habits." "For once at least," wrote the photographer, "Nature's laws have been the indirect cause of a grievous wrong." This fatalistic approach to the decline of Native society infuses Curtis's writings. He held that the Indians had always been "destined to pass" through the destruction of tribal culture. "Those who cannot withstand these trying days of the metamorphosis must succumb," he warned. Thus, Indians were "destined ultimately to become assimilated with the 'superior race.'"¹⁰¹ Curtis's quotation marks around the words "superior race" suggest that he did not consider American civilization to be better than Indian society. He did, however, believe that the former was much more powerful than the latter, and that the two could not live harmoniously together.

Historian Nicole Tonkovich contends that Social Darwinism was merely a guilt-driven ploy to justify Manifest Des-

99 Grinnell, "The Salmon Industry," 355.

100 Grinnell, "Natives," 183.

101 Curtis, introduction to *The Teton Sioux. The Yanktonai. The Assiniboin.*, xi, xiii; Curtis, introduction to *The Apache. The Jicarillas. The Navaho.*, xiii.

96 Lawlor, *Recalling the Wild*, 51.

97 Burroughs, "Narrative," 43-44.

98 Grinnell, "The Salmon Industry," 343, 345-346.



Figure 8. “The Vanishing Race,” photograph by Edward S. Curtis, c. 1904. A shadowy column of Navahos on traditional horseback disappears into black mountains – what Curtis terms “the darkness of an unknown future.” Courtesy of Northwestern University Digital Library Collections.

tiny.¹⁰² Although this assertion is in many respects accurate, Grinnell and Curtis’ espousal of Social Darwinism indicates that the concept embodied something deeper. For many like-minded Americans, savagery and civilization were no longer mere states of good or bad. Rather, they were organic entities subject to Darwinian principles of evolution. To Grinnell and Curtis, traditional Native cultures simply could not keep pace with modern, industrialized American life. The end of the weaker tribal society was a necessary, scientific evil if the Indians themselves were to survive.

In addition to documenting Indian life, Curtis responded to the destructive effects of evolution by advocating the assimilation of Indians into white society, which he thought would protect the population from extinction. Natives who desired assimilation were “enlightened,” and the photographer despaired that in some cases, “primitive conservatism” was obstructing “progress in the pursuits of civilization.” Curtis was especially frustrated with the Pueblo priesthood’s attempts to “maintain the ancient order of life” in spite of younger “progressive” Indians’ desire to adopt Euro-American ways.¹⁰³ The arrogance of this viewpoint should not discredit the photographer’s admiration for Native cultures and his distress at their apparent passing. Like Grinnell, Curtis lived among Indians for thirty years, made an unprecedented effort to understand their ways, and denounced American disregard for their rights. He even earned

the respect of the Hopi to the extent that they adopted him into their tribe and initiated him as a priest.¹⁰⁴ His Social Darwinist views reflected a concrete, Turnerian perspective that “savagery” and “civilization” were distinct stages in the lifecycle of humankind. It was an abstract, if flawed understanding of social discrepancies that was far more nuanced than expansionist notions of “savagery” and civilization’s relative worth.

Curtis’s conviction that the Indian cultures were destined to yield to white society is plain in his photographs. Historians have criticized Curtis for his “sentimentality and stylization” in posing his subjects and bringing costumes for them to wear.¹⁰⁵ Bernardin and her coauthors, for instance, revile American photographs of Natives as “a readily digestible narrative of white expansion...that furthered expansionist policies” and dismiss Curtis’s pictures as “imperialist nostalgia.”¹⁰⁶ In a similar vein, Lawlor argues that Curtis’s work insinuates Native bestowal of their ties to the land on Euro-Americans.¹⁰⁷ It is true that, as Mitchell suggests, the photographer’s staged and edited pictures presented his own view of Indianness. Nevertheless, his work imparts an unmistakable impression of sorrow for the fate of the people he studied.¹⁰⁸ Curtis titled the first photogravure of *The North American Indian* “The Vanishing Race” (Figure 8). He believed that the picture, with its expressive title and still more evocative content, conveyed the purpose of the entire series. The photograph depicts a column of



Figure 9. “The Last Sledge” – White Pass, June, 1899,” photograph by Edward S. Curtis, c. 1899. A lonely dogsled sits forlornly in a desolate landscape. Courtesy of University of Washington Digital Collections.

102 Susan Bernardin et al., introduction to *Trading Gazes: Euro-American Women Photographers and Native North Americans, 1880-1940*, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 7.

103 Edward Curtis, introduction to *The Tiwa. The Keres*. in *The North American Indian*, ed. Frederick Webb Hodge (Cambridge, USA: University Press, 1926), 16: xiii-xiv, accessed March 24, 2014, <http://curtis.library.northwestern.edu/>.

104 Mary Lawlor, *Recalling the Wild*, 49.

105 Mitchell, *Vanishing America*, 147.

106 Bernardin et al., introduction to *Trading Gazes*, 4, 14.

107 Lawlor, *Recalling the Wild*, 53.

108 Mitchell, *Vanishing America*, 147.

Navajo on horseback, facing away from the viewer and riding toward dark and distant mountains. The Natives disappear into the shadows, heading towards what Curtis calls “the darkness of an unknown future.”¹⁰⁹ The viewer cannot help but share the photographer’s anxiety for the prospects of the departing Navajo. Receding Indians with their backs to the viewer is a common theme in the photographer’s work. Clearly the idea of “vanishing” nations worried him.

Curtis’s preoccupation with imperiled Native lifestyles, in fact, emerged on the Harriman Expedition. One photograph, with the striking title “The Last Sledge” (Figure 9) is a prelude to the symbolism that fills *The North American Indian*. By portraying a single dogsled in a desolate, snowy landscape, the picture captures the forlornness of a passing way of life.¹¹⁰ This photograph is especially arresting in that it can apply to both Indian and American culture. Sledges were as integral a part of the white Alaskan frontier as they were of Alaskan Native existence. In this instance, at least, Curtis’s work reflects what Lawlor regards as regret for a disappearing pioneer heritage.¹¹¹ White and Indian societies were equally capable of passing away as a result of industrial and material progress. This strand of Social Darwinism was not triumphant, but despondent. It expressed unease that “Nature’s laws” of evolution were buffeting all humanity, and that the concept of civilization was built on an unstable foundation.

The tenuousness of civilization is a recurring theme throughout Curtis’s photographs from the Harriman Expedition. In fact, the pictures seem to evoke the expansionist fear of nature’s danger and power. These photographs depart from the expansionist perspective, however, in that they depict civilization as no godlier than the wilderness. The two are competing in the harsh game of survival of the fittest. Curtis’s “Juneau” (Figure 10) displays this tension. The thriving town of Juneau extends along the seashore, overcoming nature, but a sinister mountain casts a shadow over its very survival.¹¹² The future of both is in doubt. “House and Hearth” (Figure 11), meanwhile, pushes further at the idea that civilization is innately fragile. In the picture, a Siberian Eskimo shack and fire pit cling precariously to the tundra. The slight constructions look as though the wind might easily blow them away. More startling, however, is that their shape resembles that of the mountain behind them.¹¹³

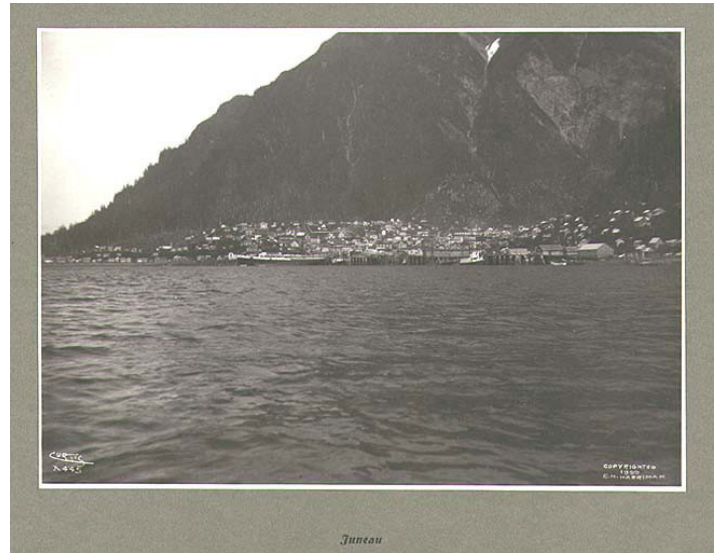


Figure 10. “Juneau,” photograph by Edward S. Curtis, c. 1899. The thriving town of Juneau extends along the coast, gamely pressing nature back, but a towering, dark mountain threatens the settlement’s existence. Courtesy of University of Washington Digital Collections.

This likeness may represent a pessimistic version of Turnerian philosophy: that in order to endure, civilization must sometimes become wilderness with no guarantee of ever reemerging victorious.

Curtis’s photographs bring American confidence in progress crashing back to earth. They seem to imply that civilization is hard-earned and never assured. As often as they call whites’ attention to the unfortunate, “vanishing” Indian, they urge Euro-American society to recognize that it, too, could meet the same end. “The Disputed Boundary” (Figure 12) appears to provide a suitable caution to America on the eve of the country’s experimentation with international imperialism. The photograph portrays the flags of Britain and the United States — two of the nineteenth century’s greatest empires — blowing in the wind on a barren hillside. Both flags are in tatters.¹¹⁴

Conclusion

The Harriman Expedition can reveal much about Americans’ shifting perspectives of wilderness and civilization at a pivotal moment of their nation’s history. In 1899, the United States was poised between an era of westward expansion and twentieth-century modernity. The closing of the frontier had forced Americans to rethink their country’s trajectory and reassess the value of its completed pioneer enterprise. The members of the Harriman Expedition were in the perfect

109 Edward S. Curtis, “The Vanishing Race – Navaho” in *The Apache. The Jicarillas. The Navaho* vol.1 *The North American Indian*, ed. Frederick Webb Hodge (Cambridge, USA: University Press, 1907), plate no. 1, accessed March 24, 2014, <http://digital.library.northwestern.edu/curtis/>.

110 Edward S. Curtis, “‘The Last Sledge’ – White Pass, June, 1899,” in *New York to Cook Inlet* vol. 1 *A Souvenir of the Harriman Alaska Expedition, May – August, 1899*, 25, accessed March 24, 2014, <https://content.lib.washington.edu/u2/harriman,30>.

111 Lawlor, *Recalling the Wild*, 51.

112 Edward S. Curtis, “Juneau,” in *Cook Inlet to Bering Strait and the Return Voyage*, vol. 2 *A Souvenir of the Harriman Alaska Expedition, May – August, 1899*, 201, accessed March 24, 2014, <https://content.lib.washington.edu/u2/harriman,230>.

113 Edward S. Curtis, “House and Hearth,” in *Cook Inlet to Bering Strait and*

the Return Voyage, vol. 2 *A Souvenir of the Harriman Alaska Expedition, May – August, 1899*, 163, accessed March 24, 2014, <https://content.lib.washington.edu/u2/harriman,191>.

114 Edward S. Curtis, “The Disputed Boundary,” in *New York to Cook Inlet* vol. 1 *A Souvenir of the Harriman Alaska Expedition, May – August, 1899*, 26, accessed March 24, 2014, <https://content.lib.washington.edu/u2/harriman,38>.



Figure 11. "House and Hearth," photograph by Edward S. Curtis, c. 1899. A fragile shack and fire pit mirror the shape of the mountain in the background, perhaps implying that surviving nature often necessitates that civilization become wilderness. Courtesy of University of Washington Digital Collections.

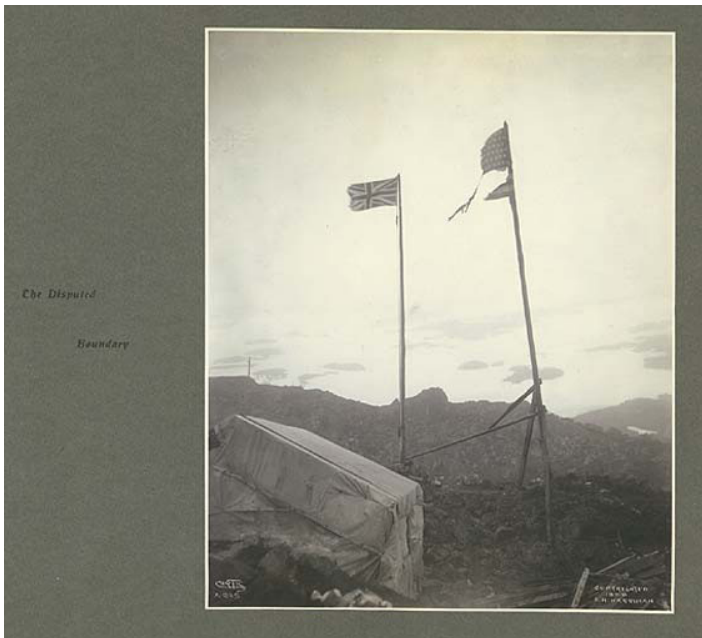


Figure 12. "The Disputed Boundary," photograph by Edward S. Curtis, c. 1899. Tattered British and American flags provide a sobering outlook on the long-term prospects of empire and civilization. Courtesy of University of Washington Digital Collections.

position to do so. As they pondered their relationship with the last American wilderness, they drew on a vast intellectual legacy of Manifest Destiny, Romantic transcendentalism, and Darwinist theory. The breadth of this legacy complicated their conceptions of wilderness and civilization. Indeed, this essay focused on the work of Burroughs, Grinnell, Muir, and Curtis, precisely because their understandings were so con-

flicted. The men embraced an expansionist perception of the usefulness and untrustworthiness of wilderness and the godly superiority of civilization; a Romantic appreciation for wilderness' sublimity and moral value, and civilization's destructive depravity; and a Social Darwinist ethos of winner-takes-all, wilderness preservation, and fear of the tenuousness of civilization. Considering the convolution of these four men's perspectives, it is reasonable to assume that the rest of the American populace espoused opinions that were even more complex.

It would be a mistake to regard the contradictory conceptions of wilderness and civilization as having no bearing on American life. The perspectives' divergence spelled the difference between industrialists, conservationists, and preservationists, and between white supremacists, assimilationists, and supporters of tribal rights. As the twentieth century dawned, Americans debated which path their country should take. Should the United States experiment with international imperialism? Should it expand its industrial powers to pursue an ideal of material progress? Or, as more radical minds proposed, should it abandon either or both projects as ruinous to its moral health?¹¹⁵ The values that Americans assigned to wilderness and civilization determined their answers to these questions. Thus, the Harriman Expedition was a microcosm of a chaotic intellectual climate that gave rise to twentieth-century disputes over land development, American treatment of Natives, and international imperialism. The *George W. Elder* pitched and rolled upon a sea of ideas more turbulent than that which sent John Burroughs scurrying to his cabin.

115 Lawlor, *Recalling the Wild*, 194; Mitchell, *Vanishing America*, 5-6, 262-264, 271.