



The

American Nature Writing Newsletter



Number 1

Spring 1989

Editor: Alicia Nitecki

Assistant Editor: Cheryll Burgess

The Woman in the Mountain: Reconstructions of Self and Land by Adirondack Women Writers, edited by Kate Winter. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989.

Lily Bart, the heroine of Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth*, returns from spending a week in the Adirondacks with some socially aspirant acquaintances basking in a sense of "her superiorities." Wharton, however, provides a thematic counterpoint to Lily's social vanity and self-satisfaction by noting that "Perhaps ... her enjoyment proceeded more than she was aware from the physical stimulus of the excursion, the challenge of crisp cold and hard exercise, the responsive thrill of her body to the influences of the winter woods. She returned to town in a glow of rejuvenation, conscious of a clearer colour in her cheeks, a fresh elasticity in her muscles. The future seemed full of a vague promise...." The promise gradually turns to tragedy, however, as the novel painfully charts Lily's seemingly inevitable social demise and death.

By including this moment in the novel, Wharton implies that another future might have been possible for Lily, if she could have only been more "aware" of the sources of her inner well being upon her return from the woods and the mountains. As in all tragedy this sense of "might have been" hovers in the background as we watch the actual course of events

unfold.

To speculate that Lily might have averted her socially determined fate is, of course, futile. Yet the thought persists, in part because of Wharton's brief suggestion, but even more for the fact that historically men and women have managed to disentangle themselves from lives of "quiet desperation," social trivia, and ill health by leaving the city or village behind and reclaiming their spiritual and artistic identity through a life lived close to nature. Thoreau, of course, comes to mind, as do Mary Austin, and, more recently, Gretel Ehrlich.

In large part this theme is the substance of Kate Winter's recent anthology *The Woman in the Mountain: Reconstructions of Self and Land by Adirondack Women Writers*, a critical and historical anthology charting the lives and writing of six women who found in the Adirondacks a source of health, personal growth, and literary inspiration. In her introduction, drawing on the work of Carol Gilligan, Winter appropriately places the writers in the larger context of a feminine approach to landscape, an approach that, as she says, focuses not on domination nor dissection but on "integration and cohesion." Her argument is also important for the light it sheds on contemporary redefinitions of the literary canon, a question that I assume is also part of Winter's thinking in putting together this anthology. Historically speaking,

literature by women that does not coincide with the established perceptions of nature has been all too easily dismissed, or at least relegated to a bottom rung on the literary ladder. By introducing these writers in terms of a new epistemic of nature, Winter simultaneously implies that we need to alter our perceptions of why writing occurs, what forms it takes, and thus ultimately how literature is to be read and critically evaluated. A failure to do so can only result in further misreadings of the past and its texts, further exclusions of "other voices" from the canon.

Not that all of these writers are equally appealing. Of those included here, only Adelaide Crapsey comes close to being a familiar or critically recognized name, although her epiphanic *cinquains* and lyric meditations on death seem less filled with freshly perceived natural life than those of the less known writers she is grouped with. The rest--Jeanne Robert Foster, Lucia Newell Oliviere, Ann LaBastille, Martha Reben, Alice Wolf Gilborn, Jean Rikhoff--will probably be as new to most readers as they were to me. Given the quality and importance of at least some of their work, this lack of familiarity is disconcerting and confirmative of Winter's belief that women who wrote of the Adirondacks (or any region for that matter) have been regularly overlooked by the critical establishment.

Some critical doubts remain, nonetheless. Although I can see the rationale behind including Foster, Oliviere, and Crapsey, and can even find some enjoyment in reading their poems, it is hard not to see their lyrics or dramatic monologues as infected with conventions of nineteenth century language and characterization reminiscent of Riley or Bryant. Crapsey, however, through her attention to verbal and imagistic sparseness, often achieves the exactness and force characteristic of her contemporaries in the Imagist

movement. One wonders what she might have gone on to achieve if she had had the opportunity to feel herself a part of such a literary community.

The anthology feels stronger when it comes to the more recent writers such as Anne LaBastille. Her energetic and exact prose, with its echoes of Thoreau in both spirit and content, sets the tone for the writers who follow her. These include the naturalist and essayist Martha Reben, the essayist, poet, and editor Martha Gilborn, and the novelist Jean Rikhoff. Each of the, achieves in their writing and in their response to the land what Winter describes in her introduction as a fusion of heart and brain. There is feeling here, a sense at times of awe-struck wonder or of transcending one's conventional perception and consciousness for some new identity with the earth, but also verbal originality and precision, an ability to find or invent a new language for new realities and experiences. More often than not, their writing finds its way towards those verbal, and potentially ontological, redefinitions of self and nature that to my thinking characterize the very best nature writing we have, whether it be that of Thoreau, Dillard, Hay, or Erhlich.

Although I suspect none of these writers will last as long as some I have compared them to, their voices are important, both for defining the region of which they wrote and for reminding us that the regions where we live are equally available if we have the heart and mind for exploring them. At their best, each of these writers achieves that fulfillment indicated by Winter's subtitle: a reconstruction of self and land through language. In the midst of so many conflicting opinions about the health and future of the planet, it is important to be reminded of the role that writing, and especially writing stemming from the kind of integrative consciousness represented here, has to play in renewing and repossessing the

earth.

Jamie Hutchinson
Simon's Rock of Bard College

Review: *Words from the Land: Encounters with Natural History Writing*, edited by Stephen Trimble. Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, Inc., 1988.

On a cross-country journey in the fall of 1986, Stephen Trimble interviewed nine of the fifteen writers represented in his anthology *Words from the Land: Encounters with Natural History Writing* (Gibbs M. Smith 1988). An evocative general introduction and brief biographical introductions describe Trimble's own encounters with these writers and their texts. They are a diverse group. One was trained as an art historian, another as a wildlife biologist, and others as a literary critic, a librarian, and a plant ecologist. All call themselves writers first, however, and Trimble discloses that, as writers, "their connection with the land is emotional and pervasive" (2) and that "they have no problems with sounding moral" (26). As Gretal Ehrlich says, "It isn't the landscape that matters so much as the way you live in it" (10).

The book's subtitle's term "natural history writing" suggests Trimble's own interest in natural history, in the matter of fact. Assuming a naturalist's bias in those interviews, he discovers their characteristic denial, and their preference to be called writers. Much of what Trimble reports they say about writing, however--and much of the general introduction is given to this--applies so broadly that, while anecdotal and instructive, it doesn't contribute substantially to an understanding of what writing from nature, more particularly, might be. Some of the interviewed get closer to the natural theme, especially Barry Lopez in his remarks about being "tutored by the

land" (7). But most make versions of this remark by John McPhee: "I know you could call me a nature writer, but it's not the nature that got me into it. It's the writing that got me into it" (4). As explorations of the wide-ranging literature of natural fact occur in the scholarship of the next several years, we will learn better what it means to call someone a "nature writer."

The anthology, with its essays divided by four broad themes--"Journeys," "Other Nations," "Living," and "Widening the Circles"--gives some idea of the range of this literature, even though Trimble admits, necessarily, to exclusions--of fiction and, more importantly, I think, of nonfiction by writers who work as scientists by profession. Trimble also excludes earlier writers, even recent ones. Although his collection is deliberately contemporary, its introduction might have given a fuller account of the reach and history of the literature of natural fact, particularly in view of the observation Trimble attributes to Barry Lopez: that this is "the primary North American contribution to literature" (28). And some of the biographical introductions might have given plainer impressions of the range of works by these writers, some of whom, like Annie Dillard, Edward Hoagland, Peter Matthiessen, and even Edward Abbey, have also done work quite different from nature writing, however defined.

Trimble's anthology offers fine reading, nevertheless, and makes a happy addition to the very short stack of such anthologies, which include books as different as Ann Ronald's *Words for the Wild* (Sierra Club Books 1987), Daniel Halpern's *On Nature* (North Point Press 1987), and William Beebe's *The Book of Naturalists* (Princeton 1988). The writers' personal passions illuminate the world we have in common. Theirs is a remarkable, interdisciplinary literature which comes from, and inspires, exploration out of bounds, in the

Thoreauvian sense.

Judy Anhorn
Norwich University

Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered, by Bill Devall and George Sessions. Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, Inc., 1985.

The environment crisis compels response--or ought to--from every sector of society and from every discipline in academe. The humanities, human-centered by definition, have lagged far behind the sciences in addressing environmental issues, but heartening exception to the pervasive institutional indifference are appearing in every field. In philosophy a movement known as "deep ecology" is rethinking the relation between humans and the environment in order to establish a coherent philosophical grounding for a better way of living on the planet. *Deep Ecology* is a provocative introduction to this philosophy.

Devall and Sessions first define the dominant, modern worldview as one that assumes that "humans are above, superior to or outside the rest of nature," having legitimate dominion over it. They argue that this "human chauvinistic" paradigm with its unquestioning faith in progress and technology, is directly responsible for our present global catastrophe. They review various "reformist" and "resource management" responses to environmental problems, acknowledging their value but concluding that all share anthropocentric assumptions, and, as such, are "shallow," alleviating symptoms without curing the deeper problem. Deep ecology attempts to heal the ailing worldview itself.

The term *deep ecology* was coined in 1973 by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, who articulated the two "ultimate norms" of an alternative worldview: 1. Self-Realization, which refers to an understanding of the self

not as an isolated ego but as deeply connected to the human and the nonhuman world; and 2. Biocentric Equality, which holds that "all organisms and entities in the ecosphere, as parts of the interrelated whole, are equal in intrinsic worth." Devall and Sessions elaborate several more principles, political strategies, and personal lifestyles that follow from these two basic intuitions. (Devall pursues the lifestyle question at greater length in *Simple in Means, Rich in Ends: Practicing Deep Ecology*, Gibbs M. Smith, 1988.) Refraining alike from the pretentious tone of much recent critical writing, and from the mood of panic and gloom that darkens much environmentalist writing, the tenor of this book is humble, hopeful, comforting, sage, the voice of a gentle teacher (skeptics might say guru) leading a troubled world to light.

A helpful chapter on sources identifies many origins of deep ecological thinking: *The Perennial Philosophy* by Aldous Huxley, the pastoral/naturalist literary tradition, the science of ecology, the "new physics," some Christian sources, feminism, the philosophies of primal peoples, and some Eastern spiritual traditions, as well as the writings of Martin Heidegger, Gary Snyder, Robinson Jeffers, John Muir, and David Brower (Aldo Leopold and Rachel Carson are mentioned in an earlier chapter). Other chapters discuss the necessity for wilderness, the need for developing "ecotopian" visions, and the value of "ecological resisting." Eight appendices by different authors focus on Naess's "Ecosophy T," on a specifically feminist view, on Gandhi and Dogen, on Western Process Metaphysics, on anthropocentrism, on ritual, and on Buddhism. The potpourri quality of the book is exaggerated by the many lengthy quotations sprinkled throughout but not integrated into the main text.

Although the book lacks an index, it is thoroughly referenced, amply

footnoted (including citations to unpublished papers), with an annotated bibliography of thirty-one titles, a three-page acknowledgements and credits section (which serves as a kind of unalphabetized bibliography), and an address list of deep ecology action groups. In short, *Deep Ecology* is a goldmine of up-to-date information, requiring the reader to do some digging, sifting, amalgamating, and annealing, but well worth the effort.

Cheryll Burgess
Cornell University

Classroom Notes

A number of people who teach nature writing have sent their syllabi, or course descriptions, and have expressed an interest in learning how others approach the subject.

George Bagby, of Hampden-Sydney College in Virginia, writes that his American Nature Writing course "is not interdisciplinary--just a peculiar kind of American Lit. course--though we do look at the Hudson River and Luminist painters in the first third of the semester." The readings for his course include:

Cooper, *The Pathfinder*; *Walden*; Emily Dickinson's poems; Cather's *O Pioneers!*; *Go Down Moses*; Robert Frost; Emerson's *Nature*; selections from Bryant; Silko's *Ceremony*. The course includes a nature walk.

Glen A. Love, of the University of Oregon in Eugene, teaches Literature and the Environment. He prefaces his syllabus for Winter, 1989 with the following paragraphs:

"Time magazine in its January 2, 1989 issue, names "Endangered Earth" its Person (Planet) of the Year. Amidst Doomsday predictions of global warming, overpopulation, nuclear winter, acid rain, inundation in our own garbage, the literary-critical establishment has decided, inexplicably, that the relationship between the biological earth and literature is not something that needs serious attention.

When the subject arises, it is likely to be assigned to some category such as 'regionalism' or 'nature writing,' obscure pigeonholes whose very titles announce their insignificance.

Joseph W. Meeker, in a courageous book published in 1974, and entitled *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology*, attempted to address the issues squarely. His book was ignored by the reviewers and went virtually unnoticed. Still, it can be our starting-point, because it confronts the essentials, and does so even more strongly today, after a decade in which the problems have grown increasingly worse in being deliberately ignored.

Meeker writes: 'Human beings are the earth's only literary creatures ... If the creation of literature is an important characteristic of the human species, it should be examined carefully and honestly to discover its influence upon human behavior and the natural environment--to determine what role, if any, it plays in the welfare and survival of mankind and what insight it offers into human relationships with other species and with the world around us. Is it an activity which adapts us better to the world or one which estranges us from it? From the unforgiving perspective of evolution and natural selection, does literature contribute more to our survival than it does to our extinction?"

The readings for Love's course include: *The Old Man and the Sea*; *Land of Little Rain*; *Words for the Wild*; Robinson Jeffers *Selected Poems*; Eiseley's *The Star Thrower*.

He asks the students to address these problems:

1. What is the right relationship between mankind and nature?
2. How does our attitude toward nature affect our reading of literature?
3. Conversely, how does our attitude toward literature affect our 'reading' of nature?
4. If humanism insists upon the

supreme importance of the individual personality, should we be humanists? Inhumanists?

5. What is beneath what the naturalists were fond of calling 'the thin veneer of civilization'? Is it a barbarian or a kinder, gentler creature?

6. How can Americans be, at once, among the greatest destroyers of nature and yet among its most devoted preservers?

Phillip G. Terrie teaches "Wilderness in American Culture" at Bowling Green State University. He describes the course as "a study of cultural and environmental values as expressed in a variety of documents--including exploration and travel narratives and the literature of contemplation." His readings include, *A Tour on the Prairies*; Headley's *The Adirondack*; Parkman's *The Oregon Trail*; *The Maine Woods* by Thoreau; *The Mountains of California* by Muir; Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*, and Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*.

Terrie asks students to consider the following questions:

"1. Who or what made the landscape? Why?

2. How much knowledge or current science does the writer show? How does she or he show it?

3. How do current trends in science shape the response to nature?

4. Is nature static or dynamic?

5. What is the writer's attitude toward nature? Should wilderness be eliminated? Preserved? Why? Are the writer's attitudes toward wilderness shaped by utilitarian, aesthetic, spiritual, or other factors? Does the writer display an ambivalence toward wilderness? Is the writer comfortable, contented, disoriented, fearful, in the wilderness?

6. What is the attitude toward progress? Materialism?

7. What evidence is there of anti-modernism? Primitivism?

8. What are the writer's rhetorical strategies? Conscious or unconscious artistry? Metaphor or image patterns?

Favorite words? A specific kind of vocabulary (e.g., scientific, lyrical, sentimental, religious, visual)? Resort to stock vocabulary? What kinds of details are emphasized? Which are minimized? Left out altogether?

9. What is the structure of the work? Chronological? Topical? Shaped by journey?

10. What kinds of landscapes does the writer prefer? What are the writer's aesthetic principles?

11. What kinds of events or circumstances produce moments of reverie, transcendence?

12. What are dramatic, climatic events?

Gyorgi Voros is teaching "Earth Wisdom: Literature and Ecology" at Hollins College in Virginia. "This course," she writes, "explores Western and non-Western relationship to nature and to wilderness--the sacred place--as expressed in folklore, myth, poetry, stories and novels. Readings include George Sessions and Bill Devall's *Deep Ecology*, chapters from Genesis, Cherokee creation myths, Shakespeare's *Tempest*, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, the sayings of Chuang Tzu, Basho's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, Thoreau's *Walden*, Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, Native American folktales, the poetry of Gary Snyder, and the essays of Wendell Berry."

Publications

Lyon, Thomas J. *This Incomperable Land: A Book of American Nature Writings*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. 1989.

Mecker, Joseph, *Minding the Earth: Thinly Disguised Essays on Environmental Ethics*. California: Latham Foundation. 1988.

Merrill, Lynn. *The Victorian Romance of Nature*. New York: Oxford University Press. 1989.

Winter, Kate H. *The Woman in the Mountain: Reconstruction of Self and Land by Adirondack Women Writers*. Albany: SUNY Press. 1989.

Bell, Barbara Currier. "Non-Identical Twins: Nature in 'The Gardent Party' and 'The Grave.'" *The Comparativist*, 12 (May 1988): 58-66.

Forthcoming

Anhorn, Judy Schaaf. "Natural Fact and Spiritual Fact in the Writings of Annie Dillard," to appear in *Letterature d'America*. Fall. 1990.

Bennett, Paula. *Emily Dickinson*. Harvester Press, Indiana University Press, Fall, 1989.

Begiebing, Robert and Vernon Owen Grumbling, eds. *The Literature of Nature in the English and American Traditions*. Plexus Publishing, Inc. A critical/historical anthology of classic nature literature designed for college courses.

Bryant, Paul T. an essay on Edward Abbey's environmental quixoticism to appear in *Western American Literature*. May 1989.

_____: an essay on the effects of 19th century American nature writers on our vision of the American West in *The Frontier in American Literature*. Texas A&M University Press, Fall, 1989.

Fast, Robin Riley. "Nature and Creative Power: Pat Mora and Patricia Haupt. *San Jose Studies*. Spring, 1989.

Hilbert, Betsy. An essay on women nature writes to appear in *CEA Forum*, 1989.

Horvitz, Howard. "'Ours by the

Law of Nature': Romance and Independents on Mark 'Twain's River," to appear in *Boundary 2*, 1989.

_____: *"By the Law of Nature": Form and Value in Nineteenth Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

Sayre, Robert F. *Take the Next Exit: How to See the Iowa Vernacular Landscape*. Iowa: Iowa University Press, 1989. An environmental history of Native American, pioneer farmer, Mormon emigrant and recreationist practices on what is now Mormon Handcart Park, Iowa City.

Scheese, Donald F. "Aldo Leopold and the Language of Landscape," *North Dakota Quarterly*.

_____: "Changes in an Iowan Landscape," in *Take the Next Exit*.

In Progress

Anhorn, Judy Schaaf. *Thoreau in the Maine Woods: A Naturalist's Education*.

Bagby, George. An essay on Bryant and Emerson.

Bell, Barbara Currier. *Encountering Nature: Basic Roles for Humankind in the Natural World*.

Nitecki, Alicia. "Vision, Perspective and the Native Idiom in the Essays of John Burroughs."

_____: a book on 19th century American naturalists.

Sheats, Paul: a book on John Muir.

Terrie, Philip G.: a book on wilderness travel narratives covering the territory from Bartram to the present.

_____: an essay on Francis Parkham.

Dissertations

Rosenthal, Melinda. *Obtaining Her Own Extent: the Singular Quest of Emily Dickinson*. University of California, Riverside.

Scheese, Donald F. *Inhabitants of the Wild: Henry Thoreau, John Muir, Aldo Leopold, and Edward Abbey*. University of Iowa.

Slovic, Scott H. *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing Since Thoreau*. Brown University.

Conferences

Sixth Annual Sitka Summer Writers Symposium. This year's theme, "Allegiances: Locating Ourselves in Place and Culture." June 11-17, 1989, Sitka. Address: Sitka Summer Writers Symposium, Box 2420, Sitka, Alaska 99835. (907)747-3794.

Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial. The Cather Memorial Prairie, a prairie restoration project in central Nebraska, is sponsoring a three-day nature writing workshop by James Work. July 14-16. Address: Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial, 326 N. Webster, Red Cloud NE 68970.

Thoreau Society, Inc. Annual meeting July 15, 1989, Concord. Address: Anne R. McGrath, Curator, The Thoreau Lyceum, 156 Belknap Street, Concord, Ma. 01742. (617)369-5912.

1989 Conference of the Society for Literature and Science. September 21-24, 1989, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Address: Professor Kenneth J. Knoespel, Program Chair, 1989 SLS Conference, Department of English,

Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta, Georgia 30332.

West Virginia University Fourteenth Annual Colloquium on Modern Language and Film. This year's theme, "The Relationship between Man and the Environment in Modern Literature and Film." October 13-14, 1989, Morgantown. Deadline for abstracts May 15. Address: Janice Spleth, WVU, Morgantown, WV 26506.

Annual Conference of the Vermont Council on the Humanities. November, 1989. This year's theme, "Suspect Terrain: The American Literature of Natural Fact." Address: Judy Anhorn, Department of English, Norwich University, Northfield, VT 05663.

Call for Papers

Interpreting Nature Across the Disciplines: Women's Views. October 1990, Bentley College. The focus of this conference is on humankind's changing relation to nature and the ways in which that relationship is expressed by women working in the various disciplines. The conference will examine the possibilities which the nature movements of the last hundred years have opened to women, and the role which nature movements and the environment have played, and continue to play, in women's lives. Address: Alicia Nitecki, Department of English, Bentley College, Waltham, Ma. 02254. Phone: (617)891-2641.

Journals

The John Burroughs Association announces that the forthcoming issue of the *John Burroughs Review* will be devoted largely to William D. Perkins' index to the works, entitled "The

Collected Works of John Burroughs;
Index to the Volumes; Their Names,
Contents, and Numbers Associated with
Them." Address: John Burroughs
Association, Inc. 15 West 77th St.,
New York, NY 10024.

Orion Nature Quarterly. Aina Niemela,
Managing Editor, writes that the next
issues of Orion will be as follows:
Summer: ecosystem observation;
Autumn: land use and human values;
Winter: "people who make a difference
in healing the earth;
Spring: animals and people sharing the
world;
Summer 1990: the contributions of
indigenous cultures to the man/nature
relationship. The summer and autumn
issues are in production. The editors
are accepting proposals for the others.
Address: Aina Niemela, Managing
Editor, *Orion Nature Quarterly*, Box
420, Great Barrington, MA 02130.

* * *

The fall issue of the newsletter
will include a bibliography of American
women nature writers compiled by
Betsy Hilbert and reviews of recent
books by Lyon, Meeker and Merrill.
Address all contributions and
correspondence to Alicia Nitecki,
Department of English, Bentley
College, Waltham, MA 02254

* * *