

## Travelling in Wilderness

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The proliferation of academic work on travel writing, on the concept of wilderness, and on nature writing notwithstanding, few scholars have looked at wilderness *and* travel writing in a sustained way.<sup>1</sup> In order to survey the topic, it is helpful to distinguish between 'wild' and 'wilderness', and one good starting place is in the United States, where lands are set aside and managed by federal agencies to be 'the last little places where intrinsic nature totally wails, blooms, nests, glints away', in the words of ecopoet Gary Snyder.<sup>2</sup> Those lands are protected under the Wilderness Act of 1964, whose most oft-quoted passage reads:

A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.<sup>3</sup>

The Act gives the term 'wilderness' an important political history. But it also has a rich linguistic genealogy. Scholars trace the word to Old English *wilde*, meaning untamed, and *déor*, beast. In keeping with this etymology, historian Roderick Nash argues that wilderness originally meant a place for untamed beasts, and he locates the term in the Old English poem *Beowulf*, the tale of a young warrior who saves the Danes from the terror and destruction spread by the monster Grendel. Nash and others believe that the poem is a founding text for understanding wilderness spaces.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> One notable exception is Kylie Crane's work: *Myths of Wilderness in Contemporary Narratives: Environmental Postcolonialism in Australia and Canada* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) and 'Wilderness Effects and Wild Affects in Contemporary UK Nature/Travel Writing', in Ina Habermann and Daniela Keller (eds.), *English Topographies in Literature and Culture: Space, Place, and Identity* (Amsterdam: Brill, 2016), pp. 41–57.

<sup>2</sup> Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild* (1990; Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2003), p. 175.

<sup>3</sup> The Wilderness Act of 1964. 'Wilderness Connect', The Wilderness Institute, University of Montana, [www.wilderness.net/nwps/legisact](http://www.wilderness.net/nwps/legisact).

<sup>4</sup> Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 5th edn (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014). Robert Macfarlane also notices that *Beowulf* is filled with 'wildéors', in *The Wild Places* (2007; London: Penguin, 2008), p. 31.

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'Wild' follows a different path, representing anything not deliberately controlled by human beings. Wild can exist almost anywhere, even a bird's nest lodged atop a streetlight in downtown Chicago. Snyder insists that 'wildness' is not a place but a process involving any phenomenon not concerning human agency: 'The involuntary quick turn of the head at a shout, the vertigo at looking off a precipice, the heart-in-the-throat in a moment of danger, the catch of the breath, the quiet moments relaxing, staring, reflecting.'<sup>5</sup> William Cronon, picking up Snyder's idea, argues that 'wildness (as opposed to wilderness) can be found anywhere'.<sup>6</sup> In other words, our minds, bodies, and imaginations are wild, containing too many thoughts and emotions for the intellect to track. Wildness, then, can be a part of any travel writing. Travel writing through wilderness spaces is a different story.

### Early European and American Travel Writing and Wilderness

Wilderness travel writing came into its own during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Europeans who travelled to and wrote about the so-called New World laid the groundwork for the concept of wilderness that the USA later codified. Those same European writers later influenced Americans who travelled their own country, helping further to shape the concept of wilderness. In the wide-ranging travels of early Americans, some of the landscapes they traversed were wildernesses.

Yet whether in wilderness or not, much global travel during this period focused on ethnography and scientific collection. The British traveller and administrator Joseph Banks, president of the Royal Society and friend of King George III, corresponded with thousands of people around the globe in search of specimens for science and commerce.<sup>7</sup> Ironically, these expeditions supplied Banks with plants for London's Kew Gardens, a tightly managed, un-wild space. Many of these agents of empire kept journals, maintained

<sup>5</sup> Snyder, *Practice of the Wild*, p. 17.

<sup>6</sup> William Cronon, 'The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature', in William Cronon (ed.), *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), pp. 69–91 (at p. 89).

<sup>7</sup> The most illuminating source on Banks's reach is Warren R. Dawson, *The Banks Letters: A Calendar of the Manuscript Correspondence of Sir Joseph Banks* (London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1958). Harold Carter notes that the global total of Banks' letters to and from various emissaries of science and commerce is over 20,000. See *The Letters of Sir Joseph Banks: A Selection, 1768–1820*, ed. Neil Chambers (London: Imperial College Press, 2000), p. xvii.

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correspondence, and wrote travel books punctuated by comments about wild lands.

In 1786, for example, Banks requested that Philadelphia resident Humphry Marshall send him a couple of hundred pounds of fresh ginseng roots. Marshall did not go himself, but dispatched his nephew and a guide on a 200-mile journey across the Allegheny mountains. They were 'obliged to encamp in the mountains, strike up a fire and lie by it all night, in the morning . . . climb up the sides of the mountain, and dig till towards evening, and then bring what they had dug to their camp, and cook their morsel and eat it'.<sup>8</sup> The very wilderness that provided Banks with specimens helped create the knowledge system that would eventually threaten to destroy it.

Marshall's account reads as a challenging camping trip next to those of other travellers who used wilderness settings to stress true dangers. Andrew Kippis chronicled Captain James Cook's three voyages in 1768, 1772, and 1776.<sup>9</sup> The first of these carried Banks, who collected over 1,000 new plant specimens. In the travel narrative, danger lurked everywhere, especially in wilderness. Kippis recounts the crew's approach to Trinity Bay in northeastern Australia in a leaking ship where they tried to get ashore: 'How horrible must be their fate, to be condemned to languish out the remainder of their lives in desolate wilderness.'<sup>10</sup> But it is not just landscape that makes the wilderness unsettling. Kippis lists native 'rudeness' and nakedness, lack of English manners, lack of 'commerce' or English social life, and above all, lack of domestic comfort among the horrors of such a place.

Mungo Park's narratives likewise use wilderness to detail English suffering for the cause of empire. Park, a Scottish surgeon, was sent to West Africa by Joseph Banks in 1795 to locate the source of the Niger River. He encounters many hardships, but none worse than being ambushed by elephant hunters who rob him and take his clothes. 'After they were gone', he writes, 'I sat for some time looking around me with amazement and terror. Whichever way I turned . . . I saw myself in the midst of a vast wilderness . . . naked and alone; surrounded by savage animals, and men still more savage. I was five hundred

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in William Darlington, *Memorials of John Bertram and Humphrey Marshall* (Philadelphia: Lindsay & Blakiston, 1849), p. 561.

<sup>9</sup> See also *The Journals of Captain James Cook on his Voyages of Discovery*, ed. J. C. Beaglehole (Cambridge University Press, 1955–74).

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Kippis, *The Life of Captain James Cook* (Dublin: Printed for Messrs. H. Chamberlain, W. Colles, R. Cross, et al., 1788), pp. 123–4.

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miles from the nearest European settlement.<sup>11</sup> Like Kippis's account of Cook, Park views wilderness as a savage desert, frightening for its immensity and unfamiliarity. In Kippis's writing, the nakedness of native peoples signifies rudeness, but in Park's account, he is the one who is naked and vulnerable.

Alexander von Humboldt, on the other hand, found wonder in wilderness and its unfamiliarity. A Prussian traveller in South America from 1799–1804, Humboldt was one of the century's most important natural history writers, inspiring generations to come. Humboldt uses the term 'wild' to refer to horses, mules, mountains, plants, sea coasts, people, villages, panoramic views, and much more. In Humboldt's wilderness, humans vanish. In South America, he notices the great scale of wilderness.<sup>12</sup> Elsewhere, he writes that travellers from Europe who first arrive in South America find a world of wonderful strangeness: 'He perceives at every step, that he is not upon the verge, but in the center [of] a vast continent, where the mountains, the rivers, and the mass of vegetation, and everything else, are gigantic.'<sup>13</sup> But in Humboldt's work modern readers notice something else: surprise. He writes of the 'freshness' of vegetation and encountering things that bear only 'a faint resemblance' to anything the traveller has experienced before. Thanks to Humboldt, celebrating the unfamiliar would become a staple of future wilderness travel writing.<sup>14</sup>

Even so, wilderness long intimidated early American travellers in their own country. William Bradford jumped off the *Mayflower* in 1620 onto the forested land of the eastern USA to find a 'hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men'.<sup>15</sup> Early Judeo-Christians perceived wilderness as a cursed place, and this concept held powerful sway over early Americans.<sup>16</sup> Their reading of the Bible would have made them think of Adam and Eve exiled from the garden into a wilderness of isolation; the

<sup>11</sup> Mungo Park, *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa, Performed under the Direction and Patronage of the African Association, in the Years 1795, 1796, and 1797* (1799; Edinburgh, 1860), p. 225.

<sup>12</sup> Alexander von Humboldt, *Personal Narrative of Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of America during the Years 1799–1804*, ed. and trans. Thomasina Ross, 3 vols. (London: George Bell & Sons, 1845), vol. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Alexander von Humboldt and William MacGillivray, *Travels and Researches of Alexander von Humboldt* (London: T. Nelson and Sons, 1855), p. 78.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Hulme ed., 'Alexander von Humboldt and America', Special Issue of *Studies in Travel Writing*, 15/1 (2011).

<sup>15</sup> William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation, 1620–1647*, ed. Samuel Eliot Morison (New York: Rutgers University Press, 1952), p. 62.

<sup>16</sup> John C. Hendee, George H. Stankey, and Robert C. Lucas, *Wilderness Management* (s.l.: Forest Service, US Department of Agriculture, 1978), p. 10.

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Israelites wandering the wilderness for forty years as punishment; and Christ tempted by Satan in the wilderness before he is crucified.

Yet early travel writers also imbued American wilderness with beauty. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the writings of William Bartram, a botanical collector from Pennsylvania, who wrote in the early 1790s. Bartram was hired by an English physician to travel the southeast finding new plants for medicine and commerce. Learning from Creek and Cherokee Indians, Bartram fulfilled the task, noting, for instance, that *Sassafras officinalis* (sassafras; dried root bark) could be used as a drink to 'purify blood and juices' as well as a cure for yaws.<sup>17</sup> In so doing, he also idealised the landscape, establishing an important thread in wilderness travel writing. He speaks of the land's 'sylvan elegance', strikingly different from Bradford's perception of its 'hideous[ness]'. He pays tribute to the 'cheerful meadows, and high distant forests, which in grand order presented themselves to view', as if the land were rising up to shake hands with him.<sup>18</sup> This view of wilderness – aesthetic enjoyment versus economic value – would seem to be a contradiction, but for Bartram the two were compatible.<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, Francis Parkman managed to combine danger and wonder in his 1849 *The Oregon Trail: Sketches of Prairie and Rocky-Mountain Life* about his travels in the American West. Here he writes from the Wyoming Territory: 'I looked round for some indications to show me where I was . . . I might as well have looked for landmarks in the midst of the ocean . . . Around me the prairie was rolling in steep swells and pitches, without a single distinctive feature to guide me.'<sup>20</sup> The relatively benign prairie becomes as psychologically distressing as Bradford's spiritual wilderness. But more importantly, Parkman characterises the landlocked prairie as fluid – a metaphoric ocean – revealing how mutable wilderness travel could be.

<sup>17</sup> William Bartram, 'Observations on the Creek and Cherokee Indians', in *William Bartram on the Southeast Indians*, ed. Gregory A. Waselkov and Kathryn E. Holland Brand (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), pp. 139–86 (at p. 163). Also see Laura E. Ray, 'Podophyllum Peltatum and Observations on the Creek and Cherokee Indians: William Bartram's Preservation of Native American Pharmacology', *Yale Journal of Biology and Medicine*, 82/1 (2009), 25–36.

<sup>18</sup> William Bartram, *Travels through North & South Carolina, Georgia, East & West Florida*. . . (Philadelphia: James & Johnson, 1791), p. 49.

<sup>19</sup> A point made in Philip G. Terrie, 'Tempests and Alligators: The Ambiguous Wilderness of William Bartram', *North Dakota Quarterly*, 59/2 (1991), 17–32.

<sup>20</sup> Francis Parkman, Jr, *The Oregon Trail: Sketches of Prairie and Rocky-Mountain Life* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1892).

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Wilderness Travel Writing of the Twentieth and  
Twenty-First Centuries

Humboldt called one of his books *Personal Narrative of a Journey to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent*. Although his personal observations dominate his work, human interaction plays a small role. Mary Louise Pratt refers to this perspective as the travel narrative genre's tendency to fix wild landscapes in a timeless present with the traveller's eye registering sights and sounds.<sup>21</sup>

'Personal narrative' means something different to modern travellers, who observe wilderness through a highly subjective lens, weaving life story with travel, ethnography, and heightened historical awareness. For instance, the closing essay in Joni Tevis's 2015 *The World Is On Fire: Scrap, Treasure, and Songs of the Apocalypse*, set in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, blends personal insight, Native American lore, and small details against a bigger-than-life landscape:

I find a twist of soft underworld, *quiviut*, snagged on a bush and tuck it into my field guide to save. It would have been better, maybe, if I had left something in its place ... to acknowledge a certain reciprocity. The Dena'ina, a Native tribe who live in central Alaska, teach that 'when a person harvests a medicinal plant in the mountains, besides speaking correctly to it, he should also leave a small gift, such as a thread of match or bit of tobacco, in place of the plant'.<sup>22</sup>

Rather than pluck specimens by the thousands as early travellers did, Tevis does so minimally and with conscience and self-doubt. She acknowledges the political-historical layers of the wilderness she crosses.

Tevis's mention of *quiviut* also highlights how modern travellers view wild landscapes through language. Robert Macfarlane uses extensive place-based terminology to discuss wild landscapes. In *The Wild Places*, he lists 'hill-forts, barrows and tumuli in the Welsh Marshes and in the 'peaks and littorals' of England's North country'.<sup>23</sup> He perfects the connection between language and wildness in *Landmarks*, which contains landscape glossaries. Part of being a traveller in wild places, he argues, is knowing what things are called and how they are ecologically connected. Still others use rich diction while purposefully rejecting the explorer's penetrating gaze. Richard Nelson in

<sup>21</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, 'Scratches on the Face of the Country; or, What Mr. Barrow Saw in the Land of the Bushmen', *Critical Inquiry*, 12/1 (1985), 119–43.

<sup>22</sup> Joni Tevis, *The World Is On Fire: Scrap, Treasure, and Songs of the Apocalypse* (Minneapolis, MI: Milkweed, 2015), p. 189.

<sup>23</sup> Macfarlane, *Wild Places*, p. 8.

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*The Island Within* travels to a wilderness somewhere in the US Pacific Northwest, but he never lets readers know where it is 'to respect the island's right of privacy and to preserve its solitude'.<sup>24</sup>

Other twentieth- and twenty-first-century travellers turn radically inward, merging travel writing, wilderness, and memoir. Inward and outward journeys coincide dramatically in Peter Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard*, one of the great wilderness travel texts in English. Matthiessen accompanied the naturalist George Schaller to the remote Crystal Mountain monastery, a Tibetan Buddhist sanctuary in Nepal's Dolpo region. Outwardly, he and Schaller, aided by Sherpa porters, search for a rare breed of Himalayan sheep, while Matthiessen also looks for the elusive snow leopard. All the while, Matthiessen experiences a difficult inner journey: grief over his ex-wife's death from cancer and his eight-year-old son's anger. He returns to the lowlands without glimpsing a snow leopard. But the point of Matthiessen's journey is Buddhist in nature, taking joy in the moment and accepting that life does not reveal everything. As he leaves the mountains, he writes: 'Butter tea and wind pictures, the Crystal Mountain, and blue sheep dancing on the snow – it's quite enough! Have you seen the snow leopard? No! Isn't that wonderful?'<sup>25</sup>

Family is another rich theme in modern wilderness travel literature. Like Matthiessen, Terry Tempest Williams uses a wilderness journey to come to terms with her mother's battle with ovarian cancer, but in Williams's case, she travels the Great Salt Lake as its rising waters threaten birds of Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge. In *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*, Williams astutely observes relationships in the natural and human worlds. 'It is here in the marshes with the birds that I seal my relationship to the Great Salt Lake. I could never have anticipated its rise', she writes. And then: 'My mother was aware of a rise on the left side of her abdomen.'<sup>26</sup> Lake, refuge, and mother become interchangeable.

Cheryl Strayed's *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail* is also motivated by her mother's death. Along her journey, Strayed combats self-doubt, writing not only about her mother, but also about her first marriage and her reckless past. Her route alternates through wilderness and national forests and sometimes along roads and through towns. In the end, she finds redemption. 'Fear, to a great extent, is born of a story we tell ourselves, and

<sup>24</sup> Richard Nelson, *The Island Within* (New York: Vintage, 1989), p. xii.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Matthiessen, *The Snow Leopard* (1978; New York: Penguin, 2016), p. 242.

<sup>26</sup> Terry Tempest Williams, *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (1991; New York: Vintage, 2001), p. 22.

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so I chose to tell myself a different story from the one women are told', she writes.<sup>27</sup> Yet Strayed takes the inner journey deeper than most wilderness writers so that the outside landscape nearly disappears.<sup>28</sup> In these texts and others, wilderness is a place to heal from grief, seek spiritual awareness, and confront fears.

Confronting fears is more serious for African American travel writers, who grapple with the legacy of slavery and lynching in wild lands. Evelyn White's 1999 travel essay, 'Black Women and the Wilderness', concerns her unease in Oregon's Cascade Mountains as a black woman. 'My genetic memory of ancestors hunted down and preyed upon in rural settings counters my fervent hopes of finding peace in the wilderness', she writes.<sup>29</sup> The courage to confront one's fears runs also through Rahawa Haile's travel essay. Haile, who identifies herself as 'a queer black woman', hiked the Appalachian Trail in 2016. She writes bluntly about the difficulties that dog her and other black hikers, such as seeing the Confederate flag whipping in the wind at a campground in Georgia. At the same time, Haile celebrates the bonds she forges: 'The weight I carried as a black woman paled in comparison with the joy I felt daily among my peers in that wilderness.'<sup>30</sup> Scholar and wilderness traveller Carolyn Finney similarly observes that unacknowledged biases of race and class often discourage black Americans from wilderness travel.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Cheryl Strayed, *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail* (New York: Knopf, 2012), p. 51.

<sup>28</sup> Some critics have argued that *Wild* is not a wilderness travel narrative because it is too internal. See, for example, Jim Hinch's 25 July 2013 article in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*: 'Wild is . . . an *Eat, Pray, Love*-style autobiographical quest that only happens to be set in the outdoors', <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/lost-on-the-pacific-crest-trail>.

<sup>29</sup> Evelyn White, 'Black Women and the Wilderness', in Robert Finch and John Elder (eds.), *Norton Book of Nature Writing* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), pp. 1063-7; (at p. 1064).

<sup>30</sup> Rahawa Haile, 'Going It Alone', *Outside Magazine*, 11 April 2017, [www.outsideonline.com/2170266/solo-hiking-appalachian-trail-queer-black-woman](http://www.outsideonline.com/2170266/solo-hiking-appalachian-trail-queer-black-woman). As Cassan van Johnson and J. M. Bowker point out, 'The slave stood as an antonym to the American myth of unrestricted wilderness exploration' and therefore black hikers have felt torn about travelling in wilderness. 'African-American Wildland Memories', *Environmental Ethics*, 26/1 (2004), 57-75; (at p. 64).

<sup>31</sup> Carolyn Finney, 'Landscapes of Exclusion', interview by Hope Wabuke, *Guernica: A Magazine of Art & Politics*, 15 September 2015, [www.guernicamag.com/landscapes-of-exclusion](http://www.guernicamag.com/landscapes-of-exclusion). Also see Carolyn Finney, *Black Faces, White Spaces: Reimagining the Relationship of African Americans to the Great Outdoors* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

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## The Myth of the Pristine in Wilderness Travel Writing

Ecocriticism, the method of reading literature through nature's lens, frowns on travel writers who look only inward without considering the historical price of wilderness.<sup>32</sup> One ecocritic, Kylie Crane, claims, 'a residue of the problems of wilderness – the displacement of peoples in particular – remains in discussions of the wild'.<sup>33</sup> Crane is referring to formally declared wilderness. She sees 'wilderness' as a problematic term because she defines it as a pristine place devoid of humans.<sup>34</sup> However, while wilderness travel writing has a dark history, it also has a subtler context.

For example, many early American writers did not think of wilderness as pristine and uninhabited and ready to be conquered. Bartram is in East Florida near Mountain Royal and Lake George when he comes upon 'a noble Indian highway',<sup>35</sup> which he describes as 'magnificent'.<sup>36</sup> Those like Bartram who ventured into country unsettled by whites often encountered Native peoples who travelled complex trail networks. Such writers acknowledged wilderness as Indian homeland. Gifford Pinchot, first chief of the Forest Service, visited the Bitterroot Mountains (later the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness) in 1896. He wrote in his travel journal of the Indians' systematic burning of forests, which perturbed him since he saw timber as a resource.<sup>37</sup> Still, Pinchot recognises that Native peoples not only dwelled in but also managed wilderness.

From Bartram to Pinchot, many wilderness travel writers understood that what might be wild to white people was home to First Peoples. This is not to say that many did not strip Native people of their homes or turn them into garish entertainment. In 1833, artist George Catlin crassly called for a 'national park' where tourists could see the Indian 'in his classic attire, galloping his

<sup>32</sup> Ken Hiltner (ed.), *Ecocriticism: The Essential Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2015) charts the rise and growth of the field of ecocriticism, which has many subgenres. The journal *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment* features the field's cutting-edge trends.

<sup>33</sup> Crane, 'Wilderness Effects and Wild Affects', pp. 44–5.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>35</sup> Bartram, *Travels through North & South Carolina*, p. 99.

<sup>36</sup> Bartram may be picking up on William Gilpin's concept of the picturesque to describe natural landscapes. William Gilpin, *Observations on several parts of England, particularly the mountains and lakes of Cumberland and Westmoreland relative chiefly to picturesque beauty, made in the year 1772* (London: R. Blamire, 1786).

<sup>37</sup> Gifford Pinchot, 1896 Selway River Diary, University of Idaho Library, Wilderness Archive. Original Source: Library of Congress. Manuscript Division. Gifford Pinchot Papers. Box 3030, 20.

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horse ... amid the fleeting herds of elks and buffaloes'.<sup>38</sup> This attitude, combined with the subsequent Indian wars and removal, erased the Indians' legacy for some, though not all, writers, replacing it with natural history seemingly devoid of people.

Yet Native peoples had been narrating wilderness travel stories for thousands of years.<sup>39</sup> Elizabeth Wilson, a relative of Chief Joseph who recorded her oral histories in the 1970s, talks repeatedly of wilderness in the land that later became the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness. She tells dozens of animal stories, about a mountain goat who lived 'way way up in the wilderness', about salmon and birds who can speak, and about the famous trickster figure, Coyote. Wilson says: 'The way my aunt went and got her guidance spirit, contact with animal or whatever it is, the medicine man, they kept on dancing every winter. They got stronger and power came to them. It must have been those times when everything was different. Clear air and wilderness and they could get in touch with animals like that.'<sup>40</sup> Wilson's stories are even today an integral part of Bitterroot Wilderness history in US Forest Service publications.

The original framers of the Wilderness Act likewise did not see wilderness as untouched. They knew humans had travelled and told stories about these spaces for millennia. But preservationists feared the land would be destroyed through settlement and development. Passing the Act was a tough battle. Howard Zahniser, one of the Act's primary authors, wrote sixty-six drafts over eight years. Admittedly, since the Act was shaped in the late 1950s and early 1960s, it retains some language (like 'value' or 'primitive') now regarded more critically. But the Wilderness Act is a valiant attempt to set aside land from degradation, a place in the modern world where natural processes are managed thoughtfully but can mostly do their own thing, and where animals can live more or less undisturbed.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 3.

<sup>39</sup> One of many writers to explore the long history of aboriginal and folk traditions, some dealing with adventures and quests, is David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in the More-than-Human World* (New York: Vintage, 1997).

<sup>40</sup> Elizabeth Wilson interviewed by Loran Olsen, Lapwai, Idaho, 1971. Washington State University, Nez Perce Music Archive, Loran Olsen Collection.

<sup>41</sup> J. Baird Callicott, 'Contemporary Criticisms of the Received Wilderness Idea', *USDA Forest Service Proceedings RMRS-P-15, 1* (2000), 24-31.

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## Travel Writing and the Wilderness Act

Travel writing shaped designated wilderness areas in two ways. First, as discussed, early European and American travel writers who ventured through wild areas laid the groundwork for the formal definition of wilderness. Second, those who knew that wild spaces had to be protected by an Act of Congress developed the idea of the Wilderness Act by writing about their wilderness travels. Such writing differed from early travel narratives. It took forms we do not think of as travel writing: field notes, policy statements, newsletters, narratives about small land parcels, and mental travels while sitting on a bench. Even the Act itself can be considered a kind of wilderness travel writing. Whereas previous writers travelled wilderness in the name of commerce or science, the authors of the Wilderness Act travelled in order to conserve the land for future generations, and thus their discourse had to take a different form.

Bob Marshall is a prime example. In 1926, Marshall made a backcountry trip through Montana's Bitterroot Mountains. Although known for his long hikes, that trip helped mould him into the visionary conservationist who pioneered the US Wilderness Preservation System, which currently consists of 110 million acres in forty-four states. He wrote about his 1926 trip, 'I had the chance of standing at its edge in mid-winter, before this wilderness is ruined forever by a highway.'<sup>42</sup> Marshall correctly pegged the era as one of great technological change. In 1900, there were 8,000 registered cars in the US. By 1929, there were over 23 million. In response to car fever, Congress began a major road-building programme. Cars and roads were used primarily for consumerism.<sup>43</sup> Nature tourism grew out of consumer culture.

Not coincidentally, in 1916, when the Federal Aid Highway Act speeded up roadwork, the National Park Service was created to promote enjoyment of wild lands. People packed their cars and drove to new national parks, which often had roads through them, experiencing nature from behind windshields. Edward Abbey, however, later dismisses this practice in his famed *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness*. He argues that national parks should be like wilderness areas – off limits to roads and mechanised traffic:

How dare you imprison your little children in your goddamn upholstered horseless hearse? Yes sir, yes madam, I entreat you, get out of those

<sup>42</sup> Bob Marshall, 'The Growth of a Forester', quoted in James M. Glover, *A Wilderness Original: The Life of Bob Marshall* (Seattle, WA: Mountaineers Books, 1986), pp. 82–3.

<sup>43</sup> Paul Sutter, *Driven Wild: How the Fight Against Automobiles Launched the Modern Wilderness Movement* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015).

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motorized wheelchairs, get off your foam rubber backsides, stand up straight like men! like women! . . . and walk-walk-WALK upon our sweet and blessed land!<sup>44</sup>

In 1930, Marshall defined wilderness as ‘a region which contains no permanent inhabitants, possesses no possibility of conveyance by any mechanical means and is sufficiently spacious that a person in crossing it must have the experience of sleeping out’.<sup>45</sup> In writing wilderness travel, Marshall followed a tradition that began with Henry David Thoreau. ‘It is no exaggeration to say that today all thought of the wilderness flows in *Walden’s* wake’, writes historian Max Oelschlaeger.<sup>46</sup> Importantly, Thoreau linked wilderness to walking. He advocated walking in the wild as the best way to maintain a healthy mind and body and to extract oneself from tedious worldly engagements and walked himself for four hours a day. ‘Walking’, his widely anthologised 1862 essay, is often cited as a defence of wilderness, particularly the line: ‘In wildness is the preservation of the world’, since much of the land Thoreau walked was unsettled at the time.<sup>47</sup> Crucial to Thoreau’s theory of walking was the ‘saunter’, which merged walking, thinking, and writing while avoiding the world of commerce.<sup>48</sup>

Like Thoreau and Marshall, wilderness travel writer John Muir was a celebrated walker. Muir trekked California’s Yosemite and the Sierra Nevada in the 1870s. He made other walks as well – in Canada, Alaska, and Arizona’s Grand Canyon, for instance – catalysing walking as a form of wilderness travel.<sup>49</sup> Yet Muir is best known for his activism, founding the Sierra Club in 1862. Hiking clubs already existed for pleasure and socialising outdoors. The Sierra Club was different: its purpose was to defend wilderness land. Historically, class status determined access to land. The wealthy had hoarded land, begrudgingly letting the landless gather wood or graze animals. By agitating for open access for all through freely available information

<sup>44</sup> Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness* (New York: Ballantine, 1968), p. 262.

<sup>45</sup> Robert Marshall, ‘The Problem of Wilderness’, *Scientific Monthly*, 30/2 (1930), 141–8 (at p. 141).

<sup>46</sup> Max Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), p. 171.

<sup>47</sup> Henry David Thoreau, ‘Walking’, in Richard Lenat (ed.), *The Thoreau Reader Online*, 2009, <https://thoreau.eserver.org>.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> James B. Hunt, *Restless Fires: Young John Muir’s Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf in 1867–68* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2012).

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in the form of travel writing, Muir's Sierra Club insisted that wilderness be democratic.<sup>50</sup>

Walking remains a primary mode of travel in the US wilderness, as well as in wild lands abroad. And because walking is also an act of imagination, as Rebecca Solnit's *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* repeatedly shows, it is well suited to wilderness travel writing.<sup>51</sup> Macfarlane's *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot* also links walking with imagination as he crisscrosses the English countryside. Like Thoreau, he praises sauntering. Walking natural landscapes gives him political and personal liberty. 'Footpaths are mundane in the best sense of that word: "worldly", open to all', he writes.<sup>52</sup> In some cases, however, walking limits wilderness access. Writer Lucia Perillo, who had MS, recounts visiting Mount Rainier where she once worked for the US Fish and Wildlife Service. She laments how for her, 'accessing wilderness now requires collaboration' – friends who lift her out of her chair.<sup>53</sup> Her disability empowers her to question just what travelling through wilderness means against the able-bodied, masculine traditions of Thoreau, Marshall, Abbey, and Macfarlane.<sup>54</sup>

Marshall's 1926 hike across the Bitterroot Mountains inspired his commitment to protecting large swaths of wilderness for foot travel. That same year, Aldo Leopold had his own say on the matter. He advocated for tracts of land big enough to absorb a two weeks' pack trip, devoid of roads, artificial trails, cottages, and 'other works of man'.<sup>55</sup> Leopold's *Sand County Almanac*, a wilderness travel narrative inspired by walking his own property, laid out his famous 'land ethic', a manifesto on ecological interdependence, though of course indigenous people had their own land ethic long before Leopold.<sup>56</sup>

In authoring the Wilderness Act, Zahniser defined wilderness as a walkable space: 'A wilderness . . . is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are *untrammelled* by man, where man himself is a visitor

<sup>50</sup> Muir had contradictory opinions about the Native Americans. He romanticised them for their ability to live off the land yet also called them dirty and estranged from nature.

<sup>51</sup> Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (New York: Viking, 2000).

<sup>52</sup> Robert Macfarlane, *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot* (New York: Viking, 2012), p. 16.

<sup>53</sup> Lucia Perillo, *I've Heard the Vultures Singing: Field Notes on Poetry, Illness, and Nature* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 2007), p. 70.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>55</sup> Aldo Leopold, 'The Wilderness and its Place in Forest Recreation Policy', *Journal of Forestry*, 19 (1921) 718–21.

<sup>56</sup> Aldo Leopold *A Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There* (1949; New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). Here, Leopold declares: 'A land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such' (p. 204).

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who does not remain' (my emphasis).<sup>57</sup> No other word in the Act is more important than 'untrammelled', which Zahniser chose for its poetic subtlety. Trammel means to bind up or constrain, not simply to touch, influence, or walk through. Holmes Rolston III points out, 'Neither the Wilderness Act nor meaningful wilderness designation requires that no humans have ever been present, only that any such people have left the lands "untrammelled".'<sup>58</sup> Read closely, the Wilderness Act is a reversal of the idea of 'pristine' nature.

## Conclusion

As the world population multiplies and the planet suffers the effects of industry, technology, and atmospheric warming, the desire for wild spaces grows. In response, many countries have protected areas for travellers of all kinds. These include not just wildernesses, but also national parks, national monuments, game preserves, safari areas, and cultural lands. Among them are Lake Gairdner National Park in Australia, Kahuzi-Biega National Park in the Congo, Argentina's Nahuel Huapi National Park, Pechora-Ilych Nature Reserve in Russia, Vatnajökull National Park in Iceland, and Indonesia's Kerinci Seblat National Park. Worldwide, new reserves are added all the time. One of the most intriguing developments is 'rewilding', which 'emphasizes the restoration and protection of big wilderness and wide-ranging, large animals – particularly carnivores'.<sup>59</sup> Such spaces are the focus of George Monbiot in his *Feral: Rewilding the Land, the Sea, and Human Life*, which takes readers on a journey around the world to explore rewilded ecosystems.<sup>60</sup>

Even with the possibility of rewilding, the International Union for Conservation of Nature has adopted a definition of wilderness that closely reflects the 1964 Wilderness Act: 'A large area of unmodified or slightly modified land, and/or sea, retaining its natural character and influence, without permanent or significant habitation, which is protected and managed

<sup>57</sup> The Wilderness Act of 1964, [www.wilderness.net/nwps/legisact](http://www.wilderness.net/nwps/legisact).

<sup>58</sup> Holmes Rolston III, 'Natural and Unnatural; Wild and Cultural', *Western North American Naturalist*, 61/3 (2001), 267–76.

<sup>59</sup> Michael Soulé and Reed Noss, 'Rewilding and Biodiversity: Complementary Goals for Continental Conservation', *Wild Earth*, 8/3 (1998), 1–11 (at p. 2). Also see Michael Soulé, 'Debating the Myths of Wilderness', The Wilderness Society (Australia) 2002 Calendar.

<sup>60</sup> George Monbiot, *Feral: Rewilding the Land, the Sea, and Human Life* (University of Chicago Press, 2014). Also see Elizabeth Kolbert, 'Recall of the Wild', *New Yorker*, 24 and 31 December 2012, [www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/12/24/recall-of-the-wild](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/12/24/recall-of-the-wild).

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so as to preserve its natural condition.<sup>61</sup> Still, some criticise this notion of wilderness. Macfarlane insists it is too narrow. He links his own journeys to first travellers to England from 500–1000 CE who were searching for ‘what we might now call wildness’.<sup>62</sup> These solitaries were known as *peregrini*, pilgrims.

Differences aside, ecologists argue that large spaces for wild animal habitat are integral to species’ and the planet’s survival. Particularly important are ‘keystone species’, animals that play a crucial role in an ecosystem as indicators of habitat health. David Henderson links keystone species to wild beasts of texts like *Beowulf*.<sup>63</sup> If a keystone species – a *wildéor* – disappears, the entire ecosystem is in danger of falling apart. J. Baird Callicott believes wilderness discussions should include animal travel. He proposes changing the term ‘wilderness’ to ‘wildlife sanctuaries’.<sup>64</sup> Though we may see a proliferation of animal pilgrims in wilderness, writing about such spaces will always be left to people.

<sup>61</sup> International Union for Conservation of Nature, ‘Category 1b: Wilderness Area’, last modified 2016, [www.iucn.org/theme/protected-areas/about/protected-area-categories/category-1b-wilderness-area](http://www.iucn.org/theme/protected-areas/about/protected-area-categories/category-1b-wilderness-area). For further reading on international concepts of wilderness, see Phillip Vannini and April Vannini, *Wilderness* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>62</sup> Macfarlane, *Wild Places*, p. 22.

<sup>63</sup> The term ‘keystone species’ was coined by zoologist Robert T. Paine. David Henderson, ‘American Wilderness Philosophy’, in *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, [www.iep.utm.edu/am-wild](http://www.iep.utm.edu/am-wild).

<sup>64</sup> Callicott, ‘Contemporary Criticisms’, p. 30.