

Wallace Stegner's Journey into Wilderness

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A little less boosterism, a little less mobility . . . a little more consideration of the earth, which is all we have to live on, and the water, which is all we have to live by, would become us. The West is not only beautiful and spacious and exhilarating, it is also very fragile. (Stegner, "This Land" 32-33)

Wallace Stegner was one of the foremost spokesmen for wilderness preservation of his time. He became devoted to the wilderness cause during the 1950s, the formative era in the American wilderness movement, and he contributed to it with his eloquent pen for the next forty years. Stegner's voice made an indelible mark on the movement, and his writings touched on major cultural and spiritual themes advanced by American wilderness activists. Throughout his work, he connected his preservationist convictions to his deep love and affection for the American West, as Watkins and others have shown.

Like a number of other such activists of that time, Stegner came to his affection for wilderness in part because of his own transition from rural, small-town life in the early twentieth century to urban and suburban life in later years. As he lived and worked in urban settings like Salt Lake City, Madison (Wisconsin), Cambridge (Massachusetts), and Stanford, Stegner came to treasure his youth on the Canadian plains in Eastend, Saskatchewan, where he had been immersed in an outdoor world filled with wildlife, favorite fishing holes, and outings on vast plains where he felt dwarfed by the immensity of the sky, awed by the silences, and touched by the wind (Stegner, "Gift" 175-76).

Stegner's upbringing was indelibly shaped by the dreams and pursuits of his father, George, who uprooted the family several times in his quest to find the "big rock candy mountain." From North Dakota to Saskatchewan, from Great Falls to Salt Lake City, the family moved from one home to another, leaving Stegner to recall that he "was born on wheels" ("Finding" 3). As many scholars have recognized, Stegner's writing is deeply informed by his sense of rootlessness and by a keen desire—shared by his mother—to have a place to call home, a permanent nest (Benson 16-38). This mobile existence in his formative years permanently shaped Stegner's ideas about the history and culture of the American West. Stegner came to feel that the history of the region was that of his family writ large: a relentless pursuit of the big bonanza, a series of raids and hit-and-run plunders on its forests, grasslands, and mining areas. The West, he once wrote,

for the first seventy-five years or so of its short history . . . was not so much settled as raided. Until the 1880s it saw few true settlers except the Mormons, and some of the few it did see should have been talked out of coming. What the West generally saw was explorers, through travelers bound for Oregon or California . . . and a series of hit-and-run plunderers—picturesque, robust, romantic, and destructive. (Introduction 20)

In Stegner's mind, and in that of many conservationists who were

his contemporaries, those hit-and-run raids on the West's lands greatly escalated following the Second World War, when rising demand for timber, minerals, and agricultural commodities placed federal grazing lands, national forests, and national parks under the intense pressure of exploitation. The postwar West was marked by numerous public lands controversies, and for a time Utah native Bernard DeVoto, who influenced Stegner tremendously, was at the center of them. DeVoto had a fierce combative streak, grounded in his convictions that public lands in the West ought to serve broad public interests and not solely commercial concerns. In 1947 and again in 1953, DeVoto employed his monthly column in *Harper's Magazine*, "The Easy Chair," to rail against western stockmen that sought to reduce federal management of grazing lands and turn federal lands over to the states. This early-day "sagebrush rebellion," led by Wyoming Senator E. V. Robertson, galvanized DeVoto, who became a household name among many conservation-minded citizens. Benny, as Stegner fondly called him, also became Stegner's teacher on public lands issues, making Stegner aware of the political minefields surrounding them, and reminding him of the importance of keeping careful watch on corporations and their "hired guns," who sought to enrich themselves by plundering the public lands. DeVoto taught Stegner that he must join in the cries against these interests and rigorously support federal agencies like the Forest Service and National Park Service, charged with managing and preserving those lands for the public at large. DeVoto also helped make Stegner aware of the fragile nature of semiarid western lands.¹

No other aspect of the West's environment loomed as large in Stegner's mind as its aridity. He had known about aridity and the wide open spaces it spawned from his youth in Saskatchewan, Montana, and Utah, as well as from the years of research he spent writing the biography of John Wesley Powell, *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian* (1954).

¹DeVoto collected his *Harper's* columns in *The Easy Chair* (1955); see also Stegner's biography of DeVoto, *The Uneasy Chair* (1974), and *Conversations with Wallace Stegner on Western History and Literature* (1983) by Stegner and Etulain.

In this now classic text, one of the most important books ever published regarding the relationship between the West's environment and its history, Stegner revealed a central conflict in the region's history generated by its arid climate and the dreams of those who wished to overlook it. In the book, Stegner brought to life such quintessential boosters as William Gilpin, whose ardent faith in a heavily populated West blinded him to its environmental realities. Powell, as Stegner vividly portrayed him, became a voice in the wilderness through his *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region of the United States of 1878* and his recommendations for revising land surveys and the public domain system (Topping 150). For Stegner, this narrative of migrants to the West encountering the reality of its environment became the core thread of western history and regional culture. Stegner maintained that aridity, the cardinal environmental reality in the West, had been ignored by generations of westerners who never accepted the limits that it imposed, and who tried, either through engineering or force of will, to overcome or ignore them. Repeatedly he emphasized that the West was too arid to support a large population, that its citizens must sooner or later recognize the environmental limits that aridity imposed, and that they must adjust their expectations about what the western landscape could provide (Stegner and Etulain 181).²

Against this background of personal experience, research, and writing, Stegner became a confirmed wilderness advocate. By the 1950s he was primed, by dint of his upbringing, understanding of western history, and awareness of public lands politics, to join the young but growing campaign to protect America's wilderness lands. To be sure, he contributed to a movement already well underway. Before World War II, wilderness had found its spokesmen in such distinctive individuals as Robert Marshall, Aldo Leopold, and Benton MacKaye, three of the original founders of the Wilderness Society in 1935. Marshall, for his part, helped instigate Forest Service U-Regulations in 1939 to establish wilderness and wild areas in the national forests; because he died that same year, the movement then remained in its

youth. Only after the Second World War did wilderness activists find a broader-based national constituency, a development rooted in rising incomes, increased leisure and travel, growing demands for outdoor recreation, and advances in the science of ecology (Hays 2-5). Wilderness preservation now became part of the mainstream conservation movement, and Stegner's emergence as a conservation activist coincided with the emergence of wilderness on the national conservation agenda.

In the 1950s, as Stegner began his work, the case for wilderness was largely restricted to cultural grounds. Conservation biology, which underpins the wilderness movement today, had not yet emerged. Nor, for that matter, had a body of law been adopted to protect wilderness, endangered species, or ecosystems. Thus, the legal weapons available to a later generation of preservationists were unavailable in the 1950s. As a result, the case for wilderness had to be made with appeals to travelers, lovers of the outdoors, hunters, fishing enthusiasts, photographers, hikers, canoeists, and others. This placed a premium on the eloquently written nature essay, for wilderness activists in the 1950s and 1960s were really public relations personnel for the cause. They spent much of their time editing magazines such as the *Living Wilderness* and *Sierra Club Bulletin* and making speeches to congressional committees and ecologically concerned audiences. Above all, they were writers, and Stegner became one of them.

His first conservation essays appeared in the early and middle 1950s.³ Then, in 1955, Stegner edited *This Is Dinosaur*, a book featuring several essays about the natural history, geology, and scenic beauties of Dinosaur National Monument, then threatened by a high dam proposed by the Bureau of Reclamation. By all accounts *This Is Dinosaur* was a resounding success; its publisher distributed free copies to every member of Congress, a move that helped persuade lawmakers to jettison the Echo Park dam from the Upper Colorado River Stor-

³See, for example, "One-Fourth of a Nation: Public Lands and Itching Fingers," "Battle for Wilderness," and "We Are Destroying Our National Parks."

age Project in 1956 (Harvey 256–59).

In the afterglow of this important triumph for the national park system, Stegner joined the campaign to enact a bill creating a national wilderness system. He wrote several essays about the importance of the bill, the most famous his “Wilderness Letter” of 1960, which he sent to the commission studying the nation’s mounting outdoor recreation needs. In the following years Stegner wrote numerous essays for *Living Wilderness* and other publications. In these pieces he championed wilderness, reflecting his belief that Americans had deep cultural needs for wild lands that were rooted in a love of the “frontier” and open spaces, and in the need for escape from urban and industrial blight. However, a closer look at this aspect of Stegner’s work reveals that he, like many of his wilderness contemporaries, valued wild land for spiritual and religious reasons, although he never articulated his wilderness thinking in either Christian or any other religious terms. We know little about his Christian faith, save for a brief reference in his book *One Way to Spell Man* (1982): “it is impossible to claim that I am even a sound Christian, though the code of conduct to which I subscribe was preached more eloquently by Jesus Christ than by any other” (“This I Believe” 3). Still, as Ann Ronald has written, Stegner’s conservation writings display his abiding faith in stewardship (88), an interpretation of biblical scripture that emphasizes the duty God imposes on mankind to protect and wisely utilize the natural world, over which he gave us dominion. In Genesis God declared that every part of his creation was “good” (1:31), thereby conferring “intrinsic value on the world and all its creatures” (Callicott 192).

Stegner’s sense of stewardship was above all an act of environmental responsibility. In the first and most basic sense, he understood that wilderness areas in the high mountains and alpine forests safeguarded watersheds and thereby offered a buffer against the ravages of aridity. In a sharp criticism of Utah Senator Arthur Watkins, who denounced a wilderness bill (and who Stegner believed was a latter-day William Gilpin), he wrote that “this is the arid West [Watkins] is speaking of, and in the arid West the abuse of land has immediate and catastrophic consequences, and the characteristic west-

ern users of land have known how to do nothing but abuse it for quick profit" ("War" 73). For this reason, Stegner believed that federal ownership and management of public lands was essential to wise stewardship; he contended that the hit-and-run raids on western lands had first brought the federal government into the West to manage lands and that the plundering inclinations of westerners required it to stay (Stegner and Etulain 175). But in a deeper sense, Stegner believed that wilderness preservation would redeem the West from the sins of its pioneer founders. Generations of westerners had ignored the limits of the land, had raided and plundered and sinned against God's creation. The time had arrived to accept responsibility, to acknowledge limits, to set aside parcels of land off limits to economic development. For Stegner, wilderness protection would manifest restraint, self-discipline, and responsibility for the West's environment: "We need to learn to listen to the land, hear what it says, understand what it can and can't do over the long haul; what, especially in the West, it should not be asked to do. To learn such things, we have to have access to natural wild land" ("Gift" 177).

In advancing these ideas of limits and restraint, Stegner tapped into elements of American environmental thought that Donald Worster has recently identified among reform-minded Protestants: "It may be the love of wilderness," Stegner once wrote, "that finally teaches us civilized responsibility" ("Gift" 170). According to Worster, such believers held a deep revulsion of extravagance, self-indulgence, and luxury, convictions which had occupied a central thread in American environmental thought from the Transcendentalists to John Muir, from Aldo Leopold to David Brower (189). Stewardship, then, brought together various ideas: discipline, restraint, acknowledgment of environmental limits, and a recognition that the cultural needs of the community rested on such environmental responsibility. While these ideas had been expressed by writers such as Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, and John Wesley Powell, it fell to Stegner to articulate the stewardship ethic for the post-World War II American West and the defenders of its public lands.

Samples of Stegner's stewardship ideas abound. In countless essays

focusing on the history of American land development, water use and management, national parks, and conservation history in general, Stegner maintained a devout faith and fervent hope that to live successfully with the land we must first understand its limits, manage those lands that are fragile, and above all commit ourselves to leaving some lands alone. The latter idea appeared in “The Marks of Human Passage,” Stegner’s introduction to *This Is Dinosaur*, one of his first great statements on behalf of wilderness:

It is legitimate to hope that there may [be] left in Dinosaur the special kind of human mark, the special record of human passage, that distinguishes man from all other species. It is rare enough among men, impossible to any other form of life. It is simply the deliberate and chosen refusal to make any marks at all. Sometimes we have withheld our power to destroy, and have left a threatened species like the buffalo, a threatened beauty spot like Yosemite or Yellowstone or Dinosaur, scrupulously alone. We are the most dangerous species of life on the planet, and every other species, even the earth itself, has cause to fear our power to exterminate. Be we are also the only species which, when it chooses to do so, will go to great effort to save what it might destroy. (17)

Such stewardship lay at the core of Stegner’s spiritual reading of wilderness. Drawing on nature writers after and including the Transcendentalists, Stegner identified wilderness with the divine. While he did not put such thoughts in Christian terms or those of any organized faith, he did touch on spiritual and sacred themes. In the first place, he maintained that wilderness comprised the purest form of nature, remnants of God’s original creation, that is, of “primitive America” (Harvey 240). Wilderness was a piece of nature present at the creation and therefore was sacred land that must not be desecrated by the hand of industrial man; as Linda Graber has written, wilderness “represents the earth as it was in the beginning, fresh from God’s hands” (15). It followed that if wilderness was nature in its purest and most perfect form, then it was truly a noble task and a

Christian duty to preserve it. Stegner wrote at a time when ecologists subscribed to the climax theory of ecosystem development, a concept that suggested a steady state of nature. Such a notion nicely aligned with ideas about original nature. Purity and originality were among the cardinal tenets of wilderness thinkers in Stegner's generation.

Of course, such a notion of pristine land all but erased native peoples from history, as William Cronon has observed (see Comment). Historians have since acknowledged that this highly selective view of landscape change overlooks the ways that native peoples utilized the land and animals for their own purposes and thereby ignores changes to the landscape before the arrival of Europeans.⁴ And here was truly one of the blind spots of Wallace Stegner and wilderness activists in his time. As Elliott West has written, "Stegner seems unsure just what to do with these people, the Indians . . . they are ignored altogether, or they appear as vanished residents of a distant past, or they are static holdovers from that timeless wilderness world" (91). Though one can hardly defend Stegner on the point, it should be said that preservationists who posited the purity of nature did so not out of a conscious desire to eliminate Indians from the landscape but out of an even more powerful interest in recognizing lands the hand of industry had not yet reached, where the garden still held sway against the machine. Such lands, whether on the great plains, the high mountains, or the desert Southwest, were also those places that provided spiritual uplift and restoration of the soul. Wilderness offered the raw power, energy, and vastness that instilled a sense of humility and reminded humans of their insignificance and their dependence on nature for survival. To spend time in the wild was to lose oneself in a larger life force, and it was that very loss of one's own self-centeredness and awareness of the other in nature that provided inspiration and renewal, according to Zahniser ("Need" 66).

American historians have usually portrayed the post-World War II period as one of economic growth, optimism, and progressive outlook.

⁴Cronon in *Changes*, Richard White, and Dan. L. Flores offer extended dis-

Yet it was also, as William Graebner has written, an age of doubt for some Americans who felt overwhelmed by the swift social changes set in progress by the war, lived in fear of the atom bomb and the nuclear arms race, and felt increasingly atomistic in a fragmented culture (12–39). Accordingly, they yearned for community, for wholeness, for a larger entity to which they might belong, and not a few of them, in their effort to wrestle with all of this, ended up on the psychiatrist's couch. Stegner offered the antidote of wilderness. Putting oneself into wild country and a place of sublime beauty promised a complete immersion in the awesomeness of creation; wild land offered restoration, renewal, and inspiration. This was a crucial part of the cultural argument for wilderness, and Stegner was a master at making the point.

The sense of awe at the power of nature was also due in part to its abiding mystery, another crucial aspect of what Stegner found in wild land. Robert Finch has written that nature writers frequently posit “a relationship with the natural environment that is more than strictly intellectual, biological, cultural, or even ethical . . . they sense that nature is at its very heart, *an enduring mystery*” (qtd. in Burton-Christie 170). This notion had a powerful resonance with Americans in the postwar years who felt ambiguous about the rapid pace of scientific and technological changes. Besides developing and setting off the atomic bomb, Americans had entered the age of high speed computers, created hundreds of new chemical products to aid farmers in their battle with pests, and in countless other ways gained mastery over nature. Yet wilderness activists believed that nature still had much to teach humans; surely, humans had not yet plumbed its depths sufficiently to understand all of its laws or habits. Nature—and most especially wilderness—remained mysterious. In preserving and protecting wilderness lands, Stegner felt that the mystery of nature would continue to offer an anchor for understanding natural processes that were crucially important to a nation relentlessly transforming the landscape with natural resource extraction, subdivisions, and superhighways.

Stegner's writings indicate his love of numerous western landscapes dominated by spellbinding natural beauty, grandeur, silence, and space—mystery, sacred land. Of the Saskatchewan plains he wrote:

For over the segmented circle of earth is domed the biggest sky anywhere, which on days like this sheds down on range and wheat and summer fallow a light to set a painter wild, a light pure, glareless, and transparent. The horizon a dozen miles away is as clean a line as the nearest fence. There is no haze, neither the woolly gray of humid countries nor the blue atmosphere of the mountain West. Across the immense sky move navies of cumuli, fair-weather clouds, their bottoms as even as if they had scraped themselves flat against the flat earth. ("Question" 7)

Yet the Colorado Plateau was perhaps his true wilderness home, the place where he found wild nature at its most dramatic, startling, and enchanting—not to say, due to aridity, its most fragile. Stegner's fondness for the canyon country of southern Utah is found in *Mormon Country* (1970), *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian*, *This Is Dinosaur*, and other writings. Yet no better indication of his powerful feelings about this corner of the West appears than in "Wilderness Letter," where he offers the Robbers' Roost country near Capital Reef National Monument as the prime example of wilderness land:

In that desert climate the dozer and jeep tracks will not soon melt back into the earth, but the country has a way of making the scars insignificant. It is a lovely and terrible wilderness, such a wilderness as Christ and the prophets went out into; harshly and beautifully colored, broken and worn until its bones are exposed, its great sky without a smudge or taint from Technocracy, and in hidden corners and pockets under its cliffs the sudden poetry of springs. Save a piece of country like that intact, and it does not matter in the slightest that only a few people every year will go into it. That is precisely its value. Roads would be a desecration, crowds would ruin it. (116)

It is interesting to speculate on whether Stegner experienced an epiphany in his response to wilderness. Certainly, some of his contemporaries did. For Aldo Leopold, the dying green eyes of a wolf he once bagged in New Mexico provided an awakening to the reality of ecol-

ogy and animal ethics (138). For Howard Zahniser, an early morning moment inside the spectacular Cloud Peak primitive area in Wyoming's Big Horns became an unforgettable spiritual occasion ("Lake" 2). We do not know if Stegner experienced such a moment. If he did, perhaps it came on his outing in a wagon outside of Eastend with his father and brother in 1915; perhaps it happened years later when he traveled with his family throughout the West to "rediscover" it in 1946; or perhaps it occurred the following year during a memorable river run through Glen Canyon.

Yet in Stegner's case the exact occasion of his conversion to wilderness is perhaps less important than are the qualities of wild land to which he responded. Susan J. Tyburski has analyzed Stegner's spiritual awakening not in terms of a moment in time but with regard to his encounter with flowing water in a mountain stream. His observation of this thunderous and foaming mountain river, according to Tyburski, put Stegner in touch with the eternal (133-34). This vision of the eternal—with a deeper reality outside of everyday life and involving the elemental forces of nature in the wilderness—lay at the core of Stegner's thought. And the type of wild land might not really matter. Stegner revered the wide open plains, the Rocky Mountains, and the Colorado Plateau—dramatically different ecosystems and landscapes, yet in his mind, sacred landscapes all. Besides offering a window into the divine, a snapshot of America's original landscape, a look at sheer perfection and sublime beauty—wilderness for Stegner was sacred ground which must not be defiled but preserved.

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