

ELITE ENVIRONMENTALISM

THE ROOTS OF THE MODERN ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT IN THE 19TH CENTURY WHIG PHILOSOPHY OF GEORGE PERKINS MARSH



Lesley Fleischman
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Advisor: Professor Lapsansky
Second Reader: Ellen Stroud

INTRODUCTION

Modern environmental thought and 19th century Whig philosophy share one basic conflict: reconciling the disconnect between faith in progress and the importance of stability. George Perkins Marsh, a 19th century scholar who wrote about civilization and the natural world, wrestled with this opposition for most of his intellectual life. His ultimate conclusion was that these were not contradictory, but complementary ideas. It was desirable for civilizations to move towards progress, but unrestrained and unlimited progress was dangerous and unsustainable. It was important, therefore, for society to place an equal importance on the values of stability and harmony. Only a society that properly balanced stability and progress would be safe from the environmental degradation that had ended numerous human civilizations, including the ancient Romans. If society were unconstrained, it would progress too rapidly, which would provide short-term benefits but create long-term disaster. Only certain actors in society, who could view society from a long-term and holistic perspective, could properly balance stability and progress. The best interests of society required that these people have the power to guide the development of civilization.

Approaching Marsh's environmental writings from this perspective brings into focus the ways in which George Perkins Marsh and Whig thought form a large part of the foundation of modern environmentalism. Marsh might be viewed as the sole voice for conservation in an age of development, but he is much more than that. He is the link between modern environmental ideology and its roots in a 19th century concept of society. While it is inappropriate to use the term environmentalism to refer to 19th century thought, the more appropriate terms would be conservationism or preservationism; I use the term environmentalism throughout this paper to

refer to general 19th century ideas about the environment, an amalgamation of these both conservationist and preservationist thought.

These seemingly contradictory ideas did not originate or culminate in George Perkins Marsh, nor was Marsh was the most important environmental thinker of his era. Instead, Marsh's writings can be used to observe the connections between the early conservation movement and Whig political philosophy. Whig political philosophy was an essential aspect of Marsh's personal and intellectual life. He wrote numerous essays and speeches examining the ways in which this political philosophy influenced his ideas about man's relationship to the natural world. But his seminal text, *Man and Nature*, provides the best statement of this fundamental framework. Because the modern environmental movement still contains remnants of these ideas—including a reliance on government to ensure environmental stability—it is essential to recognize the roots of these ideas.

In the 19th century discourse about nature and the environment, there was a burgeoning rift between *conservationists* and *preservationists*. This divide remained latent until the bitter Hetch Hetchy debate in the early 20th century. Until this point, the conservationists, exemplified by Gifford Pinchot, and the preservationists, epitomized by John Muir, still largely saw eye to eye on the main environmental issues of the day. After Hetch Hetchy, individual thinkers became much more entrenched in their separate camps. Many modern environmental writers place Marsh firmly into the conservationist camp. This, however, is problematic for two reasons. First, as David Lowenthal points out, it is incorrect to impose this current ideological distinction on Marsh, who wrote long before Hetch Hetchy. He argued that “this environmental divide is a latter-day construct. No nineteenth-century figure in either supposed camp would have

condoned it.”¹ He further argued that “today’s environmentalists impose their own apartheid on the past” and that “earlier views were far more complex and less polarized than many now suppose.”² While Lowenthal is correct to assert that this distinction was not immediately apparent in the 19th century, it is true that there was a continuum between those with romantic and poetic and those with economic and pragmatic ideas about nature.

Marsh does not fall neatly on either the conservation or preservation side of this continuum. So, even if we were to accept this division of the movement, it would be problematic to place Marsh solely in the conservationist camp. This is a simplification of Marsh and his beliefs; he had much in common with the preservationists, and differed in many ways from the conservationists. He sometimes argued for preservation; Lowenthal claims that his “delight in nature was no less ardent than Thoreau’s and Muir’s.”³ In the 1884 edition of *Man and Nature*, he wrote: “Some large and easily accessible region of American soil should remain, as far as possible, in its primitive condition, at once a museum . . . a garden.”⁴ John Elder, in his 2006 book *Pilgrimage to Vallombrosa: From Vermont to Italy in the Footsteps of George Perkins Marsh*, pointed out that Marsh often argued both sides at the same time; he “was an early advocate of preserving the Adirondacks, both for the sake of nature lovers hungry for an experience of the continent’s primeval forest and for the protection of the streams flowing into the Hudson River.”⁵ Finally, Marsh did not hold the exact same beliefs as Gifford Pinchot, the father of American conservationism. Donald Worster analyzed the birth of the conservation movement and argued that “The conservation program that emerged under Pinchot’s leadership

¹ David Lowenthal. *George Perkins Marsh: Prophet of Conservation*. (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2000), 416.

² Ibid, 419.

³ Ibid, 418.

⁴ George Perkins Marsh, *Man and Nature*, ed. David Lowenthal. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1965), 203.

⁵ John Elder. *Pilgrimage to Vallombrosa: From Vermont to Italy in the Footsteps of George Perkins Marsh*. (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2006), 41.

in the early years of the twentieth century paid little attention to ecological complications.”⁶ He contrasted Pinchot with Marsh, who was much more concerned with the “complicated biological matrix in which the trees grew” than with “maximizing the productivity of those major resources in which man had a clear, direct, and immediate interest.”⁷ Thus, Marsh cannot be easily classified into the conservation/preservation division.

Like many historical figures, Marsh has been reinterpreted as each generation struggles to understand him in its own context. By his contemporaries, Marsh was seen as a scholar, not as a public philosopher. He traveled within a small and elite group of politicians and academics. Today he is remembered for his environmental writing, but in his own time, Marsh was renowned for numerous essays and articles on history and English grammar. Additionally, he was a lawyer in Burlington, Vermont, represented Vermont in Congress as a member of the Whig party in the 1840s, and he served as a diplomat in Turkey and Italy. Lewis Mumford claimed that “neither Marsh’s legal activities, nor his diplomatic career, nor his tremendous facility with languages . . . nor his works upon the history and development of the English language . . . would account for his chief work on geography.”⁸ While Mumford did not see the connection between Marsh’s environmental ideas and other aspects of his life, these activities all helped to shape Marsh’s philosophy which led him to particular ideas about the natural world.

Since the birth of the modern environmental movement in the 1960s, Marsh’s image has been skewed, as researchers have tried to fit his characteristically nineteenth-century political and social views into the mold of contemporary environmentalism. This has created an inaccurate representation of Marsh which ignores the aspects of Marsh’s philosophy which are

⁶ Donald Worster. *Nature’s Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 269.

⁷ *Ibid*, 269.

⁸ Lewis Mumford. *The Brown Decades: A Study of the Arts in America, 1865-1895*. (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1931), 73-4.

problematic to modern views of society. Marsh was an important philosophical founder of the nascent environmental movement in the 19th century. At the same time, Marsh was deeply committed to the Whig Party and Whig political philosophy in both his personal and professional life. He came to his environmental ideas through values derived from this Whig philosophy. This philosophy valued restrained progress and placed high importance on the public good over private interests. It was a widespread political philosophy in the 19th century, but not all Whigs arrived at the same conclusions about the natural world as Marsh; some applied these principles to the economy or the government. Marsh was certainly interested in these areas as well, but throughout his life, he was chiefly interested in the effects human civilization on the natural world. It is crucial to note that Marsh did not distinguish between the different ways in which humans modified their landscape. To him, deforestation and agricultural practices were equivalent to building roads, dams, dikes, and bridges. While the methods were different, the results (the alteration by man of the natural landscape) were the same. The connection between Whig philosophy and early environmental ideas suggests that the elitism and faith in governmental control of society which are found in environmentalism have deep roots in American intellectual history.

Marsh published his seminal book *Man and Nature* in 1864, but rewrote and edited large sections of the manuscript continuously until his death in 1882. While this book sold over one thousand copies soon after it was originally published, a large number considering its length and subject, it did not significantly impact public awareness of environmental issues. Unlike the work of Thoreau, which the public embraced on an emotional level, or the activism of John Muir, which mobilized public opinion, Marsh's work was scholarly and at times dry. Lowenthal noted that this book was important, however, because "every American forestry leader was

inspired by *Man and Nature* . . . Gifford Pinchot, the first US conservation chief, judged *Man and Nature* ‘epoch-making’.”⁹ It is in this way that his environmental ideas were influential.

During the early years of the twentieth century, the growing environmental movement began to lose steam as more pressing political and economic concerns overwhelmed the country. The writings and legacy of George Perkins Marsh were nearly forgotten, not to be revived until 1931 in *The Brown Decades* by Lewis Mumford. He labeled Marsh “the fountainhead of the conservation movement.”¹⁰ Marsh and others including John Wesley Powell, who wrote a *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region of the United States* in 1878, were seen as prophets by this later generation who were “made newly aware of the perils of floods and soil erosion by Dust Bowl and other disasters of the 1930s.”¹¹ Marsh, like Powell, had argued in the 1860s and 1870s that government should play a larger role in regulating the natural environment; while “this land policy would have given far fewer citizens a chance to achieve their own farms . . . for those few it might have made the opportunity more secure and genuine.”¹² This was especially relevant to people in the Dust Bowl generation who had seen first hand the devastating effects of unwise land use. They were starting to understand the themes which Marsh had expounded upon. The United States was beginning to reach the limits of expansions, and in some cases, the country was already overdeveloped.¹³ Only wise and proactive land use would result in “a stable and orderly culture of the earth and its resources.”¹⁴ It is in this context that Marsh can be seen as the “fountainhead of the conservation movement.”¹⁵ Marsh had accurately predicted that

⁹ David Lowenthal “Nature and Morality from George Perkins Marsh to the millennium.” *Journal of Historical Geography* 26 (2000): 4.

¹⁰ Mumford., 78.

¹¹ Lowenthal, “Nature and Morality”, 4.

¹² Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 86.

¹³ *Ibid*, 184-186

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 186

¹⁵ Mumford., 78.

human civilization would cause widespread environmental destruction in an age in which many others believed strongly in the ideals of unlimited progress and development.

After the revival in the 1930s, Marsh became a staple in books published about American environmental thought. In addition, David Lowenthal wrote a biography of Marsh in 1958 which focused both his personal and public life. His goal was not to emphasize Marsh's role in the early conservation movement, but to fill in the details about Marsh's childhood, family, travels, and careers. Lowenthal devoted a chapter to *Man and Nature*, but approaches this book as an example of one of Marsh's wide interests, and not a dominant theme in Marsh's intellectual life.

By 1965, however, environmentalism was a growing intellectual and activist movement. From *Silent Spring* to the 1969 Cuyahoga River fire, the questions of how to avoid destroying ourselves and our habitat reverberated from small towns to newspapers to political debate. Interest in Marsh and his work *Man and Nature* had risen to such an extent that Harvard University Press decided to republish it; this was its first publication since 1907. David Lowenthal edited this reprint, and in the introduction to the text, Lowenthal wrote: "Before Marsh wrote this book, few saw and fewer worried about how man affected his environment. Today Marsh's insights are virtually taken for granted."¹⁶ He was acknowledging here, that Marsh's ideas, and not necessarily Marsh himself, have been important in the history of the environmental movement. With the republication of this work, however, it seemed he was attempting to remind current environmentalists about one of environmentalism's seminal writers.

In 2000, David Lowenthal published a revised and updated biography of Marsh. In the three decades since the first edition, there was a clear shift in scholarly thought about Marsh, which reflects the ascendancy of the American environmental movement since the 1960s. This

¹⁶ Lowenthal, *Man and Nature*, ix.

is clear on a very superficial level from the new title of the book: Marsh, who in Lowenthal's eyes was once a *Versatile Vermonter*, was now a *Prophet of Conservation*. In this new book, Lowenthal expanded the sections which dealt with Marsh's growing conservationist philosophy. Lowenthal emphasized that it was Marsh's years of traveling throughout the Mediterranean world that were critical to his development as a conservationist. Yet, while Marsh's international travels have been explored by many writers, the influence of domestic political and cultural factors remains largely ignored.

While Lowenthal claimed that his second biography of Marsh explored Marsh's influence in the conservation movement, one reviewer, Robert Dorman, argued that Lowenthal did not accomplish this task. According to Dorman in a review in the journal *Isis* in 2001, *Prophet of Conservation*

is not, as its title promises, a monograph about the contribution of Marsh to the origins of environmentalism. Instead, it is a less-than-elegant revision of David Lowenthal's previous biography . . . [he failed] to integrate the wealth of bibliographical detail with a broader contextual framework and with the substance of Marsh's emerging conservationism.¹⁷

From this statement it is clear that although Lowenthal's writings about Marsh are substantial and impressive, much more can still be said to add to the understanding of Marsh's conservationism. In addition to this harsh critique, Dorman went even further; he claimed that "What may be a somewhat troubling aspect of this new volume for many environmental historians and historians of science—if not historians in general—is Lowenthal's engagement in outright hagiography."¹⁸ This critique was significant, because most writers of the history of environmental thought have relied almost exclusively on Lowenthal's work when they write about Marsh.

¹⁷ Robert L. Dorman, "George Perkins Marsh: Prophet of Conservation, review." *Isis*. 92 (Sep., 2001), 621.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 622.

Robert Dorman was not merely a book reviewer, but a significant scholar of environmental history in his own right. Dorman focused on four important environmentalists in his 1998 book *A Word For Nature*. He discussed Marsh along with Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, and John Wesley Powell. Dorman analyzed how Marsh's political ideology affected his conservationist philosophy. He highlighted, in a way that no previous author had, that being a Whig was a large part of Marsh's identity and thus must have influenced his feelings toward the environment. Dorman stated, "Marsh was, by one account, 'every inch a Whig,' and the Whigs were preeminently a party of men like himself—striving, upstanding, native-born middle- and upper-class entrepreneurs, advocates of economic progress and industrial development."¹⁹ He then went on to summarize one of the main themes in Whig discourse and rhetoric: the need for a good society to balance the tension between public responsibility (Duty) and personal or private indulgence (Desire). Dorman found passages in *Man and Nature* that specifically allude to this idea: "The reconciliation of 'Duty' and 'Desire' might be revealed in 'the establishment of an approximately fixed ratio between the two most broadly characterized distinctions of rural surface,' Marsh projected—'woodland [duty] and plough land [desire].'"²⁰ It is clear that Dorman was attempting to define Marsh using the language of the nineteenth century, rather than that of modern environmental rhetoric. He did not, however, place this one passage in the context of the Whig ideology that can be found in all of Marsh's work. Instead, he laid the foundation for this task, which will be the work of this thesis.

My analysis takes this as a starting point and aims to delve further into the connections between Whig political philosophy and Marsh's environmental ideas. This philosophy is more than a side-note in the narrative of Marsh's growing environmental awareness. Whig ideology

¹⁹ Robert L. Dorman. *A Word For Nature: Four Pioneering Environmental Advocates, 1845-1913*. (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 13.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 21.

was instrumental in the development of Marsh's mindset, and was beneath the surface of every text Marsh wrote concerning the environment. The point is not to make a judgment about whether it is good or bad that modern environmental thought has its roots in Whig political philosophy. Whig philosophy is both an elitist and a holistic way of viewing society. It claims that only educated individuals, and often only the government, can pursue the long-term best interests of society as a whole. Whether it is accepted or rejected, by understanding that this is one of the many roots of modern environmental thought, environmentalists can adequately deal with its implications. The results of Marsh's thinking, however, was that he had very specific ideas about who should be making decisions in society.

CHAPTER 1

George Perkins Marsh was a typical Whig, the friend and/or ally of the high-profile shapers of American Whig philosophy, and even after the party self-destructed in 1856, its ideas remained deeply embedded in Marsh's identity and self-image and continued to shape his outlook on the world. As a result, Whig philosophy impacted his outlook on how to assess, manage, and protect its natural and economic resources. Marsh showed this commitment in both his personal affairs and his academic work, both of which were shaped by Whig political philosophy. This philosophy claimed that government, composed of societal elites had the responsibility and the right to regulate society to ensure the common good. This fact is crucial to the understanding of Whig political philosophy and the ways it influenced Marsh's environmental thought.

There are many important facets to Whig political philosophy, which shaped the way Marsh viewed the world, and which Marsh revised as he grew older. The environmental writings of George Perkins Marsh are pervaded by many aspects of this philosophy, which touched on all aspects of social, economic, and intellectual life. Whigs approached the issues of their day in a holistic manner. They strove to see the big picture instead of individual pieces. Additionally, they sought to learn lessons from the past and to ensure a secure future for the United States and the world. This philosophy was exemplified by George Perkins Marsh in both his political and scholarly work. For this reason, it is important not to look at Marsh's environmental ideas in a vacuum, or worse yet through our own post-Earth Day eyes. Whig philosophy included the belief in progress (which was exemplified in Whiggish History), the importance placed on balance and harmony within a society, ideas about the proper role of

government in the industry and morals of the nation, and how best to structure economic and political institutions.

The American Whig Party existed formally from 1834 to 1854. During this time, it was a potent and influential political power. In *The Political Culture of the American Whigs*, Daniel Walker Howe notes that “while Jacksonians won more presidential elections, the Whigs probably contributed more to shaping the new industrial society of Victorian America.”²¹ While the Whig Party structure was transient, the ideology and political philosophy of the Whigs was much more lasting. The Whigs were a national party and thus had a broad platform and numerous influential thinkers. For this reason, it is hard to pin down the precise beliefs that all Whigs shared, but it is possible to sketch the general outlines of Whig thought.

Another factor that makes it difficult to unambiguously describe Whig political philosophy was the fact that the Whigs, ironically, disliked and distrusted political parties. To the Whigs, political parties were factions which were divisive and polarizing. Instead, Whig politicians often asserted that they were working for the non-partisan public interest. “As late as 1850,” after the Whig Party had been firmly established, “Horace Greeley could explain that the Democrats were, ‘strictly speaking,’ the only political party in the country; the Whigs were simply a group of concerned citizens.”²² This strain of thought in Whig ideology goes far to explain the fluid and broad aspects of Whig thought.

Because being a Whig was an identity, more than a political party affiliation, this ideology pervaded all aspects of George Perkins Marsh’s life. Even as he left office in 1849 and began to become disillusioned with Whig politics during his time as a U.S. Ambassador, Whig political philosophy was still a major part of Marsh’s intellectual identity. George Perkins Marsh

²¹ Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs*. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), 13.

²² Greeley, Horace, *Why I am a Whig* (New York, [1851]), in Howe, 53.

cannot be understood apart from his characteristically nineteenth century political and social views. A true depiction of Marsh must be based on an understanding of his particular historical context; this includes the enduring influence of Whig political and moral philosophy on Marsh's worldview. Analyzing Marsh's writings in this way will reveal new aspects of the early conservation movement as well as insights into why and how Marsh came upon his environmental ideas. Marsh's ideas were formed and crystallized by his attachment to Whig political philosophy, and thus the connection between Whiggery and the modern environmental movement must be acknowledged and explored. It is essential to deconstruct what is meant by Whig political philosophy and the ways in which Marsh was committed to this set of beliefs throughout his life.

There were clear ideological differences between the Jacksonian Democrats and the Whigs, but it is difficult to define with certainty the demographic makeup of the Whig Party. "Observers at the time usually assumed that people with greater income, education, and respectability were more likely to be Whig."²³ Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote that that Whigs were "the active, enterprising, well-meaning and wealthy part of the people."²⁴ These statements were clearly oversimplifications. Party affiliation depended on numerous factors in antebellum society; among these factors were ethnicity, class, religion, and region. The Party "was an elaborate set of interrelated strategies serving the purposes of many different people, all of whom, for complicated and various reasons, were willing to accord leadership to a modernizing bourgeoisie."²⁵ Thus, while members of the Whig party held a diverse set of views, they agreed on fundamental issues of the role of government in society and economic policy, which

²³ Howe, 3.

²⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson, journal entry, March, 1845, in *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 9:160, in Howe, 13.

²⁵ Howe, 300.

separated them from members of the Democratic Party. The Whigs were unwavering republicans; they celebrated the U.S. republic as the ultimate expression of human progress and achievement. They did not, however, believe in the idea of freedom in the same way the Jacksonian Democrats did. Their objective was “ordered liberty” rather than unrestrained freedom.²⁶

Although the presidency of John Quincy Adams preceded the formation of the Whig party, he is considered by many to be the intellectual embodiment of Whig politics. John Quincy Adams was elected president from the Democratic-Republican Party in 1825, but over the course of his career, he identified himself increasingly with the Whig Party. This is partly because he thought of himself as a non-partisan politician and disapproved of divisive party politics; “dedicated as he was to subordination of the passions within the individual, [he] not surprisingly deplored the emergence of factions in the body politic.”²⁷ Nevertheless, he had much in common with the Whigs: he believed that “the true task of government was to balance all interests so that none of them was harmed,”²⁸ a belief consistent with Whig commitment to protecting the public interest over private concerns.

Adams lost the election of 1828, which had pit “a northern ticket of Adams and Rush against a southern one of Jackson and Calhoun . . . [this] prefigured a party alignment in which the Democrats would be generally more responsible to the slaveholding interests than the Whigs.”²⁹ Thus, when he ran for a seat in the House of Representatives in 1831, he was a member of the Whig party. Adams was still in office when George Perkins Marsh was elected to the House of Representatives in 1842. While they were not close acquaintances, “Marsh was on

²⁶ *The Permanence and Power of Whig Principles*, *American Review* 15 (March, 1852): 271, in Howe, 181.

²⁷ Howe, 52.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 51-2.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 62.

easy terms” with Adams.³⁰ They had a working relationship with one another: Marsh “backed Adam’s antislavery crusade for the right of petition, and committee work brought together the Vermonter and the pungent ex-president.”³¹ Not all Whigs, however, were as avidly anti-slavery as Marsh and Adams.

There was a deep division within the Whig party between the northern Whigs and the Southern “Cotton” Whigs. Henry Clay had tried to hold the party (and the nation) together, but with Clay’s death in 1852 the party withered away. During Marsh’s time in the House of Representatives, from 1842 to 1849, one of his close associates was Robert C. Winthrop, a Massachusetts Whig whose “moderation on slavery endeared him to Southern Whigs.”³² George Perkins Marsh, “like most Vermont Whigs . . . was a Free-Soiler at heart”; he fell squarely into the northern Whig camp.³³ Thus, the two men diverged on the key political and moral issue of their day. Even as this issue deeply divided these two men (and the party as a whole), there was a larger political ideology that they all shared. Whiggery was a comprehensive political philosophy which had more to do with one’s identity than positions on individual political issues. Marsh and Winthrop “kept up their intimacy, exchanging views on art, literature, history, and politics for more than thirty years.”³⁴ The Whig party had concrete political and economic goals, but these stemmed from deeper ideas which outlasted the formal political party organization.

While the Whigs were overshadowed by the dominance of the Jacksonian Democrats in presidential politics, they did contribute significantly to American public policy and culture. Henry Clay was never elected President, but he made the most significant contributions to the development of Whig ideology. He was “a leading contender for the presidency in 1824, 1832,

³⁰ Lowenthal, *George Perkins Marsh: Prophet of Conservation*, 71.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 71.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.* 103.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 71.

1840, 1844, and 1848, he served as speaker of the House . . . and was the most influential member of the United States Senate.”³⁵ He was a pragmatic politician, not a great philosopher. “Yet, in the aggregate, his statements reveal a coherent political program and philosophy,”³⁶ which came to define the Whig Party. He wanted to rise above the passions that he feared would overwhelm the United States republic; these passions were “exemplified for Clay in Andrew Jackson.” As opposed to the uncertainty of private passions, he believed in progress based on the “ideals of balance and harmony” that would lead to “stability and order” for the republic as a whole.³⁷

George Perkins Marsh was also acquainted with Henry Clay during his time in the House of Representatives. Marsh shared most of the beliefs that Clay espoused, yet he was not impressed with this famous Whig figure; “[Marsh] shrank from heroes and hero worship.” When Clay visited Burlington, Marsh wrote that he would “save Clay ‘one shake by keeping out of his reach.’”³⁸ This slight animosity, however, had much more to do with Marsh’s dislike of high profile politicians. He personally preferred, instead, to work quietly for the public interest rather than seek the adulation of the masses.

Marsh did not have or seek a high-profile political career. The first public office that Marsh held was in Vermont’s Supreme Legislative Council in 1835. As a prominent lawyer and citizen of Burlington, he was appointed to this position by “a coalition of Anti-Masons and Whigs.”³⁹ The major concern of the Legislative Council during the time Marsh served was to elect a governor. Public disillusionment with the appointed Council grew as they failed at this task; “the ensuing Constitutional Convention voted by more than two to one to replace the

³⁵ Howe, 123.

³⁶ Ibid, 124.

³⁷ Ibid, 125.

³⁸ Lowenthal, *George Perkins Marsh: Prophet of Conservation*, 71.

³⁹ Ibid, 42.

Council with a democratically chosen Senate.”⁴⁰ This temporarily ended Marsh’s political career. While his first political position was appointed rather than elected, Marsh proved to be an able campaigner.

In 1840, Marsh worked actively in Vermont to support the William Henry Harrison, the Whig presidential candidate. He “helped draft his state’s Whig reform platform,” which included “antislavery and tariff protection concerns” as opposed to the Democratic economic platform, which had “left the country depressed, industry prostrated, and the ‘political rights & scared barriers of the constitution trodden underfoot.’”⁴¹ With Marsh’s help, Harrison gained a strong majority in Vermont.⁴²

Marsh learned a great deal from his work on the 1840 presidential campaign. In his ultimately successful 1842 bid for the Vermont Seat in the House of Representatives, he “vowed to foster Vermont interests—economic ‘freedom’ from Britain, sound currency, a protective tariff—but refused ‘to sacrifice the general good’ of the country to promote regional matters.”⁴³ Luckily for Marsh, the Whig belief in working for the public good coincided for the most part with the interests of Vermonters: a strong industrial base protected by a tariff which would lead to economic development. Marsh’s Democratic opponents “denounced him as ‘high-toned’ and ‘aristocratic,’”⁴⁴ but Marsh was not apologetic about his elitist tendencies. He firmly believed in making decisions based on his own conscience and experience instead of following the whim of constituents. He “avowed himself to be every inch a Whig, a Whig protectionist, a Whig

⁴⁰ Ibid. 44.

⁴¹ Marsh, *Burlington Free Press*, January 10, 1840. in Lowenthal, 68.

⁴² Lowenthal, *George Perkins Marsh: Prophet of Conservation*, 68.

⁴³ Ibid, 69.

⁴⁴ *Burlington Free Press*. 17 June, 11 Aug, 8 Sept. In Lowenthal, 69.

abolitionist”⁴⁵ Marsh did not deny that he viewed the world from an upper-class intellectual perspective.

At the heart of Whig philosophy was the conviction that public duty--behaviors and policies that promised "progress" for the greatest number of citizens--should guide both public and private choices. Viewing politics from an elitist perspective did not mean that Marsh supported the interests of the upper-classes over the interests of the common people. It did mean, however, that Whig believed that only educated elites should be entrusted with leadership, because only they were able to reign in their own self-interest to advocate for the larger good. In practice, many Whigs (who often were among the nation's most substantial capitalists) tended to conflate "greater good" and "progress" with the enterprises in which they themselves were involved. Nevertheless, the *ideals* that the Whigs shared were noble and broad; they sought to negate the idea that the commonwealth as a unit could thrive simply by each person pursuing his own self interest. This philosophy was elitist, not because it argued that only those with money should make decisions, but because they believed that society should be guided deliberately and dispassionately by those with a holistic and sustainable vision of society.

During his time in office, Marsh was a staunch defender of the protective tariff on Northern industry. He argued on the floor of the House in 1844 that a reduction in the tariff “shall scarcely save a penny to any individual consumer, [but] may work utter ruin to the manufacturing capitalist, and the hundreds who depend on him.”⁴⁶ Marsh advocated this position partly because of its popularity among his Vermont constituents but mostly because of his own personal experience in industry. Marsh had built a Mill on the Winooski River in Vermont in 1835 with the intention of stimulating industry in Vermont. He wrote: “Why ship

⁴⁵ *Burlington Free Press*. 17 June, 11 Aug, 8 Sept, in Lowenthal, 69.

⁴⁶ Speech on the Tariff Bill, 1844. in Lowenthal, 74.

wool to Boston when it could be made into broadcloth on the Winooski?”⁴⁷ He entered into this venture at great personal expense, as he had to finance both the factory itself and the road to the falls. Marsh was praised by the local newspaper for his commitment to the long-term interests of Vermonters: “few men among us have contributed more liberally . . . to promote the substantial interests of the town.”⁴⁸ Marsh was willing to pursue this venture because he trusted that the tariff would protect his fledgling industry. In 1839, however, Congress cut the tariff, causing wool prices to fall. Marsh’s factory struggled on for a few more years, but went out of business by 1846.⁴⁹ While it may seem like Marsh was protecting his narrow self-interests as a northern industrialist, he did not see it this way. Instead, he thought of himself as a private individual working for the best interests of the nation. The public interest could be best served, he thought, by government supporting worthwhile private enterprises.

The tariff issue remained important throughout all of Marsh’s time in office, but by 1848, the issue of slavery was a much more heated political debate. Marsh, for a Vermont Whig, was moderate on this issue. Thus, he supported Taylor, a southern, slave-holding Whig, in the 1848 presidential race. One historian suggests that although he “was a Free-Soiler at heart . . . party loyalty, political realism, and mistrust of Van Buren kept him in Taylor’s camp.”⁵⁰ Instead of radical action, Marsh believed that “time, calm, and Whig moderation would bring emancipation.”⁵¹ This timid position, however, made him increasingly unpopular with his Vermont constituents.

Marsh’s political career could have advanced quickly in 1849, when he was considered for the position of Speaker of the House. Robert C. Winthrop was also a contender for this

⁴⁷ Lowenthal, *George Perkins Marsh: Prophet of Conservation*, 41.

⁴⁸ *Burlington Free Press*, 30 July 1830, in Lowenthal, 41.

⁴⁹ Lowenthal, *George Perkins Marsh: Prophet of Conservation*, 42.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 103.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 104.

position in 1849, but his “willingness to accommodate slaveholders had cost him Northern support.”⁵² Marsh, on the other hand, was supported by “a caucus of Whigs and Free-Soilers.”⁵³ Marsh never became speaker; instead, eager to travel, he accepted the position of Minister to Turkey. With Marsh out of the picture, Winthrop was named Speaker of the House of the 30th Congress. This marked the end of Marsh’s career in electoral politics.

Soon after, the life of the Whig party also came to an end. Beginning in 1850, a series of events occurred which led to the dissolution of the Whig Party. The Compromise of 1850 sharpened the divide between the Northern and Southern Whigs, “the growth of the Know-Nothing and other radical groups” eroded their base of support, the deaths of Henry Clay and Daniel Webster in 1852 left the party without solid leadership, and the party was “irrevocably split by the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854.”⁵⁴ Marsh remained a party loyalist to the end, but in 1856 he joined the new Republican Party.

As the Whig political party ceased to exist and Marsh spent time in Europe, Marsh gained a much broader view of society. Throughout his career, Marsh did not believe in being tied down indefinitely to a stated position on an issue. Throughout his life, he modified his political and moral philosophy to reflect new points of view that he developed through experience. His experiences as a Vermont industrialist led him hold certain views on the tariff. There is some evidence to suggest, however, that as Marsh spent more time in Europe later in his life, he altered his ideas. Lowenthal notes that in letters Marsh wrote home from Turkey, “Marsh himself felt ‘mightily inclined to Democracy’ . . . another year or two in the Old World would make him ‘a desperate Radical.’ He had ‘clear given up Tariff (since my factory failed) and most Whig

⁵² Ibid, 106.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 165-6.

devilry.”⁵⁵ It is unclear how much of this statement is serious and how much is sarcasm. In the same letter, he wrote “My wife turned Democrat two years ago because the customs house people at Boston charged duty on some gewgaws she sent home from Egypt. She has been a save free-trader ever since.”⁵⁶ This statement seems much more obviously tongue-in-cheek. Regardless, it is clear that Marsh’s perspective on classic Whig issues was altered by his time in Europe. He didn’t move away from the ideals that made him a Whig in the first place; instead he gained new perspectives on which policies would best promote the public good.

While Marsh gained a broader perspective on the tariff issue while living in the Old World, he also developed a broader sense of Man’s relationship with the natural world. While he served as a Minister in Turkey and Italy, he constantly observed the landscapes of the Old World. These observations led him to adapt and revise his old Whig assumptions to fit his shifting and broadening worldview. Thus, Marsh’s personal intellectual development perfectly illustrates why the Whigs believed in an elitist view of government and society. Earlier in his life, Marsh had tried to advocate for the common good of society, but his lack of experience and unintentional narrow self-interest had prevented him from truly pursuing this goal. As he gained more experience, he also was better able to understand what was best for society. While it was impossible for any person to have a completely perfect understanding of how best to reach the common good, societal elites had more experience and therefore better judgment in these matters.

The aspect of Whig political philosophy that George Perkins Marsh epitomized most was their emphasis on balancing public and private interests. This idea of public versus private welfare extended beyond the economic realm; it was a matter of virtue and morality, not only

⁵⁵ To Francis Markoe, 14 Jan. 1854. in Lowenthal, 147.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

economy. To this end, it was crucial for individuals to “subordinate their private interests to the welfare of the community—that they be capable of ‘public virtue’ (or ‘patriotism’).”⁵⁷ This fused ideas of morality and virtue with those of politics. A clear parallel between this and Marsh’s environmental ideas can be drawn: Marsh saw environmental degradation as the result of private greed and only an enlightened republic could ensure public welfare.

As noted above, Marsh built his Mill on the Winooski River not only for private profit, but also because he believed that a Mill in Burlington would serve the long term best interests of all the people there. He expected, in return, that the federal government would protect his investment by maintaining the high external tariff. For the Whigs, “The question of ‘private enterprise’ versus ‘public enterprise’ . . . The question was rather one that concerned enterprise in general: how important was the economic development of the country?”⁵⁸ Private interests were always subordinate to the public good, but the best situation occurred when these two sets of interests overlapped. As Henry Clay wrote, “When any one of our merchants displays a spirit of enterprise and humanity, it is very proper on the part of the government to encourage such efforts.”⁵⁹ Marsh would have certainly been an ideal entrepreneur in Clay’s eyes.

Part of the justification for promoting the public good over private concerns was the great importance Whigs placed on stability. According to Ormsby’s classic *History of the Whig Party*, the Whig

has not the gratification of a present passion in view; but crushes out and sacrifices private feelings and interest, and compromises with antagonistic views, to secure the stability of the country, develop its resources, and place its future on a safe and enduring basis.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Thomas Brown. *Politics and Statesmanship: Essays on the American Whig Party*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 4.

⁵⁸ Howe, 98.

⁵⁹ Henry Clay, *Works*, NY, G P Putnam’s Sons, 1904. in Howe, 99.

⁶⁰ R. McKinley Ormsby. *A History of the Whig Party*. (Boston: Crosby, Nichols and Co., 1859), 372.

Only by sacrificing the fulfillment of some passions would society be able to achieve a prosperous and stable future. Marsh, himself, noted during his European travels how attention to the public good would lead to societal stability. He wrote: “European public works were far superior — canals . . . railroads . . . stone and masonry bridges . . . viaducts . . . [and] best of all, wide, macadamized, moderately graded common roads.”⁶¹ Not only were these impressive works of civil engineering, “their construction was also a safety valve against rural unrest . . . showed a rare awareness of needs to mitigate appalling economic inequalities . . . especially commendable because it fostered public stewardship.”⁶² Marsh’s observations of the benefits of European public works were clearly related to his support of the American System advocated by Clay and others. Clay advocated building transportation and communication networks throughout the United States. This “American System was a highly organized articulation of Whig political culture,” which supported Whig values “such as order, harmony, purposefulness, and improvement.”⁶³ Thus, Clay advocated public works for the sake of “[fostering] national integration and [inhibiting] sectionalism”⁶⁴ The American System was not merely about building public works. Instead, the American System was meant to “knit the Union more strongly together . . . on the basis of a harmony of interests.”⁶⁵ Marsh had always believed in the importance that public interests played in ensuring stability and harmony. Before spending time in Europe, however, he believed it was possible that the public interest could be achieved through enlightened private action. He believed he was acting as an enlightened private citizen by building his Mill in Vermont. However, after seeing the impressiveness of European public works and observing “the gigantic frauds of the post-Civil war era, when business interest

⁶¹ Lowenthal, *George Perkins Marsh: Prophet of Conservation*, 172.

⁶² *Ibid*, 172-3.

⁶³ Howe, 137.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 138.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*.

corrupted every branch of government,” his “hostility toward corporations in general” was fortified.⁶⁶ Marsh’s broadening experience led him to doubt that private enterprise could ever serve the public good.

As Marsh began to lose faith in private enterprise, he also began to observe more closely how human actions altered the physical environment. While at first he believed that these changes were positive or benign, he eventually judged that the effect of human civilization on the natural world was negative and harmful. Marsh believed that government intervention was necessary in order to halt the degradation of the natural world. “Marsh’s corporate animus was not only consonant with his mandates for conserving resources, but causally related to them. In both arenas he saw private interests endangering public welfare; in both he opted, as a pragmatist, for public control rather than private reformation.”⁶⁷ Marsh believed in the values of progress and development, but that these must be checked and slowed by governments to preserve stability.

An important aspect of Whig political philosophy is the idea of progress. According to this, Man is a “social political animal who could fulfill his destiny only in an evolutionary ‘progression’ from ‘rudeness’ toward ‘civilization.’”⁶⁸ Therefore, it was the task of “good government . . . to facilitate the ‘improvement’ of the inhabitants.”⁶⁹ Not only should government ensure the public good, but government should make every effort to educate and inform citizens about the ways in which public welfare was really the enlightened self-interest of all citizens. Individual morality was intimately tied with the economic program of the Whig party. In both cases, there was an emphasis of “self-control and restraint . . . thrift, sobriety, and

⁶⁶ Lowenthal, *George Perkins Marsh: Prophet of Conservation*, 195.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 196.

⁶⁸ Howe, 73.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 39.

public responsibility.”⁷⁰ These two facets, the maintenance of public welfare and the improvement of private morality, were central to George Perkins Marsh’s conservation ideas.

The use of intellectual and historical arguments to compare the present state to past civilization was common in Whig philosophy. Modern man must either learn lessons from the past, or be doomed to repeat these same mistakes. As Rufus Choate, an influential Whig thinker, and a close associate of Marsh, stated “In Greece, in Rome, in Venice, in France, men have called on the Goddess of Liberty, but they were not wise enough, they were not virtuous enough, for diffused, steady, lasting freedom.”⁷¹ Marsh believed that only a republic that embodied the ideals of wisdom and virtue could address long-term concerns and thereby ensure an enduring liberty. He also warned of the disasters that could befall America if liberty and bounty were taken for granted.

This manner of understanding and studying history was called Whiggish History. In this practice, past events were not studied for their own sake, but for the valuable lessons they could teach about the present and future. The term Whiggish History originally came from the British Whig party, which glorified English democracy by celebrating its northern European Anglo-Saxon roots. But, a Whiggish view of history was also an element of the political philosophy of the American Whig party. This was especially apparent when Whig history is contrasted with the history written by 19th century Democrats. In the antebellum period, historians who identified with the Democratic Party were interested in molding the narrative of American history. They often believed, however, that American was too busy making history to be concerned with studying the past.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 33.

⁷¹ Rufus Choate, “The Colonial Age of New England” (1834), Works, 1”360, in Howe, 75.

In Butterfield's classic book, The Whig Interpretation of History, he was very critical of this mode of historical study. He claimed that "it has often been an obstruction to historical understanding because it has been taken to mean the study of the past with direct and perpetual reference to the present."⁷² Further, Butterfield argued that this manner of approaching the past was "the ratification if not the glorification of the present," rather than a serious scholarly pursuit.⁷³ The end result of a Whiggish historical narrative was "a scheme of general history which is bound to converge beautifully upon the present."⁷⁴ Butterfield outlined this argument against a Whiggish interpretation of history in 1959, but for Marsh and his contemporaries, this historical view was not problematic.

Nineteenth-century proponents of Whiggish history believed that by studying the past, elites would be able to make informed decisions about the best interests for society as a whole. They used this argument to justify their elitist view of government; elites have more knowledge and a broader perspective, and therefore the elites should make all important decisions. Ormsby noted that a Whig's "ideas are not formed on partial views, nor inspired by local interest; but are liberal, enlarged, comprehensive, and are the growth of long-continued and mature reflection."⁷⁵ Only by studying "the dangers, the perils, within and without, that beset the path and cloud the future of his beloved republic," could a politician make wise decisions.⁷⁶

In an essay titled "Goths in New England," Marsh explicitly explored the themes of Whiggish history. In this essay, he "[claimed] the inherent superiority of Nordic (or Gothic) languages and people. And in ascribing the same virtues to his fellow New Englanders, Marsh

⁷² Butterfield, 11.

⁷³ Ibid, v.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 12.

⁷⁵ Ormsby, 372-3.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 373.

linked them by descent.”⁷⁷ He linked the founders of the United State with the Goths by claiming “it was the spirit of the Goth, that guided the May Flower across the trackless ocean; the blood of the Goth, that flowed at Bunker Hill.”⁷⁸ While the topic of this essay was the past, the purpose of writing it was to glorify the present. He elevated the virtues of New Englanders by placing them at the climax of his historical scheme. This scheme pitted “Protestant, democratic, pious, hard-working Goths against Catholic, despotic, sensuous, lazy Romans.”⁷⁹ This was not a new idea, he “relied on an environmental determinism of ancient Greek origin . . . Goths had prospered because nature was so hard on them. Warmth bred stagnation.”⁸⁰ Marsh eventually gave up this racially charged and environmentally deterministic view of history. He had always loved his native Vermont, but his years spent in Italy made his historical outlook much broader.

Even after Marsh gave up the explicit study of Gothic history, the elitism that is at the root of a Whiggish conception of history is still present in many of Marsh’s writings about nature. He framed all of his arguments about agriculture and internal improvements in terms of the ways in which they helped society progress. Agricultural development and government spending on internal improvements were good for society because they contributed to making society balanced and stable.

Influential Whigs emphasized that a good society should balance Duty and Desire. This sentiment was expressed by the Whig reformer Horace Greeley: “I look for the harmonizing of Desire with Duty, not through the blotting out of the latter, but through the chastening,

⁷⁷ Lowenthal, *George Perkins Marsh: Prophet of Conservation*, 57.

⁷⁸ Marsh, *The Goths in New England*, in Lowenthal, 57.

⁷⁹ Lowenthal. *George Perkins Marsh: Prophet of Conservation*, 59.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

renovating, and purifying of the former.”⁸¹ Within this system of thought, “the highest value was balance . . . The good life entailed continual self-discipline and societal-discipline, as one sought to ‘suppress his passions’ or ‘cultivate or improve his virtues’”⁸² Therefore, self-discipline and societal-discipline were two aspects of Whig philosophy that could not be separated.

The Whigs wanted politicians to make decisions based on their broad experience and knowledge and not be bound to the passions of their constituents. Instead, “the Whig idea was the original one observed in the construction of our institutions; and this would place the representative in the national legislature free to act in accordance with the conclusions of his unbiased judgment.”⁸³ Only then would representatives be able to work toward the common good of the country as a whole, rather than for sectional and regional interests.⁸⁴ Thus, there was a clear connection between the Whig faith in an elitist and limited republican form of government, and the advocacy for the public good.

Unlike the Jacksonian Democrats, the Whigs did not think society would benefit from unlimited democracy and universal suffrage. Instead of democracy, their vision of an ideal society was a republic, in the classical sense. In this ideal republic, “those who had not had the opportunity of education should defer to the leadership of those who had received it.”⁸⁵ In many ways, the Whig Party combined “an old-fashioned elitist view of politics and society” with the active promotion of economic development and progress.⁸⁶ According to Howe, “they were able to take traditional ideas about the social roles and obligations, about paternalism and duty, and adapt them creatively to the new society. They poured the new wine of commerce and

⁸¹ Horace Greeley, in Henry James [Sr.] et al., *Love, Marriage, and Divorce*. (New York, 1853), [p. 71]. In Howe, 36.

⁸² Howe, 29.

⁸³ Ormsby, 370.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 372.

⁸⁵ Howe, 30.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 32.

industrialization into the old bottles of deference, patriarchalism, Scottish moral philosophy, and classical rhetoric.”⁸⁷ The theme of using traditional morals and values and finding ways to apply them to new societal developments is developed in the work of George Perkins Marsh over his life’s work.

As Marsh’s academic thought evolved, he did not completely discard Whig philosophy, but he did adapt and revise these ideas to fit his shifting and broadening worldview. Although the thread of connection has been mostly lost, it is this revised Whig philosophy seen in Marsh’s work which is now embedded in modern environmental thought. Much of Marsh’s work is pervaded by the fear of what could happen to human civilization if Man did not properly steward the natural environment. Yet, Marsh had faith that in a civilized society, individuals would balance Duty and Desire. Government had a large role to play in ensuring balance, harmony, and stability. Similarly, modern environmentalists often attempt to educate people about environmental issues to help them act in enlightened self-interest, but they also rely on government to regulate environmental concerns. The core ideas of Whig philosophy pervade both, thus showing how Whig thought is at the core of modern environmental philosophy even if many are not aware of it. The connection between the early conservation movement and a revised Whig philosophy, as seen in the writings of George Perkins Marsh, sheds new light on the basis of modern environmentalism.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

CHAPTER 2

Even after the Whig party disintegrated and Marsh became less active in American politics, Marsh still saw the world through the lens of Whig political philosophy. The environmental writings of George Perkins Marsh can be more fully understood in this context of Whig political philosophy. The subtle changes in Marsh's conservation ideology are brought into sharper focus when one keeps in mind the holistic philosophy that underlies much of his thought. Marsh developed his Whig philosophical world-view early in his life, and it is clear from his active political career that Whig politics was extremely important to him. Even in Marsh's early writings, in which his environmental philosophy had not yet been fully developed, Marsh used Whig political philosophy as a framework to understand man's relationship with the natural world.

For Marsh, political ideas were not simply abstractions but rather, they were the foundation of daily life choices. For example, Marsh praised agriculture because of the moral and economic virtues that it fostered. In Marsh's early work, he was optimistic about the role that agriculture played in subduing the earth for human needs. He contrasted his own society, which practiced good husbandry, with more "savage" societies, which did not contribute to taming the land. In these early writings, Whig ideas of history, progress, and development play a central role in Marsh's view of the natural world. He believed that societal interests should be placed above private ones, and he thought it was possible for individuals to actively work for the public interest. In the later years of his life, Marsh changed his view. His numerous observations of American and European landscapes led him to believe that man's alterations of the natural world were not completely positive. He began to see the downsides of practices such

as deforestation and irrigation. Despite this seemingly bleak outlook, Marsh remained an optimist throughout his life. Although Marsh surveyed the environmental damage that was occurring as a result of human action, he believed that, through government intervention, all of these problems could be solved. In these later writings, Marsh still included the Whig ideas of progress and development, but he emphasized that government rather than individuals, was responsible for pursuing public interests. In either case, the purposeful actions of elites, usually government, was necessary to halt environmental degradation.

Marsh's earliest speech that dealt with these matters was an address delivered before the Agricultural Society of Rutland County in 1847. In this speech, he shared his thoughts about "the herdsman and the mechanic [and] the ploughman . . . as means and instruments of civilization and social progress."⁸⁸ It is clear from the above quote that Marsh's interest in the natural world cannot be separated from his ideas about humanity and civilization. The natural world, in its pure and wild state, was not the topic of this talk. Instead, it was a treatise on the relationship between man and the Earth. He had been invited to the County Fair to "judge oxen, swine, and maple sugar" as well as to deliver this speech.⁸⁹ So, he "caution[ed] against heedless depletion of resources" while "commending progress in farming."⁹⁰ This speech contained a multitude of assumptions about civilization and progress. As this speech was Marsh's earliest published essay, it serves as a foundation for judging his future work. Documents from later in his life show a progression in his ideas about natural history, civilization, and progress. Many of the assumptions he made in this speech are rooted in Whig political philosophy and history, which he reevaluated throughout his life.

⁸⁸ George Perkins Marsh, "Address Delivered before the Agricultural Society of Rutland County," in *So Great a Vision: The Conservation Writings of George Perkins Marsh*, ed. Stephen C. Trombulak (Hanover and London: Middlebury College Press, University Press of New England, 2000), 2.

⁸⁹ Lowenthal, *George Perkins Marsh: Prophet of Conservation*, 95.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

In his 1847 speech, Marsh expressed the belief that the conflict between Man and Nature over the physical world was a fundamental aspect of natural history. When humans developed civilizations, it meant that they had triumphed over Nature. Marsh had strong faith in human progress, and he therefore believed that this triumph was inevitable. The battle between Man and Nature reflected the progression of Man from a state of savagery to civilization. While Marsh's ideas of civilization were not unique, he saw this conflict through the distinct lens of natural history rather than through ideas of art and culture as did many of his contemporaries. Marsh believed that while Man was in the state of savagery, Nature was the dominant force on the physical world; in this state, Man could exert little control over physical geography. Man, however, had ultimately triumphed over Nature and "the earth has been subdued in the same proportion, and by the same slow process, that man has been civilized."⁹¹ Thus, the civilization of Man paralleled the triumph of Man over Nature; this process was slow but its direction was certain.

While this was true of the natural history of the rest of the world, Marsh argued that "America offers the first example of the struggle between civilized Man and barbarous uncultivated nature."⁹² Instead of savage Man slowly evolving to a dominant position, the domination of Man over Nature occurred suddenly with the arrival of Europeans on the American continent. He described the way in which "the full energies of advanced European civilization, stimulated by its accumulated intelligence, were brought to bear at once on a desert continent, and it has been but the work of a day to win empires from the wilderness."⁹³ By using words such as *advanced* and *intelligence* to describe the force of Man on the American continent, and using the word *desert* to describe the state of Nature, he was making a normative statement:

⁹¹ Marsh, "Address Delivered before the Agricultural Society of Rutland County," 2.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

the force of Man was good, while the force of Nature was bad. This assumption was implicit throughout Marsh's speech to the Agricultural Society. In the later years of Marsh's life, he reassessed this early judgment that the affect of Man on the physical environment was always positive.

As stated above, Marsh claimed that Man was in the savage state as long as Nature remained the dominant force on the physical environment. "In purely savage life," Marsh stated, "[Man] takes no thought for the reproduction of that which he improvidently consumes, but trusts implicitly to the bounty of spontaneous Nature to supply the demands which the appetites and needs of her own children have created."⁹⁴ He went on to say that "the arts of the savage are the arts of destruction."⁹⁵ Thus, savage Man added nothing positive to the physical world; he merely survived off the products of Nature. Civilized Man, in contrast, had triumphed over Nature and gained power over the Earth. Along with this power came the responsibility to be a good steward of the Earth. Man could no longer rely on the bounty of Nature, and instead he had to make "arrangements for securing the continued and regular supply of man's two great wants, food and clothing."⁹⁶ It was this civilization that transformed the unproductive savage "into a beneficent, a fructifying, and a protective influence . . . of the organic creation."⁹⁷ Thus, it was clear that while civilization implied that Man had become more powerful than Nature in shaping the physical environment, the fact that Man was "civilized" implied that he had taken responsibility for the maintenance and well-being of the Earth.

While Marsh was still optimistic about Man's impact on the physical world, this optimism was tempered by his strong attachment to Whig political philosophy. The aspect of

⁹⁴ Ibid, 4-5.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

Whig philosophy that applied most closely to Marsh was the emphasis on finding a balance between Duty and Desire. “Whig rhetoric emphasized ‘morality’—or ‘duties’ rather than ‘rights.’”⁹⁸ Thus, Man did not have a right to abuse the Earth; instead, Man had the duty to subdue and tame the wilderness. Marsh’s speech to this agricultural society fit neatly into this framework.

As Marsh described, between the stages of savagery and civilization, there was a moment in human history when Man first realized his responsibility to the Earth. This moment occurred, he claimed, when pastoral life combined with agriculture to form stable settlements. When this happened, humans “begin to realize what, as wandering shepherds, they had before dimly suspected, that Man has a right to the use, not the abuse, of the products of Nature; that consumption should everywhere compensate by increased production.”⁹⁹ It was not wrong, therefore, for Man to use the products of the earth, but a civilized Man would return to the earth at least as much as he took.

For Marsh, Europe was the ultimate example of civilization because of how Europeans treat the Earth. They put “an enlightened self-interest”¹⁰⁰ above short-sighted individual interests, and this made their civilization strong. He pointed out that “it has long been a practice in many parts of Europe, as well as in our older settlements, to cut the forests reserved for timber and fuel at stated intervals.”¹⁰¹ The mark of civilization was foresight, and the degree to which a society acted in a sustainable and intelligent manner measured the heights of civilization they had reached.

At this point, Marsh attempted to prove that the civilization in Vermont (and in New

⁹⁸ Howe, 21.

⁹⁹ Marsh, “Address Delivered before the Agricultural Society of Rutland County,” 7.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 18.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 17.

England in general) was superior to that of the rest of the United States. He spoke about the “rude climate” of Vermont, in which there were “three winters each year—two Southern with a Siberian interrelated between.”¹⁰² The Europeans who settled Vermont had to deal with this extreme adversity in order to build a society. As a result, in Vermont, a high value had been placed on frugality, moderation, and foresight. He contrasted this environment with “the tempting attractions of the milder sky and less laborious life of the South, and the seductions of the boasted greatness and exaggerated fertility of the West.”¹⁰³ Vermont did not have the same labor resources as the South, because their economy was not based on slavery, nor do they have the same land resources as the West, because available land was limited. Yet, Man became civilized in Vermont sooner, because he was forced at an earlier stage to address the problems of limited resources. Thus, Marsh did not primarily care about the state of the physical environment; the most important thing is the development of Man’s character. When a society took adequate care of the physical environment, this was merely a sign of civilization; conserving the physical environment had no value in itself.

A close examination of this single speech that George Perkins Marsh made in 1847 reveals a great deal about his philosophy of nature, natural history, civilization, and Man’s relationship to the Earth. Nature was the force that acted on the earth in a wild state, before it was dominated by Man. Natural history was the story of Man’s development from savagery, in which Nature was dominant over Man, to civilization, in which Man became more powerful than Nature. The mark of a civilized society was that it both used and cared for the physical environment with sustainable and long-term goals in mind. At this point in Marsh’s philosophy, preserving and restoring was not a good in itself, but merely a sign that a society has reached this

¹⁰² Ibid, 19.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

high level of civilization. Later in his life, Marsh moved beyond this narrow and Whiggish view of history, but to understand this transformation, one must understand the ideas he had in 1847.

The next time Marsh formally dealt with the issues surrounding Man's relation to the natural world was a lecture entitled "The Camel" before the Smithsonian Institution in 1855. In this speech, he argued that the Camel should be brought to the American West to be used for transportation and military purposes. Marsh had spent many years as a diplomat in Turkey and traveling throughout the Middle Eastern region. In this lecture, Marsh synthesized his personal experiences traveling in the Egyptian desert with up to date scientific knowledge.

When it was published, it "passed almost unnoticed" and was pronounced "very near a total failure."¹⁰⁴ It was dismissed by many as "a potpourri of odd facts, learned lore, legends, and anecdotes," but at the same time, it was a concrete study "aimed at a practical goal of domestic adaptation."¹⁰⁵ While the book was not a popular success, it did have some influence because of Marsh's personal connections with Spencer Baird and others at the Smithsonian Institution. Therefore, it was no coincidence that "in 1856, a year after Marsh's lecture was published, thirty-four camels . . . arrived in Indianola, Texas, and became the foundation of the U.S. Camel Corps."¹⁰⁶ This program had little success and was disbanded after the Civil War. Yet, Marsh's philosophy that led him to support the importation and domestication of camels in the United States sheds light on Marsh's ideas about the relationship between man and the natural environment. Political elites had the right and the responsibility to experiment with new programs and innovations that would promote the collective good of all citizens.

The premise of "The Camel" suggested that Marsh believed that man could and should alter the physical environment. He believed that Man had the responsibility to subjugate "the

¹⁰⁴ Lowenthal, *George Perkins Marsh: Prophet of Conservation*, 176.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 277.

¹⁰⁶ Trombulak, 25.

entire organic and inorganic world to human control and human use.”¹⁰⁷ While he saw that western civilization had subjugated the natural world to a great extent, he also believed that the arid American West presented an untapped prospect to spread civilization. Because of this, he argued that “Man is yet far from having achieved the fulfillment of his grand mission . . . [because] millions of leagues of [the earth’s] surface still lie uninhabited, unenjoyed, and unsubdued.”¹⁰⁸ This attitude differed greatly from the argument Marsh made eight years later in *Man and Nature*. In this later work, “Marsh demonstrated that he was aware of the problems posed by the introduction of exotic animals,” and was not convinced that human alterations of the natural world were always positive.¹⁰⁹ Yet, in this statement, there was no “hesitation on his part about the advisability of such a manipulation of a region’s fauna.”¹¹⁰ While he adapted his views during these eight years because of new observations he made while traveling, he did not fundamentally change his beliefs. He remained consistently concerned with the progress and development of human civilization, and his new experiences led him to rethink the best method for reaching this goal. When he wrote *The Camel*, he believed that “the importation and exploitation of a domesticated quadruped that would be kept under human control at all times” would lead to great benefits for society.¹¹¹ Later in his life, when he argued for conservation to protect forests, soil, and streams, it was because he believed that doing so was in the long term best interest of society.

In his view, the camel served an important function in the physical geography of the Arabian Peninsula, and there was no reason why the desert in the American West should be

¹⁰⁷ George Perkins Marsh, “Lectures Delivered before the Smithsonian Institution, No. 1—The Camel” in *So Great a Vision: The Conservation Writings of George Perkins Marsh*, ed. Stephen C. Trombulak (Hanover and London: Middlebury College Press, University Press of New England, 2000), 25.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁰⁹ Trombulak, 24.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

deprived of this advantage. He stated, “I cannot doubt that it would prove a most powerful auxiliary in all measures tending to keep in check the hostile Indian on the frontier, as well as in maintaining the military and postal communication between our Pacific territory and the east.”¹¹² This was consistent with aspects of Whig political philosophy; government had the responsibility to improve public welfare. “A society that did not respond positively to such an opportunity for collective self-improvement would become ‘a community of self-degradation,’ warned John Quincy Adams.”¹¹³ Only if a government actively worked to make society better, in this case by importing the Camel, would society continue to flourish and progress.

Marsh then abandoned this exotic subject and returned to issues relating to agriculture and land use. In 1856, Marsh delivered a speech to the New Hampshire Agricultural Society about the agriculture and its effects on the development of civilization. The new perspectives that he had gained during the intervening years, however, make this speech much more unique than his 1847 speech before the Agricultural Society of Rutland County. This was because Marsh had adapted his vision of Man’s relationship with the natural world by incorporating new observations of the environments in Europe and the Middle East into his narrow New England perspective. Thus, one of the “greatest contribution[s] of Marsh’s writings . . . was his cross-cultural perspective on agriculture and forestry.”¹¹⁴ This broad perspective is what makes Marsh such an important figure in early conservation thought.

The earlier speech focused on the ways in which agriculture led to a balanced society, and it also contained implicit references to a Whiggish view of history. At that point in his life, his outlook was shaped by living in Vermont and serving as a U.S. Congressman. The speech in New Hampshire, on the other hand, was influenced by his travels throughout Europe and his

¹¹² Marsh, “Lectures Delivered before the Smithsonian Institution, No. 1—The Camel,” 32.

¹¹³ Howe, 36.

¹¹⁴ Trombulak, 34.

ministry posts in Turkey. He was fascinated by the highly developed public works system that he observed in many parts of Europe. He was still looking at the world through the lens of Whiggish history, but his frame of reference had changed. While he had at one point seen agriculture in Vermont as a peak of civilization compared to the “savage” society of the Native Americans and the wasteful civilization in the American West, he now believed that Europe’s civilization was even greater because of its enormous investment in public works.

Marsh noted numerous differences between the European and the American landscapes, which he attributed to the length of time the respective continents had undergone intensive agriculture. He observed: “a long course of cultivation has obliterated the minor irregularities and inequalities of the natural surface . . . thus given the whole landscape a rolling outline.”¹¹⁵ He did not say if this was a good or a bad thing, but he did make the point that the European landscape had been vastly altered by human activity. The centuries of large-scale agriculture had degraded the European continent, yet the European example showed that it was possible to halt this environmental devastation.

In the European case, only “centuries of loss had finally impelled Europeans to stem erosion and depletion.”¹¹⁶ Marsh urged Americans to be proactive instead of waiting for the degradation of the American continent to become this severe. Like a good Whig historian, Marsh believed that through studying the past, it was possible for society to avoid similar misfortunes. “The grim saga of destruction abroad should teach Americans to stem further loss by restricting logging, afforestation, and stream control, as Europeans were at last beginning to

¹¹⁵ George Perkins Marsh, “Oration before the New Hampshire State Agricultural Society,” in *So Great a Vision: The Conservation Writings of George Perkins Marsh*, ed. Stephen C. Trombulak (Hanover and London: Middlebury College Press, University Press of New England, 2000), 39.

¹¹⁶ Lowenthal, 277.

do.”¹¹⁷ If Americans did not act to prevent environmental degradation, their civilization would not be sustainable.

In this New Hampshire speech, Marsh valued moderation, unlike in his Rutland address in which he had valued unlimited agricultural development. This difference can be seen in ways that his concepts of Duty and Desire differed in these two speeches. In the Rutland speech, Duty was mankind’s responsibility to develop and farm the land, while Desire was living off the land while giving nothing back. In the New Hampshire, in contrast, he argued that Desire was unlimited agricultural development with no thought to the long term effects altering the landscape. Duty was the responsibility to develop “rural agricultural systems that could sustainably support both crop production and communities of people with strong moral character.”¹¹⁸ Thus, Marsh is still thinking in terms of the Whig dichotomy between Duty and Desire, but his broadening perspective led him to modify the meanings of these terms.

Marsh argued in his New Hampshire speech that one of the hallmarks of an advanced civilization was that the benefits of this civilization were shared among all classes of society. He did not think that it was good for the economic or moral development of a people for a small segment of the population to control all the resources. This was consistent with the Whig ideal of promoting public interests over private concerns. He noted that the “welfare [of the State] is best promoted by that public and private policy which tends to distribute and equalize, rather than to accumulate pecuniary capital.”¹¹⁹ This, additionally, is connected to the value that the Whigs placed on stability and harmony within a society. Marsh judged that only the government, run by political and societal elites, could properly make policy decisions in a society. He did not, however, believe that the interests of the elites should be served above the

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Trombulak, 35.

¹¹⁹ Marsh, “Oration before the New Hampshire State Agricultural Society,” 39.

interests of society as a whole. He had faith that elites would address societal problems in a holistic manner that would put the collective good over their own private needs.

As in his earlier speech in Rutland, Marsh still believed that agriculture would develop individual character and ensure societal stability. In this type of society, “Man’s . . . physical, moral, and intellectual nature, are most completely, equally, and harmoniously evolved, trained, and perfected.”¹²⁰ But, in this new speech, he warned that some modes of agriculture were better than others. A system that reduced the people who worked the land to serfs, slaves, or wage-workers, would not lead to the development of physical, moral, and intellectual character. He pointed out the fact that “independent freemen are very much more efficient and reliable supporters and defenders of the government of their choice, than if they were reduced to the condition of hirelings.”¹²¹ A society, in turn, could only be stable if the morality of its citizens was fully developed. Rather than a subordinate interest, the well-being of the lower classes, “who in the first instance extract from the bosom of the soil that which supplies the life-blood of the nation, and who in the last resort are the defenders of that soil,” was crucial to the stability of society.¹²² Thus, Marsh cared about land management not because he intrinsically cared about the land, but because his Whig values showed him the importance of ensuring the public interest.

A stable society required sustainable agricultural practices, and the government had the responsibility to fund large-scale internal improvements for the benefit of the entire society. If public works were left to the management of private corporations, numerous people would be excluded from the benefits provided. He believed that corporations were “for the most part unprincipled [and] speculating.”¹²³ If public works were completely in the hands of private

¹²⁰ Ibid, 45.

¹²¹ Ibid, 39.

¹²² Ibid, 43.

¹²³ Ibid, 54.

interests, this would lead to “wide-spread demoralization and the vast amount of private ruin and misery, which are necessary consequences of the predominance of corporate action and the trade of stock-jobbing.”¹²⁴ Corporate control of important aspects of society was neither sustainable nor beneficial for all.

Marsh’s 1856 New Hampshire speech was both consistent with and also a departure from Marsh’s previous work. He praised the value of agriculture and was concerned with societal stability. All of his arguments were still consistent with Whig political philosophy, but the knowledge he gained while traveling in Europe and the Middle East helped him to further refine that Whig philosophy. Because Whig philosophy was a holistic way of seeing the world, it could change and adapt to new circumstances. Marsh was still optimistic about Man’s ability improve upon the natural landscape of the earth. He was more aware when he was making this speech, however, that the alterations that man made to the earth could have disastrous consequences. Thus, in this speech, he was much more restrained in his praise of agriculture. Agriculture could still be positive, both for individuals and society, but only if practiced in the correct manner. This correct manner required an attention to proper distribution of wealth and a commitment to internal improvement. These objectives could only be achieved by a government which was working proactively to promote policies that served the public interest and maintained societal stability.

In 1857, Marsh wrote a report on the state of fisheries on Vermont, not as a concerned private citizen, but as an appointed official in the Vermont government. He was commissioned by the Governor of Vermont to write a Report on the Artificial Propagation of Fish. This report was necessary because “many species of fish had declined dramatically or had become extirpated

¹²⁴ Ibid.

altogether.”¹²⁵ This had been a problem since the 1820s when the state “passed acts to safeguard particular lakes and streams, but even when enforced, such protection was not enough to sustain fish numbers.”¹²⁶ Marsh examined the declining fisheries, but he “conducted no original research” on this topic.¹²⁷ He was not, nor did he ever claim to be, a scientist. Rather, Marsh excelled at synthesizing the work of others. “He appended papers by European experts on fish breeding and kindred studies from southern New England” to put together a “summary in light of what it might mean for Vermont and Vermonters.”¹²⁸ In his final analysis, Marsh believed that fisheries in Vermont should be used judiciously and carefully preserved. This paper was largely ignored by the Vermont Legislature in 1857, but it was extremely influential in the creation of the Vermont Fish Commission in 1866 and in the development of federal fishery laws.¹²⁹

Marsh did not believe that the fishery problem could be solved by small protections of individual lakes and streams. Even well-intentioned actions of forward thinking individuals could not solve this problem. Instead, he took a characteristically Whig approach to this problem and pursued this problem in a holistic manner; only government could understand and take action in the necessary comprehensive manner. Marsh was acutely aware of “the interplay of plant and animal habitats, and alarmed by human impairment to their intricate linkages.”¹³⁰ Marsh first ascribed the decreasing fish stock to actions of fisherman who took fish from the water “at the spawning season, or in greater numbers at other times than the natural increase can supply.”¹³¹ Then, he suggested that there were more ecologically complex reasons for the

¹²⁵ Trombulak, 62.

¹²⁶ Lowenthal, *George Perkins Marsh: Prophet of Conservation*, 182.

¹²⁷ Trombulak, 62

¹²⁸ Lowenthal, *George Perkins Marsh: Prophet of Conservation*, 182; Trombulak, 62.

¹²⁹ Trombulak, 63.

¹³⁰ Lowenthal, *George Perkins Marsh: Prophet of Conservation*, 183.

¹³¹ George Perkins Marsh, “Report, the Artificial Propagation of Fish” in *So Great a Vision: The Conservation Writings of George Perkins Marsh*, ed. Stephen C. Trombulak (Hanover and London: Middlebury College Press, University Press of New England, 2000), 67.

decline of fish. First he put the blame on industry: “the erection of sawmills, factories, and other industrial establishments on all our considerable steams, has tended to destroy or drive away fish . . . [and has rendered them] less suitable as a habitation for aquatic life.”¹³² Then he attributed the fault to deforestation: “brooks and rivulets, which once flowed with a clear, gentle, and equable stream through the year, are now dry or nearly so in the summer, but turbid with mud and swollen to the size of a river after heavy rains.”¹³³ For these reasons, a policy that restricted the times of the year and the quantities of fish that fisherman could take would have little effect on the state of the fisheries in Vermont. “It is therefore not probable,” he argued, that “any mere protective legislation, however faithfully obeyed, would restore the ancient abundance of our public fisheries.”¹³⁴ The problem with the fisheries was linked to the broader changes in the land caused by industry and agriculture.

It was not possible, nor was it desirable, to completely reverse these alterations to the land. He did not want to eliminate civilization; he “was not out-and-out protectionist, no sentimental foe to all development.”¹³⁵ He wrote that “however desirable it might be . . . to repeople the woods and the streams . . . it is for obvious reasons, impracticable to restore a condition of things incompatible with the necessities and the habits of cultivated social life.”¹³⁶ He believed that these “human *improvements* [had] produced an almost total change in all the external conditions of piscatorial life.”¹³⁷ The fact that he used the word “*improvement*” suggests that he believed that man had a generally positive impact on the natural world. He qualified this optimism, however, by stressing that it was crucial for this society to recognize the

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid, 69.

¹³⁵ Lowenthal, *George Perkins Marsh: Prophet of Conservation*, 183-4.

¹³⁶ Marsh, “Report, the Artificial Propagation of Fish,” 65.

¹³⁷ Ibid, 68.

impact it had on the natural world. Only by understanding the “shorn and crippled condition to which human progress [had] reduced [the earth],” could people “do something to recover at least a share of the abundance which, in a more primitive state, the watery kingdom afforded.”¹³⁸ Thus, he supported progress, but advocated for a wise and sustainable progress that would benefit society in both the short and long run.

Marsh’s Whig impulses also led him to look to the past to advise him about the best fishery policy. From his extensive historical studies, he knew that even in ancient Rome, people had been experimenting with “the artificial breeding, or at least feeding and fattening of fish” to mitigate the decline in fisheries.¹³⁹ This, to Marsh, was both a sign of the high level of civilization that Rome had achieved, as well as a model that the United States should follow. In his later work, *Man and Nature*, Marsh again compared the American Republic to ancient Rome but in more pessimistic way. He would later argue that environmental degradation was one of the major reasons for the decline of Roman civilization. Instead of a positive example to follow, Rome was a negative example to avoid. But, in 1857, seven years before the publication of *Man and Nature*, he had not yet reached that conclusion.

The next chapter will go into more detail about Marsh’s argument in *Man and Nature*, the ways it was infused with Whig political philosophy, and the implications this may have for modern environmental thought. But, before we proceed, it is important to dwell on the importance of the essays and speeches that were discussed in this chapter. Their topics vary widely, and Marsh did not strive to make one consistent argument. Instead, they were snippets of thoughts from a man who had very diverse intellectual interests. Although Marsh did not mention the Whigs explicitly, Whig ideology was the foundation of these works. This ideology

¹³⁸ Ibid, 66.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

led him to approach all societal problems that he faced through the same lens. Problems could be solved only through the purposeful action of government, which strove to act in the long-term best interests of society as a whole. This conclusion was elitist, in that it trusted educated and knowledgeable elites, not common people, to make policy decisions. But, Marsh made clear even in these early writings that he expected elites to work for the public interest, not their own personal self-interest.

CHAPTER 3

Marsh argued in his seminal text *Man and Nature* that the development of human civilization inevitably led to changes in the natural environment. At the same time, Marsh expressed ideas about wise and proper use of land, avoidance of waste, and creation of a progressive yet stable society, which had deep roots in Whig political philosophy. Progress inevitably changed the environment, but this alteration would not lead to degradation if a responsible and powerful government guided the development. He wrote that every human civilization has “reacted upon organized and inorganic nature, and thereby modified, if not determined, the material structure of his earthly home.”¹⁴⁰ However, these changes were not necessarily bad because they made possible the benefits of advanced civilization. Instead, he argued that a society that only pursued progress and did not attempt to live in harmony with the natural world was doomed to be short-lived. He is frequently remembered for his prophecy which he published in *Man and Nature* that “Man has too long forgotten that the earth was given to him for usufruct alone, not for consumption, still less for profligate waste.”¹⁴¹ As Marsh often expressed in his earlier writings, with the development of civilization, man also had a greater responsibility to care for and steward the natural environment. Despite the presence of these views in the earlier works, it was in his publication of *Man and Nature* that Marsh most coherently and systematically outlined these ideas.

One of the central tenets of this text was Marsh’s argument about the relationship between civilization, progress, and the environment. Marsh claimed that human civilization was sustainable only if man understood his relationship to the natural world. This was because, in

¹⁴⁰ Marsh. *Man and Nature*, 13.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid*, 36.

order to form an advanced civilization, man destroyed the natural balance of the earth. It was essential, therefore, for man to create an artificial balance that would stabilize civilization in the absence of this natural balance. This new balance could only be implemented by people who possessed a full understanding of man's relationship to the natural world and who were actively working for the best interests of society as a whole. To Marsh's mind, government was the only entity that could properly weigh the opposing forces of Duty and Desire to pursue society's holistic and long term stability. Private corporations and individuals, however noble their intentions (Marsh did not have great faith in their intentions), had goals that were too limited to benefit the breadth of public interests. Government, on the other hand, was comprised of society's most learned, disciplined, and selfless individuals who had been installed as a result of the public's understanding that these were society's *best* representatives. Having thought this through, Marsh concluded that only those who had already demonstrated a certain level of educational, experience, and participation in broad government planning, should be trusted to see the multiple variables involved in the big picture of protecting the environment on the one hand, and enthusiasm for technological progress on the other. Only such people—the elites—should be entrusted with this planning.

The argument in *Man and Nature* implicitly raises both then and now a number of collateral issues. First of all, is a clean environment a privilege of only societal elites or for everyone in society equally? Next, whose job is it to address environmental issues? Is it solely the government's job, or do all citizens share this responsibility? As will be seen, Marsh believed that a clean and stable environment would benefit all segments of society, not only the elites. Marsh also believed that all individuals should act in an enlightened self-interest to work for a sustainable environment. Yet, ultimately, it was government's responsibility to ensure that

progress was restrained society was stable. Thus, as suggested earlier, Marsh's vision of the natural world and man's place in it cannot be separated from these basic principles of Whig philosophy.

On the surface, *Man and Nature* was a summary of the most up to date knowledge that was available to Marsh about man's influence on the natural environment. He detailed the changes in the natural world that were attributable to the actions of men. Marsh did not hesitate, however, to insert his opinions throughout this comprehensive scientific account. From these asides and summations, it is clear that Marsh's vision of the world when he wrote this text was still deeply rooted in Whig principles. While Marsh organized his book thematically (with chapters on vegetable and animal life, the forests, the waters, and the sands), I organize my discussion of this book in view of the overarching argument that Marsh is making about Man's relationship with the natural world.

Marsh had a clear vision of the way the world should be ordered, but he was not an activist. He rarely actively lobbied for the implementation of specific policies; instead he believed that his cause was best served by a cogent and academic argument. Marsh was not coy about his purpose for writing this book, which was:

to indicate the character and . . . extent of the changes produced by human action in the physical conditions of the globe . . . the dangers of imprudence and the necessity of caution in all operations which . . . interfere with the spontaneous arrangements of the organic and inorganic world; to suggest the possibility and the importance of the restoration of disturbed harmonies and the material improvement of wasted and exhausted regions.¹⁴²

It was vitally important that men study and understand the natural world, but the next step—acting wisely by using this knowledge—was equally important. Marsh left it up to others to

¹⁴² Ibid, 3.

implement his vision in policy, but it was clear that the purpose of a scientific inquiry into the natural world was to repair concrete problems.

For this reason, Marsh did not claim to be a scientist or that he wrote this book for scientists. His goal was to summarize scientific data in a way that all educated people could understand. He stated: “I address myself not to professed physicists, but to the general intelligence of educated, observing, and thinking men, my purpose is rather to make practical suggestions rather than to indulge theoretical speculations properly suited to a different class from that to which those for whom I wrote belong.”¹⁴³ He thus made it clear from the beginning that while his topic may have seemed theoretical, there were practical applications of this environmental knowledge that were of great importance for human civilization.

At the root of his warnings about the environment was the Whig desire for two seemingly contradictory goals: stability and progress. But, these two opposites were really complementary. Progress was good as long as it was restrained and under control; only restrained progress would lead to a stable and prosperous future. Pure stability of the natural world, Marsh argued, was only possible in the absence of man. He stated this idea clearly: “Nature, left undisturbed, so fashions her territory as to give it almost unchanging permanence of form, outline, and proportion . . . a condition of equilibrium has been reached which without the action of man, would remain, with little fluctuation, for countless ages.”¹⁴⁴ Marsh argued that all human activity caused a disruption in nature.

The changes that man made in the natural environment were not always negative and not always deliberate. He understood that man acted “sometimes, indeed, with conscious purpose, but for the most part, as unforeseen though natural consequences of acts performed for narrower

¹⁴³ Ibid, 4-5.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 29-30

and more immediate ends.”¹⁴⁵ The fact that changes to the natural environment were usually not intentional was crucial to Marsh’s argument. It was one thing to ask people to forgo actions which directly influenced nature, but it was more challenging to make people understand the inadvertent consequences of their actions. Marsh used a concrete example to illustrate this point. Scientists had observed the destruction of pine forests in North Carolina by once harmless insects. Marsh concluded from this data that:

Man is the indirect cause of an evil for which he pays so heavy a penalty. Insects increase whenever the birds which feed upon them disappear. Hence, in the wanton destruction of the robin and other insectivorous birds, the *bipes implumis*, the featherless biped, man . . . is waging a treacherous warfare on his natural allies.¹⁴⁶

The birds played a vitally important role in the forest ecosystem, but if man did not study the natural environment, he would have no way of knowing this. The birds should have been protected not for their own sake, but because they indirectly protected man’s interests by preying “on the insects most destructive to [man’s] own harvests.”¹⁴⁷ Although man did not intend to disrupt the forest ecosystem by killing birds, there were concrete actions that man could take to correct this imbalance.

Early in the text, Marsh feigned a detached and theoretical perspective. He wrote that he wished to “[point] out the directions and [illustrate] the modes in which human action has been or may be most injurious or most beneficial in its influence upon the physical conditions of the earth we inhabit.”¹⁴⁸ It seemed that he has not yet made up his mind about whether man’s actions were positive or negative. He did this to make it clear that he was not trying to condemn

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 19.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 34.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 39.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 15.

civilization blindly. Rather, he insisted, he aimed to balance modernization with reasoned discipline.

Later in the book, however, Marsh changed his tone and argued that man's changes to the landscape were undoubtedly destructive to the harmonies of nature. He wrote: "man is everywhere a disturbing agent. Wherever he plants his foot, the harmonies of nature are turned to discords."¹⁴⁹ Marsh was aware that man was not the only cause of change in the natural environment, but he argued that the actions of man were vastly different than those of other natural actors: "of all organic beings, man alone is to be regarded as essentially a destructive power,"¹⁵⁰ and "every plant, every animal, is a geographical agency, man a destructive, vegetables and even wild beasts, restorative powers."¹⁵¹ He was extremely critical of man's actions in these passages. This criticism was sparked by his direct observations of the Mediterranean landscape. Nineteenth-century Italy was barren compared to the lush descriptions of ancient authors.

Although Marsh recognized the environmental damages that had been caused by human civilization, he did not conclude that civilization is the root of evil and that man should return to a state of nature. For Marsh, this was both impossible and undesirable because the alteration of the natural environment was a prerequisite for the development of human civilization. "Man . . . cannot subsist and rise to the full development of [his] higher properties, unless brute and unconscious nature be effectually combated, and, in a great degree, vanquished by human art."¹⁵² In this statement, he placed a higher importance on the development of human art and society than on the preservation of the natural world. For this reason, it is important to note that Marsh

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 36.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 36-7

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 53.

¹⁵² Ibid, 38.

was not an *environmentalist*. The terms environmentalist and environmentalism were not in use in Marsh's lifetime. Ideas about the environment were essential to the way he viewed the world and he was deeply concerned about the state of the natural world, yet these ideas were subordinate to a larger idea about the best way for society as a whole to be organized. Thus, although Marsh was not an environmentalist, he had specific ideas about man's appropriate relationship to the natural world.

While man inevitably altered the natural environment, Marsh believed that it was both desirable and possible to limit the extent of these changes. He wrote that these "transforming operations should be so conducted as not unnecessarily to derange and destroy what, in too many cases, it is beyond the power of man to rectify and restore."¹⁵³ Thus, while the changes themselves were inevitable, the extent and severity of these changes could be controlled if man did not act recklessly. He argued that while "a certain measure of transformation of terrestrial surface, or suppression of natural, and stimulation of artificially modified productivity becomes necessary . . . man has unfortunately exceeded" this measure."¹⁵⁴

These excessive alterations were not caused by malicious exploits; instead they were more often caused by shortsighted and careless actions. As an example of this, Marsh pointed to the actions of settlers on the American western frontier. Because the western frontier was viewed as a limitless and virgin wilderness by many settlers, they had not striven to use the natural resources in efficient and sustainable ways. Marsh explained that "the needs of agriculture are the most familiar cause of the destruction of the forest in new countries . . . but the slovenly husbandry of the border settler soon exhausts the luxuriance of his first fields, and

¹⁵³ Ibid, 35.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, 38.

compels him to remove his household gods to a fresher soil.”¹⁵⁵ Because Marsh viewed this environmental degradation through the lens of Whig philosophy, he believed that this lifestyle was not only destructive to the natural environment, but was counter to the full development of individuals and society. Individuals could only reach their full potential in a stable society, so it was crucial for men to use the natural environment properly to ensure this stability.

Marsh was not concerned with protecting the natural environment for its own sake or for aesthetic purposes; instead he argued that improper use of the natural environment would lead to desolation of the land and decay of civilization. The results of this decay would be more than unpleasant, they would be disastrous. Marsh made this point explicit, he wrote: “There are parts of Asia Minor, of Northern Africa, of Greece, and even of Alpine Europe, where the operation of causes set in action by man has brought the face of the earth to a desolation almost as complete as that of the moon.”¹⁵⁶ As a Whig historian, Marsh not only sought to understand the past; he actively sought to learn lessons from the past to apply to contemporary society. He concluded after extensive research on the environment of the Mediterranean world that America would face the same environmental desolation as Rome if it continued on the same path. As evidence for this decay, Marsh compared the contemporary environment of the Mediterranean world “with the descriptions that ancient historians and geographers have given of their fertility and general capability of ministering to human uses.”¹⁵⁷ The difference between these was stark and undeniable. Further, he observed the “decayed works of internal improvement, [which] show that at former epochs a dense population inhabited those now lonely districts.”¹⁵⁸ The only way

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, 233.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, 42.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, 9.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 10.

to avoid the fate of this previous civilization was to understand the natural world and to practice good stewardship.

As a core principle of Whig political philosophy, Marsh placed value in societal stability above the condition of the natural environment. It was only the fact that a disruption of the harmonies of nature caused equal disruptions in human society that concerned Marsh. While human civilization inevitably altered the harmonies of nature, civilized societies had a responsibility to replace these broken harmonies with equally stable man-made harmonies. For this reason, man had the responsibility “to become a coworker with nature in the reconstruction of the damaged fabric” of the natural world.¹⁵⁹ Civilizations in the early stages of development were less aware of their impacts on the natural environment, but it was the mark of an advanced civilization that “well-ordered husbandry, human ingenuity has contrived more or less efficient substitutes.”¹⁶⁰ In such a civilization, an artificial harmony replaced the original natural harmony.

Marsh believed that society should be governed by those with a holistic and long-term vision for the proper relationship between nature and civilization. Acquiring this vision, however, was not easy. For this reason, Marsh did not believe that individual citizens working for their own immediate and private interests would be able to work for the long term best interests of society. Even if their intentions were good, they did not have the ability to work in the best interests of society as a whole. Thus, Marsh believed that government was responsible for this task. Government actions could be “dictated by higher views of state economy;” in contrast, the actions of individuals and private corporations were “merely pecuniary

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, 35.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 12-13.

investment.”¹⁶¹ To this end, Marsh argued that “abundant experience has shown that no legislation can secure the permanence of the forest in private hands.”¹⁶² Governments could not force individuals to act in the interests of society as a whole. Governments must instead work actively to truly achieve long term stability.

Marsh did not assume, however, that governments would always strive to promote the public interest. One of the principle causes of environmental degradation, along with ignorance of the laws of nature, was “civil and ecclesiastical tyranny and misrule.”¹⁶³ There were numerous historical examples of bad governments inadvertently causing environmental decay. If a bad government could cause environmental degradation, it was equally true that a wise and enlightened government could restore environmental harmonies. This was a pressing issue for Marsh, who had seen first hand the political tyranny in pre-unification Italy. Marsh was a strong proponent of the development of the Italian Risorgimento. Italian unification, he believed, would establish a more stable and lasting government in that country. Another example of an enlightened government was France, in which “the restoration of the forests . . . is a measure of the same elevated character.”¹⁶⁴ Actions like these gave Marsh “hope that the rulers of Christendom are coming better to understand the true duties and interests of civilized government.”¹⁶⁵ For numerous reasons, governments in Marsh’s time were beginning to appreciate and understand the importance of environmental conservation.

Marsh argued that governments in modern Europe practiced more conscientious stewardship than the United States. He did not find this surprising, because it was usually the case that only when the “exhaustion of the natural resources of the soil is threatening,” does a

¹⁶¹ Ibid, 436

¹⁶² Ibid, 250.

¹⁶³ Ibid, 10-11.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, 436.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

civilization realize “the necessity of preserving what is left, if not of restoring what has been wantonly wasted.”¹⁶⁶ The lands in Europe had been intensively cultivated for a longer time than those in the United States. But even Europe, which had begun to realize this necessity, had only “been half awakened to the necessity of restoring the disturbed harmonies of nature.”¹⁶⁷ They had taken great steps in this direction, through reforestation, building dikes, and “repeopling” the waters with fish. Yet, they still “give faint hope that we shall yet make full atonement for our spendthrift waste of the bounties of nature.”¹⁶⁸ While European land use policy was superior to American policy, much more was required to achieve the appropriate level of societal stability.

Thus, the Whigs promoted a vision of society that properly balanced stability and progress. These concepts can neatly fit into the schema of Duty (stability) and Desire (progress). Societies, led by an invisible hand, always move toward progress. This was generally a good thing, as the Whigs believed that moral progress would follow economic and technological progress. But, unregulated progress was not sustainable. It was the responsibility of government to impose stability and order in society. The correct balance between Duty and Desire in this case would result in restrained and sustainable progress.

In Marsh’s lifetime, the United States was growing and developing at an impressive rate. But, to sustain this development required a heightened emphasis on stability in national culture, in government, and in monitoring and controlling man’s relationship to the natural world. Marsh believed that the biggest flaw in American culture was a “restless love of change.” This was true both of the American character and of “the face of physical nature in the United States.”¹⁶⁹ Thus Marsh deemed it necessary for the government to intervene and attempt to bring American

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, 40.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 12-13.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, 43-44.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 280.

society back into order. This required “the establishment of an approximately fixed ratio between the two most broadly characterized distinctions of rural surface—woodland and plough land—[which] would involve a certain persistence of character in all the branches of industry.”¹⁷⁰ Marsh divided the natural world into two types of land: “plough-land” that is actively used and altered for human use, and “woodland” that is protected from degradation. This framework also fit neatly within the Whig schema of Duty and Desire. It was Man’s desire to convert the entire landscape into “plough-land” in order to reap as many benefits from the land as possible. But, it was Man’s Duty to preserve some of the landscape as “woodland” to ensure that these benefits would be lasting. Stability in human civilization could only exist if the natural world was also in harmony. While many people in Marsh’s era believed that a civilization progressed by subduing and cultivating as much land as possible, Marsh knew that in order to be “a people of progress,” America must first become “a well-ordered and stable commonwealth.”¹⁷¹

Man and Nature was not the first time Marsh wrote about Man’s relationship with the natural environment. It represented, however, a culmination of many of his earlier ideas that would develop and change through his successive re-workings of the arguments in *Man and Nature*. His previous arguments about this topic were scattered between various speeches and essays. Because of this, it takes effort to piece together the various strands of Marsh’s thought. In *Man and Nature*, however, Marsh is much more explicit and straightforward about his philosophy. This philosophy combines ideas about the physical environment, which were current in Marsh’s time, with Marsh’s deeply held Whig political philosophy.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 280; Dorman, 21.

¹⁷¹ Ibid, 280.

CONCLUSION

What can the Whigs, a short-lived 19th century political party, teach us about the modern environmental movement? Few Whigs dealt explicitly with environmental issues, and the Whig party dissolved in 1856, decades before the birth of the American conservationist and preservationist movements. The writings of George Perkins Marsh, however, clearly indicate that Whig political philosophy was one of the intellectual forerunners of modern environmental thought. Marsh, having been immersed in Whig philosophy for his entire adult life, applied the Whig conflict between faith in progress and the value of stability, to his observations of the natural world. He concluded that stability and progress were complementary not contradictory; it was important, both in human civilization and in man's relationship with the natural world, for a balance to be found between them. History had shown the numerous past civilizations that had collapsed because they were not able to find the correct balance. Short-sighted individuals and corporations would always pursue their own interests, and not the best interests of society as a whole. The progress/stability balance, therefore, implied an elitist way of looking at society. Only educated and knowledgeable governmental elites could make the best decisions for society as a whole, and it was these people who should have decisive power in a society.

Further, Marsh concluded that if a balance between progress and stability in human civilization were found, a similar one was also necessary in the natural world. Human civilization could never exist in isolation from the natural world in which people lived. While Marsh was primarily concerned with the development of human civilization, he realized that human civilization was completely dependent on nature. He concluded that nature should be used wisely and sometimes completely protected from human use, not because of nature's inherent value but because human civilization depended upon using natural resources in a

thoughtful and measured way. Thus, Marsh became an inadvertent environmentalist. In his attempt to solve the societal problems posed by Whig philosophy, he crafted an argument about man's relationship with the natural world. Even before Marsh coherently formulated this argument in *Man and Nature*, he had been interested in nature, but always from a detached and observational standpoint. When he began to see the intrinsic connection between harmony in human society and harmony in the natural world, he transformed this interest in nature into a conservation ideal.

At the same time, Marsh modified his own personal philosophy to more closely fit this growing environmental awareness. In its pure form, Whig philosophy had faith in the individual's ability understand that his/her enlightened self-interest would also promote the public good. Whigs believed that the government's duty to act in the public interest was secondary only to the responsibility of private actors. While Marsh agreed with this belief in his early life, he rejected it as he grew older. Private individuals, he asserted, could never truly advance the common good; their actions were sometimes intentionally malicious, but more often, they were inadvertently harmful. Only the government, which had an ability to see problems in a holistic and long-term manner, could promote public welfare. This point of view assumed that only those with a broad and disinterested perspective who could properly weigh the many variables involved in making environmental policy—the elites—should have the power to make decisions in a society.

Just as Marsh had an idea about who could best make decisions in society, modern environmentalists also have ideas about who should be in charge. The elites in Marsh's time were very different than modern day elites. Marsh lived before the professionalization of numerous fields, including forestry and ecology. Thus, he trusted government, which was

supposed to be composed of individuals with broad and comprehensive knowledge and experience, to make decisions for the best interests of society. Today, with increasing specialization of knowledge and expertise, it is impossible for one person to have comprehensive knowledge of every field that is relevant to decisions being made. There is still the belief, however, that government is the best locus of decision making, as government has the ability to bring together the finest minds from various specialties, in order to create the best policies. Thus, while Marsh thought of elites as individuals who had broad knowledge of society as a whole, today, it is better to think of elites as a combination of specialists. Each specialist contributes his own unique vision of the world to create a framework for making policy decisions.

There are many advantages to having people who are trained to make these plans, particularly in today's world where environmental issues are often tangled with other human rights and justice issues. A disadvantage could arise if planning for environmental issues becomes the specialty of a too small or too politicized group of people. This could keep the discussion about environmental issues from being broadly democratic. For example, if environmental concerns are only regarded as important to liberals or the Democrats, numerous perspectives and specialties will be either purposely or inadvertently ignored. Marsh did not see man's relationship with the natural world as a political issue; it was an issue that society as a whole needed to address.

Seeing elites as discrete, and possibly political, individuals who have the power to make sweeping decisions in a society would surely exclude many important points of view. This would be problematic, and it would surely create more problems than it would solve. But, imagining this elite environmentalism as a movement that brings together minds from different

disciplines and perspectives resolves this conflict. Only the combined perspectives of a forestry expert, a resource economist, a community organizer, a chemical engineer, a diplomat, and many others, would be able to create the type of holistic and sustainable environmental policies that George Perkins Marsh envisioned.

In his 1842 congressional campaign, Marsh's democratic opponent had tried to sully Marsh's name by calling Marsh an elitist. From Marsh's point of view, if being an elitist meant being able to address societal problems from a broad and comprehensive perspective, he would happily embrace this label. Marsh carried this attitude with him when he became increasingly concerned with issues regarding man's relationship with the natural world. His vision of a progressive yet stable society required that government to play a large regulatory role. There was nothing more important, in Marsh's view, than creating such a society, and he was unapologetic about the elitist implications of this proposal. By embracing Marsh as an ideological forerunner of modern environmentalist, one must also be willing to accept the elitist connotations of the Whig political philosophy which are at the root of Marsh's environmental ideas.

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