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"You'll Love the Rockies"

"YOU'LL LOVE the Rockies," my hosts in Denver told me when I arrived from England on my first visit to the States. They knew of my love of mountains, and my many years of walking and scrambling up the hills and mountains of Britain and the Alps. Many others I met in Denver, that sprawling city where the plains meet the mountains, said the same. Certainly it was impressive to step out of the house in suburban Denver and find there, framed at the end of the road, a sparkling, snow-capped fourteen-thousander; even more impressive to know there were fifty-one more in the state. Yet when I actually got into the Rockies, they were a disappointment. This puzzled me, because they are fine, tall mountains, and I pondered this as I left the Rockies and wandered around Yosemite Valley, Mount Rainier, Manhattan, and other scenic wonders of the United States. Were my expectations raised too high by my hosts? Or was there something disappointing about the Colorado Rockies themselves? I suspect it was both. First, the expectations....

THE AMERICAN NATIONAL RELIGION

The place of the Great Outdoors in American culture immediately strikes the European visitor. The great landscapes of the West are not presented as scenery, as something esthetic to be enjoyed by those who are interested in such things and passed over by those who are not; rather they are treated as archetypally American, to be revered and venerated by all. A brochure for Yosemite National Park in California informed me that "Thousands of

people have come to Yosemite and left refreshed and relaxed and perhaps a bit more knowledgeable about what they want out of life. See what you can find." This puzzled me. You don't find this kind of invitation in Europe, and in any case, I thought I knew what I wanted out of life. I couldn't see how a waterfall or a granite dome could add very much to the millennia of Western culture that have informed my life view. On venturing onto the trail to Nevada Falls, the homilies came thick and fast on carefully placed little notices: "Take these moments home/ but linger now and enjoy sound and power and change," then, "I'll acquaint myself with the glaciers and the wild gardens, and get as near the heart of the world as I can." I was being authoritatively told what this scenery meant. I thought it was strange that a government that prides itself on allowing freedom of religion and bans religious education from public schools should be engaged through its National Park Service in a massive education program informing citizens that the wonders of the great outdoors are no chance geological happening, nor scenery to be admired, nor the creation of the Judeo-Christian God, but an autonomous deity — the great goddess Nature — whom we revere and from whom we will receive wisdom as to the meaning and purpose of our lives. You are not left alone to interpret the scenery as you will; the National Park Service believes that the ordinary visitor requires interpretation, and the interpretation given is unmistakably tinged with religion.

The place of nature in the

national consciousness clearly varies from nation to nation. Consider France, Germany, and Italy, which all contain substantial portions of the Alps. Travel posters advertising Germany (I mean the whole country, not just its mountainous regions) often depict an alpine mountain towering above a meadow or lake; this is taken to be the "real" Germany, very healthy and outdoorsy. But posters for France and Italy hardly ever depict their alpine scenery, even though it may be more dramatic than Germany's; instead, we find the dome of the cathedral in Florence, or the Seine in Paris. Apparently, it is culture and history, not nature, that are near to the hearts of these nations.

Well, in the States, it is nature that reigns supreme. I met people who had taken a few months off to do a grand tour of the wonders of the West, the American equivalent of the grand tour of the antiquities of the Mediterranean by English ladies and gentlemen in the past century. I half expected this from reading books by American historians and geographers about the place of the land in images of America, but I was surprised to find this reverence for nature not only in the great outdoors but in the cities as well. In fact, I observed that the middle-income people I met had no language for describing cities that is truly urban. Let me give examples.

Virtually everyone I met in Denver seems to love living there. When I asked them why, their reply was always, "Because of the mountains." I found this very odd. I have lived in Aberdeen, Scotland, which like Denver is one- to two-hours

drive from the mountains, and many people go there to walk or ski. Yet ask natives who are hikers what they like about Aberdeen, and they reply by praising characteristics of the city: its pubs, its musical life, the career prospects, and so on. Ask even non-mountain-climbers in Denver what they like about their city, and they reply, "the mountains." So, apparently the merits of Denver — as big as England's second city, Birmingham — can be described only in terms of nature.

I thought at first this lack of urban rhetoric might apply only to Denver and other western cities that attracted people because of the climate or outdoor life, but I began to suspect otherwise when I visited Chicago. My hosts were overjoyed that I deemed Chicago worth a visit. "No tourists ever come to Chicago," they said. Well, this I found odd too, for here were the most beautiful skyscrapers in the States, the most interesting ethnic communities, some beautiful juxtapositions of glittering buildings and lake or river. But in the national image, this is nothing compared to the forests and canyons of the West.

My suspicion was confirmed when I ended up in New York. Here is possibly the most exciting city in the world with one of the most stunning skylines, the most amazing diversity of people, and perhaps the biggest selection of art and restaurants anywhere. I took a bus tour to Harlem and our guide was a sophisticated woman who clearly loved her city. Yet as we drove past the only major piece of greenery in Manhattan, the welcome but slightly scruffy Central Park, she announced: "We are now passing Central Park, probably the most beautiful thing in New York." The most beautiful thing in New York? Can you imagine a Londoner saying this of Hyde Park? It was not that she didn't love and appreciate the intense urbanity of New York; she just didn't have a language to describe it. She had to use the language of nature, the

only legitimate fount of beauty for Americans. I later learned with no surprise that the States' most famous architect, Frank Lloyd Wright, also disdained the city and looked to nature for his architectural vocabulary, carefully photographing shells to discover how nature builds houses.

I then began to understand why decidedly nonnatural artifacts like the Statue of Liberty are owned and run by the National Park Service, which I had naively assumed was dedicated to the preservation of natural scenery. I began to see that, whereas in Europe we began preserving old buildings long before we thought of preserving scenery, in the States it was the other way around. The national importance of scenery was recognized first, the park service was set up, and then it later turned its hand to preserving buildings. So after a boat ride of just a few minutes from that epitome of cityness, lower Manhattan, we find ourselves once more in the care of the National Park Service; can you imagine the "National City Service"? Sounds like a garbage collection agency, which sadly is how many Americans see their cities.

So at my first port of call, Denver, I found myself in a culture that reveres nature, which leads — certainly for the naive visitor — to high expectations of it. In this cultural climate it was heresy for me to admit that the Rockies were OK, but hardly awe-inspiring. As a visitor my opinions on a whole range of matters were canvassed and my replies were always courteously tolerated — except when I expressed disappointment in the Rockies: I could see jaws drop as the heretical words were spoken. When I added how much I liked the new skyscrapers downtown and the older suburbs of Denver, the jaws dropped farther still.

A DIFFERENT BEAUTY

More than just the expectations caused problems. On reflection, I concluded that as a European I

found much about the Rockies, and American mountains in general, difficult to handle. I grew up with a different aesthetic, a different way of seeing beauty and splendor in the physical tangle of rock and snow, tree and lake, grass and lichen. This had to be unlearned, and a new aesthetic mastered.

My first problem was that the Colorado Rockies have no glaciers to speak of. I had assumed that a real mountain, and certainly one that is fourteen thousand feet or more, should be protected by an array of glaciers as in the Alps. Certainly I knew that the nearer the equator, the higher the snow line, but my sentiments were formed by the European image of a mountain as a glaciated alpine horn: on such mountains, after all, the sport of mountaineering began in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and such mountains first attracted the pens and brushes of romantics such as Lord Byron and J.M.W. Turner, who shaped European images of mountain beauty. Settlers in the New World needed several generations to shake the European aesthetic and create their own, centered on the wilderness with its aura of remoteness and solitude. It was perhaps expecting too much for me to revise my sense of mountain beauty in a few weeks.

My second problem was caused by the sun. It was too high in the sky. I am used to the hills of Britain, where the sun is low, especially in winter. This puts every crag and outcrop in shadow, even though they may be at only forty degrees or so, and makes them look vertical. Every little undulation is emphasized, so the mountains look much bigger than they are. In Colorado the sun was higher, so everything, bar the truly vertical, was in the sun, and the landscape was somewhat flattened as a result. In such latitudes you need a landscape more vertical than much of the Colorado Rockies if it is to appear really dramatic. I do not mean that Colorado has no dramatic



The Rocky Mountains look tall and striking to initiates, but foreigners who have grown up with a different landscape may have another view. Crestone Peak, San Isabel National Forest, Colorado. Photo courtesy of the United States Forest Service.

scenery, but the *general* effect is a flattened one.

In addition, the sun shone too much. In maritime Britain the hills generally are illuminated by an ever changing sky, with patches of sunlight picking out a crag here, a lake there, or a patch of heather somewhere else. The subtleties of color, of light and shade, are brought out all the time. In addition, the weather rarely is so bad that you can't be outside. In the Rockies, by contrast, I was subjected either to what I had always considered the epitome of visual boredom, a cloudless day, or to assaults by hail, lightning, and thunder so ferocious that the locals had long since gone home. After a while I began to come to terms with the weather, the sun, and the lack of glaciers. But when I arrived in the Pacific Northwest my senses did not need to struggle out of their European mold because rain and glaciers existed there in plenty.

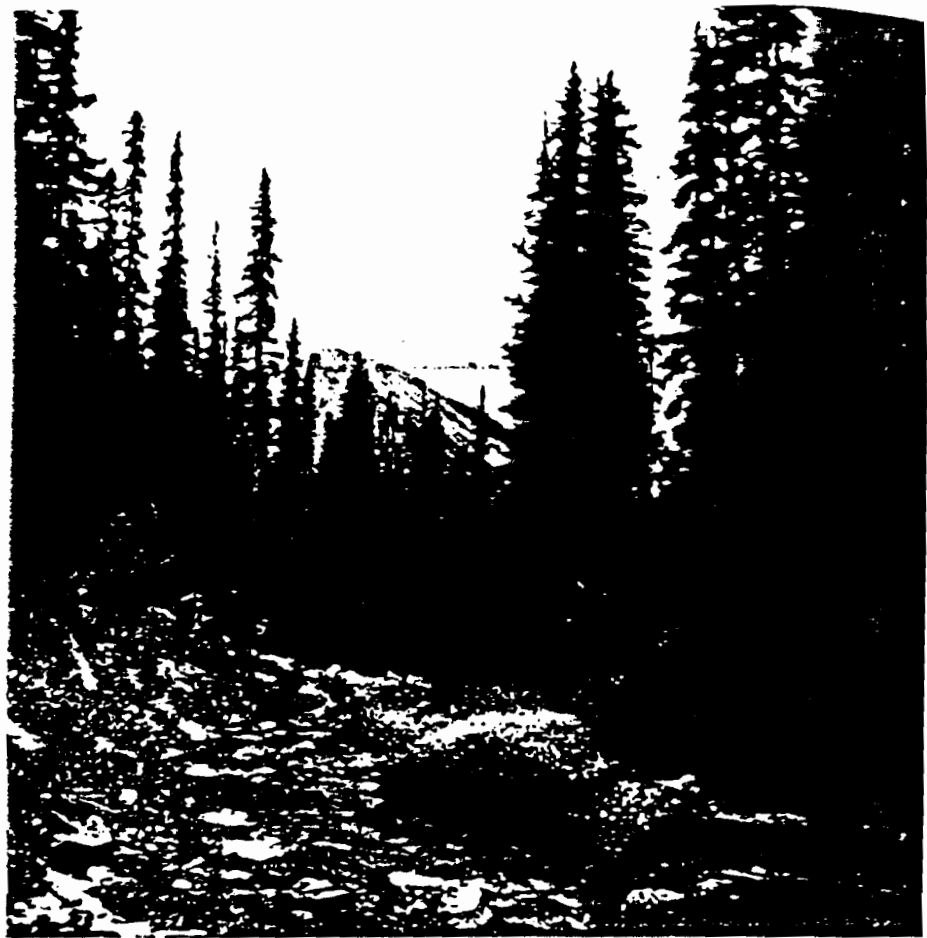
What I could never appreciate were the trees. Millions of them, all evergreen, and except where they thinned near the timberline, all blocking the view. For the British, being out on the hills means being out on the open moors and fells, artificially denuded of their tree cover centuries ago by medieval axe

and by sheep and deer in later centuries. On the open moor you learn to appreciate the view when the weather is good, and you learn to use a map and compass when the mist closes in. You can go where you will; you hear the skylarks above; you see a herd of red deer in the distance. You feel that once again you can breathe the air, even though a smoky industrial town lies just a couple of miles out of sight below.

But those infernal trees of the American West! I found them everywhere, in the Rockies, in the Sierra, in the Cascades. Claustrophobic. Boring. For hour after hour I couldn't see a thing from the trail. Yet Americans love them! Why?

I suppose forests symbolize God's wilderness before *Homo industrialis* came to rape the earth, but surely that has been said before. As important, perhaps, is that most Americans live in cities laid out expansively on flat plains; lots of sky and lots of openness are not what most Americans lack. What the forests provide, in contrast, is a secure womb; if Mother Nature's landscapes are to be different from the landscapes of everyday life, they must be womblike. They provide security and reassurance for a society that is open geographically as well as

Depending on your point of view, trees may be majestic or just in the way. Blue Creek, Uncomphagre National Forest, Colorado. Photo courtesy of the United States Forest Service.



culturally. English towns are more enclosed — certainly Bath, where I live, is that way — so we seek openness when we take to the hills. The forest that Americans experience as womblike, I found claustrophobic.

The other adjective I used for American forests was *boring*. This hints at the chief difference between how Americans and Europeans construe beauty in landscape, the difference between beauty based on essence and beauty based on balance. In Britain, particularly Wales and the south of England, the landscape is characteristically complex, composed of a mixture of elements. Think of a typical scene in the English Lake District described so well by the poet Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy, and so beloved of English Tourist Board brochures. A cottage nestles by a lake with a little coppice close by and maybe some flowers. Across the lake are walled fields with sheep grazing, above

them a hillside, not dramatic but a subtle blend of curves and crags and colors. The scene is beautiful, and what makes it beautiful is the composition; the way the elements are put together. In particular, the beauty lies in the balance between people and nature, sensitively won over the centuries. The beauty of the Swiss Alps is composed in the same way; peak and pasture, glacier and cowshed, mountain and meadow, forest and village, all in delicate balance.

The finest American landscapes are constructed differently. They are not a balance of several elements. They are either a vivid contrast between only two elements — skyscraper and waterfront, rock spire and desert, ice-clad volcano and forest — or they are one element in pure essence: aspens in fall, the canyon, the desert, the forest, the mountain. You drive for two hundred miles and see nothing but

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desert or nothing but prairie. You really begin to get inside that one. pure landscape. You even find that suburban gardens are constructed of essence rather than balance. Whereas the English garden is a careful balance of small lawns, various flower beds, and trees, the American garden is all essence: pure lawn, pure space. Once you have learned one esthetic language, it is strange to be in a country that also speaks English but speaks a different visual language. It's as though the English landscape, like English culture, speaks in subtle shades, while the American landscape and culture speak in primary colors. An English garden in the States looks fussy and overrefined; an American garden in England looks crude and tasteless.

I recall a television documentary recently screened in Britain about a husband and wife who were bringing up their two children in a log cabin twenty miles upstream from their nearest neighbors in the Alaskan wilderness. One shot showed the man in his fishing boat on the river with one vast forested mountain filling the backdrop. This was perfection for him; pure wilderness, pure mountain. Introducing any human artifact into the scene, other than his own boat, would have profaned the wilderness for him. But I would have appreciated a cabin or a small town at the base of the mountain: the tiny insignificance of the human structures would have emphasized the grandeur of the mountain. I am used to seeing the Matterhorn towering above the little town of Zermatt, or the Jungfrau glistening above the big resort of Interlaken. Each enhances the other. Two very different ways of seeing beauty exist here — essence versus balance. Perhaps neither is to be preferred to the other, but appreciating a particular scene when you have learned the other set of rules can be difficult.

I think this explains why I found Yosemite, and especially its backcountry, so beautiful. I had come expecting something typically

American — pure rock, vast scale. Yet what I found was something utterly European — a magical tumbling together of various elements — cliff, forest, meadow, dome, river, waterfall, snowy alpine peak. This combination, not any one cliff or waterfall, made the place beautiful. When I tried to figure out how the combination worked, I couldn't, because it was too subtle. As a bonus, I could actually see the view most of the time, for even well below timberline the profusion of naked granite creates many spaces where trees will not grow.

How we judge beauty is related to how we judge scale, and here is another European/American difference that hindered my appreciation of the Rockies. Everything in the United States is, by European standards, big. Houses are big, lawns are big, cars are big, rivers are big; the forests, the desert, and the prairie, are all big. After a while nothing seems big any more. Rising above the thousand-mile prairie and sprawling Denver, the Rockies do not seem nearly as large as if they had been set in a toy-scale landscape of Europe. It is a matter of context. The lakeland fells of northern England, a mere two- to three-thousand feet, but set in the most magically intricate landscape of little lakes and villages and farmhouses, look twice their size. In the States, though, a mountain has to be enormous, like Rainier or McKinley, to impress (and Rainier did impress me).

I think this explains a curious gestalt switch I have experienced several times since returning home. It occurs when I happen across a photograph of a mountain in a book or on a poster. I may assume the mountain is in North America, but then I notice chalets at the bottom that place it unmistakably in the Italian Dolomites and immediately the mountain looks much bigger. If I cover the chalets with my hand, and again imagine that the peak is in the States, it looks smaller. As the imagined context of the mountain shifts, so does my perception of

it — from one unidentified rock face among thousands in the vast wilderness of the American West, insignificant among the multitude, to a very specific cliff towering above a tiny Italian village, notable for the terror it induced among peasants in medieval times, famous for its rock climbs today, and significant for the tourism and prosperity it now brings the village. Significant objects always look bigger.

A mind influenced by the typically American wilderness ethic, though, sees mountains as more impressive if they are more removed from civilization, more lost among countless other mountains. Bob Marshall in his book, *Alaska Wilderness*, which has become a classic in the literature of the wilderness cult, repeatedly overestimated the height of each new mountain or the depth of each new canyon he discovered in the Brooks Range. For him these mountains were big because they were significant, and they were significant because they were remote. If you have not learned to value remoteness, as many European mountain lovers haven't, then such mountains are insignificant and seem smaller.

This observation may explain another curious thing. Usually if I see a mountain I want to climb it. Not so in the States, I simply lost the desire. I still have not fathomed this, but I suspect that it is because in the vast, nameless wilderness no mountain is special.

Not wanting to climb the mountains was the strongest indication of how little the great outdoors, which means so much to Americans, meant to me. Nature may reign supreme in the courts of beauty in America, but culture put her there. If you do not share the culture, the queen looks odd. Americans often asked me to explain our royal family because they couldn't understand something so strange. I now realize that asking Denverites about their reverence for the Rockies is not so different.

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