

Edward K. Spann, "New England and Early Conservationism: *The North American Review* 1803-1860" *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* Volume 29, No. 2 (Summer 2001).

Published by: Institute for Massachusetts Studies and Westfield State University

You may use content in this archive for your personal, non-commercial use. Please contact the *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* regarding any further use of this work:

[masshistoryjournal@westfield.ma.edu](mailto:masshistoryjournal@westfield.ma.edu)

Funding for digitization of issues was provided through a generous grant from MassHumanities.



Some digitized versions of the articles have been reformatted from their original, published appearance. When citing, please give the original print source (volume/ number/ date) but add "retrieved from HJM's online archive at <http://www.westfield.ma.edu/mhj/>."

Editor, *Historical Journal of Massachusetts*  
c/o Westfield State University  
577 Western Ave. Westfield MA 01086



**New England and Early Conservationism:  
*The North American Review*  
1830-1860**

**By**

**Edward K. Spann**

The publication of George Perkins Marsh's *Man and Nature* in 1864 is generally believed to mark the beginning of modern conservationism in the United States; in 1963, for instance, Secretary of Interior Stewart L. Udall said that it introduced "land wisdom in this country."<sup>1</sup> From the start, the Vermonter's book won a respectful hearing in influential circles, most notably in New England's leading quarterly journal, the *North American Review*, whose editor, James Russell Lowell, recognized that Marsh had issued a call on Modern Man to exercise an enlightened stewardship over the natural world. The book, said Lowell, properly indicted Man as "a destroying agent" of the physical environment, but it was ultimately "consoling; for proving as it does the power of man for mischief, it also suggests that the same prodigious force, intelligently organized and guided, may be equally potent for remedy and the restoration of equilibrium."<sup>2</sup> This appraisal was to be expected from the *Review*, because over the previous three

---

<sup>1</sup> George Perkins Marsh, *Man and Nature*, edited by David Lowenthal (Cambridge, MA, 1965); Udall is quoted on page xxii. For Marsh, see David Lowenthal, *George Perkins Marsh: Versatile Vermonter* (New York, 1958).

<sup>2</sup> *North American Review*[abbreviated henceforth as *N.A.R.*], 99 (1864), 319-20.

decades it had often expressed the same general attitude toward the relationship between human society and the natural world.

It is probably true that *Man and Nature* was, as Lewis Mumford called it, the “fountainhead” of conservationism on the national level, but such judgments ignore earlier origins of the conservationist movement. This oversight tends both to overstate the importance of the post-Civil War period in originating the movement and to obscure the full meaning of conservationism; if any credit is given to the pre-war period, it is bestowed on the work of artists and writers, especially Henry Thoreau, in promoting wilderness preservation.<sup>3</sup> The subject of this article is another form of antebellum conservationism which emphasized a more positive relationship between nature and a modernizing society.

This form appeared in the *North American Review* between 1830 and 1860, when New England experienced a period of rapid modernization in nearly every aspect of its life. Like Marsh, the *Review* had a much different attitude toward nature than that of its better known contemporaries, the Transcendentalists, who saw the natural world chiefly as an antidote to civilized life; it would certainly not agree with Thoreau when he declared that “hope and future for me are not in the lawns and cultivated fields, not in towns and cities, but in the impervious and quaking swamps.” Although it recognized the literary brilliance of *Walden*, it ended its brief review of that book in 1854 by questioning its relevance, “for the author’s life in the woods was on too narrow a scale to find imitation.”<sup>4</sup> In contrast to Thoreau’s sophisticated primitivism with its a-social individualism, the attitude of this conservative

---

<sup>3</sup> Various authors have placed the birth of modern conservationism in the post-1865 period: Henry Clepper, ed., *Origins of American Conservation* (New York, 1966), 5; Benjamin H. Hibbard, *A History of the Public Land Policies* (Madison, WI, 1965), 528, 531; John Ise, *The United States Forest Policy* (New Haven, CT, 1920), 26. For Thoreau, see Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven, CT, 1967), 87-102. In his *The American Environment* (Reading, MA, 1968), Nash chooses only the artist George Catlin and Thoreau to represent the pre-Civil War period. Donald J. Pisani complains that historians have treated conservationism as a twentieth-century phenomenon to the neglect of the decades after the Civil War -- only himself to neglect the pre-war conservationism of *The North American Review*. “Forests and Conservationism, 1865-1890,” *Journal of American History*, 72(1985), 340-59.

<sup>4</sup> *N.A.R.*, 79(1854), 536. Nash, *American Environment*, 12.

Boston-based quarterly was that human beings had the right and obligation to cultivate nature in the interests of progress and a civilized society.

*The North American Review* was founded in 1815 by William Tudor with the aim of protecting the United States from both the domination of English culture and the influence of French radical thought. As it matured, it became an influential agency for the spread of progressive ideas as well as a defender of traditional Yankee values. Throughout the nineteenth century, it represented the enlightened conservatism of a small but select constituency, chiefly scholars, ministers, and other professional men who helped to guide the modernization of eastern New England. It was not a popular journal nor a particularly inspired one, but it was a respected medium for many of the new ideas which eventually influenced policy in the region and in the nation.<sup>5</sup>

The *Review's* attitude toward nature developed out of its distinctive view of human society and its potential. Rejecting the pessimistic forecast of Thomas Malthus that population increases would inevitably prevent humankind from overcoming scarcity and privation, its editors believed that the growth of population under modern conditions could be expected to bring an even greater growth in material wealth. This was especially the view of the brothers Alexander Hill and Edward Everett and of Francis Bowen, its three most influential editors who guided it for a total of eighteen years, between 1820 and 1853. In 1822, Alexander Hill Everett had published his *New Ideas on Population* with the avowed purpose of countering the influence of Malthusianism. Everett argued that the increase of population within any human settlement provided conditions for the further development of the skills and understanding by which society could control the forces of nature for human benefit.<sup>6</sup> A quarter of a century later, Francis Bowen summed up the anti-Malthusian

---

<sup>5</sup> Frank Luther Mott, *History of American Magazines, 1850-1865* (Cambridge, MA, 1938), pages 219-40.

<sup>6</sup> Alexander Hill Everett's book was summarized and praised as a notable work in economics by his younger brother, Edward Everett, in the *N.A.R.*, 17 (1823). During his editorship of the *Review* between 1830 and 1835, the older Everett re-iterated his theory in various articles, including one in which he said that the increase of population, "instead of being, as Mr. Malthus supposes, a cause of scarcity, is a cause -- indeed almost the only real and permanent one -- of abundance." *N.A.R.*, 33(1831), 5, 18.

philosophy when he declared that “our position is that in the most thickly populated country on earth, the number of people is yet very far within the limit of subsistence which land is capable of affording.” In theory, the future might eventually confront the Malthusian nightmare of an overstocked and depleted earth, but Bowen was confident that modern affluence and enlightenment would reduce population growth long before it reached its ultimate limits. Under the conditions of a civilized, settled society, there was no foreseeable limit to modern progress, and the Malthusian prophecy was no more relevant than the prediction that the sun would ultimately exhaust itself.<sup>7</sup>

This connection between progress and population density was made more directly by another writer for the *Review* when he attributed the backwardness of “savage” societies to the “roving habit induced by the freedom and loneliness of a thinly populated country” and then said that “had half a million of Indians, ages ago, been restricted to Manhattan Island as their only home, doubtless they would have built up a sort of metropolis with an extensive trade and solid civilization.”<sup>8</sup> The connection had its positive demonstration for such men in the experience of their own eastern Massachusetts, the most densely populated region of America. Although it was not naturally blessed with many easily exploitable resources, it had become ever more prosperous and civilized, proof for the *Review* of the superiority of its society over those not only of Indians but of the sparser, less stable populations of the South and the West.

Whatever the virtues of settled society, however, it had become increasingly unsettled by the migratory propensities of its inhabitants. Particularly disturbing was the disposition of young rural New Englanders to yield to “the roving habit” by deserting their ancestral homesteads for the under-populated regions of the frontier West, leading Edward Everett to say in 1829 that the East was experiencing “a steady powerful drain” on its population and capital. For Everett, this served largely to demonstrate the virtues of eastern society, which had

---

<sup>7</sup> *N.A.R.*, 65 (1848), 500-1; 67 (1848), 396-98, and 74 (1852), 239-45. Daniel Walker Howe discusses Bowen’s economic theories in relation to New England Unitarianism in *The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Moral Philosophy, 1805-1861* (Cambridge, MA, 1970), 227-40.

<sup>8</sup> H. W. Parker, “A Natural Theology of Art,” *N.A.R.*, 79 (1854), 20.

continued to make progress despite its apparent handicap, but for others the westward movement indicated that something was wrong in the New England countryside.<sup>9</sup> They attributed the trouble not to overpopulation but to a failure to develop available resources. Their remedy was the application of science and reason for the more productive cultivation of nature within the region.

In the 1830s, the state of Massachusetts initiated surveys of its geological, zoological, and agricultural resources, the first government in the United States and perhaps in the modern world to carry-out a publicly supported inventory of nature. In 1841, Henry Colman, the Commissioner of the agricultural survey, declared in the *Review* that “the actual productive powers of an acre of land have not yet been fully tested,” the full productiveness of nature being limited by ignorance of agricultural science. Rejecting the romantic notion that “the mysteries of nature are too sacred for inquiry,” Colman applauded the efforts of scientists to unlock those mysteries and to generate the knowledge which, when applied by agriculturalists, would banish starvation and misery from the world. He hoped that in the process the state’s farmers could be persuaded to “submit to the quiet, noiseless, apparently slow and doubtful process of requiring an ample independent support by a perpetual cultivation of the earth,” thereby assuring that agriculture, with its connection to both nature and the past, would continue to be an integral element of Yankee society and a stabilizing influence on its progress.<sup>10</sup>

Modern power in irresponsible hands could lead to new forms of human abuse against nature, but these Yankee optimists believed that, within the limits of their own settled society at least, any such tendency would be checked by the recognition that long-term progress depended on a respectful understanding of the elements of life. Their ideal was, as Marsh would later title it, *Man and Nature*, a dynamic relationship to be maintained by Man’s enlightened management of the natural world in the interests of civilized society. Undoubtedly, this was linked to their

---

<sup>9</sup> *N.A.R.*, 28(1829), 82-3. In this article, Everett refers to westward emigration as “the safety-valve of states,” but his use of the term differs from that, later, of Frederick Jackson Turner.

<sup>10</sup> *N.A.R.*, 42 (1836), 428; 49 (1839), 241-42; 53 (1841), 148, 167-68; 54 (1842), 477, 483.

Yankee patriotism, to their tendency to view New England as a distinct system whose natural and human resources should be coordinately developed for its special benefit; just so had Yankee ingenuity harnessed rushing streams to power the mills which had given employment to many of the daughters of New England farmers without apparent damage to nature.<sup>11</sup>

Much of this ideal was evident in the writings of William Bourne Oliver Peabody (1799-1847), the brother-in-law of Alexander Hill Everett and the contributor of more than forty articles to the *Review*. Peabody, a Harvard graduate, was a model of the settled existence, dedicating the last half of his short life to a Unitarian ministry in Springfield, Massachusetts. A gentleman scholar noted for his interest in natural history, he was responsible for preparing the report on the birds of Massachusetts for the state zoological survey. An enthusiastic proponent of what he called the “arts of life,” he rejected the “old prejudice” which placed nature and human art in opposition to each other: “Nature, under all circumstances, was meant to be improved by human care; it is *unnatural* to leave it to itself.” In an article on the “study of Natural History,” he predicted that science “will continually unfold new productions and properties in all departments; -- new uses for animals, vegetables and minerals, and ways in which they can be applied to the benefit of man. It will teach men to employ nature against itself, and so to neutralize many of its evils.” The dream of Francis Bacon that Man could gain dominion over the world was becoming an enticing reality for many of the writers for the *Review*.<sup>12</sup>

Peabody recognized, however, that an unwise dominion was a threat to Man as well as to Nature. Some of this concern was evident in his views of entomology, a science which he described as the study of “our

---

<sup>11</sup> Marsh was essentially a New England nationalist who believed in the virtues of the limited homogeneous region and who saw dangers in the territorial expansion and growing diversity of the nation. Lowenthal, *Marsh*, 107. Although it avoided any explicit identification with the region, the *Review* had a similar attitude.

<sup>12</sup> Peabody’s life was summarized by his twin brother, Oliver William Bourne Peabody, in his review of the “Sermons of the late William B. O. Peabody,” *N.A.R.*, 69 (1849), 164-69. *N.A.R.*, 33 (1831), 84 and 406; 41 (1835), 421-425. The *Review* was strongly influenced by the Baconian philosophy throughout the pre-Civil War period.

fellow-creatures of the insect race.” His respect for “our fellow-creatures” in no way dissuaded him from urging the importance of entomology as the basis for a systematic campaign to exterminate the insect pests which threatened Man and his living possessions. On the other hand, though, he also argued that “if they torment us, we torment them” and denounced the ignorant prejudice which had prevented men from appreciating the virtues of these co-inhabitants in the natural world: “As we became better acquainted with them, we invariably find that their injuries are less, and their services greater, than we had supposed.”<sup>13</sup> And so enlightened Modern Man would learn how to conserve and to cultivate the living world around him.

Peabody revealed this same attitude in his views regarding an even greater depredation against nature. In his “American Forest Trees” (1832), he tried to call public attention to the accelerating devastation of America’s forests.<sup>14</sup> He condemned the deep-rooted tendency among Americans to treat the forest as an enemy: “Even now, the pioneer of civilization begins his improvements, as he calls them, by cutting down every tree within gunshot of his dwelling.” The pioneer’s work, though, had already proven less threatening than the reckless lumbering of New England’s forests to satisfy the needs of progress and even this was less destructive than the many forest fires caused by human carelessness. In 1825, “an immense fire” in the Maine woods may have been responsible for an eye-stinging pall of smoke that afflicted much of the eastern seaboard as far south as New York City; seven years later, Peabody said that a visitor to northern New England could often see “flames circling the hillsides.”<sup>15</sup> “This wanton violence upon the face of nature,” he warned, was destroying a necessary basis for civilization.

Economically, a developing society depended on forests for lumber and fuel. Physically, the earth needed them “to shelter it from the extremes of cold and heat, to maintain and treasure moisture, and to

---

<sup>13</sup> *N.A.R.*, 35 (1832), 198-207; 54 (1842), 74-79.

<sup>14</sup> Peabody acknowledged the influence both of D. J. Browne’s *American Forest Trees* (Boston, 1831) and of European students of forests, notably Francois Andre Michaux, who as early as 1819 had warned in his *North American Sylva* of “an alarming destruction of trees” in the United States. See, *United States Forest Policy*, 26.

<sup>15</sup> *N.A.R.*, 35 (1832), 401, 414-16. *Boston Masonic Mirror* (Oct. 15, 1825).



produce certain changes in the air.” As a matter of patriotism, forests were “monuments of our country,” needed to remind the generations of the primal vigor of their nation.<sup>16</sup> Modern society in general and New England in particular either would continue to rise or would eventually fall depending on its willingness responsibly to cultivate the natural world.

Peabody and other conservative New Englanders hoped that the benefits derived from the enlightened cultivation of nature would persuade the sons and daughters of the region to remain at home in a settled society rather than migrating westward. In 1843, Peabody digressed from a discussion of rural architecture to assert that “the means of improved cultivation now encouraged among us, are not means for increasing the fertility of the soil only... They are rather civil and social improvements, enabling two members of the family to fix their residence where none could remain before.” This aim was stated even more explicitly by George B. Emerson, the author of a book on the trees of Massachusetts: “This is our native land. It is painful to separate members of the same family. Every improvement in agriculture, in the management of our forests, and in the other natural resources of our State, makes it capable of sustaining a larger population...We wish that our children should grow up under the influence of the institutions which our forebearers have formed and left us, and which we have endeavored to improve. Here we wish to live and die.”<sup>17</sup>

These concerns and hopes inspired Peabody and other authors in the *Review* to outline a form of conservationism especially suited to Yankee needs. The contribution made by these writers were piecemeal, occasional and not notably original; their concern over diminishing forest resources, for instance, had been raised as early as the 1790s by John Jay, who warned of an impending shortage of timber for shipbuilding. Treated as a whole, however, their thinking anticipated the attitude expressed by the conservationist Clifford Pinchot a century later when he defined conservation as “the wise use of the earth and its resources for the lasting good of man. Conservation is the foresighted utilization, preservation, and/or renewal of forests, waters, lands and minerals, for

---

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 403, 411, 416-419.

<sup>17</sup> *N.A.R.*, 56 (1843), 5. Emerson is quoted in a review of his book in the *N.A.R.*, 66 (1848), 197.

the greatest good of the greatest number for the longest time.” Even more, the *Review* displayed a coherent view which in its pronounced concern for conserving the social as well as natural resources of a modernizing region pointed ahead to the more developed outlook in the 1920s of Lewis Mumford and the Regional Planning Association.<sup>18</sup> From this view there developed a two-pronged strategy that laid the basis for early conservationist policy in New England and in the nation.

One prong emphasized tree-planting, an approach which had already received some public attention at least since 1818 when the Massachusetts legislature authorized the agricultural societies of the state to offer prizes to encourage the growing of timber for shipbuilding.<sup>19</sup> In 1832, Peabody advocated a more general plan to promote the planting of trees on the less fertile soils of the region, reserving only the best land for farming. He believed that this approach would both renew the supply of wood and benefit agriculture by encouraging the more intensive farming favored by agricultural reformers: “The husbandman might labor to more advantage in narrower bounds.” With the assistance of agricultural science, New England farmers would profit more from a few acres than from “large farms, partially cultivated.”<sup>20</sup> Tree planting itself would further increase income. In 1841, an unidentified author -- perhaps Peabody -- argued that it could bring greater future prosperity than was likely to be attained by settling in the West: “As a money speculation, he who should plant a few barren acres with forest trees, would most probably realize for his children a more solid fortune than if he were to enter government lands at the minimum price.” Later, another writer estimated that for most Yankee farmers the profits derived from their woodlands were at least three times as great as the profits from their fields.<sup>21</sup> By this happy arithmetic, private interest rationally pursued would benefit the public interest in maintaining a settled and efficient society.

---

<sup>18</sup> Gifford Pinchot on the birth of conservationism in Nash, *Environment*, 62. Lewis Mumford provides a thorough discussion of regional planning in his *The Culture of Cities* (N.Y., 1938), especially Chapter V.

<sup>19</sup> Ise, *United States Forest Policy*, 22.

<sup>20</sup> *N.A.R.*, 35 (1832), 415-416, 428-431; 56 (1843), 5.

<sup>21</sup> *N.A.R.*, 53 (1841), 261; 85 (1857), 187-89.

The emphasis on tree-planting suited the more general hope that the enlightened cultivation of nature would keep the native population at home. Ideally, the new woodlands would improve the moral conditions and physical appearance of rural life as well as adding to its wealth. Peabody, one of whose interests was in landscape architecture, said that tree cultivation could be a profitable hobby for many farmers, which over the years would progressively improve the landscape and deepen the “Local attachment” of the people. J. C. Gray, a wealthy Boston enthusiast for horticulture, said that tree-planting should be viewed as an act of “ardent and deep-felt patriotism” that would be of immediate benefit to the next generation and would instill in Americans some of the same conserving devotion to the homeland as he believed existed in Europe.<sup>22</sup>

As Gray demonstrated, the interest in tree-planting benefited from the rising enthusiasm for horticulture and gardening among the affluent business and professional classes of the expanding cities.<sup>23</sup> If rural society were incapable of regenerating itself, then it would be regenerated by the spread of enlightenment from the urban centers. “A taste for rural occupations is rapidly springing up and extending itself in our large cities,” said Gray in 1837, and “objects of this description are gradually absorbing more and more of the capital as well as intelligence of that portion of our community.”<sup>24</sup> Gentleman farmers, enlightened by gentleman scholars, would demonstrate to country folk that tree-planting would yield both profit and pleasure, thereby helping to preserve rural society as an antidote to the uncaring materialism so disturbing evident in their modernizing world.

The interests and attitudes of urban Massachusetts figured even more directly in the second prong of conservationist strategy, the preservation and management of existing forests. Peabody was more

---

<sup>22</sup> *N.A.R.*, 35 (1832), 403-404, 418; 44 (1837), 406. For Gray on Horticulture, see 47 (1835), 423-450.

<sup>23</sup> Tamara Plakins Thornton emphasizes the class aspect of agricultural improvement in her two articles “Between Generations: Boston Agricultural Reform and the Aging of New England, 1815-1830,” *New England Quarterly*, 59 (1986), 189-211, and “The Moral Dimension of Horticulture in Antebellum America,” *Ibid.*, 57 (1984), 3-24.

<sup>24</sup> *N.A.R.*, 44 (1837), 358; 56 (1843), 4-5, 12.

interested in tree-planting than in preservation, but he did attempt to persuade his readers of the need for greater care in the use of existing forests. More emphatically, Gray urged “the necessity of economizing what yet remains of these rich national treasures” in connection with his call in 1837 for immediate action to preserve New England’s last remaining great forests in Maine. After noting that wood for fuel had become scarce throughout seaboard society, he warned that the reckless exploitation of Maine’s pine forests would soon lead to a scarcity of the timber required for the construction of ships as well as buildings. Seven years later, Lorenzo Sabine, in an article on “The Forest Lands of Maine,” repeated the warning and declared that the times demanded the conservation of woodlands so “that something of what we inherited from our fathers, may descend to our children.”<sup>25</sup>

In 1848, Anne Wales Abbott, one of the few women to write for the *Review*, said it might be supposed that “a long-headed Yankee land-owner would not fell a single oak...without at the same time planting an acorn.” In fact, the needless destruction of woodland in Massachusetts had become a threat to its manufacturing as well as to its natural resources. Aside from its effects on shipbuilding, the developing shortages of timber was forcing those industries that depended on wood or charcoal to move westward, a disturbing development for a region that had come to look to its industrial growth to keep its population at home. Even worse, Abbott warned that the reduction of forest areas was diminishing the waterpower on which many mills depended, a matter of concern for other *Review* authors as well.<sup>26</sup>

These concerns pointed to the need for some kind of public conservation policy, but the *Review* authors were notably more interested in the problem than in any public solution. In part because he doubted the ability of a democratic government to act in favor of conservation, Peabody placed his hopes on the willingness of his generally upper-class readers to plant and cultivate trees on their own tracts of land, large and small. In 1837, however, Gray did call on the Maine legislature to take steps for the preservation of timber on its public lands and suggested that the interests which Massachusetts had in the forests of its former

---

<sup>25</sup> *N.A.R.*, 44 (1837), 341, 357; 58 (1844), 327-29.

<sup>26</sup> *N.A.R.*, 66 (1848), 192-198.

province “might render a respectful interposition on her part advisable.”<sup>27</sup>

A decade later, Abbott spoke even more strongly in favor of governmental action when she warned that individuals alone could not be expected to save the woodlands of Massachusetts: “The task of fostering, enlarging, and improving the forest of the State is one whose importance to the commonweal makes it the proper action of government.” She made no attempt, though, to describe what action government should take. Perhaps she was considering the use of bounties to encourage tree-planting, an idea from the past, or possibly a state law regulating tree-cutting in the public interest, an idea advanced by another *Review* author in the 1850s.<sup>28</sup> In general, the times favored an approach that gave much less attention to promoting a specific conservation program than to nurturing a conservationist attitude. Once the public were made aware of the importance of preserving and cultivating woodlands to the social order and the continued progress of the region, then the public would act individually and collectively in the interests of conservation.

The development of conservationism, however, was unsteady and slow. In 1857, Charles H. Brigham, a Unitarian minister who frequently wrote for the *Review*, said that the journal had in 1832 been “one of the first to utter a warning against the wanton waste of our beautiful forests” and that it had published “at least four elaborate essays on the fertile theme” of woodlands. In the quarter of century since the first warning, there had been some progress: various tree-planting societies had been formed in the cities and towns, numberless trees had been planted, and “the desolation which threatened whole sections of our country has been partially arrested.” On the other hand, though, he noted that the destruction of the Maine forests was accelerating: “Thirty years ago, the State of Maine was described as ‘a dense wilderness.’ Now, it is possible to ride for miles in the interior without the protection of any grateful shade.” In Massachusetts, deforestation had reduced water-power to the point where “not a few of our large factories have been compelled to introduce steam-power.” Although Brigham remained hopeful, he also expressed some concern over the threat that the

---

<sup>27</sup> *N.A.R.*, 35 (1832), 416; 44 (1837), 341; 58 (1844), 329.

<sup>28</sup> *N.A.R.*, 66 (1848), 196-98; 85 (1857), 183.

increasing use of coal and iron would diminish what public interest there was in forest preservation and cultivation.<sup>29</sup>

The fact that Brigham's article was the only one on the matter of conservation published by the *Review* between 1848 and 1864 suggests that the effort to preserve the settled rural order of New England society was becoming a lost cause by the 1850s. Beginning in the 1840s, the United States had entered into an increasingly lurid phase of territorial expansionism, further disrupting New England society. Earlier, Lorenzo Sabine had annexed to his plea for timber conservation a proposal that the state make free gifts of its idle farm lands "to promote settlements, and to prevent our young men from becoming victims of agues and intermittents at the West." It was to no avail. Sixteen years later, another *Review* author lamented the continued movement of "our young men away from the old homestead" and warned that farms in New England, "instead of being divided and subdivided as they ought to be, are growing larger and more unmanageable."<sup>30</sup> The social disruptions occasioned by the Civil War seem to have extinguished the last remaining hopes for preserving the old social order and to have retarded the development of conservationism.

Brigham himself eventually abandoned the state of his birth. After twenty years as a minister in Taunton, Massachusetts, he moved in 1865 to a church in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Three years later, he published his last article for the *Review*, "The Lumbering Region of Michigan." In it, he took care to say that his adopted state had "more of the New England civilization" than any other western state -- a new New England at an early stage of development. Unfortunately, as saw the situation, the new was doomed to repeat the mistakes of the old. In less than twenty years, he predicted, the apparently "inexhaustable" pine forests of lower Michigan would disappear under the lumberman's axe, and no cry for conservation was likely to have any effect:

The warning is not new. It was uttered years ago, and has been repeated with the succeeding seasons...It is useless to remonstrate. The pioneer is insensible to arguments touching the future supply...The want of foresight that permitted the destruc-

---

<sup>29</sup> *N.A.R.*, 85 (1857), 178-205.

<sup>30</sup> *N.A.R.*, 58 (1844), 329; 89 (1860), 367-68.

tion of these magnificent forests will be bitterly lamented. But the lament will come from the next generation.<sup>31</sup>

The message was clear. So long as portions of the nation remained unsettled, so long would the waste of “inexhaustable” resources continue; so long as there were frontiers to provide escapes from the responsibilities of settled society, so long would Americans refrain from the enlightened cultivation of nature. In 1865, E. L. Godkin made essentially this point when in the *Review* he said that the diffusion of the population toward the frontier had excited the growth of individualism at the expense of a social sense among Americans; the result was a national character full of energy and equipped with a “confidence that rises into conceit,” a character which had little use for theory, prior experience, or a concern for posterity. So pervasive was this western influence that it had even penetrated into New England.<sup>32</sup>

A year earlier, George Perkins Marsh had connected this phenomenon directly to the cause of conservation. In a footnote near the end of his exceptionally long chapter on “The Woods” in *Man and Nature*, Marsh remarked, regarding the roving propensities of Americans, that “this life of incessant flitting is unfavorable for the execution of improvements of every sort, and especially of those, which like the forest, are slow in repaying the capital expended in them.” In closing the chapter, he was somewhat more optimistic about the ultimate realization of the conservative dream when he indulged in the hope that eventually a fixed proportion of rural lands would be set aside for woodlands and forests. This, he predicted, “would involve a certain persistence of character in all branches of industry...and would thus help us become, more emphatically, a well-ordered and stable commonwealth, and, not less conspicuously, a people of progress.”<sup>33</sup> In the revised edition of his book (1874), which he prepared while in Rome as American minister to Italy, he reiterated the conservative dream and even added a new note of optimism by concluding that a moderate amount of government support would “render the creation of new forests

---

<sup>31</sup> *N.A.R.*, 107 (1868), 78, 96-97.

<sup>32</sup> *N.A.R.*, 100 (1865), 213-217.

<sup>33</sup> Marsh, *Man and Nature*, 280 and 280n.

an object of private interest as well as of public advantage.”<sup>34</sup> *The North American Review* had said essentially the same things three decades before.

*Man and Nature* was a far more sophisticated study of nature and plea for conservation than anything published in the *Review*, and there is no evident indication of any influence by that journal on Marsh’s thinking, but they shared the same basic attitudes toward a responsible cultivation of the natural world. If nothing else, they drew on the same Yankee hopes and concerns raised by modernization and by the westward movement. On the title page of his book, Marsh used a quotation from a sermon given by one of New England’s most influential theologians, Horace Bushnell: “Not all the winds, and storms, and earthquakes, and seas, and seasons of the world have done so much to revolutionize the earth as MAN.” The essential question was whether Man would use his growing power to revolutionize nature for the good of his posterity and of his earth. During these generally optimistic times, it seemed possible that humankind could be persuaded eventually to settle down, become civilized, and use its powers for purposes of conservation and cultivation.

In the ebbs and flows of progress, there were signs of hope. There was some notable progress in scientific agriculture, especially the establishment of agricultural colleges with the support of federal land-grants. In 1858, the chief proponent of the idea in Congress, Justin Smith Morrill of Vermont, said that the colleges would do “something to prevent the dispersion of our population and to concentrate it around the best lands of our country.”<sup>35</sup> The passage in 1862 of the Morrill Act establishing land-grant colleges was followed by a revival of interest in forestry, especially in the form of tree cultivation. Some slow but notable progress took place in Massachusetts, which enacted a law in 1878 to encourage the planting of woodlands. Subsequently, an association of prominent Yankees, which included Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Edward Everett Hale, succeeded in 1882 in lobbying for a state forestry law, leading Theodore Weld to applaud them for

---

<sup>34</sup> George Perkins Marsh, *The Earth as Modified by Human Action* (N.Y., 1885), 385.

<sup>35</sup> Carter A. Goodrich, ed., *The Government and the Economy, 1783-1861* (Indianapolis, 1967), 420.



“preaching the gospel of *National Salvation*” against what he saw as an impending calamity: “If this universal vandalism that sweeps down the forests, millions of acres every year, can’t be stopped, and that speedily, the life of the whole nation is sapped.” There were also some gains on the national level. In 1873, Congress enacted the Timber Culture Act to promote tree-planting in the treeless areas of the West, and followed this eight years later by creating a division of Forestry in the Department of Agriculture, a department which itself was created in response to the long term agitation for an improved cultivation of nature. The hopes for the federal timber culture program were defeated by fraud and indifference, and the 1873 act was repealed in 1891, but a rider attached to the repeal bill opened the way for the creation of a national system of forest preserves -- nearly sixty years after Peabody had called attention to the need for such a program.<sup>36</sup>

There was progress, but the next century would frustrate, if not destroy, the larger dream. There would be no settled and orderly society to encourage the development of an ever more responsible and enlightened cultivation of nature for future as well as present good. And there would be no end of frontiers to disrupt the hopes for an ordered civilization capable of maintaining a symbiotic relationship with the natural world. Man’s dominion over the forces of nature would continue to be a troubled and troubling one; his dominion over himself would be no more satisfying. There would be no New England in the future world, not even in New England itself.

---

<sup>36</sup> Ise, *United States Forest Policy*, 37, 43; Hibbard, *Public Lands*, 411-421; 530; Clepper, *Origins*, 9-14, 43-44, and Nash, *American Environment*, xv-xvi, 25-28. Benjamin F. Thomas, *Theodore Weld* (New Brunswick, N.Y., 1950), 262-63. In 1898, the Massachusetts Forestry Association was formed to promote public interest in “forestry and tree-culture,” including the planting of trees on the waste areas of farms in the state. *The Forester*, 5 (1890), 220-21.