

Past Like a Mask, or, The Trouble with “The Trouble with Wilderness”¹

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*Amarillo by morning, up from San Antone,
Everything that I have is just what I got on.
I ain't got a lot but what I got is mine
I ain't rich, but Lord, I'm free.*³

Twenty years ago I was much smarter than I am today. Contemplating a Fulbright fellowship at the Turnbull Library, I had most of the answers worked out before leaving American shores; all I needed was some evidence.⁴ Well schooled in the historical traditions of the Great Plains of North America, which are grounded in the environmental determinism of Texas historian Walter P. Webb, I knew what must have happened in the tussock grasslands of the South Island.⁵ In subhumid grasslands colonized by Britons, certain interactions of humankind with the environment must have taken place, many of them symbolized by arcane acts of adaptation—the application of fire to the biome, the bounding of lands with fences and plantings, struggles with animal pests and weedy plants, contests between herdsmen and plowmen, and ultimately the crystallization of a regional identity and a defined character. The rest would be detail, variations on a theme.

Much is made by both American historians and their international critics of American exceptionalism, the idea that the United States constitutes a special case in human affairs, that Americans have, to quote one icon of American popular culture, a “mission from God.”⁶ This is not, however, how Great Plains historians of my tradition think. Our hallmark, rather, is a parochial chauvinism. To us, a pastoralist is just a rancher with a Lutheran-sounding label. Gauchos must be a lot like cowboys, a yurt is a great big tipi, and a bushranger is an outlaw like Jesse James.

A funny thing happened as I pored through the trolleys of documents so genially delivered to me in the Turnbull reading room. In the first place, the details were not working out. There turned out to be fundamental differences between the tussock grasslands and the American prairies, such that the effects of fires and fences and other human conceits refused to conform to my expectations. The questions were similar, but the answers were off script. Then, this whole matter of regional identity and character just fizzled out. There were local, vernacular identities rooted in the land—Central Otago was a great example—but there was a lack of any generalized and articulate regional sense such as characterizes the Great Plains of North America.

I give myself credit for embracing these unexpected findings in good spirit. Reporting them to colleagues at home, I theorized that while the common experience with a given environment was sufficient to generate vernacular local identity at the grassroots, the conception of a broader and more reflective regional identity required the work of an intellectual and literary elite—which the South Island grasslands lacked, because its historians and writers were too busy looking homeward, out to sea, to turn their attention to matters at hand. Canterbury had no Cather, Otago had no Webb, and that was that. Now, although I stand by this analysis so far as it goes, I realize it is a partial explanation at best.⁷

All participating nations are familiar with the visiting-fireman syndrome of the Fulbright exchange program. Smart, Type-A American scholars come for their term or year, either fall in love with the country or trash it (David Ausubel making the mould for the latter alternative), and then go home again.⁸ Back home they show their slides, place their curios on the credenza, maybe publish a little something, and are not heard from again.

In contrast, like a bad penny, I keep turning up here every year, and for this reason: the country keeps teaching me things. The first foray thrashed the determinisms out of me, opened my ears and eyes. I acquired friends and mentors—old guys like Jim Gardner and Kevin O'Connor, generational peers like Tom Brooking and James Watson—who were generous with me. The published literature of the Kiwi historical tradition, too, gives me concepts to take home and deploy—recolonisation, for instance, is one with particular utility on my northern plains.⁹

Involvement with the *Environmental Histories of New Zealand* was a particular opportunity for situating myself in relation to Kiwi scholarship and redefining my own positions. I am the only American contributor to that Oxford publication.¹⁰ The editors gave me the chapter on pests and weeds. The irony of that was not lost on me. As we worked through one another's chapters, it became clear I was the odd man in, in two ways. First, my fellow authors trusted government. Any environmental problem to be corrected, any natural legacy to be protected, for them, the state was the answer; for me, the state was the likely cause of the problems and certainly an unreliable curator of the legacy. This was when I realized that George Strait and I are both great Americans. We ain't rich, but Lord we're free.

A second thing I noticed was, my colleagues in the Oxford project were better believers than I. They believed there was something like wilderness to be preserved, and that ecology worked the way it was supposed to. By this time I had lost my faith in such things; in fact, I had lost it in their own country. My skepticism about their ecological faith compelled me to attempt an alternative explanation, and as I did so, Geoff Parks, one of the best intellectual conversationalists I ever have known, interjected, "Why, what you're talking about sounds like chaos theory." I am forever grateful to Geoff for understanding what I was thinking before I did myself.¹¹

The land, too, is a great teacher; as Kevin likes to say, it will tell its own story. The particular piece of land I have been listening to lately, in company with my wife and co-investigator, Suzanne Kelley, is the Upper Clutha valley, extending up to Lindis Pass.¹² We have given a name to our long-term investigation of this region: "Learning from the Lindis." The definition of the Lindis as a region rests on various circumstances: its origin as a single sheep station, Morven Hills, taken up by Jock McLean in the 1850s; the bioregional integrity of the upper Clutha watershed; the commonalities of economic enterprises and social customs among residents; the layers of historical experience they hold in common. We argue also that narrative is essential to regional definition. The stories people tell about themselves are the elemental stuff of region, and where they coalesce into collective memory, the sense of place becomes palpable. In the Lindis we are attempting to combine bioregional history, which incorporates deep description of the interaction of humankind with the land, and cultural history, which makes the memory of that interaction, rather than the interaction itself, the focus of attention. I bring to the project an experiential knowledge of crops and livestock and a predilection for folklore. My wife tends to view the world through iconographic art. The result is an approach that is less than, and more than, linear.¹³

My debt to this country is profound. What can I offer in return? For one thing, when I lecture my HIST 381 class at North Dakota State University, it constitutes, I feel sure, the largest

assembly of students in North America studying the history of New Zealand. You can be assured that while I may not get everything right, your country is treated with respect and affection.

For another thing, I offer modest contributions to a grounded, reflective, and evolving knowledge of the relationship of humankind with nature in this place. I am learning from the Lindis, but I am what I am. I may think differently than you. Let's talk.

Oh, Indirection!

*The soul of this creek has something to do with green,
But green is not the soul of this creek.
Oh, indirection! Keep coming round that bend.*¹⁴

In the middle of the Lindis is the village of Tarras, a leg-stretching stop on the Mount Cook bus line, briefly an oasis for the Orks of cinema, still a locus of rural community. On entering the Tarras tearooms, you can cross the creaky wooden floor and order a flat white, or stop to study the larger-than-life portrait of Willie Wong. There is no label to identify him; Tarras knows the man on sight, but strangers are welcome to ask, because everyone has a story to tell about Willie. The artist's use of brown and red skin tones conveys the man's union with dirt and sun; his gaze into the distance evokes life experience—not all of it good. His cheeks are ruddy and his face is lined, but it is his hands, clasping a sturdy staff, that figure front and center—hands that seem too large, but in reality are big and strong and permanently dirty in the knuckles and nails. In the foreground, too, is the stub of a finger—just one outward sign of the forty (at last count) serious accidents that Willie has survived, and that define him as a living legend. When we asked Willie why the artist, D.A. Copeland, wanted to paint his portrait, he replied quizzically, “Because I'm Willie Wong.”¹⁵

Bill Cowie, a.k.a. Willie Wong, is a legend of the Lindis, and he knows it. To the great surprise of all who know him, he has celebrated seventy birthdays, despite his personal fondness for dynamite, and despite having his body mangled, pierced, and broken in a series of misadventures that would knock lesser men out of the race of life. A killer of spectacular stags, a fencer of impossible landscapes, a breaker of outlaw horses, rich in experience but unlucky in love, he never lowers his legendary façade.

Willie rolled his Land Rover down a mountain. He broke his ribs and his neck, ending up in the hospital for several months. One of his policemen friends took him out of the hospital one day for a drive; neighbor and mate Beau Trevathan was shifting a mob of sheep when he met them, and they pulled over to where Beau could see that Willie sat in the passenger seat, in a full body cast with nothing sticking out but his ears. Willie said, “I suppose you think I can be happy now, Beau!” Beau said, “Why's that?” “Well, you always reckoned I'd never be happy until I bwoke me bwoody neck!” Beau shakes his head in the telling and remembers how Willie “starts laughing at his own joke, and you can see the agony in his face with the laughter.”

What makes Willie legendary is the narrative reworking of a Kiwi archetype: the keen man, the handy bloke who ties it up with wire and is game to the end.¹⁶ Willie will tackle any job, meet any situation, but often at the cost of severe personal injury. Heroic and hapless, he gets hurt, but he keeps plugging away—even if he has to do so on crutches or in a body cast.

If I were a social scientist, I might conduct a survey of the inhabitants of the Lindis in order to discern their identity and gauge their sense of place. Being a humanist, and not a social scientist, I instead rely on the mediation of found material, the legends of the Lindis, to make the case that the Lindis, because it is a land of legendary characters, is a place indeed.

Indirection next draws us across the road to the old Tarras Church, where Episcopal priests and Presbyterian ministers swap Sundays preaching to the same flock. In 1993, as New Zealand celebrated the hundredth year of women's suffrage, the women of the Tarras Branch of the Women's Division of Federated Farmers pushed needles and wool through canvas to produce, in the form of needlepoint kneelers for the Tarras Church, tangible depictions of regional memory. Their product, the Tapestries of Tarras, is a remarkable work of historical iconography—remarkable first in that it is, unlike most regional chronicles, a women's history; remarkable, too, in that as a grassroots production, it comprises both the consensus view and the idiosyncratic complexity of the district's past; and remarkable most of all in that it distinguishes the women of Tarras as a self-conscious memory group, suggesting a high level of historical consciousness and grounded identity at the grassroots of New Zealand's high country.¹⁷

It all started when Heather Perriam of Bendigo Station, owner of the Merino Shop in Tarras, had one of her great ideas. As a neighbor noted, "Heather has lots of big ideas, she does." This one involved working seven thousand balls of surplus wool into kneelers, each woman choosing the scenes and symbols that would best represent her family and community. The women gathered for smokos and teas in the Tarras memorial hall, they labored over canvases on their laps while watching, or not watching, rugby matches, and along with their labor, they incorporated serious thought into their creations.

Helen Lucas Pledger, for instance, who with her husband Colin has a pottery shop at Rocky Point overlooking Lake Dunstan, worked up a kneeler depicting the cob building from gold mining days that houses her shop. It is surrounded by hollyhocks, roses, and irises, carrying on the floral traditions of Helen's mother. In the background rises the St. Bathans Range, which bounds the district and her world. The elements in the kneeler are personal and familial, but they bespeak a pervasive sense of place; every element represents a historic interaction with the regional environment.

The Tarras kneelers are a record all the more rich because it is mediated. Wool, canvas, and labor encode the regional experience. We not only read it among the pews but also are led to inquire further, to follow the iconography back into the countryside and into the realms of memory, fleshing out the symbols.

The Tarras kneelers are evidence not only of a powerful sense of place, recorded in collective memory, but also of the definite pull of community. The question of connectedness versus atomization has been in play among New Zealand's historians since 1989.¹⁸ Learning from the Lindis, we find community not in some mystic chords of memory but rather in the material cords of Merino yarn. Our experience suggests that historians have been looking for connectedness in all the wrong places. It suggests, begin with the women, especially when investigating a culture wherein women define themselves as the keepers of community. It suggests further, examine the material evidence of community, its artifacts, and use that material evidence as an entre to the verbal evidence.

Let me now state plainly my emerging argument: historical knowledge is memory work, and mediated memory is the richest vein to mine. I am about to extend this idea of mediation into unknown territory; walk with me, and watch your step, for we are going to that place where humankind achieves knowledge of nature.

Just up the road from Helen's pottery shop is a sign that reads, "Lindis Honey." Here Ross and Claire Mackay, following their marriage in 1957, commenced beekeeping to take advantage of the efflorescence of clover that accompanied land development by oversowing and topdressing of the high country. Claire's church kneeler depicts clover, dandelion, and viper's

bugloss, three of the five flowering plants that seasonally sustain the honey business. The other two are cat's hair and thyme, making five distinct flavor-varieties of honey. The Mackays have to know just when and where across the Lindis the plants will flower so as to situate their hives properly.¹⁹

We begin to sense that these folk, the Mackays of Lindis Honey, have a peculiar knowledge of nature here. Claire cooies Ross from the orchard into the parlor so that we can question more deeply. What emerges is an incredible body of knowledge that not only spans the Lindis but also comprehends its many microenvironments, cataloging the flowering species in every place, reckoning the effects of altitude, temperature, humidity, soils, and slope. This is applied knowledge, but the application spills over into aesthetics, into scent, color, and taste, and into the honest affection for the landscape that comes from intimate familiarity with it. And this knowledge all has been mediated by insects, by bees. Herbert Guthrie-Smith tells us that it was the sheep who were the cartographers of his run.²⁰ It is the bees who have taught Ross and Claire Mackey about the Lindis.

I wish now to make the case that the fundamental problem of environmental history is human estrangement from nature, or rather I should say, the rest of nature. This may seem obvious, but I argue further that to break through this estrangement from nature is an exceedingly difficult thing. In their own version of the Fall of Man, some macro-historians insist the estrangement of which I speak is definitely associated with the advent of agriculture. I would push the date back still further. Estrangement from nature is at least a partial definition of the human condition. Easy connection with nature is not the usual state of humankind; estrangement is. We need help to overcome this condition.

Once sensitized by Lindis Honey to the capacity of other species to mediate the human connection with nature, we recognize that the Lindis, as I suspect most places, is full of examples. Viticulturalists possess knowledge of soils and micro-environmental conditions that the rest of us do not even suspect exists. Pastoralists, when they look upon a particular aspect of range, see not only what is there but also the evolution of species and formations spanning the length of their experience with the tract, because the sheep have drawn their attention to them. No one knows the natural world of the gray rabbit so well as the professional rabbitier.

These people who, by virtue of their crops and animals, live in connection with nature often find themselves in conflict with other elements or species in the system. This should not obscure the fact of their interaction with nature. A dysfunctional relationship is still a relationship.

Do not allow me to idealize this too much. The aerial bombardment of possums with 1080 may not result in much of a relationship. An industrialized milking barn certainly takes the romance, and likely the sensitivity, out of the relationship.

Still, if there are such ugly instances of failure, let us remember there are also beautiful examples of success in the cultivation of a relationship with nature mediated by other species. The ritual of the vision quest, a period of mystic contemplation commonly culminating in the acquisition of a spirit animal who serves as guide and mentor to the fortunate person, is well known on the northern plains of my homeland. I am humbled that a Blackfoot woman who studied with me one summer bestowed on me, in her own language, the name of Red-tail Hawk.

My studies in the grasslands of three nations, studies focusing on the everyday lives of people on the land, convince me that the sustained interaction with nature, mediated by other species, has produced an impressive body of common expertise among agriculturalists, pastoralists, and others entwined in these relationships. This is valuable knowledge that can

inform policy and enrich everyday life in real places. How is it that we have failed to enlist this knowledge in the cause of informed living with nature?

It is because we have a past like a mask. Each of us holds learned habits of thought that both empower and restrict us. Throughout the lifespan of environmental history as a salient subdiscipline, the predominant habits of thought have been the ideal of wilderness and the dialectic of ecology. Because pastoralists and agriculturalists destroy wilderness and disrupt ecology, we have demonized them. If pastoralists and agriculturalists possess knowledge, then it must be bad knowledge.

One of a Hardy Race

*He came from some small Central place,
Twas Arrowtown, I reckon.
He was one of a hardy race
To whom the high peaks beckon.
To men like him the ranges beg
And bind fast as a tether.
At Pisa and at Roaring Meg,
We mustered sheep together.²¹*

In environmental history, there is no substitute for boots on the ground. Broad reading of the literature, butt time in the archives, these are necessary conditions, but there are insights that come available only to those who are willing to go over the ground physically as well as intellectually. Frankly, this is one of the appeals of doing this sort of history—the opportunity to savor the outdoors and call it work.

Hanging on a hook in my office is a pair of handmade Lucchese hiking boots. They look serviceable, but they are worn out from the inside and so are retired from field duty to artifactual status. These boots are a catalyst for memory and story; they are the boots I wore hiking Campbell's Gully, on Northburn Station. What a tangle of briar and matagouri that was! It shredded my clothes and lacerated my skin, which I thoroughly enjoyed, or at least recollect that I did.

Campbell's Gully is where Leonard Cockayne, a man who would be eulogized as “the greatest botanist who has lived, worked, and died in New Zealand,” conducted his landmark research on the montane tussock grasslands.²² A self-taught scientist, Cockayne is credited as the founder of grassland ecology in New Zealand, the publication of his pioneering paper on the vegetation of the Waimakariri marking the discipline's debut in 1899.²³ Cockayne's deployment of German plant geography as a foil to British imperial botany was followed by his assertion of a nascent botanical nationalism: “The natural grasslands of New Zealand differ essentially from the meadows of the Old World,” he declared; the plants of New Zealand “stand forth as living organisms with special stories of their own to tell.”²⁴ In matters of botany, all roads were supposed to lead to Kew; but this amateur Cockayne, with his postcolonial science, declared that these are our formations, and our plants, generating our own stories.²⁵

Up Campbell's Gully, a place of woefully degraded grasslands, Cockayne laid out the twelve enclosed research plots that would be the basis for his masterwork, “An Economic Investigation of the Montane Tussock-Grassland of New Zealand.”²⁶ Cockayne reflected on his plots and produced findings that would govern the future development of the high country. The tussock formations should not be supplanted, he said, but rather should be supplemented,

integrating useful and palatable forages among the sturdy tussocks. Old World plants should not displace natives in their own country; rather they should find their place within the native formations. It is instructive to go up Campbell's Gully, walk the hillsides where Cockayne did his work, make notes as to details on the ground, but also take time for contemplation and, dare I say it, communion.

Cockayne made his way to Campbell's Gully on a push-bike up from Clyde. He was gone by the time another push-bike rider, the manly Scot Angus Ross, would enter the Lindis from the other direction, over the Haast, conducting field research for his 1933 master's thesis on Te Puoho's invasion of the South Island in 1836. Another nascent nationalist, who one day would interject the study of New Zealand into the History curriculum at the University of Otago, Ross tracked Te Puoho in search of an epic martial past for his own South Island. In 2007 my companion and I in turn tracked Ross, reconstructing his investigative fieldwork.²⁷

There are two reasons why I introduce Angus Ross's quest for Te Puoho to this narrative. First, our retracing of his retracing of Te Puoho's march was possibly the most exhilarating piece of fieldwork we ever have done. We slapped sandflies on western beaches, hiked the summits and breasted the streams that Angus did, even ducked inside an ancient hollow beech alongside the Haast River that I fancied was the same one in which Angus took shelter when struck by an unseasonable snowstorm. My point is, historical fieldwork is profoundly satisfying.

Second, the tale illustrates that in a storied place like the Lindis, every investigator comes with an agenda. Angus Ross came in search of martial glories; we came in search of Ross, the nationalist pilgrim; and every surveyor, botanist, artist, historian, or other carrier of compass or clipboard ever to roam the Lindis had an agenda. If you look diligently, and you truly believe, you might even find wilderness.

Four Strong Winds

*Four strong winds that blow lonely,
Seven seas that run high—
All these things that don't change, come what may.
Now our good times are all gone,
I'm bound for moving on—
I'll look for you if I'm ever back this way.²⁸*

About the same time as Leonard Cockayne founded grassland ecology in New Zealand, the bright students of botanist Charles Bessey at the University of Nebraska, working from the same German sources and assertive impulses as Cockayne, founded grassland ecology in America.²⁹ They are the reason why I learned terms such as "biome," "succession," and "climax" in junior high school. This might have had a perverse influence on such a sensitive chap as I, since in ecological terms, I, as a German immigrant, would have to be classed a "disturbance" in my own native prairies, but in fact, like others of my place and time, I internalized the ascetic tenets of grassland ecology. This is probably why, in more advanced studies, I was so taken with the environmental determinism that characterized the scholarly study of Great Plains history. Like Marxism, religious fundamentalism, and liberal democracy, grassland ecology is a dialectic. It tells us the direction that things, naturally and rightly, should go. On the Great Plains we had prairie, a stable climax formation. I loved all these things that don't change.

I have fallen away from the faith of grassland ecology. I remember how it came to be that I lost my faith. It happened in 1991, when I took my first Fulbright to study the subhumid

grasslands of the South Island of New Zealand. As I worked through collections in the Turnbull, I read works like *Grasslands of New Zealand*, by Sir Bruce Levy, works whose authors, in the English tradition of grassland farming, possessed what seemed to me excessive confidence in their ability to make productive pastures by intensive stocking and intensive management.³⁰ I read further on the era of development in the high country, from the 1950s into the 1980s, when clover seed and cocksfoot and super-phosphate rained from the sky. What arrogance, I thought, to attempt to remake those tussock grasslands into English pastures.

I learned, sure enough, that there ensued severe environmental problems in the tussock country. The old enemy, the European gray rabbit, broke out to revage the great sheep stations of Central Otago and the Mackenzie basin. A new enemy, the hawkweed *Hieracium pilosella*, was less comprehensible and thus more frightening. This gray-green, yellow-flowered Eurasian matweed threw a drab and unproductive blanket across vast tracts of tussock. The pastoralists of the high country pleaded for help, but the neo-liberal government desired only to cut its losses. Blame was freely shared.

In the context of a rising urban green movement, a story about the problems of the tussock country emerged. The story was that the tussock was a beautiful, natural formation which the greedy pastoralists, through over-burning and over-stocking and over-grazing and over-exploitation in general, had degraded and nearly destroyed. Rabbits and hawkweeds, it was said, were not the problems, they were mere symptoms. The way to solve the problems of the high country was to take off the sheep—and the pastoralists—and let nature heal itself.

Then I went to the Mackenzie country and saw for myself.³¹ The country was in a shocking state. I remember standing in the middle of it with Alistair France, one of the dispirited pastoralists, gazing amazed at tens of thousands of desertified acres, and then looking down at the ground around me. I realized that there was no native vegetation, not even any soil visible. I was standing on a carpet of rabbit turds with nothing protruding from it but the odd pale bouquet of hieracium.

The sheep were off this range—had been for years—but nature was not healing itself, it was not even scabbing over. As public inputs were pulled out, as pastoralists gave up the fight, the tussock country degenerated further, and the area given over to rabbits and hieracium expanded. Rabbits and hieracium were not mere indicators of deeper problems; they were the problems, invasive species fully capable, even in the absence of humankind and domestic animals, of displacing native formations.

I said to Alistair, this country is dying, and you've got to do something. The Mackenzie will carry lucerne, alfalfa, I said. Maybe someday the tussock can be restored, but right now, you have to stop the rabbits and the hieracium. Turn it, fence it, seed it, put a bandage on it. Alistair gave me a quizzical look. Pastoralists don't do that.

That was when I realized the conflict between pastoralists and greens was the wrong fight, a shadow-boxing proposition. The pastoralists and the greens were essentially the same. They were at least on the same continuum, and fairly close to one another on it. Both believed in grassland ecology. Both believed in the bounty of nature and in the capacity of nature to maintain and heal itself. They differed only in the degree to which they believed that a formation could be compelled to produce commodities before it would break down. The pastoralists believed that there was plenty of fat on the land that they could consume without hurting it. The greens said there was very little fat, and the land would bear very little human pressure.

If the pastoralists or the greens or anyone else truly cared about the Mackenzie, they could not abandon the land to its certain fate of destruction. To say all that was needed was to take off

the sheep and let nature heal itself not only was lazy and irresponsible; it contradicted the facts on the ground. What was required, what is required, is not ecology, but husbandry.

No one has ever seen a climax formation. It exists only as an article of faith. The state of nature is not stability. The state of nature is transition.

Past Like a Mask

*I've got a past like a mask,
And I sure took my time to understand.³²*

John Hore Grennell is a son of the Maniototo and one of the great acclimatizers of American country music to New Zealand. I met him at a tent dance up near Pateoroa, when he came home to entertain the Cavalcade that was riding across Otago as an act of historical remembrance. The thing is, John is a darned good writer of original songs about life in his own country. I never understood why songs like “The Sheep Crutching Blues” failed to go platinum. Irrespective of that, John achieved commercial success mainly by bringing North American songs to Otago and convincing people they were natives and not exotics. When he sang the old Jim Reeves standard, “Welcome to My World,” in all those Toyota commercials, lots of people really thought he was singing about the Maniototo. Likewise “Past Like a Mask,” one of John’s better hits, was a cover of a song penned by a writer in Houston, which is far, far from Naseby.

Returning myself to the states, in late 1991, I soon learned that I was not the only apostate to the environmentalist faith. Shortly afterward William Cronon, one of America’s foremost environmental historians, published his influential essay, “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature.”³³ Wilderness, Cronon discloses, “is not quite what it seems.” In the first place, wilderness is not something that exists apart from humankind, but rather “is quite profoundly a human creation”—something we have imagined because we think we need it. This act of imagination derives from the European “doctrine of the sublime” and from the American myth of the frontier, making wilderness “a place not just of religious redemption but of national renewal.” Wilderness is masculine in its manifestation and racist in its implementation, sweeping away natives so as to create the appearance of nature untouched by human hands.

The real “trouble with wilderness,” Cronon concludes, is that it encourages “escape from responsibility” and misdirects people’s attention from pressing matters near home: “Idealizing a distant wilderness too often means not idealizing the environment in which we actually live, the landscape that for better or worse we call home.”

The old edifice of environmental history, built upon wilderness and activism, already was teetering by the time Cronon wrote. His essay mercilessly demolishes the ideal of wilderness—not only makes it logically untenable, but brands it as morally “insidious.” This brings us to the classic problem of sweeping revisionism: What is to take the place of the old doctrine?

From my perspective on the plains, there are two promising directions. The first is the rise of “agency,” something quite kin to the “responsibility” of which Cronon writes.³⁴ Perhaps the best deployment of agency in the writing of prairie history is that of Elliott West, especially in his sweeping work, *The Contested Plains*.³⁵ In West’s West, people, native and white, appraise circumstances, make decisions, and deal with the consequences. We might say, they ain’t rich, but they are free agents. Thus changes in the land become matters of human responsibility. We have to think about them, and not just apply deterministic models.

Practitioners of another brand of environmental history, the bioregional approach, begin by delineating the physical scope of study according to bioregionalism, a somewhat fuzzy concept that amounts to environmental definition of region; embrace the *longue durée* in order to discern patterns not necessarily evident to historical actors in their own times; and engage in deep description of human interaction with nature in a particular place. The best exponent of bioregional history in my part of the world is Dan Flores.³⁶

These rising approaches to the practice of environmental history are productive of insights, but they do not deliver that which is most needed. The ideal of wilderness provided moral grounding: Wilderness was a good thing; human works that diminished wilderness were bad things. Without wilderness, how do we tell the good guys from the bad guys? How do we adjudicate actions? How do we appraise landscapes?

I would add, abandonment of the dialectic of ecology also leaves us adrift. Should there be some other dialectic? Should we just get along without one? Take away the ideal of wilderness and the dialectic of ecology, and we no longer know where to go, and if we did know, we wouldn't know how to get there.

And that, dear colleagues and friends, is the trouble with "The Trouble with Wilderness." Wilderness is a mask like a past.

Create in Me a Clean Heart

*Create in me a clean heart, O God,
And renew a right spirit within me.*

I have, on occasion, filled a Lutheran pulpit. More commonly my parish consists of a flock of graduate students. A pastor without a faith to profess is no good. My remarks here might be taken to indicate uncertainty, perhaps even an epistemological crisis. In fact, I lead the flock with some confidence toward a constructive history of the American prairies—a history of agency, complexity, and memory. On the other hand, this matter of the lack of moral authority in relation to nature troubles me, as it does most other serious historians of the environment.³⁷

Notwithstanding my talk about boots on the ground in the practice of my profession, I have found helicopters to be wonderfully handy in working out certain historical problems. A few years ago, working from field notebooks I had accessed at Land Information New Zealand, I wanted to retrace the path of surveyor John Turnbull Thomson through the Lindis in 1857. Enlisting the assistance of high country pastoralist Russell Emmerson and the helicopter he used for mustering, we set out to follow Thomson and his theodolite peak to peak, one triangulation point to another. We completed the work in a day and had time for a beer at the pub, too.

The high point for me was when Russell set us down atop Grandview, the mountain overlooking the junction of the Lindis with the Clutha, as well as lakes Wanaka and Hawea and the Hawea Flat. Back of us stretched a high ridge strewn with fantastic tors of schist. Front of us yawned the spectacular valley, a masterpiece of geometry and color. To my delight, using Thomson's sketches, I was able to determine the precise spot where he had set up his easel to paint this landscape.

And I thought, how would I get down from here without Russell and the chopper? I am too long in the tooth to descend this declivity afoot. What if Russell got thirsty and flew off and left me?

I would then have been in the same position as environmental historians find themselves today. Our pilot—that's you, Bill Cronon—has left us on this precipice overlooking the valley

that I call post-modern ecology—environmental history without the ideal of wilderness or the dialectic of ecology. How shall we find our way down? Here we go, watch your step.

To begin with, we don't need a dialectic, in fact, we do better without one. Geoff was right, it's chaos out there. Chaos theory tells us there are patterns that might eventually be discerned, but they are long, looping, multi-dimensional patterns. Even in the *longue durée* we can hope to comprehend only parts of them. We do best to focus on complexity, that is, how agents—in history, people or groups of people—relate to one another in systems. Complex systems, such as the regional society of the Great Plains or of the Lindis, comprise diverse agents who forge structures of order but also retain enough disorder to foster emergence, that is, new structures representing continuing adaptation. From this process we may form up a historical narrative of the Great Plains, or the Lindis, or whatever is your venue. Acknowledging chaos and focusing on complexity not only moves us toward a humanistic narrative history, rather than one ostensibly governed by social-scientific laws, but also provides us sufficient diagnostics that we need not pine for the dialectic. Certainly I do not.

Well and good, but the absence of an ideal toward which we might aim remains troubling. Absent wilderness, how do we direct our efforts as historians? Once again, how do we adjudicate actions? How do we appraise landscapes? What is a good landscape, anyway?

Flores hints at one alternative, which is aesthetics. In tending his own property in Montana, he confronts the issue of moral authority. By what right does he eradicate the encroaching thistles and privilege the native grasses growing in his portion of the plains? In the end he decides to do it simply because he likes prairie the way it was in the days of the bison, without thistles.³⁸

My philosopher friends say, stay away from the field of aesthetics, that's a hopeless mess. Without going too far into the mess I know that if we walk with Flores, we are soon brought up short by Kant. We can say nothing more powerful than "it is agreeable to me." This is unlikely to be convincing, and that is the trouble with aesthetics.

Relief comes with the recognition that we historians do not necessarily hold responsibility for making these moral determinations about landscapes. On account of aesthetics, but even more so on account of competing economic interests and cultural proclivities, landscapes will always be matters of contention. Just as we must embrace transition and eschew stability in ecology, we must also accept contest and give up hoping for peace as to our relationship with the land.

To Live Together on the Land

*We remembered Blanco Canyon and the Battle of Adobe Walls,
We remembered the young Comanche warrior who could not be killed at all.
I thought it best to parley, to try to understand,
To make ourselves a treaty to live together on the land.*³⁹

In your country, as in mine, thankfully, we do not have the option of eliminating those people who harbor different designs on the land than we do. We live together on the land, and even granted discourse that is informed and civil, we will forever disagree about how to live on it. If we do not wish decisions about the land to be decided solely on the basis of wealth and power, then we need to discuss processes and qualifications. Based on my experience with doing history in grassy places, I feel qualified to suggest certain rules of engagement for our contests. The question I wish to address is, who are the stakeholders to whom we should listen? Who has

standing to speak in these matters of the land? I suggest three standards, to be applied reflectively, not categorically.

First, if you wish to speak to issues of the land, then demonstrate that you possess a body of expertise. I have argued that there are many sources of expertise available, knowledge present in people whose life experience, through the grace of mediation, has made them intimate with landscapes. We should hear from these people, and those persons promoting designs on the land but exhibiting no comparable body of expertise should have to be quiet and listen.

The second rule of engagement is, although you may possess valuable expertise, you cannot expect to govern unless you can muster a community of husbandry. Transition is the state of nature. Peoples and interests who once flourished in a given place may eventually diminish. They may fail to reproduce, physically or socially, or conditions on the land may change so that their way of living on the land no longer is tenable. If these interested parties, however venerable their way of life may be, become too weak or too thin on the land to exercise husbandry of the landscape, then they must give way.

The final rule of engagement is the one most problematic, which is what makes it, like the problem child among siblings, most dear to me. In all contests where the outcome is otherwise indeterminate, as most of them are, the prize goes to the party who tells the best story. As the promoter of a certain vision for the land, can you produce a story that makes sense of the matter, that situates your vision reasonably and compatibly into the evolving ecology of narrative that inhabits the place? That story will be more compelling than reams of impact statements.

You must see, there is work here for all of us. Let us go out and locate those hidden bodies of expertise among the people on the land; chronicle their communities of husbandry; listen to, and appraise, their stories. I thank God I am a historian. Don't you just love it?

¹ This article is substantially what was presented as a keynote address to the New Zealand Historical Association biennial conference in Palmerston North, November 28, 2009. Credit should be given to my spouse and collaborator, Suzanne Kelley, of Minnesota State University-Moorhead, who was co-researcher for elements treated in the paper.

² Professor of History & University Distinguished Professor, North Dakota State University.

³ Terry Stafford and Paul Fraser, "Amarillo by Morning," as sung by George Strait, *Strait from the Heart* (Nashville: MCA, 1982).

⁴ The author was Senior Fulbright Scholar in residence at the Turnbull Library and the Stout Center of Victoria University in 1991; his research agenda in New Zealand, still active today, dates from this experience.

⁵ Webb's master work is *The Great Plains* (Boston: Ginn & Co., 1931).

⁶ The icon of popular culture referred to is, of course, John Belushi, but for an excellent scholarly discourse on American exceptionalism in international context, see Ian Tyrrell, "American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History," *American Historical Review* 96 (October 1991): 1031–1055.

⁷ The argument here summarized is elaborated in my article, "Nowhere Spelled Backwards: The Quest for Region in the Tussock Grasslands of New Zealand," *Western Historical Quarterly* 31 (Winter 2000): 477–85.

⁸ David Paul Ausubel, *The Fern and the Tiki: An American View of New Zealand National Character, Social Attitudes, and Race Relations* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1965).

⁹ Reference here is to the concept of recolonisation as developed by James Belich in *Paradise Reforged: A History of the New Zealanders from the 1880s to the Year 2000* (Auckland: Allen Lane/The Penguin Press, 2001).

¹⁰ "Companions, Stowaways, Imperialists, Invaders: Pests and Weeds in New Zealand," chapter in *Environmental Histories of New Zealand*, ed. by Eric Pawson and Tom Brooking (South Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2002) : 233–45.

¹¹ These conversations took place at the symposium for the authors of the Oxford environmental histories of New Zealand, at the University of Canterbury, February 2000.

¹² Our study area is substantially the same as that treated by Geoffrey P. Duff in a traditional district history, *Sheep May Safely Graze: The Story of Morven Hills Station and the Tarras District, Central Otago* (The Author, 1978).

¹³ A prospectus for the Lindis research project was given in my paper, "Learning from the Lindis: Toward a New Regional History in the New Zealand High Country," Rural History 2010, global conference on rural history, University of Sussex, September 13, 2010.

¹⁴ Steve Hind, "Painter's Landscape," *In a Place With No Map* (Topeka: Woodley Press and Washburn Center for Kansas Studies, 1997), 9.

¹⁵ Willie Wong and other legendary characters are treated in our (Isern and Kelly) paper, "Legends of the Lindis," Western Social Science Association, Calgary, April 12, 2007.

¹⁶ The classic study of Kiwi masculinity is Jock Phillips, *A Man's Country? The Image of the Pakeha Male: A History* (Auckland: Penguin, 1987).

¹⁷ Our (Isern and Kelley) study of the history of the Tarras kneelers is "Keeping History in Stitches: High-Country History in the Tarras Church Kneelers," paper presented to the Western Social Science Association, Phoenix, April 20, 2006. The Tarras women record their own story in Women's Division of Federated Farmers, Tarras Branch, *A Tapestry of Tarras: Local Stories Told in Stitches* (Dunedin: John McIndoe Ltd., n.d. [1996]).

¹⁸ The obvious reference here is to the publication of Miles Fairburn, *The Ideal Society and Its Enemies: The Foundations of Modern New Zealand Society, 1850-1900* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1989).

¹⁹ Suzanne Kelley recorded an extended interview with Claire and Ross Mackay on March 17, 2006.

²⁰ H. Guthrie-Smith, *Tutira: The Story of a New Zealand Sheep Station* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1921).

²¹ Blue Jeans (Ross McMillan), "We Mustered Sheep Together," recited by the author at the Ancient Briton Hotel, Naseby, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dZVv1ZQ7Fgk>.

²² R.M.L. in "Obituary: Leonard Cockayne, 1855-1934," *Transactions and Proceedings of the Royal Society of New Zealand* 65 (March 1936): 457.

²³ L. Cockayne, "A Sketch of the Plant Geography of the Waimakariri River Basin, Considered Chiefly from an Ecological Point of View," *Transactions and Proceedings of the New Zealand Institute* 32 (1899): 95–136.

²⁴ Leonard Cockayne, *The Vegetation of New Zealand* (3rd Ed., Weinheim: J. Cramer, 1958), 210; L. Cockayne, *New Zealand Plants and Their Story*, 85.

²⁵ My interpretation of the work of Cockayne is elaborated in "Leonard Cockayne and the Origins of Grassland Ecology in New Zealand," paper presented to the Western Social Science Association, Las Vegas, April 11, 2003.

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- ²⁶ Originally published serially in the *New Zealand Journal of Agriculture*, 1918-22, Cockayne's work on the montane grasslands has been republished conveniently as *An Economic Investigation of the Montane Tussock-Grassland of New Zealand* (Wellington: Queen Elizabeth II National Trust, 2001).
- ²⁷ The thesis by Angus Ross (a.k.a. "Afield") is "Te Puoho and His South Island Raid, or, From Taranaki to Tutarau," University of Otago, M.A. History Honours Thesis, 1933. Kelley and I track Ross's travels in "Angus Ross, Afield: An Otago Identity Quest," paper presented to the Western Social Science Association, Denver, April 25, 2008.
- ²⁸ Ian Tyson, "Four Strong Winds," on Ian & Sylvia, *Four Strong Winds* (Vanguard Records), 1964.
- ²⁹ See Ronald C. Tobey, *Saving the Prairies: The Life Cycle of the Founding of American Plant Ecology, 1895-1955* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).
- ³⁰ Sir Bruce Levy, *Grasslands of New Zealand* (Wellington: R.E. Owen, 1955).
- ³¹ The author interviewed Alistair France at Holbrook Station on 17 November 1991.
- ³² John Hore Grenell, "Past Like a Mask," *Welcome to Our World* (CBS, 1990).
- ³³ William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1995): 69-90.
- ³⁴ The author treats the rise of agency in historical interpretation in "Agency, Complexity, Memory: A Scholarship for Western Places," presidential address to the Western Social Science Association, Denver, 12 April 2013, forthcoming in the *Social Science Quarterly*.
- ³⁵ Elliott West, *The Contested Plains: Indians, Gold-Seekers, and the Rush to Colorado* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988).
- ³⁶ Dan Flores, "Place: An Argument for Bioregional History," *Environmental History Review* 18 (Winter 1994): 1-18.
- ³⁷ The author's field research on John Turnbull Thomson is recounted in "Frowning Nature and the Colonial Gaze: John Turnbull Thomson and the Exploration of Central Otago," paper presented to the Western Social Science Association, Salt Lake City, April 23, 2004.
- ³⁸ See Dan Flores, *The Natural West: Environmental History in the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001).
- ³⁹ Andy Wilkinson, "Power in the Wind," *Charlie Goodnight: His Life in Poetry and Song* (CD Baby, 2010).