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"NATURE'S NATION," ENLARGED AND PENITENT:
A REVIEW ESSAY

LEWIS O. SAUM

WITNESSES TO A VANISHING AMERICA: THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY RESPONSE. By Lee Clark Mitchell. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981. Pp. xvii, 320. Illus., notes, bibliog., index. \$18.50.

AN ALMOST IMPERTINENT LINE from nineteenth-century oratorical lore came to mind on reading Lee Clark Mitchell's *Witnesses to a Vanishing America*. That line supposedly came from one who stood in awed attendance as Edward Dickinson Baker, one of the spellbinders of his time, spoke the grave-side eulogy of a California friend killed in a politically inspired duel. Transported by Baker's eloquence, the man offered this thought: "T'were worth dying to be remembered so." Those witnesses upon whom Mitchell focuses his attention sometimes appear as distressed at the vanquishing and death of much of natural America as Baker was when his fellow Republican was killed in 1859. And the propensity for intense remembering and repining of a wilderness undone constitutes an important cultural current, whether expressed by Mitchell and others in our time or by those in the time that Mitchell studies.

Needless to say, most of us have quantum-leaped from the views of our Christian ancestry, from that emblematic figure described by Perry Miller long since as that "hard-bitten Calvinist [who] reminded his people of ancient distinctions between nature and grace." If that "hard-bitten Calvinist" lays little claim upon our attention, one supposes that a hard-bitten Darwinist might, say with that contemplation of a "tangled bank" with its reminder of the "war of nature" at the end of *Origin of Species*, or with the conclusion of *Descent of Man* where we find that stern reminder of how "a savage in his native land" actually existed.

Dark thoughts about nature and natural man, whether Calvin's or Darwin's, have little place in Mitchell's account. Roughly in the 1820s, he contends, doubts began to take hold regarding the "destruction of a wilderness" (p. xiii). As an explanatory mechanism anxiety comes forth quite frequently these times, and surely it does yeoman service here. "Anxiety about the wilderness gusted fitfully . . ." (pp. 28-29), and the fitfulness of those anxiety-stricken beholders increased as the century moved along. By 1900 that anxiety, channelled and magnified now by cultural relativism, begot "self-revulsion" (p. 261). "Increasingly respectful

admiration for native tribes," for example, led to a "devastating indictment of American society from the very perspective offered by tribal life" (p. 255).

As the foregoing should indicate, Mitchell has written a bold book—bold in scope, bold in interpretation, and bold in the theoretical base of the interpretation. Though his academic moorings are in American literature, the author ventures into a variety of areas. Mitchell chooses his witnesses not only from appropriate literary figures but from among traders, historians, missionaries, painters, photographers, anthropologists, and yet others. That endeavor involves much overview and synthesis, and, perhaps inevitably, it betrays here and there what some might consider a questionable reading. The intellectual historian, for example, might wonder about the employment of Theodore Parker (pp. 226, 257). Did Parker's quarrel with Prescott's *History of the Conquest of Mexico* reflect solicitude for Aztec civilization nearly as much as it did execration of Spanish and Catholic civilization? Would the western historian think of Irving's *Astoria* as attempting "the definitive history of western riverboatmen" as well as of "fur traders" (p. 27)? Would the student of Pacific Northwest history accept the placement of James G. Swan not only among the ranks of "serious ethnographers" but also among the ranks of "dedicated professionals" (p. 185)?

In turn, Mitchell shows boldness in construing and interpreting the material he has selected from that variety of sources, and again the results are mixed. In itself the following assertion has much to commend it: "Our nineteenth-century predecessors swaggered with less thoughtless confidence than the accepted historical record suggests . . ." (p. xvi). Indeed I find such a contention so compelling that I have elsewhere volunteered some thoughts very much along that line (Lewis O. Saum, *The Popular Mood of Pre-Civil War America*, [1980]). I would, however, be exceedingly reluctant to ascribe much if any of that comparative lack of swagger to concern over "issues of conservation, endangered wildlife, and native American rights" (p. xvi). As William H. Shurr's *Rappaccini's Children: American Writers in a Calvinist World* (1981) has very recently indicated in the literary sphere, swagger simply would not comport with the still vigorous legacy that the nineteenth century received from the dour Genevan. The anxieties were old and theological far more than they were new and ecological.

Too frequently the material under scrutiny seems to do something less than the author maintains. For example, even in a mention of an obligingly "didactic" Thomas Cole painting the author did a bit more managing than seemed appropriate. That painting, *Landscape: The Wilderness Axeman*, appears as illustration, and the author informs us that it "presents a woodman senselessly attacking a tree in the midst of a clearing he has already hacked out of the forest" (p. 37). Here, as the sentence closes, the author provides footnote citation to a page of Richard Rudisill's *Mirror Image: The Influence of the Daguerreotype on American Society* (1971). But Rudisill's treatment of that painting has a slightly but tellingly different tone. Rudisill describes an axeman "in the center of the canvas attacking a tree while around him is a clearing he has hacked out of the forest." Mitchell appropriates two tendential adverbs—"senselessly" and "already." There is nothing inherently "senseless" about chopping up a tree that one has felled. "Already" seems to suggest that the axeman might have been expected to have sated his

irrational wantonness in clearing a field and, were he not a rapacious energumen, to have left the firewood unchopped. In his lecture remarks that Rudisill quotes on that page, Cole said his was a "regret," not a "complaint." Mitchell comes close to expunging that disclaimer.

Simply, Mitchell confronts the hard reality that his witnesses show reluctance to oblige him with clearly stated evidence of their feelings. Not everyone will be satisfied by the abundance of such locutions as that, of these witnesses, "many reflect no specific urge to preserve a wilderness vision" (p. 29). After a similar acknowledgment in treating frontier photographers, the author offers the following: "Yet their work, bankruptcies, and broken homes tacitly attest to costly, arduous commitments" (pp. 73-74). Work, bankruptcies, and broken homes have been known to attest to things far removed from worry over a vanishing wilderness.

The author's resourcefulness is not entirely ill-used. Pensiveness pervaded the American setting, and the detection of it becomes all but inevitable when we focus our attention upon those in a retrospective mood. To find, for example, environmental implications in the formation of state historical societies seems, however ingenious, somewhat beside the point. Such implications may have entered, but the unembroidered commemorative and nostalgic dimensions would by far preponderate. Does it tell us very much to label such efforts "an ever more conscious race against time and progress" (p. 79)? If one were among a handful of embarrassed witnesses to a small-town Veterans' Day parade in November 1981, one could say as much, or as little. Those founders of historical societies were putting things, to use Emerson's terms, in "the amber of memory." That is all but unutterably fundamental. One could, if one were of a mind, make an environmental statement of "Woodman, Spare that Tree," but to do so would transform its sentiment into what would be at best the ancillary and at worst the clearly irrelevant.

Melancholy inheres in photographs. They too are exercises in retrospect, and few of us need reminders from Susan Sontag about a "mournful vision of loss." Immediately after the Sontag reminder, Mitchell generalizes as follows: "The West specifically, and the Indian in particular, emblemized all that was changing. In many documentary photographs made through the course of the century, a 'vision of loss' confronts the viewer" (p. 149). That is quite true, and quite self-evident. And we need not rely on the West or the Indian to do the emblemizing, though M. Gidley's beautiful new book, *Kopet: A Documentary Narrative of Chief Joseph's Last Years* (1981), with its compelling photographic illustrations from Edward S. Curtis and others, could hardly be excelled if one wished to use such emblems. But the matter is more comprehensively grave than that illustration suggests. Thus Ben Maddow, himself professionally involved in pictographic arts, remarked in *A Sunday Between Wars: The Course of American Life from 1865 to 1917* (1979) that "[t]here are no smiling Indians in nineteenth-century photographs." Here he mentioned the Indian notion that a likeness appropriated a part of the soul and thereby diminished a man. "And in a sense," Maddow ventured, "they were right: Every image of oneself, even in a mirror, diminishes one's inflated fantasy" (p. 43). Very recently Jane Sugden presented *New England Past: Photographs 1880-1915* (1981), and she quoted Brooks Adams to good, morose purpose: "The world

is tired of us" (p. 8). Had we accepted the somewhat over-wrought constructions placed by Michael Lesy on the visual bombardment of his *Wisconsin Death Trip* (1973) a few years ago, we might have written off all of small-town, turn-of-the-century America as a colossal psychopathic ward, instead of recognizing that a "vision of loss"—unprepossessing, ill at ease, graceless and even pitiable common people—confronted us. If the point required reinforcing we could simply turn to the pages of that arresting book that featured the death photos of children readied for burial. Here, as almost anywhere else, the photo gives visual evidence that what was no longer is.

All in all, though Mitchell seems quite right in urging that there was a good deal more spiritual disquietude in nineteenth-century America than we sometimes suppose, he may have ascribed rather too much of it to concern over nature. "Deep resistance to the devastation" wrought by westward expansion seems a quite apt way of discussing Bayard Taylor, but as we move into the next paragraph and the next page, enlarging the scope "[f]rom private diarists to famous writers, housewives to professional journalists" (pp. 31–32), uneasiness is in order. The unsophisticated reserved their distress about "westward progress," not for "wounds on the land," but for wounds inflicted on the religious and social fabric by the westering process (Saum, *The Popular Mood of Pre-Civil War America*, especially Chapter 8).

Simply, one wonders about the pervasiveness of the particular misgivings upon which the book is based, and one wonders about the author's assessment of that pervasiveness. Here and there the reader encounters qualifiers and disclaimers indicating that we should be cautious in generalizing from what the Bayard Taylors were expressing. Elsewhere, however, we seem to assume a more expansive posture, as when we find that the individuals treated in the book should not be seen as "uniquely perceptive figures but as spokesmen for a broad intellectual movement shared with their many less articulate contemporaries" (p. xvi). And surely, one is being allowed to believe more than one should when one reads that by the end of the nineteenth century "[r]esistance to militant missionizing had swollen into a flood tide of public opinion, and alienation from contemporary society expressed itself more outspokenly against America's ruthless imperialism in the Philippines, in China, in Central America, and, not least, in the American West, where the frontier was closing" (pp. 257–58). But, Mitchell has written a bold book.

Perhaps the boldest aspect of this challenging and in some ways admirable work is in its shift or its intensification of the theoretical base for interpretation. Some of us may not be sufficiently alert at the outset when Mitchell calls for "a revision in our notions" of the American past "by revealing the ambivalence felt among even those who participated in the nation's triumphant conquest of the wilderness" (p. xiv). The familiar ring is deceptive. A half century and more ago the theoretical base for the scrutiny of such "ambivalence" would have been firmly in the realms of philosophical and literary conventions. Philosophers George Boas and A. O. Lovejoy did much to inform us of such currents in antiquity, and they were joined in bringing the story forward by such literary scholars as Hoxie Neale Fairchild and Chauncey Brewster Tinker. One might have supposed that America—for

shame or for glory—had had a comparative immunity to these primitivistic notions. What Vernon Louis Parrington called *The Romantic Revolution in America* (1927) was, as he put it at the outset, "economic romance" (p. v).

In time our scholars discerned other ingredients of America's nineteenth-century mood, ingredients that bore a resemblance to what the Lovejoys and Fairchilds had studied in other settings. A romantic and primitivistic strain emerged, and that strain often seemed hardly more than a popularized version of Byron or Rousseau. But when such examinations of American culture came of age, they did so with a somewhat revised motive force. Though Roy Harvey Pearce's *The Savages of America: A Study of the Indian and the Idea of Civilization* (1953) was dedicated to A. O. Lovejoy and showed much of his influence, it and a good many other things rendered philosophical and literary conventions into more flexible symbols and myths. Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950) stands as the cardinal event. That publication did much to inspire and inform portrayals of an American past that took a kinder view of the natural condition. And forthwith, that fonder view received illumination from the theoretical formulations of Mircea Eliade, especially from his *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return* (1949), which became available in English early in the 1950s. We were now better prepared to see that the American past had had something more than "economic" romance and a rage for progress.

The ambivalence our nineteenth-century ancestors felt took on several shadings in the literature that followed *Virgin Land*. John W. Ward's *Andrew Jackson: Symbol for an Age* (1955) presented Americans who offered rather straightforward prescriptions for maintaining a middle ground between the unduly natural and the unduly civilized. The tone was mediational, and to the Jacksonians the ideal American scene was "a cornfield surrounded by a split rail fence" (p. 33). A decade after Ward's book, maturation rather than mediation provided the informing spirit for a couple of important works in this genre, and the tone was appropriately more dour. Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal* (1964) concluded with "Epilogue: The Garden of Ashes" wherein the "American hero is either dead or totally alienated from society, alone and powerless, like the evicted shepherd of Virgil's eclogue. And if, at the same time, he pays a tribute to the image of a green landscape, it is likely to be ironic and bitter" (p. 364). Another book, Loren Baritz's *City on a Hill: A History of Ideas and Myths in America* (1964), closed with a chapter on the ever-puzzling but ever-obliging Melville, the last lines of which depicted that pensive and dolorous witness as follows: "He had seen the passing of the land and the development of civilization. . . . The land had come of age, and age was time and tragedy and the end" (p. 331).

Mitchell has gone boldly beyond all of these. He does not confine himself to the somber lucubrations of an isolated and prescient Melville nor to the twentieth-century parallel in Marx's depiction of Jay Gatsby's futile resistance to the "root conflict of our culture." He goes beyond Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1967) by giving large and explicit coverage to the image of the Indian and by multiplying Nash's handful of prototypical figures. Indeed his audacity does not suffer in comparison to Leslie Fiedler's *The Return of the Vanishing*

American, like Nash's book first published in 1967. Fiedler's remarkable foray had to settle largely for fictive, mythic archetypal figures acting as spiritual precursors of the "Ultimate Westerner" who inhabits "the West of Here and Now, rather than There and Then—the West of Madness" (pp. 181, 185). To be sure, Mitchell does not extend his wilderness mission into the lush undergrowth of the counter culture, but his contentions if not always his evidence render Fiedler's views prodigiously closer to believable, though still a good distance removed.

"The reader may object that I am talking nonsense"—that recognition came near the outset of the previously quoted essay by Perry Miller in the 1955 *Harvard Theological Review*. Therein he told us that Americans ignored the message of that "still hard-bitten Calvinist" about the dangers of nature, and he impressionistically urged that an almost ecological concern permeated pre-Civil War America. Miller, it seems to me, allowed us to mislead ourselves when he neglected to emphasize a separation or gradation at the end of that essay. "[T]he American, or at least the American artist," he blurringly wrote, "cherishes in his innermost being the impulse to reject completely the gospel of civilization. . . ." The chasm between the "American" and the "American artist" is not at all susceptible to this blithe bridging. Mitchell blurs and bridges in a way quite analogous to Miller's; but Mitchell out-does Miller too. In fact, Miller's message came from an earlier age; he did not celebrate that above-mentioned "impulse" to go native. Indeed his closing lines enjoined American religion to examine "with the severest self-criticism, the course on which it so blithely embarked a century ago, when it dallied with the sublime and failed to comprehend the sinister dynamic of Nature." Such an admonition would appear absurdly out of place in Mitchell's depiction.

In 1981, Lee Clark Mitchell, a very young scholar, published his first book, an audacious and ambitious synthesis of a great amount of material informed throughout by an arresting and consistent thesis. In 1981, Ray Allen Billington published his last scholarly book, *Land of Savagery, Land of Promise: The European Image of the American Frontier*. The birth dates of the two men are separated by more than fifty years, and, bearing in mind that the subject matter of the two books is parallel but not identical, that half-century may help explain a disparity of construction between the two. Many of us would have been predisposed to the view that Billington's Europeans, some of them "witnesses," some of them fireside travellers, would have entertained a more solicitous idea of America's natural and frontier realm. But, if both of these accounts are to be credited, that is not the case. As the nineteenth century moved along in Billington's portrayal, those European "image-makers" "increasingly agreed on one point: that Nature was an evil to be subdued, not a god to be worshipped" (p. 80).

Conceivably, both scholars are right; but Billington seems substantially more so. Mitchell's book will appeal to many, and it will deserve nearly all of the approval it receives. But its discernment of an ecological concern takes on fuller form than many of us would accept. In the *William and Mary Quarterly* (July 1972) James Axtell opened an essay regarding Indians and whites in the colonial setting with a line from the poet Marianne Moore. That line involved a "philosophy of the wilderness," a philosophy "to combat which one must stand outside and laugh since to go in is to be lost." There is no laughing at a wilderness as compelling

as that portrayed by Mitchell, by his "witnesses," and by their other remembrancers, but there is the strong inclination yet in some of us to stand outside lest we go in and be lost in that insinuating and intoxicating realm. And I conclude that that reaction would have gained the approval of more of our nineteenth-century ancestors than Mitchell's account would have us believe.