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Early 20th Century Environmental
Thought

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Lost in an environmental discourse dominated by the works and writings of "Great Men," Abby Williams Hill, a railroad painter, writer, and mother, lived a life steeped in environmental philosophy that has gone almost unnoticed in the scope of the history of early environmentalism. An avid camper and lover of the wilderness, Abby Hill traveled extensively in the National Parks with her children (and, later, her husband Dr. Frank R. Hill) from 1904 to well into the 1920s. She wrote extensive letters and journals, the majority of which have been preserved, and her correspondence provides an incredible wealth of social-historical information for research into the practicalities and common perceptions of environmental thought in the early 20th century. As an American Impressionist artist she painted wilderness landscapes in the open air at campsites, as a mother she raised her children partly in the wilderness, and in addition to that there is a substantial amount of evidence (from her own personal correspondence and journals) that she fully embraced the type of Preservationist philosophy¹ that individuals like Muir characterized.² I hope to examine Hill's beliefs, their relation to those of the proto-environmentalist³ Muir and the Transcendentalist discourse from which he emerged, and their effect on the way she lived her life as a means of puzzling out the lofty philosophical ideas and attendant practical considerations that are brought through in this amazingly adventurous woman's commentary on her life.

Beginning with a brief overview of Hill's life and the relevant context for her travels in the National Parks, I will examine the impacts of Transcendentalism on the American philosophy

¹ Preservationism is, in brief, the idea that sections of "wilderness" (that is, parts of the natural world mostly untouched by Mankind) should be preserved for future generations to experience. This is the rationale behind the National Parks System and stands in contrast to the competing Environmentalist position of Conservationism, which is all about managing the natural world for use without destroying it. Preservation was advocated by John Muir, and Conservation by Gifford Pinchot on the national political stage in the late 1800s.

² On this note, Muir represents a good point of reference for this comparison not only because of his role as a progenitor of the conservation movement but because his lifestyle compares very directly with Hill's own.

³ Environmentalism as we know it is not a phrase used at this time. People like Muir were known as Naturalists, generally, but that conveys a meaning much closer to "ecologist," "botanist," or "geographer" than it does what we know to be an environmentalist. However, these individuals form the basis of environmental thought, and I will refer to them as "proto-environmentalists" throughout this paper to reflect that distinction.

of Nature (as exemplified by Muir, and as adopted by Hill), the position of art and artists in recording the natural world, the Native presence in America and the role of the Native peoples in Anglo-American concepts of Nature, and the tenets of the Preservationist movement as they relate to and inform my reading of Hill's own philosophies on Nature and the natural world. In each case I will conclude by drawing those topics into a narrower context and discussing Hill's thoughts on the issues in order to explain the breadth of her philosophies towards nature, her life and work, and how those can be seen as a microcosm of the turn of the century environmental views that would set the precedent for the modern Environmentalist movement. I would put forward that Abby Williams Hill represents both a more egalitarian view of the Native peoples and a more practical and utilitarian version of what has become the idealized view of Muir's Preservation. Her life and work are a testament to both her Progressive ideology of racial equality and her adamant desire to experience the beauty of the natural world and let its pristine beauty be shown to others.

A Brief Biography of Abby Williams Hill

Before we get into the technical and historical details important to this topic, it is important to provide some context for the life of Abby Williams Hill in order to gain a greater understanding of the circumstances from which she came and how those might reflect on the issues that will be discussed further on. Born into an upper-class family in Grinnell, Iowa, Hill had the opportunity to pursue her artistic interests without worrying about her financial situation. Additionally, her talent in the visual arts afforded Hill the opportunity to study at the prestigious Art Students League in New York under the Impressionist William Merritt Chase.⁴ In 1889 she moved to Tacoma, Washington with her husband Dr. Frank Hill. Her son was born that same year, though her early life as a mother was complicated by the fact that he was born partially

⁴ Ronald Fields, *Abby Williams Hill and the Lure of the West* (Washington State Historical Society, 1989), 11.

paralyzed.⁵ By 1901 Hill had adopted three more children, all girls, and had already begun her family camping trips in the wilderness of Washington.⁶ Hill secured a painting contract from the Great Northern Railroad in 1903⁷ to produce a number of works advertising their Washington line, a task that launched her into the world of contracted advertising work, national parks, and scenic landscape painting. From 1903 to 1906 Hill produced a body of around 55 pieces⁸ for the railroads under three contracts in areas ranging from the Northern Cascades to Yellowstone National Park.⁹ Hill's summers spent camping in these areas with her children would bring her into contact with a wide range of people, from Eastern tourists to Native Americans, and the grandeur she saw in the wilderness seems only to have reinforced her desire to see it preserved.

Transcendent Nature

That being said, the most appropriate place to begin our exploration of environmental thought and American culture is with the Transcendentalists and the emergence of Christian nature-worship (of at least a superficial kind) in American thought. Barbara Novak, in her comprehensive analysis of American landscape painting *Nature and Culture*, put forward the thesis that the idea of America as, in part, an Eden-like paradise with great swathes of land untouched by the ravages of civilization has long been a staple of American culture and art. In the introduction to that work, she states that "Ideas of God's nature and of God *in* nature became hopelessly entangled, and only the most scrupulous theologians even tried to separate them. If

⁵ Fields, 13.

⁶ Fields, 21.

⁷ Great Northern Railway Co. Local Advertising Contract to Abby R. Hill, 1903. Abby Williams Hill Collection. University of Puget Sound, Tacoma, Wa.

⁸ Ronald Fields, the first to catalogue Hill's archive, estimated this as the number of works that were done. It reflects works listed in her journals and daybooks as commissioned pieces and related works in the collection not specifically noted by Hill but dated from the same time period.

⁹ However, she did not sell any of these pieces. Rather, she required that they be returned to her after their advertising purposes were served. This, along with the stipulation in her contracts that she be paid in railroad tickets rather than cash, suggests that she did not paint for profit but rather out of personal motivation - the railroads were perhaps only a means to an end in this regard.

nature was God's Holy Book, it *was* God."¹⁰ This sentiment can be seen in some variation throughout the artwork and literature of the early 19th century,¹¹ but the most ardent champions of the aesthetic of God-as-Nature were the Transcendentalist authors Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Thoreau.

Emerson's famous treatise *Nature* presents to us a clear view of the Transcendentalist perspective, equating the natural world at once with the message of the Bible, the purity of Eden, and the body and will of God himself. To Emerson, Nature and the natural world were a source of endless joy and fulfillment in the purest sense. In illustrating the majesty of Nature, Emerson wrote:

In the presence of nature, a wild delight runs through the man, in spite of real sorrows... Within these plantations of God, a decorum and sanctity reign, a perennial festival is dressed, and the guest sees not how he should tire of them in a thousand years. In the woods, we return to reason and faith.¹²

Emerson's pursuit of nature strove towards a spiritual fulfillment that he implicates modern man in ignoring, either willfully or through gross ignorance. He seems to have suggested that the scientific, observational understanding of the world was lacking an essential aspect of spiritual consciousness and a personal, individual experience with that faith. In the closing section of "Nature," he wrote: "At present, man applies to nature but half his force. He works on the world with his understanding alone. He lives in it and masters it by a penny-wisdom; and he that works most in it, is but a half-man, and whilst his arms are strong and his digestion good, his mind is

¹⁰ Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 3.

¹¹ One of Novak's major arguments revolves around the Hudson River School artists of the 19th century, particularly Frederic Edwin Church, Albert Bierstadt, and Thomas Moran, their connection with the myth of a virgin American continent, and the privileged place of America in the annals of Human history. See: *Nature and Culture* chapter 2.

¹² Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, Joel Porte, ed. (New York: The Library of America, 1983), 10.

imbruted, and he is a selfish savage."¹³ In Emerson's view, even if a man lived in nature he could not benefit from it in the fullest without attempting to understand it in a deeper way rather than simply to use it for his own benefit.¹⁴

This position on nature was echoed by John Muir, arguably the most prominent figure in forming the preservationist discourse which gave the country its national parks, and on whom many books have been written since the advent of the modern Environmentalist movement. Muir was a great personal fan of Emerson's work, and meeting him once in Yosemite was eventually recounted by Muir as one of his favorite experiences.¹⁵ Owing to that, it is no surprise that his understanding of the natural world took a great deal from Emerson's ideas of Transcendentalist Christian philosophy. Muir tended to take his natural rhetoric much further, however, up to the point of eschewing the world of civilization altogether. In letters to his friends, Muir referred to cities and towns in no uncertain terms, calling Oakland (where his friend and sometimes hiking companion J.B. McChesney lived) "...those Oakland wastes of civilization."¹⁶ or "...that befogged jungle of human plants..."¹⁷ Where Emerson saw a balance between the artifice of mankind and the pristine beauty of nature, Muir saw the untamed cities and industries of the 19th century United States as examples of the hubris and sin resultant from the Fall.¹⁸

It is due to this that I must separate the terms "Nature" and "nature" in the scope of this analysis. "Nature" refers to the broader philosophical term advocated by Emerson and adopted by Muir, something that carries with it the baggage of an attendant religious perspective and a

¹³ Emerson in Porte, 46.

¹⁴ Curiously, Emerson does seem to credit common people who worked in nature (likely woodsmen, farmers, or other physical laborers) with greater strength and better health, implying not only that interaction with nature could benefit the physical body, something which we will see again with Hill and Muir as well as others, but also that those benefits could come even for those who don't try to understand nature as they experience it.

¹⁵ Terry Gifford, ed., *John Muir: His Life, Letters, and Other Writings* (Seattle: The Mountaineers, 1996), 131.

¹⁶ Ibid. 182.

¹⁷ Ibid. 184.

¹⁸ Dennis Williams, "John Muir, Christian Mysticism, and the Spiritual Value of Nature," in *John Muir: Life and Work*, Sally M. Miller, ed. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), 91.

broader web of aesthetic, ethical, and experiential considerations related to the Transcendentalists and their modes of thought. Nature, used in this way, will not always be connected to God-in-Nature directly but will generally refer to a concept of the natural world and natural aesthetics that retains the philosophical influence of Transcendentalism. In reference to terms which are to be detached from this ideological background, I will use phrases such as "natural beauty," "natural thought," or the somewhat-loaded term "Wilderness."¹⁹

Hill and The Value of Nature - Reverence and Difference

With this sort of sentiment beginning the push into the exploration of Nature and the natural world, we must look at Abby Williams Hill not as a counterpoint but as a parallel to these ideas of Natural Religion. While she viewed the natural world in a similarly important light as Emerson and Muir, Hill seem to have stood at a tangent to Transcendentalist thought in a number of ways; informed by the movement but ultimately differing from it. By far the most important way in which Hill's kind of environmental thought differed is that Hill did not seem to conflate God's works and God in her interpretation of the Christian cosmology. That is to say that Hill, though she seems to embrace the Transcendentalist mindset of natural living and the importance of understanding the natural world, did not identify Nature with god directly, but rather approached Nature as the greatest of God's works. This squares with more traditional American Christianity and suggests both the waning influence of Transcendentalism as a religious movement in the early 20th century as well as its lingering impression on the American perception of natural world.

¹⁹ Equally loaded in that there is little consensus on what this term means. Though it is used by Abby Williams Hill to refer to unsettled land and places "off the beaten path" such as the National Parks, there is some debate as to whether or not it's an appropriate term at all considering the length of Native American inhabitation in places traditionally considered to be wilderness. Nonetheless, I am using it in Hill's context and generally will be referring to Hill and her perspective when I use the term.

One of the few instances in which Hill displays her religious tendencies strongly is seen in an interview given to *The New York Age*, a black newspaper, about her choice to name Mt. Booker after Booker T. Washington.²⁰ When speaking on the stature of the mountain itself, she says: "Here was a glorious monument not made by the hand of man, but carved by the Almighty. What could be more fitting than to name it for one of the most truly great men of our times; great in soul, in serving the Lord, through service to humanity..."²¹ From this we can get a sense of her religious sensibilities to some extent, not only her view on nature but also a sense of religious equality that brought her to see non-white Americans as admirable and Godly men.

Towards another side of Nature philosophy and religion, we must look at how Hill's views on Nature and the wilderness square with the idea of the "Natural Church" that is set forward in a great deal of American natural literature and philosophy.²² For example, we see in many of Muir's journals and letters that he references ideas of sin and depravity in association with "civilized" society, and that he firmly believed that when he was in nature he was in direct communion with God.²³ As we have seen, Thoreau and Emerson also held that acceptance and harmony with Nature-as-God was a source of religious enlightenment, but Hill approached the philosophy of their Nature without bringing forward the religious aspect in nearly the same way. For her, the ultimate qualities of nature were its outstanding beauty (as a product of God, certainly, but not connected with God or sin) and its ability to influence the health and happiness of people in a positive way. To Hill direct experience of nature was important because it improved the physical and emotional well-being of individuals in a way that little else could.

²⁰ Booker T. Washington was an important black leader in post-Civil War America. Among other achievements, he founded the Tuskegee Institute, which Hill had visited and will be mentioned further on, and promoted education for the newly-freed African American population.

²¹ "Mountain in State of Washington Named In Honor Booker Washington By Mrs. Abby Williams Hill, Painter," *The New York Age*, undated (possibly 1904).

²² Novak, 151-152.

²³ Williams in Miller, 90.

Emerson, too, credited Nature and natural beauty with the power to revitalize the body after the ills of civilization,²⁴ and his views (as espoused in his essay "Nature") had certainly made their way through the American psyche by Hill's time. However the healing aspect of Nature was especially important to Hill and her family because of her son, Romaine Hill, who was born partially paralyzed and remained sickly for most of his childhood.²⁵ In Nature, Hill seems to have sought not only a better lifestyle for herself, but also a cure for her ailing son. She illustrated her views in her letters home from Yellowstone, in which she recounts not only Romaine's well-being in nature, but also a humorous anecdote in which a woman's complaints and her companions' observations served to validate her lifestyle:

...to her all it was explained, that I was an artist and these my children and they always went with me. She exclaimed in horror, 'And do you take these children way off like this? Suppose they got sick or something happened to them.'

Between her exclamations the others were commenting, 'Look at the biggest girls legs and see how well they are. I guess it agrees with them all right. Did you ever see such hearty looking children!'²⁶

Hill bemusedly dealt with the questions (and sometimes condescension) of many people during her camping tours, but she continued to steadfastly believed in the benefit of the wilderness on one's health. When her husband was released from the hospital in 1924²⁷ she brought him and two of her children across the country, camping at various parks in the hopes of helping his condition.²⁸ In bringing her family into Nature on a regular basis, especially her son and husband

²⁴ Emerson in Porte, 14.

²⁵ Fields, 13.

²⁶ Abby Williams Hill, letter dated Sept. 11, 1905.

²⁷ After over a decade of treatment related to his mental breakdown in 1909 (Fields, 102).

²⁸ Fields, 105.

when they were suffering with their conditions, Hill shows us that she practiced what she preached.

Not only did Hill hold the healing power of Nature as important, but she also seems to firmly have believed that her work as an artist in depicting nature and her efforts to immerse herself in the beauty and grandeur of nature were ways in which she could bring a sense of that emotional and physical fulfillment to others. "Art ought to teach people to love nature better," she wrote, "ought to lift them, cheer them. If I did not believe this, and that it could do it and has done it, I should never paint again and it should not cost me a pang."²⁹ So in Hill's case we can revise Novak's statement on Transcendentalism superficially to reflect Hill's ambitions while keeping the same sentiment - that if Nature and natural beauty could provide both emotional and physical fulfillment, even when represented through painting, then perhaps to Hill those two concepts were the same. It seems that to Hill physical and spiritual fulfillment were not found in Nature, they *were* Nature. This is very much in keeping with Emerson and Thoreau's ideas of Nature and the natural world. Hill, though she never directly mentions Transcendentalist philosophy in her letters and journals,³⁰ had certainly absorbed some portion of their view of the natural world in her lifetime.

The Position of Art in Nature

What Hill's view of nature called for was experience and respect, something that necessitated preservation, but also her first priority as an artist was in observation. After all, "art ought to teach people to love nature better,"³¹ and as an artist it was her vocation to observe Nature and re-create it for those who could not be in her place. Therefore, to understand Hill we

²⁹ Abby Williams Hill in Fields, 106.

³⁰ This is not to discount the possibility that she came into contact with their works but her writings seem to deal only with that information which she deemed most important.

³¹ See note 29 above.

must first have a look at the artistic culture from which she emerged and which influenced the way she approached her art. Hill had the fortune to be trained at the Art Students League in New York under the Impressionist William Merritt Chase.³² This means that she was most likely exposed to the works of early American landscape painters (namely those from the Hudson River School) as well as the views of the Impressionists whom Chase knew and associated with. To understand the place of Hill's art and how her profession influenced her perception of Nature, we must look back to the aesthetics of Nature in her predecessors.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, and through him the Transcendentalist movement, held a position on aesthetics and nature that squared with his other conceptions of Godhead and Nature. Natural beauty, according to Emerson, was a reflection of the light that illuminated everything for Man's eye.³³ But what is most important about Emerson's Transcendentalist take on natural beauty is that it prized art most of all in reproducing the Platonic ideal of Nature. On the creation of art, he says that "a work of art is an abstract or epitome of the world. It is the result or expression of nature. For, although the works of nature are innumerable and all different, the results or the expression of them all is similar and single... Thus is Art, a nature passed through the alembic of man. Thus in art, does nature work through the will of a man filled with the beauty of her first works."³⁴ Thus it seems that, to Emerson and the Transcendentalists, art reflected the utmost devotion and attention to both the material beauty of the natural world and the spiritual form and enlightened perception that it represented. An artist, then, can be seen as equivalent to an evangelist or a minister of Nature's church, bringing the Word of Nature's Book to mankind.

For the part of artists themselves, the Hudson River School painters also delved into Christian spiritualism during this time. Gene Edward Veith, in his book *Painters of Faith: The*

³² Fields, 11.

³³ Emerson in Porte, 14.

³⁴ Emerson in Porte, 19.

Spiritual Landscape in Nineteenth-Century America, puts forward a striking argument for the idea that the Hudson River School painters painted after their Protestant roots. Though many of them were not Transcendentalist by faith, there were many who saw their religious ideals mirrored in Nature. Frederic Edwin Church, an influential painter of the Hudson River School, was heavily influenced by his pastor, Horace Bushnell, who advocated for a very similar reading of Nature to the Transcendentalists. Though he did not consider Nature and God to be the same thing, he spoke in intensely spiritual terms about the divinity of the natural world.³⁵ To Bushnell, Nature was "a kind of constant quantity and fixed term between us and God."³⁶ However, unlike Emerson's highly romanticized version of Nature, Bushnell saw it as a reflection of both all the good and all the bad that could exist in Creation. It symbolized both a place in which to admire and connect with God's grace and to meditate on sin and the flaws of a Fallen world.³⁷

With this kind of Christian background in mind, we can see in the art of the Hudson River School a romantic attachment to both the failings and successes of Man and Nature. In Thomas Cole's multi-part work *The Course of Empire*, for example, he both idealizes the beginnings of civilization in the earlier pastoral works and underscores the change and devastation that man can short-sightedly wreak on the landscape.³⁸ Though the piece is not exactly an environmentalist or preservationist piece, it highlights a problematized view of man's place in nature and a relatively new conception that the common belief in mankind's Biblical writ to be master of Nature was not necessarily true or right. Art as an educational or allegorical tool was certainly not new at this time, but I feel it is important to set up a dichotomy between the

³⁵ Gene Edward Veith, *Painters of Faith: The Spiritual Landscape in Nineteenth-Century America* (Washington D.C.: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 2001), 40-41.

³⁶ Horace Bushnell, in Gene Edward Veith, *Painters of Faith: The Spiritual Landscape in Nineteenth-Century America*, 41.

³⁷ Veith, 42-43.

³⁸ Veith, 96-99.

Hudson River School's allegorical and Romantic depictions of Nature and a directly representational view of the landscape. The Hudson River School painters may have extolled the beauty of Nature, but they altered it in order to fit their message, whether that was an indictment of the follies of civilization (as with Thomas Cole) or to evangelize their Transcendentalist religious beliefs. In comparison, Abby Williams Hill seems to have painted in a way that was more closely aligned with the idealistic depiction of the artist in Emerson's work.

Though I doubt that Ralph Waldo Emerson's description of the Platonic artist was meant to match directly with Hill's representational style, as American Impressionism wouldn't emerge in earnest until well after the publication of *Nature*,³⁹ I can say with some certainty that her approach to art represents (at least in some respects) an extension of that Platonic artist into the 20th century. As a painter, Hill believed wholeheartedly in the value of the natural world for supplying imagery to paint. Rather than being a blank canvas (so to speak) for allegory and interpretation, Hill seemed to prefer to record it in the exact state in which she saw it (as her penchant for *plein air*⁴⁰ painting certainly shows us). Her training under famed American Impressionist William Merritt Chase certainly had something to do with this.⁴¹ Though it is not entirely necessary to describe Chase in detail, Ronald Fields' art historical analysis of Hill's work⁴² gives us some insight into how his technique influenced her work. Fields remarked that "[Chase] must have introduced [his students] to the techniques of Impressionism as well as the bravura brushwork and tonalities of the Munich school. Aspects of both styles appear in

³⁹ *Nature* was first compiled in 1836, during the time when the Hudson River School and Luminist paintings were popular. These artists reflect Romanticism rather than the philosophy of direct representation that Hill's Impressionism was based on. The style in which she was taught did not gain popularity in America until the late 1800s.

⁴⁰ A French term which refers to painting in the open air, i.e. painting outside the studio.

⁴¹ Fields, 11.

⁴² *Abby Williams Hill and the Lure of the West* was originally produced as a catalogue for the 1988 exhibition of Hill's work, the first public show of the collection in over fifty years.

Hill's later canvases, although with neither the obviousness nor the brilliance of Chase's techniques."⁴³ As Fields suggests, Hill's technique seems to derive from that of her mentor but diverges in the way that she approaches the depiction of the natural world. In her paintings, such as in *Yellowstone Falls (distant view)*,⁴⁴ there is both the distinct loose brushwork of Impressionism but also a striking attention to the physical geography of the landscape. Hill certainly demonstrated her fascination with the natural world and her desire to represent it as-is in a quote from her diary in 1897 that closely mimics Emerson's thoughts on the beauty of nature: "We need beauty, grace, pleasing lines... When I have been unable to paint, nature has supplied the want and one always has beauty in nature if they seek it."⁴⁵ This quote is a fair distillation of much of the rest of what Hill had to say about art in her letters and journals, primarily that she saw Nature as beautiful enough to paint as it was without embellishment. To this end, the railroad contracts Hill undertook seem to have provided the perfect means for Hill to seek out the beauty of the natural world. She needed only to provide camping equipment and provisions and she would be taken by the railroads to some of the most beautiful natural wonders of the American West.

Nature and the Native peoples - Noble Savages or Something More?

As we have seen, Nature to the Transcendentalists represented a kind of Edenic perfection and, to those proto-environmentalists and preservationists who would come after, it represented an essential facet of the human experience that many people were missing. With that said, it isn't hard to infer how Native Americans would factor into their understanding of the world. Representing the idea of a culture that was seen as more in-tune with nature than

⁴³ Fields, 11-12.

⁴⁴ Abby Williams Hill, "Yellowstone Falls (distant view)," available in the Abby Williams Hill Digital Collection, <http://digitalcollections.pugetsound.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/abbyhill/id/201/rec/9> (accessed 5/15/2014).

⁴⁵ Abby Williams Hill in Fields, 12.

Europeans of the time, the Native was seen by contemporary Anglo-American culture almost as a part of the wilderness itself. In the art of the 19th century, such as Asher B. Durand's *Progress*, 1853, Natives are even represented as a part of the old landscape in the same way that gnarled trees and thick undergrowth are, ready to be displaced or scythed away by European settlers and their industry as easily as those same forests.⁴⁶ The myth of the "noble savage"⁴⁷ was certainly alive and well, but in the perceptions of people like Thoreau we see the emergence of another idea, somewhat related but communicated and pursued in a very different way - that the Native people and their beliefs represented something spiritual that was missing from European society altogether. In some ways this paralleled concepts of the innocence of Man before the Fall, while in others it was a reminder that Europeans and Natives had commonality enough to learn from one another.

Richard F. Fleck contends in *Henry Thoreau and John Muir Among the Indians* that there was a deep ideological connection between the Transcendentalist Thoreau and the Natives whom he visited during his lifetime⁴⁸ that extended beyond mere primitivism. Thoreau saw the Penobscot as a group whose connection with the universal spirit of Nature (as championed by Emerson) was greater than that of Europeans, a people from whom he, and ultimately, perhaps, the whole of European society, could learn to appreciate nature in a more whole way.⁴⁹ This belief led him to engage with the Natives as closely as he could, learning their language, their myths, and their livelihoods as thoroughly as he felt he was able to.⁵⁰ Further, he draws parallels

⁴⁶ Novak, *Nature and Culture*.

⁴⁷ The "noble savage" is a stereotype that emerged during the Colonial Era throughout the West that suggested that while the natives of various colonized lands were uncivilized and potentially dangerous they also had admirable qualities. These often had to do with their stature and bravery, but there's no real standard that links every aspect of the stereotype. In its essence, it is a fetishization of "primal virtue" or Edenic naiveté.

⁴⁸ The Penobscot of Maine being the tribe he spent the most time with.

⁴⁹ Richard F. Fleck, *Henry Thoreau and John Muir Among the Indians* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1985), 4.

⁵⁰ Fleck, 16-21.

between Thoreau's view and Muir's in the way that Natives came to represent natural knowledge in a way that I feel represents a strong similarity with Hill's own understanding of the tribes of the Mid-Western and Western United States, which I will discuss further on. Whereas some other authors held the Native tribes in contempt,⁵¹ Muir's initial distaste for the natives (earned in his childhood) was reversed by his experiences among the tribes of Alaska, whom he saw as having a truer understanding of the natural world than any European settler cared to have.

Hill and the Native - Progressivism and Racial Understanding

Hill's interest in the Flathead Indians was the earliest encounter she had with Native tribes, and seems to have resulted out of her long-held desire to paint Indian Portraits.⁵² Unlike Thoreau, who studied the Penobscot through anthropological texts before he visited them,⁵³ and Muir who was introduced to Native American culture somewhat slowly through a work companion in the Sierras,⁵⁴ Hill seems to have immersed herself in the Flathead culture with little introduction and not a whole lot of guidance except her strong desire to paint. This led not only to culture shock, but also some amusing recounted stories of her misconceptions about the tribe. On one occasion she was thrilled with the chance to paint Flathead Chief Charlo, who promised to dress in the war regalia his father had worn fifty years prior.⁵⁵ Hill seems to have expected him to dress in hides and feathers, but much to her shock he came dressed in his father's Western clothing. With no lack of dramatic overstatement she wrote: "Oh! Agony! Out comes the suit and it was the one Mrs. H. had described."⁵⁶ I thought I must refuse to paint him but

⁵¹ Fleck, 35-36, 42, 52-53.

⁵² Fields, 70.

⁵³ Fleck, 9-10.

⁵⁴ Fleck, 37.

⁵⁵ Abby Williams Hill, letter dated Oct. 6th, 1905 - Flathead Indian Agency, Montana.

⁵⁶ A much more modern set of clothing described at the end of the letter cited above, once worn when Charlo was visited by a Sioux chief.

decided to hold on as some of his attire was Indian."⁵⁷ And yet as much as she seems to engage dramatically with her disappointment in these entries her response suggests she viewed the whole thing as a chance to learn, and perhaps to satirize her own Western assumptions. Her description of the encounter ends with her painting the Chief, despite his threatening tone when they spoke, as he eschewed his warlike attire for a suit and peace pipe. Her response is indicative of her desire to understand rather than judge the Flathead chief for his attitude. Hill gave him a painting and a glowing description in her letter home,⁵⁸ along with an exclamation of her happiness that she was allowed to stay at the reservation and dance the "Joy dance" with the Flatheads.⁵⁹

Hill became strongly anti-"civilizing" during her time with the Flatheads in Montana, as she spoke with the men and women and made her way through a prairie depleted of buffalo and a people restricted by treaties to the mission-towns where they were proselytized. Hill expresses her frustration with the efforts of people to impress Western cultural norms on the Native American tribes succinctly in an a letter written only a little more than a week after her meeting with Charlo:

"We try to civilize the Indian by cutting his hair and putting our kind of clothes on him and find it strange that short hair and trousers do not seem infinitely better to him than braids and a blanket. We corset the women and do their hair on top of their heads, give them French heels, tight gloves, trains, monstrous hats with civilized feathers on them and cry aghast when they leave school and get back to

⁵⁷ Abby Williams Hill, letter dated Oct. 7th, 1905 - Flathead Indian Reservation, Montana.

⁵⁸ From the same letter, her description of him is as follows: "He has a fine face, full of interest, and with a fatherly look when he smiles... He was careful to keep the pose as well as he could and would not stop to rest."

⁵⁹ Ibid.

the reservations because they immediately return to the simple, practical garment of their foremothers, wear moccasins, and braid their hair."⁶⁰

In some ways this is an expression of her exasperation with Western societal norms and styles of dress,⁶¹ something which she spent quite a bit of time making fun of whenever she had to dress up or engage with the meetings of the Congress of Mothers in Washington, DC.,⁶² but it also shows a deep sympathy with the Native Americans. Hill seems to have seen a lot of herself in the men and women of the Flathead tribe, or at least the understanding of them that she gleaned during his time. While it's hard to say how much of that was an idealization of her experiences and thoughts about the Native Americans, it's safe to say that Hill held them in deep regard nonetheless, and certainly wished for other Americans to do the same. Her reverence for the Flatheads was tied directly to her love for nature, and she saw in them a lifestyle that was well worth understanding (and, if possible, emulating). She went on to write that her "heart aches for these poor people and as one knows more of them, sees life from their standpoint and sees so much in their character to love and respect, one realizes what we have lost by not, in the first place, making of ourselves such true friends they could trust and depend on us..." Having been told of the abuses they suffered, she knew well enough that there was much more taken from the Flatheads than given. In addition, she went on to elaborate on what she found so admirable about the Native Americans whom she knew. It was a kinship with them, with people who seemed to cherish Nature and the beauty of the world in the same way that she did while retaining a utilitarian way of life.⁶³ "The Indian's love of wandering through the mountains, living in the wilds, dressing generation after generation in the same clothes of simple, practical make are

⁶⁰ Abby Williams Hill, letter dated Oct. 16, 1905 - Ronan, Montana.

⁶¹ To that end, the next few pages of her letter are dedicated to how much better Flathead women are at raising their children than any mother she's met, and how well behaved and conscious of nature they are.

⁶² Fields, 78-79.

⁶³ And Hill's comments on women's fashion do much to suggest she hated frivolity. See: Fields, 78-79.

virtues which make for natural living. We box ourselves too much... and lose in what is best of all God has given us."⁶⁴

Hill's interest in the lifestyles of the Native Americans was not limited to the Flatheads, though she would continue to visit their reservation in the future. In the collection of her letters and belongings eventually bequeathed to the University of Puget Sound, a number of the newspaper and magazine articles that she chose to save dealt with the Native American tribes of the West and their political and cultural states across a number of years. It's clear that Hill continued to care for the affairs of these tribes throughout her life, out of a sense of wonder and interest that went well beyond her initial artistic pursuits. She ended her journal of October 16th with a note appended to the events of the day that I feel perfectly illustrates how she felt she could learn from the Flatheads. "An Indian wrapped in a blanket came into Mr. Beckwith's store at sun set, could not speak [English], but in excitement drew Mr. B. out and pointed to the glowing range of mountains. They are children of nature. We need them to develop it in us. They can teach us much."⁶⁵ That sense of wonder and simplicity that she saw in each of the Flathead Indians drew her to them precisely because it caused them to value nature more. The deep reverence for nature that Muir saw in the Alaskans, that Thoreau saw in the Penobscot, Abby Williams Hill saw in the Flatheads, and it reinforced her belief that nature was something to be cherished.

Contextualization - Hill at Tuskegee

For her part, Hill seems to have held a stance on the Native Americans that squared well with her stance on others who were non-European, which suggests that her admiration was not out of a belief in the "noble savage" stereotype. As a Progressive, Hill certainly differed from

⁶⁴ Abby Williams Hill, letter dated Oct. 16, 1905 - Ronan, Montana.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

Muir and Thoreau in that she had an incredibly outspoken desire for equality between people of different skin colors. In 1901, Hill had the chance to visit the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, an experience which led her to have not only a good look at the work being done by black intellectuals like Booker T. Washington, but also to engage with a segment of American culture for which she had very little sympathy or understanding. Southern whites seemed to Hill to be at best quite backwards in how they thought about blacks, and she refused participate in segregation, to the point of confronting anyone who argued with her about what she saw as the hypocrisy of the act.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, she was so impressed by Washington's work at Tuskegee that she would go on to name a mountain in northern Washington State after him.⁶⁷

Hill's decision to name Mt. Booker certainly isn't proof of her dedication to social equality, a letter to the U.S. Geographical Survey (USGS) not being entirely political in and of itself, but her response to the minor media panic that erupted is indicative of her commitment to her social beliefs. With the USGS subsequently denying the name's meaning (but not its existence), Hill was asked by a number of newspapers for her response to the controversy. She remained steadfast in her conviction that Washington deserved the honor, that "the name is essentially appropriate and [she] expressed her confidence that race prejudice would take no umbrage against naming the mountain after 'the greatest colored man of the generation.'"⁶⁸

That being said, Hill's view on the Native Americans, especially the Flatheads, stemmed from a similar philosophical notion as Muir's and Thoreau's. Hill believed that the people of these tribes were closer to nature than Europeans were, and that through interacting with them,

⁶⁶ Fields, 25.

⁶⁷ "Named For A Famous Negro - Peak Near Lake Chelan To Be Called Mt. Booker," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, April 22, 1904.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

learning their customs, and internalizing the sense of wonder she saw in them Americans could come to a more whole understanding of the world they lived in and thereby improve their lives.

Why Preservation?

The destruction of the wilderness by the march of civilization is certainly not a new concept in environmental thought. In the early part of the 19th century people were already witnessing the widespread deforestation of the Northeast and the rise of American industrialization (as a conquering force over wilderness and the American garden) as symbolized by the web of railroads that fed sprawling cities and connected the country. The problem of disappearing wilderness was certainly on the minds of Americans in the East, but it took different forms than we might imagine it today. For example, as mentioned previously, the Hudson River School painters engaged in their renditions of nature in part to preserve it as an allegorical and spiritual tool. In this effort they were praised by some as the saviors of the American pastoral landscape: in the words of one newspaperman: "Yankee enterprise has little sympathy with the picturesque, and it behooves our artists to rescue from its grasp the little that is left, before it is too late."⁶⁹ As we have seen, however, they viewed nature as spiritually valuable or representative of greater concepts but not as worth saving in and of itself, something that we can consider to be a hallmark of the modern Environmentalist movement. To a large extent, the broadest sympathy for the natural world was for what it could provide to mankind.

In his essay "Why Wilderness? John Muir's Deep Ecology,"⁷⁰ James D. Heffernan makes an interesting case for us to see Muir's environmentalism as a kind of predecessor to the modern approach. Though Muir noted the usefulness of plants and animals for human means, he seems to have taken umbrage with the idea (promulgated by some Protestant denominations in

⁶⁹ From Miller, Perry, *Errand into the Wilderness* in Novak, 5.

⁷⁰ James D. Heffernan, "Why Wilderness? Jon Muir's 'Deep Ecology,'" in *John Muir: Life and Work*, Sally M. Miller, ed. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), 103-116.

America) that everything in the world was made by God for the service of mankind. Muir knew firsthand that much of the wilderness was inhospitable in various ways, from biting insects to deadly predators, and that suggested to him a much broader idea of Nature.⁷¹ Heffernan's main point is to call to our attention the idea that Muir's observations of the wilderness and his philosophies of Nature seem to suggest that he saw plants and animals as an outside perspective in the world. To Muir, as a Naturalist and a botanist, he could tell easily that all species worked towards their own ends without a single care for human beings. Heffernan cites Muir when he spoke about the comparative uselessness of poison ivy: "Like most other things not apparently useful to man, it has few friends, and the blind question 'Why was that made?' goes on and on with never a guess that first of all it might have been made for itself."⁷² Though it is clear from his writing that Muir viewed Nature as an icon and reflection of the divine, in his own worship and understandings he seems to have strongly detached Nature from the anthropocentrism of many contemporary Christian denominations. These musings on comparatively "useless" creatures bring to the fore Heffernan's position - that Muir saw Nature in a way that many didn't, that it could have value for itself and by itself without the interference of Man. His religious views led him, and those who he influenced, to see the natural world as something that could exist for its own happiness and pleasure. And Muir, at least, felt that mankind ought to see some sense of equality between himself and his fellow creatures.⁷³ In advocating for the preservation of national parks and national forests, it seems to me as though Muir was extending the best aid he could to the creatures with which he felt that companionship of Creation. This kind of attitude represents the idealism that the Preservationist segment of modern Environmentalism is founded upon, as well as the roots upon which the National Park system grew. This philosophy of Nature

⁷¹ Ibid. 105-106.

⁷² Ibid. 108.

⁷³ Ibid. 111-113.

for Nature's sake stands in some contrast with Hill's perspective on the natural world, as we will see shortly.

Hill and Preservation - Look But Touch if You Do It Softly

In my readings of Hill's journals and letters, she seems to have held a view that prioritized Preservation, but her vision becomes somewhat problematized through her advertising work with the railroads and the results of the tourism she helped to promote. In addition, it seems as though her drive towards preservation did not follow Muir's altruistic Nature-for-Nature's-sake ideal but rather a more pragmatic approach that favored her own philosophy while also accommodating a wilderness lifestyle.

Throughout her life Hill was fascinated by the natural world and its beauty despite, or perhaps because of, the hardships and rough living she had to do in order to experience it. Hill was much more active in campaigning for preservation and regulation of industry and development later in her life, especially in the late 1920s and early 1930s. In 1929 Hill gave an interview to the Tucson Daily Citizen that illustrated her ideas on preserving the wilderness and her proposals to curb the devastation she saw in the cities of Europe and the Northeast. In the article she first praises the beauty of the Arizona desert, something which she felt belied the connotations of the name. But she warned the residents of the follies of overdevelopment, especially in her home state of Washington where many of the landmarks she painted for the railroads had disappeared. In it, she seems to suggest the two major motivations for her impetus to dwell in Nature - natural beauty and physical well-being:

"Among [the pictures painted for the Great Northern] were several of scenery that has since been spoiled; only pictures are left to show what once thrilled the heart of man... There are many waterfalls in the Cascade mountains, which have no

picturesque setting, no entrancing view of snow fields beyond, yet this particular one, Sunset Falls, was selected for power, and now, where the falls once were, there is only a tiny trickle of water - all the beauty gone."⁷⁴

She goes on to talk about the environment of Tucson, which she feels is perfect for helping the health of those with lung conditions and which makes the preservation of nature for its future residents to experience absolutely critical.

This interview is one of the most public places in which Hill put forward an overtly preservationist stance, but it is by far not the only one. Hill wrote a series of letters later that year to Superintendent Albright, the Superintendent of National Parks in D.C., in order to complain about the devastation and recklessness she saw in Sequoia National Park. She seems to have been shocked by the sheer number of people camping and their proximity to the trees.⁷⁵ She felt that not only were the visitors treating the forest badly, but that the blasting of roads through the forest by the National Park Service (to accommodate the volume of travel) was also entirely against the ideal promised by the National Parks. Hill's sentiment towards the fines for damage to the forest reflect her outrage, but also her desire to preserve Nature as a mostly-untouched wilderness. "If those who harm them were obliged to pay a billion dollars," she wrote, "it would not bring back the forest after it is gone..."⁷⁶

Yet there is some tension between Hill's own ambitions to enjoy unspoiled Nature and her desire to promote it to others. I have mentioned before that Hill advertised the national parks, specifically Yellowstone, for the railroads as a tourist destination and we have also seen that she

⁷⁴ Effie Leese Scott "Artist Says Tucson Should 'Wake Up' Before It Is Too Late To Save Scenery," *Tucson Daily Citizen*, May 12, 1929.

⁷⁵ "...where ever I go in the Giant Forest there are tent frames shutting off the view of the trees, cottages, garbage racks, camp tables, chairs, and the ground is absolutely cleared of natural growth in many places." (Abby Williams Hill, letter to Superintendent Albright, Oct. 8, 1929, Abby Williams Hill Collection).

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

herself camped in the parks for quite some time. Hill was quite a bit more pragmatic about her approach to living in the parks than she seems to expect others ought to be. For example, in a letter dated September 1st, 1905, Hill recounts her experience living in Yellowstone and the steps she took to maintain her family's washing in the park. "We made a long detour by way of the springs having taken some woolens to wash. Around the resorts this is not permitted but no one visits these springs. We have our water, most of it, hauled and washing at the spring is the easiest way."⁷⁷ She makes a valid case for why it's easier to wash at a close hot-spring, but the idea that she believed it was more appropriate to wash her laundry in the springs that tourists wouldn't be able to see is a bit more problematic when looking ahead at the views she would come to have towards the tourists camping in the Giant Forest. Though that is not to say that Hill did not appreciate tourism to the parks. Rather, it is curious to me that she relished the privilege of camping in the wilderness and living off of the fruits of Nature in such a way, but at the same time saw the uncomfortable consequences of sightseers and other campers being allowed to do the same.

Hill's proposal for possible rules for Sequoia National Park sets an interesting precedent that I feel underscores her criteria for who should and should not be allowed to enter the park to camp and visit:

"...if only roads to reach different points and one road in and one out were allowed and gateways such as there are to the Yellowstone and only the [Superintendent] and rangers living actually within the area to protect and safe guard it the public would enjoy it just as much, would feel it a greater privilege to

⁷⁷ Abby Williams Hill, letter dated Sept. 1, 1905.

visit it and, generally speaking, appreciate the groves far more if they saw that they were protected..."⁷⁸

This seems to suggest that the line she drew was reverence and appropriate behavior. I believe she saw herself as appropriately educated and conscious of how to live in Nature in order to be able to appreciate it, and her suggestion that visitors should feel a greater privilege to be in the presence of old growth trees and natural beauty solidifies this idea.

Yet not all of her views on preservation dealt with keeping the wilderness untouched. While those suggestions of hard-line preservation seem to have entered Hill's letters later in her life, it seems that she also felt, as mentioned before, that there was much that people could do to live in Nature if they had the appropriate reverence for it and understood how to treat the natural world. Turning to the Native Americans, Hill had a great deal of respect for the natural environments and animal-raising patterns of the Native Americans of the Montana plains. In a letter from Ronan, Montana, Hill recounts the sadness of the loss of the buffalo from the plains in very utilitarian terms:

"The bison we saw yesterday were great fat, sleek fellows. I never saw any so fine and did not know their fur ever looked so well. Most of the cattle we saw were thin and starved looking. If we had the wild herds of bison natural to the plains and had kept our treaties with the Indians and made friends of them, how much better for all."⁷⁹

To some extent this thought shows us the last part of the puzzle of Hill's pragmatic view of Nature and the wilderness in terms of preservation. There doesn't seem to be a real tension between Hill's idealized view of Nature as something needing to be preserved as wilderness and

⁷⁸ Abby Williams Hill, letter to Superintendent Albright, dated April 29, 1930.

⁷⁹ Abby Williams Hill, letter from Ronan, Montana, dated Oct. 16th, 1905.

her opinions on the utilitarianism of Nature and natural resources. Rather, Hill seems to admit that it's important to live in Nature (as many other philosophers we've seen have, to some extent), but that one needs first to understand and appropriately appreciate the power and fragility of Nature lest one damage its ability to grant those benefits. It's important to look at a person like Hill and see that the thought behind early proto-Environmentalism often existed outside the ivory tower, that it had to deal with the vagaries of life in the still largely-undeveloped West and that it was not an all-or-nothing look at the world (and certainly isn't that way now either).

Conclusion: Why Hill?

I hope that this discussion on Hill has sparked some interest in the topic of early 20th century environmental thought as a candidate for social-historical analysis, but the most important question coming to the conclusion of this is: why study Hill? Abby Williams Hill represents to me a perfect opportunity to examine the penetration of Naturalism, Transcendentalist natural religion, and the American preoccupation with Nature and the wilderness into the fabric of society in the American West. Hill is important because her views show us the perspective of someone who was exceptional in certain ways but ultimately represents an individual who tried to live her life in the best way she felt she could, much like we all do. Indeed, Hill also may represent a proto-feminist look at Nature and environmental thought. Though it was not within the purview of my research as such, I suspect there is a wealth of information for those scholars looking to understand early women's Progressivism as it relates to the environmental movement.

To look at the information as a whole, Hill was motivated by a desire to enjoy the natural world. She saw Nature as something that brought her joy and improved her livelihood, and as something that could also do the same for others. She saw Native Americans as human beings

who were deserving not only of acceptance but respect. She felt knew the West and the natural world better than she did, and because she wanted to understand Nature she turned to them hoping to see the world in a different way. Hill was a mother who wanted to raise her children in the best possible way and an artist who hoped to reproduce the unsurpassed beauty she saw in every mountain and every forest. This puts her in the company of Emerson, Thoreau, and Muir, and certainly within the company of those campers and sightseers who flocked to the National Parks in order to see the glories of the American continent. Her philosophy of Nature was one that embraced all natural things as works of God and representative of the wonder of Creation, but, unlike Emerson and Thoreau's semi-Romanticism, Hill hoped to interact with it in pragmatically human terms. She desired a simple lifestyle that allowed her to exist in the companionship of the natural world, a lifestyle which seems to be the confluence and ultimate expression of the kinds of Natural philosophy that were exemplified in the works of the Transcendentalists with whom I have compared her. Hill's travels across the country and her desire to understand and potentially befriend the Native Americans suggest that Hill was unsettled by the kind of life that she would have to lead in "civilized" society. Not only that, but that she saw a conflict between her Progressive ideals and the way in which the Native American tribes (whom she saw as exemplifying the lifestyle people ought to lead) were being treated by the people of her nation. Hill's perspective is historically significant because she exemplifies a sense of dissonance in the way that American society viewed its interactions with the natural world. Hill lived in accordance with the ideals championed by the Transcendentalists, but understood that they had to be interpreted in a utilitarian way. What she could not do, however, was stand by and see Nature misused by others and the people who understood it best (the Native peoples, to whom the land had belonged for millennia) brought low by swindlers and the vices

that Progressive organizations were attempting to remove from other parts of the country.⁸⁰ What she shows us is a country that was schizophrenic in its appreciation of Nature. While she attempted to live with it in her own way, she was constantly confronted by things that her ideological standpoint could not be reconciled with and that she tried to fight as best she could. On the one hand, railroads sold beauty in the National Parks and along their lines, while on the other businesses dammed those waterfalls for power and industry. She hoped to open Nature to all, but that opening blasted roads through the Sequoias. Hill's story is, in large part, that of the clash between Preservation and the culture of American consumerism and anthropocentrism. The way she lived her life is the guide by which we can judge the boundaries of those conflicting ideologies.

⁸⁰ Namely, alcohol and domestic violence.

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