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MISSIONARIES TO THE WILDERNESS: A HISTORY OF LAND, IDENTITY, AND MORAL GEOGRAPHY IN APPALACHIA

BY JILL FRALEY

This article revisits the relationship between missionaries and Appalachian stereotypes, bringing to the discussion new developments in geographical theory and the intellectual history of ideas of wilderness. The article argues that missionary activities during the early twentieth century are best understood through their beliefs about wilderness and particularly about the moral climate of man within it. In this way the missionaries also contributed to the process of intermingling ideas about the land and the people and thereby contributed to the formation of a quasi-ethnic regional identity in the American public consciousness—and also substantially changed Appalachia by applying a set of hierarchical land values that stemmed from ideas about wilderness.

Introduction

During the early 1900s missionaries from dozens of denominations and religious groups traveled to Appalachia—to an area that was virtually homogeneously Christian and proceeded to proselytize and build churches. Scholars have explained this phenomenon by describing a “symbiotic relationship between missionaries and private developers” (Whisnant 1980, xv). This article seeks to complement the existing story by using recent work in the fields of intellectual history and geographical theory to explain how a particular moral geography motivated missionaries who traveled to Appalachia during the early twentieth century. The intention is not to replace arguments regarding economic motivations, but rather to demonstrate how economic motivations were buttressed by a particular intellectual inheritance—with respect to wilderness.

By showing the social history of ideas of wilderness, this article demonstrates that long before missionaries set out for Appalachia, the American public consciousness contained specific notions about the wilderness and the moral state of humans when they found themselves there (Nash 2001). While these notions about wilderness persevered as a

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part of American and Western culture generally, moral geographies were amplified within Christian philosophies (Edwards 2005). The wilderness was a place without God, a place to be tempted by devils, and a direct contrast to civilization, which of course was tied directly to Christianity (Nash 2001). People might be Christian when they entered, but if they did not tame the wilderness, they would not remain so for long. Thoreau exemplified this notion when he spoke of the mountains in Maine as “a place for heathenism and superstitious rites—to be inhabited of men nearer of kin to the rocks and wild animals than we” (Spence 1999, 21). While ideas of wilderness shifted in the American mind during the twentieth century, Christian theology was slow to accept the idea that civilization was not always ideal and indeed was often environmentally devastating.

The history of social ideas about wilderness dates back centuries, but there is reason to believe these philosophies were of elevated importance during the early twentieth century. The missionary movement to Appalachia coincides with the moral geography movement in human geography—a movement which captured the public imagination (Livingstone 1994). Geographers at elite institutions traveled the world purporting to catalog the character and moral values of different groups of people and arguing a direct link between character and climate or geography (Semple 1911; Semple 1918; Huntington 1924).

By combining popular ideas about moral geography with deep-seated beliefs about wilderness, missionaries found their impetus for travel to the region. And indeed they did more than that. By confusing ideas about the wilderness with ideas about the people of the region, the missionaries increasingly divided the Appalachian people from the rest of the nation—sowing the seeds for a regional, quasi-ethnic identity that would develop increasingly over the coming decades.

Understanding the missionary process in Appalachia requires recognizing that symbolic geography can be critical. While this notion has been inherent in native spiritualities for centuries (Swan 1988), scholars have only recently come to appreciate the power of symbolic and mythical representations of places and landscapes (Harley 1988; Soja 1989). Thus, a particular representation holds “a history, a geography, a morality,” all captured within a mythical geography that “transforms history into nature” (Pringle 1988, 146). Rather than being a backdrop, geography is an active medium of power within political struggles (Ford 1991; Borrows 1997; Pile 1997). Similarly, landscape is “a social product, the consequence of a collective human transformation of nature,” and thus is an ideological concept (Cosgrove 1984, 14).

Most importantly, there are direct economic consequences of our constructed or imaginary geographies. As geographer Nicholas Blomely

put it, “the *representation* of space is a critical question in any struggle over property” (Blomley 1998, 572). Tools such as maps and surveys legitimate land appropriation in ways that obscure their own violence (Blomley 2003). Thus, representations influenced social understandings of land and different regions of the country in ways that generated direct physical and economic consequences.

Missions to Appalachia

Missionaries to Appalachia may have held many uninformed stereotypes when they traveled to the region, but they were not unaware that the region was far and away a Christian area. Yet the movement was substantial. By 1920, at least seventeen denominations had missions in Appalachia and there were more than five hundred missionaries working in the region (Drake 2001).

Missionaries explicitly acknowledged that they were not traveling to the mountains to convert to Christianity—but rather specifically acknowledged existing mountain churches and dismissed those churches as uncivilized (McCauley 1995). The missionaries in fact often relied upon stereotype and prejudice as a method of dismissing the authority of mountain churches (McCauley 1995). Missionaries to the mountains believed that Appalachians had “fallen victim to degeneration, regression and a stagnation epitomized by their religion” (McCauley 1995, 27). Appalachian churches, like African-American churches during the same era, were seen as deviant forms of Christianity. Both groups heard missionaries describe their churches as superstitious, primitive, and overly emotional.

Jack Weller, who famously wrote of his missionary exploits in Appalachia, described mountain religion as a folk religion, made of a mix of tradition and superstition. He described mountain faith as not god-centered and certainly not Christianity (Weller 1965). It was, in his words, primitive, backward, and exotic. Weller was unimpressed by the emotional zeal of Appalachian Christianity and strived to replace it with more “mainstream” protestant beliefs.

Most significantly, the missionaries brought with them not only attitudes toward Appalachian religion, but more generally toward the moral values of the region. The missionaries saw a divide not just in the two religious traditions, but in the very ways of living of the Appalachians when they were compared with urban Americans (McCauley 1995). The people of the region were, in Weller’s words, simply backward (Weller 1965). The attitude would prevail for decades. In 1987, when a Catholic priest was asked about his goals with reference to a mission in Appalachia, he explained “I want to raise them to my level and give them my values”

(McCauley 1995, 454). While the Appalachian might profess to be Christian, according to the missionaries, he lacked the practical moral values that were primary to civilized Christianity (Drake 2001). Modernity was as much a goal of missionaries as anything else (Eller 2008). In the words of one scholar, missionaries were convinced that “mountain children would be saved only if they learned which side the fork goes on” (Whisnant 1980, xix).

Missionaries who brought values as much—or even more than—religion, were more typical than atypical. Missionary efforts toward many minority groups around the world have included a significant portion of “civilizing.” The missionaries sought to assimilate the minority culture into the mainstream (Harbison 1995). The same could be said of Appalachia and mainstream America.

Nature and Wilderness in Cultural History

Recently, scholars of intellectual history have traced the development of the notions of wilderness in American culture. From our very founding days, wilderness was a social construction that supported a very specific notion of civilization (Nash 2001; Ginn and Demeritt 2009). Civilization is defined by human labor and particularly labor upon the land and the changing of the landscape (Cronon 1995). Lands that are civilized are cultivated, fenced, and deforested; they are places of order, law and control (Blomley 2003). Wilderness is contrasted against this ideal as places without human labor, remaining wild, untamed, unknown, chaotic, and dangerous (Cronon 1995). Indeed, in the American tradition wilderness has been constructed as a place absent of humans (Cronon 1995; Lekan 2004) so thoroughly that our creation of the national park system entailed the removal of native populations to create the wilderness ideal (Spence 1999). Wilderness was not a place that people would inhabit (Cronon 1995), but that people would transform and improve. In the early 1800s one commentator observed that “Americans love their country, not, indeed, as it is, but as it will be” (Lowenthal 1976, 96).

The contrast was not an invention in colonial America, but rather an inheritance, dating back centuries (Oelschlaeger 1991; Nash 2001). This social inheritance strongly influenced the colonial process of land claiming in North America. The cultivation of lands—their removal from the wilderness—was central to establishing legal possession in the British culture (Seed 1995). Lands that were not obviously garden or factory were labeled as empty or waste, allowing for European possession (Highfield 1995; Sluyter 2001; Tomlins 2003). These legal convictions were a product of European cultures that preferred urban, settled environments and equated wilderness with chaos (Tuan 1976; Peet 1998).

Although the end of the nineteenth century saw a movement towards

recognizing value in unimproved lands and uninhabited regions, the movement was slow to capture the public imagination. For decades, the philosophy would be espoused largely by social elites (Nash 2001). Additionally, much of the positive political rhetoric about nature in the public discourse referenced the ideal of rural, cultivated communities rather than the unimproved lands (Nash 2001). Even more notably, those who did develop a fond regard for wilderness were generally those without strong religious commitments (Nash 2001).

Nature and Wilderness in Land Claiming

Historically, a notion of wilderness was incorporated into the process of claiming land in North America. The various imperial powers of Europe used multiple methods of justifying their claims to colonial lands (Seed 1995). While the Portuguese claimed land based on scientific knowledge of its location and the Spanish by deputizing native populations as citizens, the British protestant tradition was particularly dependent upon a notion of wilderness: land was legally possessed when a house was built and a garden established (Seed 1995). British colonists tended to view North America as a wilderness prior to their arrival—a place that was unused, unimproved, and lawless (Comaroff 2001). While observers have justified British land claims on the basis of “discovery,” historical evidence demonstrates that colonists themselves favored the physical improvement of the land (Seed 1995).

By contrasting wilderness with productive land uses, British colonists justified their movement onto native properties (Sluyter 2001). In their argument one rightfully possessed land when homes, fences, hedges, and gardens were constructed (Seed 1995). Settlement and the building of forts were understood to secure rights to mineral resources underground (Gee 1767). John Mitchell’s writings from 1767 demonstrate that colonists combined their ideas of legal possession with the idea that security could be gained through populating and cultivating the land (Mitchell 1767).

Christian clergy deeply supported this process, as is evidenced by John Donne’s 1622 sermon to the Virginia Company. Donne justified claiming the North American territory because land “never inhabited by, or utterly derelicted and immemorially abandoned by the former inhabitants, becomes theirs that will possess it” (Tomlins 2003, 469). Similarly, British colonial maps constructed a “mythic geography” by combining depictions of settlement with “incantations of loyalty to state emblems and to the values of a Christian piety” (Harley 1989, 10). Charters asserted a right to claim land that was not under Christian rule (Tomlins 2001) and *vis-à-vis* other European powers, this land was claimed by the British through cultivating the wilderness (Seed 1995).

Nature and Wilderness in the Christian Tradition

The wilderness is a concept dating back to Biblical usage. Indeed Biblical definitions of the wilderness as a “treeless wasteland” were highly influential in American culture (Nash 2001). Old testament stories reveal that the wilderness was frequently cursed, known as a place of immorality (Nash 2001). Wilderness played not just a counterpoint to civilization, but to the ideas of Eden, paradise, and the garden as well (Nash 2001). Settlers to America lamented that what they found was wilderness more than garden in their estimation.

There are, of course, competing notions of wilderness within the Christian tradition (Oelschlaeger 1991). However, it is the notion of wilderness as moral wasteland and as a place to be conquered and turned to production that was strongest within the missionary perspective. As missionary efforts paralleled colonization over the centuries, “Christians judged their work to be successful when they cleared away the wild forests and cut down the sacred groves where the pagans held their rites” (Nash 2001, 17). Progress was measured not just in conversion of man, but in conversion of the land itself to cultivation and industrialization. The attitude reflected an idea of the world as something humans were given by God to rule (Oelschlaeger 1991). According to the missionaries, civilization was a process of bringing order out of chaos, production out of the wild. Indeed, in early American culture westward expansion itself was seen as an important responsibility of the colonists—to bring civilization to the wilderness (Nash 2001).

Of the wilderness areas, mountains were particularly suspect, having been “regarded in the early seventeenth century as warts, pimples, blisters, and other ugly deformities on the earth’s surface” (Nash 2001, 45).

Missionaries also saw the wilderness—having neither law nor order—as a place where people were likely to fall away from the habits of civilization. In short, wilderness was an invitation to sin and savagery (Henderson 1920; Nash 2001). Those who continued to live within the wilderness were expected to devolve into an earlier and more animal state—one of course lacking in moral conscience (Nash 2001). As Thomas Pownall wrote in 1755, “there is but little good Land in the mountains; to be sure not one Tenth Part is capable of Culture” (Pownall 1755, 112). Mountains were associated with primitivism and a lack of civilized behavior or legal rule (Sahlins 1989; Scott 1998; Benton 2010).

These attitudes reflected ideas of the wilderness as the fallen state of “man” (Oelschlaeger 1991). In wild myths that were sent back and reported in reputable newspapers such as the *New York Times*, the missionaries described people in Appalachia by explicitly referencing these ideas of a moral wilderness, claiming that people in eastern Kentucky “are so

accustomed to murder that they do not look upon it with the horror with which it is regarded in civilized communities" (O'Brien 2003, 21).

By combining ideas of wilderness and the inhabitants, missionaries to Appalachia generated a set of stereotypes that depicted Appalachians as backward, heathen, and uncivilized. Missionaries created in the American mind "images of Appalachia [as] backwoods, something behind, in an area characterized by nature and animals, not human beings" (Cunningham 1987, 18). The stereotypes incorporated a strong sense of paternalism that dispossessed the Appalachians of intelligence and faculties to make decisions for themselves—particularly about development, economics, and the best use of their lands.

Moral Geography and the Wilderness Idea

The early twentieth century witnessed significant development in the social sciences as well as a rising interest in social engineering. This context was critical to the rise of the field of human geography. Most importantly, prevailing cultural ideas were not merely background, but "insinuated their way into the very heart of the theorizing" (Livingstone 1994, 133). Simultaneously, geography blessed these social concepts with a mantle of scientific accuracy and neutrality.

Eventually, matching the cultural concept of the empty wilderness, geographers would sharply divide themselves between human and physical geography (Fitzsimmons 1986). But in the early twentieth century, scholars devoted much of their work to the intersection of human and physical geography. Geographers generated an index, associating climate and geographical features with the character and moral attributes of the area's inhabitants (Livingstone 1994). Ellsworth Huntington, a professor of Geography at Yale University, was one of many who dedicated most of his life to this movement. Huntington attempted the equivalent of grand social theory in his field by planning a survey of morals and character across the globe, which he planned to correlate with climate and geographical features (Huntington 1913, 1). Lacking any other ideas for measuring character traits, Huntington developed a survey that he mailed to colleagues around the globe asking them to describe and rank the character traits of people in the regions of the world. The task was, as one respondent summarized, "to sit in judgment upon the world . . . to hold a country in his hand and decide whether it goes in barbarous, semi-barbarous or the savage group" (Smith 1914, 1). Notably, a review of Huntington's correspondence demonstrates that his many elite colleagues either cooperated with the survey or pleaded insufficient knowledge to carry it out; very few objected to the underlying premise.

The scientific community accepted Ellsworth, even though he

carried his ideas about moral geography to some extremes. He believed in sterilization for those who were “known to carry serious hereditary defects” (1923 “Eugenics in History,” 1). He stopped short of supporting eugenics, but only because he thought results not reliable, stating that, “If eugenics could accomplish what its advocates claim, it would be one of the world’s greatest blessings” (1923 “Eugenics in History,” 1). He pondered the question of how much New England ancestry was worth and delivered lectures on supposed reasons for character difference among races.

In one unpublished manuscript, Huntington directed his energies to the Appalachian Mountain Region. He explained that “The geographer is sure that the people in the mountains differ from those in plains. He wishes he were sure how much difference is due directly to the mountains and how much to the inherited character of the people (Huntington “A geographer’s idea of mountaineers,” 1). Huntington went on to conclude that at least, “in the southern Appalachian Highland it is easy to see the direct effect of the mountains” (Huntington “A geographer’s idea of mountaineers,” 1). His conclusion was that “better land gets the better people” (Huntington “A geographer’s idea of mountaineers,” 5).

Ellen Semple, another early twentieth-century geographer, developed theory based specifically on character and the mountain range as a geographic feature. Semple concluded that mountain ranges “discourage the budding of genius because they are areas of isolation, confinement, and remote from the great currents of men and ideas that move along the river valleys” (Semple 1911, 20). Semple linked poverty also with the mountains and character traits, finding that “They are regions of much labor and little leisure, of poverty to-day and anxiety for the morrow, of toil-cramped hands and toil-dulled brains” (Semple 1911, 20). The result of Semple’s logic was that by the early twentieth century, regional issues of poverty were not viewed in terms of the uneven geography of development alone, but rather as something *caused by* the regions themselves and the people there (Massey 1994). For decades, the ideas of Semple and other environmental determinists would be re-circulated as the notion of a “culture of poverty,” which would allow victims to be blamed for the socio-economic circumstances (Cunningham 1987).

Such beliefs, while jarring for the modern sensibilities, were widely accepted at the time and influential with the general public. Among geographers of the time, the idea of moral character determined by geographic and climatic situation was common (Livingstone 1994). From the eighteenth century forward into the nineteenth, geographers used such climatic arguments as part-and-parcel of the colonial project (Livingstone 1994). The project became even more widely endorsed in the

latter part of the nineteenth century when geographical theory “shifted in its conceptual basis from natural theology to evolutionary biology,” which drove geographers to conclude that “man is a product of the earth’s surface” (Peet 1998, 12). The movement lasted centuries, strongly influencing geography and public notions of the races and regions of the world (Livingstone 1994). Simultaneously, land and property were imbued with moral attributes (Blomley 1998), buttressing economic motivations behind Appalachian dispossession. With this scientific endorsement, it was reasonable for the public to draw conclusions about character based on one’s geographical location. Such scientific research supported the centuries-old religious and cultural ideas about the effect of the wilderness on human character and moral values.

In the public consciousness, Appalachia and wilderness became so aligned that scholars continue to refer to Appalachia’s wilderness and “hinterlands” in connection with notions of civilization and progress. The moral geography of mountains and wilderness, as created by scholars in the early 1900s, became a part of the mythical construction of Appalachia. Such a mythical geography is deeply influential, because even upon passing it “leaves behind a whole system of values: a history, a geography, a morality” (Pringle 1988, 143). And indeed it may be an explanation for why the Appalachian Regional Commission, despite sharp criticism, spent so much of its budget on highway connection to metropolitan areas without any evidence that such a road system would have automatic results for socio-economic status in the region (Estall 1982).

Missionaries and the Best Use of Land in Appalachia

While some early colonists described America as an Eden or a promised land, the larger theme is a discussion of America as a wilderness that had to be transformed to be a safe home for the colonists. Settlers to America quickly developed cultural-religious ideas that described the land as a wilderness that could be *turned into* an Eden—if it were tamed with much labor (Merchant 2003). Religious philosophies of land use drew upon Locke’s philosophy of law, which recognized the earth as given by God to humanity, but private property as rooted in labor and transformation of that land (Freyfogle 1998). The Christian concepts of wilderness and civilization contain an inherent system of land valuing, where the best land is that which is harnessed for the direct support of man through food and shelter (Nash 2001). Uncultivated land was in their estimation “absolutely useless” (Nash 2001). Such beliefs are, of course, fitting with Christian attitudes that privileged work—seeing “labor in the fields . . . [as] part of the divine plan for salvation” (Oelschlaeger 1991). The reformation did not change this belief, but rather linked economic

production to virtue and endorsed exploitation of nature (Oelschlaeger 1991).

This religious outlook allowed for a hierarchy of appropriate land uses—one that strongly favored industrialization and mining development within the region. Such notions were even coded into laws of the time. For example, the Tennessee Valley Authority was empowered by statute to determine the “best use of land” in the region. Roosevelt made the mission clear in a public statement on the TVA’s plans in the mountains:

[W]e are going to the highest mountain peak of the Tennessee Watershed . . . And a few feet farther down we are going to come to a shack on the side of the mountain where there is a white man of about as fine stock as we have in this country who, with his family of children, is completely uneducated—never had a chance, never sees twenty-five or fifty dollars in cash a year, but just keeps body and soul together—manages to do that—and is the progenitor of a large line of children for many generations to come. He certainly has been forgotten, not by the Administration, but by the American people. They are going to see that he and his children have a chance, and they are going to see that the farm he is using is classified, and if it is not proper for him to farm it, we are going to give him a chance on better land. (McDonald and Muldowny 1981)

The farmers of the region were not qualified to determine the best use of land—even the land that they owned as private property. For the sake of socio-economic growth in the depression, Roosevelt and others were willing to sacrifice property rights—at least those of the Appalachians. Of course, the agenda of the TVA favored development over all other ends and the mountain region was quickly surveyed to reveal deposits of coal and even asbestos, which the TVA set about arranging to extract. A mine was not yet a thing to be reviled; a mine meant progress and civilization—an inroad into the wilderness.

Missionary notions of a wilderness Appalachia also parallel the process of colonization in other regions. Comaroff and Comaroff have detailed how European conquest entailed a territory being wilderness before it was settled, developed, conquered, and administered (2001). The parallel resonates with other studies which have described the exploitation of Appalachia within the United States as a process of internal colonization (Lewis, Johnson, and Askins 1978). By many accounts, it is no coincidence

that “the opening of the Appalachian region to large-scale economic exploitation . . . coincided, as the opening of new colonies frequently does, with the coming of hundreds of missionaries” (Whisnant 1980, 3).

Even if missionaries are given more of the benefit of the doubt in their enterprises than many scholars would accord them, there is reason to believe their cultural beliefs would have had significant repercussions. Even if missionaries did not think of themselves as engaged in a colonial enterprise, their activities within the region and the type of development that they encouraged would have been influenced by even unconscious mental structures such as those setting forth notions about the best use of land and ideas about wilderness as wasted land.

Similarly, Ginn and Demeritt have argued that wilderness as a concept is “culturally and historically contingent [on] a certain colonist way of seeing nature” (Ginn and Demeritt 2009, 304). And if the concept of wilderness inherently incorporates a colonial mindset, it would also naturally include the accompanying colonial beliefs about land use and natural resource extraction. The best land was transformed land—an idea that was born of religious notions of garden and wilderness elevated by the whip of a puritan work ethic.

Conclusion

Missionaries to Appalachia engaged in a complex cultural exchange—bringing with them ideas about land use, wilderness, and industrialization and sending back to their homes dispatches about the mountains and the people of Appalachia. Employing historical Christian attitudes to wilderness and accepting contemporary attitudes of environmental determinism, the missionaries increasingly mixed their ideas about the region with their ideas about the people of Appalachia, thereby strengthening notions in the public consciousness of a regional quasi-ethnic identity within Appalachia. The result was a substantial literature that informed the public consciousness and generated an imagined Appalachia that would endure in the American mind for generations (Drake 2001). Missionaries and their notions of wilderness became a substantial part of the process of socially constructing Appalachia as a “coherent region inhabited by a homogenous population possessing uniform culture” (Shapiro 1978, ix). Missionaries encouraged industrialization within the region and supported the developing mining industry by preferring land use that changed the surface of the land—removed trees, erected fences, and extracted productive minerals. These men and women aided in generating patterns of land use and exploitation that would continue in Appalachia decades later. Scholars have since recognized that missionaries were a substantial part of an industrialization

movement that “gained control of Appalachia and subjected its people to economic exploitation and cultural denigration” (Cunningham 1987, 132). Indeed, the industrialists and missionaries were close companions, with industrialists extensively funding missionary efforts to Appalachia—and enjoying the profits made available to them by proliferating stereotypes of the Appalachian people as backward, ignorant, and unable to make decisions about their land for themselves (O’Brien 2003). In the estimation of many scholars, these missionaries invented stereotypes that served their own plans and purposes within the region, particularly supporting industrialization (Whisnant 1980; Batteau 1990).

Explaining the oddity of missionary work to Christians represents more than filling in a bit of the lost missionary story. The reasons that missionaries worked in the overwhelmingly Christian regions of Appalachia to “change moral values” provide insights into developing attitudes to Appalachia both within and outside the region and demonstrate how the intellectual inheritance of wilderness ideas supported economic exploitation. With missionaries motivated by cultural attitudes to wilderness and employing religious notions of productive use of land (and accompanying value systems), these visitors to the region were able to influence social and economic structures simply by operating with the conscious and unconscious cultural patterns that they brought to the region.

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