Alexis de Tocqueville resolved to see wilderness during his 1831 trip to the United States, and in Michigan Territory in July the young Frenchman found himself at last on the fringe of civilization. But when he informed the frontiersmen of his desire to travel for pleasure into the primitive forest, they thought him mad. The Americans required considerable persuasion from Tocqueville to convince them that his interests lay in matters other than lumbering or land speculation. Afterwards he generalized in his journal that “living in the wilds, [the pioneer] only priz[es] the works of man” while Europeans, like himself, valued wilderness because of its novelty. Expanding the point in Democracy in America, Tocqueville concluded: “in Europe people talk a great deal of the wilds of America, but the Americans themselves never think about them; they are insensible to the wonders of inanimate nature and they may be said not to perceive the mighty forests that surround them till they fall beneath the hatchet. Their eyes are fixed upon another sight,” he added, “the...march across these wilds, draining swamps, turning the course of rivers, peopling solitudes, and subduing nature.”

The unfavorable attitude toward wilderness that Tocqueville observed in Michigan also existed on other American frontiers. When William Bradford stepped off the Mayflower into a “hideous and desolate wilderness” he started a tradition of repugnance. With few exceptions later pioneers continued to regard wilderness with defiant hatred and joined the Chillicothe Supporter in celebrating the advance of civilization as the greatest of blessings. Under any circumstances the necessity of living in close proximity to wild country—what one of Bradford’s contemporaries called “a Wilderness condition”—engendered strong antipathy. Two centuries after Bradford, a fur trader named Alexander Ross recorded his despair in encountering a “gloomy,” “dreary,” and “unhallowed wilderness” near the Columbia River.

Two components figured in the American pioneer’s bias against wilderness. On the direct, physical level, it constituted a formidable threat to his very survival. The transatlantic journey and subsequent western advances stripped away centuries. Successive waves of frontiersmen had to contend with wilderness as uncontrolled and terrifying as that which primitive man confronted. Safety and comfort, even necessities like food and shelter, depended on overcoming the wild environment. For the first Americans, as for medieval Europeans, the forest’s darkness hid savage men, wild beasts, and still stranger creatures of the imagination. In addition civilized man faced the danger of succumbing to the wilderness of his surroundings and reverting to savagery himself. The pioneer, in short, lived too close to wilderness for appreciation. Understandably, his attitude was hostile and his dominant criteria utilitarian. The conquest of wilderness was his major concern.

Wilderness not only frustrated the pioneers physically but also acquired significance as a dark and sinister symbol. They shared the long Western tradition of imagining wild country as a moral vacuum, a cursed and chaotic wasteland. As a consequence, frontiersmen acutely sensed that they battled wild country not only for personal survival but in the name of nation, race, and God. Civilizing the New World meant enlightening darkness, ordering chaos, and changing evil into good. In the morality play of westward expansion, wilderness was the villain, and the pioneer, as hero, relished its destruction. The transformation of a wilderness into civilization was the reward for his sacrifices, the definition of his achievement, and the source of his pride. He applauded his successes in terms suggestive of the high stakes he attached to the conflict.

The discovery of the New World rekindled the traditional European notion that an earthly paradise lay somewhere to the west. As the reports of the first explorers filtered back the Old World began to believe that America might be the place of which it had dreamed since antiquity. One theme in the paradise myth stressed the material and sensual attributes of the new land. It fed on reports of fabulous riches, a temperate climate, longevity, and garden-like natural beauty. Promoters of discovery and colonization embellished these rumors. One Londoner, who likely never set foot in the New World, wrote lyrically of the rich-

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1 Roderick Nash, ch 2 in *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 4th ed, Yale Univ Press, 2001
ness of Virginia’s soil and the abundance of its game. He even added: “nor is the present wilderness of it without a particular beauty, being all over a naturall Grove of Oakes, Pines, Cedars...all of so delectable an aspect, that the melancholiest eye in the World cannot look upon it without contentment, nor content himself without admiration.” Generally, however, European portrayers of a material paradise in the New World completely ignored the “wildnersse” aspect, as inconsistent with the idea of beneficent nature. Illogically, they exempted America from the adverse conditions of life in other uncivilized places.

Anticipations of a second Eden quickly shattered against the reality of North America. Soon after he arrived the seventeenth-century frontiersman realized that the New World was the antipode of paradise. Previous hopes intensified the disappointment. At Jamestown the colonists abandoned the search for gold and turned, shocked, to the necessity of survival in a hostile environment. A few years later William Bradford recorded his dismay at finding Cape Cod wild and desolate. He lamented the Pilgrims’ inability to find a vantage point “to view from this wilderness a more goodly country to feed their hopes.” In fact, there was none. The forest stretched farther than Bradford and his generation imagined. For Europeans wild country was a single peak or heath, an island of uninhabited land surrounded by settlement. They at least knew its character and extent. But the seemingly boundless wilderness of the New World was something else. In the face of this vast blankness, courage failed and imagination multiplied fears.

Commenting on the arrival of the Puritans some years after, Cotton Mather indicated the change in attitude that contact with the New World produced. “Lady Arabella,” he wrote, left an “earthly paradise” in England to come to America and “encounter the sorrows of a wilderness.” She then died and “left that wilderness for the Heavenly paradise.” Clearly the American wilderness was not paradise. If men expected to enjoy an idyllic environment in America, they would have to make it by conquering wild country. Mather realized in 1693 that “Wilderness” was the stage “thro’ which we are passing to the Promised Land.” Yet optimistic Americans continued to be fooled. “Instead of a garden,” declared one traveler in the Ohio Valley in 1820, “I found a wilderness.”

How frontiersmen described the wilderness they found reflected the intensity of their antipathy. The same descriptive phrases appeared again and again. Wilderness was “howling,” “dismal,” “terrible.” In the 1650s John Eliot wrote of going “into a wilderness where nothing appeareth but hard labour [and] wants,” and Edward Johnson described “the penuries of a Wildernesse.” Cotton Mather agreed in 1702 about the “difficulties of a rough and hard wilderness,” and in 1839 John Plumbe, Jr. told about “the hardships and privations of the wilderness” in Iowa and Wisconsin. Invariably the pioneers singled out wilderness as the root cause of their difficulties. For one thing, the physical character of the primeval forest proved baffling and frustrating to settlers. One chronicler of the “Wildernesse-worke” of establishing the town of Concord, Massachusetts portrayed in graphic detail the struggle through “unknowne woods,” swamps, and flesh-tearing thickets. The town founders wandered lost for days in the bewildering gloom of the dense forest. Finally came the back-breaking labor of carving fields from the wilderness. Later generations who settled forested regions reported similar hardships. On every frontier obtaining cleared land, the symbol of civilization, demanded tremendous effort.

The pioneers’ situation and attitude prompted them to use military metaphors to discuss the coming of civilization. Countless diaries, addresses, and memorials of the frontier period represented wilderness as an “enemy” which had to be “conquered,” “subdued,” and “vanquished” by a “pioneer army.” The same phraseology persisted into the present century; an old Michigan pioneer recalled how as a youth he had engaged in a “struggle with nature” for the purpose of “converting a wilderness into a rich and prosperous civilization.” Historians of westward expansion chose the same figure: “they conquered the wilderness, they subdued the forests, they reduced the land to fruitful subjection.” The image of man and wilderness locked in mortal combat was difficult to forget. Advocates of a giant dam on the Colorado River system spoke in the 1950s of “that eternal problem of subduing the earth” and of “conquering the wilderness” while a President urged us in his 1961 inaugural address to “conquer the deserts.” Wilderness, declared a correspondent to the Saturday Evening Post in 1965, “is precisely what man has been fighting against since he began his painful, awkward climb to civilization. It is the dark, the formless, the terrible, the old chaos which our fathers pushed back.... It is held at bay by constant vigilance, and when the vigilance slackens it swoops down for a melo-
dramatic revenge.” Such language animated the wilderness, investing it with an almost conscious enmity toward men, who returned it in full measure.

Along with the obstacle it offered to settlement and civilization, wilderness also confronted the frontier mind with terrifying creatures, both known and imagined. Wild men headed the menagerie. Initially Indians were regarded with pity and instructed in the Gospel, but after the first massacres most of the compassion changed to contempt. Sweeping out of the forest to strike, and then melting back into it, savages were almost always associated with wilderness. When Mary Rowlandson was captured in the 1670s on the Massachusetts frontier, she wrote that she went “mourning and lamenting, leaving farther my own Country, and travelling into the vast and howling Wilderness.” The remainder of her account revealed an hysterical horror of her captors and of what she called “this Wilderness-condition.” A century later J. Hector St. John Crevecoeur discussed the imminency of Indian attack as one of the chief “distresses” of frontier life and described the agony of waiting, gun in hand, for the first arrows to strike his home. “The wilderness,” he observed, “is a harbour where it is impossible to find [the Indians]...a door through which they can enter our country whenever they please.” Imagination and the presence of wild country could multiply fears. Riding through “savage haunts” on the Santa Fe Trail in the 1830s, Josiah Gregg noticed how “each click of a pebble” seemed “the snap of a firelock” and “in a very rebound of a twig was the whisk of an arrow.”

Wild animals added to the danger of the American wilderness, and here too the element of the unknown intensified feelings. Reporting in 1630 on the “discommodities” of New England, Francis Higginson wrote that “this Countrey being verie full of Woods and Wildernesses, doth also much abound with Snakes and Serpents of strange colours and huge greatness.” There were some, he added, “that haue [have] Rattles in their Tayles that will not flye from a Man...but will flye upon him and sting him so mortally, that he will dye within a quarter of an houre after.” Clearly there was some truth here and in the stories that echo through frontier literature of men whom “the savage Beasts had devoured...in the Wilderness,” but often fear led to exaggeration. Cotton Mather, for instance, warned in 1707 of “the Evening Wolves, the rabid and howling Wolves of the Wilderness [which] would make...Havock among you, and not leave the Bones till the morning.” Granted this was a jeremiad intended to shock Mather’s contemporaries into godly behavior, but his choice of imagery still reflected a vivid conception of the physical danger of wild country. Elsewhere Mather wrote quite seriously about the “Dragons,” “Droves of Devils,” and “Fiery flying serpents” to be found in the primeval forest. Indeed, legends and folktales from first contact until well into the national period linked the New World wilderness with a host of monsters, witches, and similar supernatural beings.

A more subtle terror than Indians or animals was the opportunity the freedom of wilderness presented for men to behave in a savage or bestial manner. Immigrants to the New World certainly sought release from oppressive European laws and traditions, yet the complete license of the wilderness was an overdose. Morality and social order seemed to stop at the edge of the clearing. Given the absence of restraint, might not the pioneer succumb to what John Eliot called “wilderness-temptations?” Would not the proximity of wilderness pull down the level of all American civilization? Many feared for the worst, and the concern with the struggle against barbarism was widespread in the colonies. Seventeenth-century town “planters” in New England, for instance, were painfully aware of the dangers wilderness posed for the individual. They attempted to settle the northern frontier through the well-organized movement of entire communities. Americans like these pointed out that while liberty and solitude might be desirable to the man in a crowd, it was the gregarious tendency and controlling institutions of society that took precedence in the wilderness.

Yale’s president, Timothy Dwight, spoke for most of his generation in regretting that as the pioneer pushed further and further into the wilds he became “less and less a civilized man.” J. Hector St. John Crevecoeur was still more specific. Those who lived near “the great woods,” he wrote in 1782, tend to be “regulated by the wildness of their neighborhood.” This amounted to no regulation at all; the frontiersmen were beyond “the power of example, and check of shame.” According to Crevecoeur, they had “degenerated altogether into the hunting state” and became ultimately “no better than carnivorous animals of a superior rank.” He concluded that if man wanted happiness, “he cannot live in solitude, he must belong to some community bound by some ties.”

The behavior of pioneers frequently lent sub-
stance to these fears. In the struggle for survival many existed at a level close to savagery, and not a few joined Indian tribes. Even the ultimate horror of cannibalism was not unknown among the mountain men of the Rockies, as the case of Charles “Big Phil” Gardner proved. Wilderness could reduce men to such a condition unless society maintained constant vigilance. Under wilderness conditions the veneer civilization laid over the barbaric elements in man seemed much thinner than in the settled regions.

It followed from the pioneer's association of wilderness with hardship and danger in a variety of forms, that the rural, controlled, state of nature was the object of his affection and goal of his labor. The pastoral condition seemed closest to the life of ease and contentment. Americans hardly needed reminding that Eden had been a garden. The rural was also the fruitful and as such satisfied the frontiersman's utilitarian instincts. On both the idyllic and practical counts wilderness was anathema.

Transforming the wild into the rural had Scriptural precedents which the New England pioneers knew well. Genesis 1:28, the first commandment of God to man, stated that mankind should increase, conquer the earth, and have dominion over all living things. This made the fate of wilderness plain. In 1629 when John Winthrop listed reasons for departing “into...the wilderness,” an important one was that “the whole earth is the lords Garden & he hath given it to the sonnes of men, and with a general Condision, Gen. 1.28: Increase & multiply, replenish the earth & subdue it.” Why remain in England, Winthrop argued, and “suffer a whole Continent...to lie waste without any improvement.” Discussing the point a year later, John White also used the idea of man's God-appointed dominion to conclude that he did not see “how men should make benefit of [vacant land]...but by habitation and culture.” Two centuries later advocates of expansion into the wilderness used the same rhetoric. “There can be no doubt,” declared Lewis Cass, soldier and senator from Michigan, in 1830, “that the Creator intended the earth should be reclaimed from a state of nature and cultivated.” In the same year Governor George R. Gilmer of Georgia noted that this was specifically “by virtue of that command of the Creator delivered to man upon his formation—be fruitful, multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it.” Wilderness was waste; the proper behavior toward it, exploitation.

Without invoking the Bible, others involved in the pioneering process revealed a proclivity for the rural and useful. Wherever they encountered wild country they viewed it through utilitarian spectacles: trees became lumber, prairies farms, and canyons the sites of hydroelectric dams. The pioneers' self-conceived mission was to bring these things to pass. Writing about his experience settling northern New York in the late eighteenth century, William Cooper declared that his “great primary object” was “to cause the Wilderness to bloom and fructify.” Another popular expression of the waste-to-garden imagery appeared in an account of how the Iowa farmer “makes the wilderness blossom like the rose.” Rural, garden-like nature was invariably the criterion of goodness to this mentality. A seventeenth-century account of New England’s history noted the way a “howling wilderness” had, through the labors of settlers, become “pleasant Land.” Speaking of the Ohio country in 1751, Christopher Gist noted that “it wants Nothing but Cultivation to make it a most delightful Country.” Wilderness alone could neither please nor delight the pioneer. “Uncultivated” land, as an early nineteenth-century report put it, was “absolutely useless.”

At times the adulation of the pastoral became charged with emotion. On a trip to the fringe of settlement in the 1750s Thomas Pownall wrote: “with what an overflowing Joy does the Heart melt, while one views the Banks where rising Farms, new Fields, or flowering Orchards begin to illuminate this Face of Nature; nothing can be more delightful to the Eye, nothing go with more penetrating Sensation to the Heart.” Similarly, on his 1806 journey of discovery Zebulon M. Pike conceived of the wild prairies near the Osage River as “the future seats of husbandry” and relished the thought of “the numerous herds of domestic cattle, which are no doubt destined to crown with joy these happy plains.” Several decades later, in the Sierra, Zenas Leonard anticipated in a few years even those mountains being “greeted with the enlivening sound of the workman’s hammer, and the merry whistle of the ploughboy.” Frontiersmen such as these looked through, rather than at, wilderness. Wild country had value as potential civilization.

Enthusiasm for “nature” in America during the pioneering period almost always had reference to the rural state. The frequent celebrations of country life, beginning with Richard Steele's The Husbandman’s Calling of 1668 and continuing through the more familiar statements of Robert Beverley, Thomas Jefferson, and John Taylor of
Caroline, reveal only a contempt for the wild, native landscape as “unimproved” land. When wilderness scenery did appeal, it was not for its wildness but because it resembled a “Garden or Orchard in England.” The case of Samuel Sewall is instructive, since his 1697 encomium to Plum Island north of Boston has been cited as the earliest known manifestation of love for the New World landscape. What actually appealed to Sewall, however, was not the island’s wild qualities but its resemblance to an English countryside. He mentioned cattle feeding in the fields, sheep on the hills, “fruitful marshes,” and, as a final pastoral touch, the doves picking up left-over grain after a harvest. In Plum Island Sewall saw the rural idyll familiar since the Greeks, hardly the American wilderness. Indeed, in the same tract, he singled out “a dark Wilderness Cave” as the fearful location for pagan rites.

Samuel Sewall’s association of wild country with the ungodly is a reminder that wilderness commonly signified other than a material obstacle or physical threat. As a concept it carried a heavy load of ethical connotations and lent itself to elaborate figurative usage. Indeed, by the seventeenth century “wilderness” had become a favorite metaphor for discussing the Christian situation. John Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress summarized the prevailing viewpoint of wilderness as the symbol of anarchy and evil to which the Christian was unalterably opposed. The book’s opening phrase, “As I walk’d through the Wilderness of this World,” set the tone for the subsequent description of attempts to keep the faith in the chaotic and temptation-laden existence on earth. Even more pointed in the meaning it attached to wilderness was Benjamin Keach’s Tropologia, or a Key to Open Scripture Metaphor. In a series of analogies, Keach instructed his readers that as wilderness is “barren” so the world is devoid of holiness; as men lose their way in the wilds so they stray from God in the secular sphere; and as travelers need protection from beasts in wild country, so the Christian needs the guidance and help of God. “A Wilderness,” Keach concluded, “is a solitary and dolesom Place: so is this World to a godly Man.”

The Puritans who settled New England shared the same tradition regarding wilderness that gave rise to the attitudes of Bunyan and Keach. In the middle of his 1664 dictionary of the Indian language Roger Williams moralized: “the Wilderness is a cleer resemblance of the world, where greedy and furious men persecute and devour the harm-lesse and innocent as the wilde beasts pursue and devour the Hinds and Roes.” The Puritans, especially, understood the Christian conception of wilderness, since they conceived of themselves as the latest in a long line of dissenting groups who had braved the wild in order to advance God’s cause. They found precedents for coming to the New World in the twelfth-century Waldensians and in still earlier Christian hermits and ascetics who had sought the freedom of deserts or mountains. As enthusiastic practitioners of the art of typology (according to which events in the Old Testament were thought to prefigure later occurrences), the first New Englanders associated their migration with the Exodus. As soon as William Bradford reached Massachusetts Bay, he looked for “Pisgah,” the mountain from which Moses had allegedly seen the promised land. Edward Johnson specifically compared the Puritans to “the ancient Beloved of Christ, whom he of old led by the hand from Egypt to Canaan, through that great and terrible Wilderness.” For Samuel Danforth the experience of John the Baptist seemed the closest parallel to the New England situation, although he too likened their mission to that of the children of Israel.

While the Puritans and their predecessors in perfectionism often fled to the wilderness from a corrupt civilization, they never regarded the wilderness itself as their goal. The driving impulse was always to carve a garden from the wilds; to make an island of spiritual light in the surrounding darkness. The Puritan mission had no place for wild country. It was, after all, a city on a hill that John Winthrop called upon his colleagues to erect. The Puritans, and to a considerable extent their neighbors in the plantations to the south, went to the wilderness in order to begin the task of redeeming the world from its “wilderness” state. Paradoxically, their sanctuary and their enemy were one and the same.

Recent scholarship has glossed over the strength of the Puritans’ intellectual legacy concerning wilderness. Their conception of the American wilderness did not come entirely or even largely “out of that wilderness itself,” as Alan Heimert alleges. They realized before leaving Europe that they were, as John Winthrop put it in 1629, fleeing “into...the wilderness” to found the true Church. And their Bibles contained all they needed to know in order to hate wilderness. Contact with the North American wilderness only supplemented what the Puritans already believed. In this sense the colonists’ conception of the wilder-
ness was more a product of the Old World than of the New.

For the Puritans, of course, wilderness was metaphor as well as actuality. On the frontier the two meanings reinforced each other, multiplying horrors. Seventeenth-century writing is permeated with the idea of wild country as the environment of evil. Just as the Old Testament scribes represented the desert as the cursed land where satyrs and lesser demons roamed, the early New Englanders agreed with Michael Wigglesworth that on the eve of settlement the New World was: “a waste and howling wilderness, / Where none inhabited / But hellish fiends, and brutish men / That Devils worshiped.” This idea of a pagan continent haunted the Puritan imagination. Wigglesworth went on to term North America the region of “eternal night” and “grim death” where the “Sun of righteousness” never shone. As a consequence “the dark and dismal Western woods” were “the Devils den.” Cotton Mather believed he knew how it got into this condition: Satan had seduced the first Indian inhabitants for the purpose of making a stronghold. From this perspective, the natives were not merely heathens but active disciples of the devil. Mather verged on hysteria in describing “the Indians, whose chief Sagamores are well known unto some of our Captives to have been horrid Sorcerers, and hellish Conjurers and such as Conversed with Daemons.” The wilderness that harbored such beings was never merely neutral, never just a physical obstacle.

As self-styled agents of God the Puritan pioneers conceived their mission as breaking the power of evil. This involved an inner battle over that “desolate and outgrowne wilfulness of humane nature,” and on the New England frontier it also meant conquering wild nature. The Puritans seldom forgot that civilizing the wilderness meant far more than profit, security, and worldly comfort. A manichean battle was being waged between “the cleare sunshine of the Gospell” on the one hand and “thick antichristian darkness” on the other. Puritan writing frequently employed this light-and-dark imagery to express the idea that wilderness was ungodly. As William Steele declared in 1652 in regard to missionary work among the Indians, the “first fruits of a barren Wilderness” were obtained when civilization and Christianity succeeded in “shining...a beame of Light into the darknesse of another World.” Cotton Mather’s Magnalia concerned the wondrous way that religion “flying...to the American Strand” had “irradiated an Indian Wilderness.” Those who resisted the “glorious gospel-shine” fled, as might be expected, ever deeper into “forrests wide & great.”

In view of the transcendant importance they attached to conquering wilderness the Puritans understandably celebrated westward expansion as one of their greatest achievements. It was a ceaseless wonder and an evidence of God’s blessing that wild country should become fruitful and civilized. Edward Johnson’s Wonder-Working Providence of 1654 is an extended commentary on this transformation. Always it was “Christ Jesus” or “the Lord” who “made this poore barren Wil- lerness become a fruitful Land” or who “hath...been pleased to turn one of the most Hideous, boundless, and unknown Wildernesses in the world...to a well-ordered Commonwealth.” In Boston, for instance, the “admirable Acts of Christ” had in a few decades transformed the “hideous Thickets” where “Wolfes and Beares nurst up their young” into “streets full of Girles and Boys sporting up and downe.” Johnson and his contemporaries never doubted that God was on their side in their effort to destroy the wilderness. God’s “blessing upon their undertakings,” the elderly John Higginson wrote in 1697, made it possible that “a wilderness was subdued...Towns erected, and Churches settled...in a place where...[there] had been nothing before but Heathenism, Idolatry, and Devil-worship.” The New England colonists saw themselves as “Christs Army” or “Souldiers of Christ” in a war against wildness.

One reason why the Puritan settlers portrayed wilderness as replete with physical hardships and spiritual temptations was to remind later generations of the magnitude of their accomplishment. The credit for this feat, of course, went to God, but the colonists could not hide a strong sense of pride in their own role in breaking the wilderness. One of the first explicit statements appeared in the Memoirs of Roger Clap. A member of the group who arrived in New England in 1630, Clap decided in the 1670s to write an account of the early days for the instruction of his children. He detailed the distresses of life in the “then unsubdued wilderness” and the many “wants” of God’s servants. Then, directly addressing the second generation, he drew the moral: “you have better food and raiment than was in former times; but have you better hearts than your forefathers had?” In 1671 Joshua Scottow used the same theme when he demanded that the initial colonists’ “Voluntary Exile into this Wil- lerness” be “Recollected, Remembered, and not For-
gotten." Implied was a relationship between the dangers of the wilderness and the quality of those who faced them. A few years later John Higginson looked back on his long experience as a pioneer and declared: "our wilderness-condition hath been full of humbling, trying, distressing provi

dences." Their purpose, he felt, had been to determine "whether according to our professions, and [God's] expectation we would keep [His] commandments or not." Survival seemed an indication of success in this respect. Portrayed as a harsh and hostile environment, wilderness was a foil that emphasized the predicament and accentuated the achievement of pioneers.

The sinister connotation of wilderness did not end with the seventeenth century. Representatives of later generations, especially those persons who came into direct contact with the frontier, continued to sense the symbolic potency of wild country. While Jonathan Edwards might occasionally derive spiritual joy from, and even perceive beauty in, natural objects such as clouds, flowers, and fields, wilderness was still beyond the pale. For Edwards, as for his Christian predecessors, "the land that we have to travel through [to Heaven] is a wilderness; there are many mountains, rocks, and rough places that we must go over in the way." Following the Puritans, Americans continued to interpret wilderness in Biblical terms. When Eleazar Wheelock founded Dartmouth College on the upper Connecticut in 1769, he took as his motto "Vox Clamantis in Deserto." The use of "desert" to describe a forest in this and so many other accounts suggests that the Old Testament was even more important than New England actuality in determining reaction to the wilderness. The Dartmouth motto also was reminiscent of John the Baptist, and the initial impulse behind the college was similar: spreading the Word into a pagan realm. Later college founders advanced boldly into the west with a comparable idea of striking the spark that would in time transform darkness into light. Joseph P. Thompson, for instance, closed an 1859 speech before the Society for the Promotion of Collegiate and Theological Education At the West with an exhortation: "go you into the moral wilderness of the West; there open springs in the desert, and build a fountain for the waters of life." Wilderness remained the obstacle to overcome.

Much of the writing of Nathaniel Hawthorne suggests the persistence into the nineteenth century of the Puritan conception of wilderness. For him wild country was still "black" and "howling" as well as a powerful symbol of man's dark and untamed heart. In several of Hawthorne's short stories wilderness dominated the action. Its terrifying qualities in Roger Malvin's Burial (1831) prompted a man to shoot his son in retribution for a dark deed the father performed earlier in "the tangled and gloomy forest." The protagonist of Young Goodman Brown (1835) also found the wilderness a nightmarish locale of both the devil and devilish tendencies in man. The Scarlet Letter (1850) climaxed Hawthorne's experimentation with the wilderness theme. The primeval forest he creates around seventeenth-century Salem represents and accentuates the "moral wilderness" in which Hester Prynne wandered so long. The forest meant freedom from social ostracism, yet Hawthorne left no doubt that such total license would only result in an irresistible temptation to evil. The illegitimate Pearl, "imp of evil, emblem and product of sin" is the only character at home in the wilderness. For Hawthorne and the Puritans a frightening gulf, both literal and figurative, existed between civilization and wilderness.

The increasing tendency to redefine America's mission in secular rather than sacred terms made little difference in regard to antipathy toward wilderness. Insofar as the westward expansion of civilization was thought good, wilderness was bad. It was construed as much a barrier to progress, prosperity, and power as it was to godliness. On every frontier intense enthusiasm greeted the transformation of the wild into the civilized. Pioneer diaries and reminiscences rang with the theme that what was "unbroken and trackless wilderness" had been "reclaimed" and "transformed into fruitful farms and...flourishing cities" which, of course, was "always for the better." Others simply said the wilds had been made "like Eden."

This taming of the wilderness gave meaning and purpose to the frontiersman's life. In an age which idealized "progress," the pioneer considered himself its spearhead, performing a worthy cause in the interest of all mankind. While laboring directly for himself and his heirs, pioneers and their spokesmen were ever conscious that greater issues hung in the balance. Orators at state agricultural society gatherings harped on the theme of the beneficent effect of the law of "progressive development or growth" under whose guidance cities sprang "from the bosom of the wilderness." They raised paean to those who worked "until the wilderness has blossomed with the fruits of their toil, and these once western wilds are vocal
with the songs of joy.” As the pioneer conceived it, the rewards of this process were far greater than bountiful harvests. Was he not the agent of civilization battling man’s traditional foe on behalf of the welfare of the race? After all, it was he who broke “the long chain of savage life” and for “primeval barbarism” substituted “civilization, liberty and law” not to speak of “arts and sciences.” Put in these terms, there could be little doubt of the value of destroying wilderness. As Andrew Jackson asked rhetorically in his 1830 inaugural address, “what good man would prefer a country covered with forests and ranged by a few thousand savages to our extensive Republic, studed with cities, towns, and prosperous farms, embellished with all the improvements which art can devise or industry execute.” In the vocabulary of material progress, wilderness had meaning only as an obstacle.

The nineteenth-century pioneer’s emphasis on material progress did not entirely exclude the older idea of conquering wilderness in the name of God. William Gilpin, an early governor of Colorado and trumpeter of America’s Manifest Destiny, made clear that “Progress is God” and that the “occupation of wild territory...proceeds with all the solemnity of a providential ordinance.” It was, in fact, the “hand of God” that pushed the nation westward and caused the wilderness to surrender to ax and plow. The frontiersmen never forgot that one of their chief aims was the “extension of pure Christianity”: they viewed with satisfaction the replacement of the “savage yell” with the “songs of Zion.” Settlement and religion went together. Charles D. Kirk summarized in an 1860 novel the frontier view of the westward march as “the tramp, tramp, steady and slow, but sure, of the advancing hosts of Civilization and Christianity.”

Understandably, subjugation of wilderness was the chief source of pioneer pride. Indeed the whole nation considered the settlement of the West its outstanding accomplishment. Timothy Dwight even felt it worthy of comparison with the cultural magnificence of Europe. “The conversion of a wilderness into a desirable residence for man,” he declared early in the century, “at least...may compensate the want of ancient castles, ruined abbeys, and fine pictures.” For a young country, self-conscious about its achievements and anxious to justify independence with success, the conquest of wilderness bolstered the national ego. “What a people we are! What a country is this of ours,” chortled Josiah Grinnell in 1845, “which but as yesterday was a wilderness.” On a humbler level the individual pioneer felt a glow of pride in clearing the land or breaking the virgin sod. One guidebook for settlers advertised: “you look around and whisper, ‘I vanquished this wilderness and made the chaos pregnant with order and civilization, alone I did it.’” The same note often sounds in the rhetoric of a President who takes great pride in the way his family made the “barren” and “forbidding” country in the valley of Texas’ Pedernales River “abundant with fruit, cattle, goats and sheep.”

Of course, many pioneers deliberately chose to live in the wilderness. Many moved westward to a new homestead, legend has it, when they could see a neighbor’s smoke. Love of the wilds, however, did not prompt this behavior but rather a hunger for their destruction. Pioneers welcomed wild country as a challenge. They conceived of themselves as agents in the regenerating process that turned the ungodly and useless into a beneficent civilization. To perform this function wilderness was necessary, hence the westward urge. Only a handful of mountain men and voyageurs were literally absorbed by the forest and ignored the regenerative mission. Reverting to the primitive, in some cases even joining Indian tribes, these exceptions regarded civilization with the antipathy most pioneers reserved for wilderness.

Tocqueville, on the whole, was correct in his analysis that “living in the wilds” produced a bias against them. Constant exposure to wilderness gave rise to fear and hatred on the part of those who had to fight it for survival and success. Although there were a few exceptions, American frontiersmen rarely judged wilderness with criteria other than the utilitarian or spoke of their relation to it in other than a military metaphor. It was their children and grandchildren, removed from a wilderness condition, who began to sense its ethical and aesthetic values. Yet even city dwellers found it difficult to ignore the older attitudes completely. Prejudice against wilderness had the strength of centuries behind it and continued to influence American opinion long after pioneering conditions disappeared. Against this darker background of repugnance more favorable responses haltingly took shape.
Questions

1. State the author’s main point and describe how he supports it.

2. Suppose you wanted to challenge or verify the author’s contention. How would you go about it?

3. According to the author, what were the main attitudes of the pioneers toward wilderness? What were the reasons for these attitudes?

4. Describe the reactions of early American settlers and citizens to wilderness on a spiritual level.
Prosperity

The most prosperous nation of today is the United States. Our unexampled wealth and well-being are directly due to the superb natural resources of our country, and to the use which has been made of them by our citizens, both in the present and in the past. We are prosperous because our forefathers bequeathed to us a land of marvellous resources still unexhausted. Shall we conserve those resources, and in our turn transmit them, still unexhausted, to our descendants?

Unless we do, those who come after us will have to pay the price of misery, degradation, and failure for the progress and prosperity of our day. When the natural resources of any nation become exhausted, disaster and decay in every department of national life follow as a matter of course. Therefore the conservation of natural resources is the basis, and the only permanent basis, of national success. There are other conditions, but this one lies at the foundation...

Principles of Conservation

The principles which the word Conservation has come to embody are not many, and they are exceedingly simple. I have had occasion to say a good many times that no other great movement has ever achieved such progress in so short a time, or made itself felt in so many directions with such vigor and effectiveness, as the movement for the conservation of natural resources.

Forestry made good its position in the United States before the conservation movement was born. As a forester I am glad to believe that conservation began with forestry, and that the principles which govern the Forest Service in particular and forestry in general are also the ideas that control conservation.

The first idea of real foresight in connection with natural resources arose in connection with the forest. From it sprang the movement which gathered impetus until it culminated in the great Convention of Governors at Washington in May, 1908. Then came The second official meeting of the National Conservation movement, December, 1908, in Washington. Afterward came the various gatherings of citizens in convention, come together to express their judgment on what ought to be done, and to contribute, as only such meetings can, to the formation of effective public opinion.

The movement so begun and so prosecuted has gathered immense swing and impetus. In 1907 few knew what Conservation meant. Now it has become a household word. While at first Conservation was supposed to apply only to forests, we see now that its sweep extends even beyond the natural resources.

The principles which govern the conservation movement, like all great and effective things, are simple and easily understood. Yet it is often hard to make the simple, easy, and direct facts about a movement of this kind known to the people generally.

The first great fact about conservation is that it stands for development. There has been a fundamental misconception that conservation means nothing but the husbanding of resources for future generations. There could be no more serious mistake. Conservation does mean provision for the future, but it means also and first of all the recognition of the right of the present generation to the fullest necessary use of all the resources with which this country is so abundantly blessed. Conservation demands the welfare of this generation first, and afterward the welfare of the generations to follow.

The first principle of Conservation is development, the use of the natural resources now existing on this continent for the benefit of the people who live here now. There may be just as much waste in neglecting the development and use of certain natural resources as there is in their destruction. We have a limited supply of coal, and only a limited supply. Whether it is to last for a hundred or a hundred and fifty or a thousand years, the coal is limited in amount, unless through geological changes which we shall not live to see, there will never be any more of it than there is now. But coal is in a sense the vital essence of our civilization. If it can be preserved, if the life of the mines can be extended, if by preventing waste there can be more coal left in this country after we of this generation have made every needed use of this

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1Gifford Pinchot, excerpted from *The Fight for Conservation*, 1910. Italics have been added for emphasis.
source of power, then we shall have deserved well of our descendants.

Conservation stands emphatically for the development and use of water-power now, without delay. It stands for the immediate construction of navigable waterways under a broad and comprehensive plan as assistants to the railroads. More coal and more iron are required to move a ton of freight by rail than by water, three to one. In every case and in every direction the conservation movement has development for its first principle, and at the very beginning of its work. The development of our natural resources and the fullest use of them for the present generation is the first duty of this generation. So much for development.

In the second place conservation stands for the prevention of waste. There has come gradually in this country an understanding that waste is not a good thing and that the attack on waste is an industrial necessity. I recall very well indeed how, in the early days of forest fires, they were considered simply and solely as acts of God, against which any opposition was hopeless and any attempt to control them not merely hopeless but childish. It was assumed that they came in the natural order of things, as inevitably as the seasons or the rising and setting of the sun. Today we understand that forest fires are wholly within the control of men. So we are coming in like manner to understand that the prevention of waste in all other directions is a simple matter of good business. The first duty of the human race is to control the earth it lives upon.

We are in a position more and more completely to say how far the waste and destruction of natural resources are to be allowed to go on and where they are to stop. It is curious that the effort to stop waste, like the effort to stop forest fires, has often been considered as a matter controlled wholly by economic law. I think there could be no greater mistake. Forest fires were allowed to burn long after the people had means to stop them. The idea that men were helpless in the face of them held long after the time had passed when the means of control were fully within our reach. It was the old story that “as a man thinketh, so is he”; we came to see that we could stop forest fires, and we found that the means had long been at hand. When at length we came to see that the control of logging in certain directions was profitable, we found it had long been possible. In all these matters of waste of natural resources, the education of the people to understand that they can stop the leakage comes before the actual stopping and after the means of stopping it have long been ready at our hands.

In addition to the principles of development and preservation of our resources there is a third principle. It is this: The natural resources must be developed and preserved for the benefit of the many, and not merely for the profit of a few. We are coming to understand in this country that public action for public benefit has a very much wider field to cover and a much larger part to play than was the case when there were resources enough for every one, and before certain constitutional provisions had given so tremendously strong a position to vested rights and property in general...

The conservation idea covers a wider range than the field of natural resources alone. Conservation means the greatest good to the greatest number for the longest time. One of its great contributions is just this, that it has added to the worn and well-known phrase, “the greatest good to the greatest number,” the additional words “for the longest time,” thus recognizing that this nation of ours must be made to endure as the best possible home for all its people.

Conservation advocates the use of foresight, prudence, thrift, and intelligence in dealing with public matters, for the same reasons and in the same way that we each use foresight, prudence, thrift, and intelligence in dealing with our own private affairs. It proclaims the right and duty of the people to act for the benefit of the people. Conservation demands the application of commonsense to the common problems for the common good.

The principles of conservation thus described—development, preservation, the common good—have a general application which is growing rapidly wider. The development of resources and the prevention of waste and loss, the protection of the public interests, by foresight, prudence, and the ordinary business and homemaking virtues, all these apply to other things as well as to the natural resources. There is, in fact, no interest of the people to which the principles of conservation do not apply.

The conservation point of view is valuable in the education of our people as well as in forestry; it applies to the body politic as well as to the earth and its minerals. A municipal franchise is as properly within its sphere as a franchise for water-power. The same point of view governs in both. It applies as much to the subject of good roads as to waterways, and the training of our people in citizenship is as germane to it as the produc-
tiveness of the earth. The application of commonsense to any problem for the Nation's good will lead directly to national efficiency wherever applied. In other words, and that is the burden of the message, we are coming to see the logical and inevitable outcome that these principles, which arose in forestry and have their bloom in the conservation of natural resources, will have their fruit in the increase and promotion of national efficiency along other lines of national life.

The outgrowth of conservation, the inevitable result, is national efficiency. In the great commercial struggle between nations which is eventually to determine the welfare of all, national efficiency will be the deciding factor. So from every point of view conservation is a good thing for the American people.

The National Forest Service, one of the chief agencies of the conservation movement, is trying to be useful to the people of this nation. The Service recognizes, and recognizes it more and more strongly all the time, that whatever it has done or is doing has just one object, and that object is the welfare of the plain American citizen. Unless the Forest Service has served the people, and is able to contribute to their welfare, it has failed in its work and should be abolished. But just so far as by cooperation, by intelligence, by attention to the work laid upon it, it contributes to the welfare of our citizens, it is a good thing and should be allowed to go on with its work...

**The Moral Issue**

The central thing for which Conservation stands is to make this country the best possible place to live in, both for us and for our descendants. It stands against the waste of the natural resources which cannot be renewed, such as coal and iron; it stands for the perpetuation of the resources which can be renewed, such as the food-producing soils and the forests; and most of all it stands for an equal opportunity for every American citizen to get his fair share of benefit from these resources, both now and hereafter...

Conservation is the most democratic movement this country has known for a generation. It holds that the people have not only the right, but the duty to control the use of the natural resources, which are the great sources of prosperity. And it regards the absorption of these resources by the special interests, unless their operations are under effective public control, as a moral wrong. Conservation is the application of commonsense to the common problems for the common good, and I believe it stands nearer to the desires, aspirations, and purposes of the average man than any other policy now before the American people.

**Questions**

1. State in one sentence the overriding purpose of conservation, according to Pinchot.

2. Summarize Pinchot’s vision for natural resource conservation.

3. Based solely on this reading, how would you characterize Pinchot’s attitude towards nature?

4. Pinchot states that ‘conservation stands for the prevention of waste.’ What does he mean by ‘waste?’

5. Pinchot claims that conservation is ‘the most democratic movement this country has known for a generation?’ What makes him say so?

6. ‘Conservation means the greatest good to the greatest number for the longest time.’ What are some ethical objections to this vision of conservation?

7. Pinchot’s version of conservation is sometimes called *Progressive Conservation*. Explain how Pinchot might differ from other Conservationists—or other Progressives, for that matter.