

# Environmentalism

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IN the mid-twentieth century, the term *environmentalism* became commonly used to refer to efforts to protect the natural environment from human abuse and disrespect. Attitudes to safeguarding the environment, however, had already been taking shape for some time, based on interpretive practices that affirmed the values, needs, and desires of some people and not others, and rarely those of nonhuman animals. Changing perceptions of species, race, gender, class, and wealth influenced who had the privilege, knowledge, and opportunity to recognize abuses of nature, envision environmentalist possibilities, and act on them. Philip P. Morgan observes, for example, in a study of Caribbean ecology across centuries, that global capitalism, extractivism, and ecological dispossession have skewed which parts of the human population and the natural world have been recognized as worthy of attention and the forms this attention has taken.<sup>1</sup>

As Ramachandra Guha points out, in the nineteenth century industrialization led to the “*first wave* of environmentalism.”<sup>2</sup> According to James Winter, “the first to accept responsibility for having destroyed [a sense of environmental harmony] were the Victorians themselves, and particularly the intelligentsia: the novelists, poets, painters, philosophers, social theorists, and socially conscious journalists.”<sup>3</sup> At the same time, Allen MacDuffie argues, “literature of the period—especially that written in direct conversation with the implications of Darwinian thought specifically, and with scientific naturalism more generally—reveals a culture simultaneously struggling to come to terms with, and struggling to avoid, its relationship to the natural world, and thus its situation on this planet.”<sup>4</sup> Issues that impacted nineteenth-century environmentalism in Britain included fossil capitalism, tourism, expanding train routes, new land-management practices, innovations in literature and the arts, and developments in geology, ecology, and other sciences.

Writers, activists, and scientists—William Wordsworth, Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, Charles Darwin, George Eliot, Octavia Hill,

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Herbert Spencer, Vernon Lee, Henry Salt, Edward Carpenter, and others—speak of the environment as, among other things, an ecosystem of which one is a part, a planetary network, a set of resources, a spiritual force, and an ethical responsibility. Notions of environmentalism reside, often implicitly, in these influential formulations, complemented by more overt claims regarding the rights of workers, nonhuman animals, and aspects of the land itself. The nineteenth century saw the formation of the Commons Preservation Society (founded 1865); the Kyrle Society (1877), led by sisters Miranda and Octavia Hill; the Selborne Society (1885), the UK's oldest conservation society, for which Alfred Tennyson served as president in 1888; and the National Trust for Places of Historic Interest or Natural Beauty (1895), among others. As the missions of these groups suggest, shifts from environmental issues to political action were usually driven by concerns arising from devastation that was visible on a local level and in a human time frame.<sup>5</sup>

The sociopolitical biases and historical situatedness of different forms of nineteenth-century environmentalism are effectively captured by one of the earliest environmentalist writers, the poet John Clare. Raised as an agricultural laborer and with a limited education, Clare wrote several poems addressing the destruction of multispecies symbiotic relations through the acts of enclosure that occurred in England from 1809 to 1820, involving the construction of fences across formerly open fields and woodlands. As wild forests were destroyed, heathland cleared, and marshes drained or converted into irrigation channels for productivity's sake, the commons on which many humans and other species relied were erased. In what are known as Clare's enclosure elegies, environmental disruption is as much a form of inhumanity to humans as anything else. His well-known "The Lament of Swordy Well" (1824–32), however, evokes a radical alterity by giving voice, if not suggesting some element of personhood, to an actual limestone quarry started by the Romans, abandoned, and then reactivated in Clare's time when the local parish declared the land agriculturally unproductive.<sup>6</sup> It is somewhat confusing to have an industrial quarry voice its anger over the disrespect and destruction that came with enclosures, dykes, intense plowing, and monetary greed, but Swordy Well does just that:

Though Im no man yet any wrong  
 Some sort of right may seek  
 And I am glad if een a song  
 Give me the room to speak.<sup>7</sup>

Clare has the terrain proclaim the crucial role of the verbal arts—the “song” of the quarry’s lament—in multispecies environmental politics, as art encourages what animal activist Henry Salt, in 1892, referred to as an “imaginative sympathy” that economic and political platforms would not otherwise recognize.<sup>8</sup>

Swordy Well concludes with a plea for a future in which the quarry is protected from human damage and allowed to return to a more naturalized state:

And if I could but find a friend  
With no deceit to sham  
Who’d send me some few sheep to tend  
And leave me as I am.<sup>9</sup>

Buttressing its argument with an idyllic pastoral motif, the site does not request rewilding or lament a time before the impact of the Romans. Rather, it begs to be returned to a recent era and landscape, advocating specifically for Clare’s own perspective and preferred lifestyle.

The actual site’s later history reaffirms the view of environmentalism as a subjective phenomenon influenced by various perspectives that reflect ever-changing (and often conflicting) values, needs, and desires. Between 1915 and 1924, the National Trust leased the site and turned it into one of England’s first nature reserves. But then, resource needs and political priorities led to it being used again as a quarry, then a bomb dump, a landfill, and a racetrack. In 2003 the Langdyke Countryside Trust fashioned it into a nature reserve again.<sup>10</sup> Like Swordy Well, environmentalism mutates in response to shifting ecological concerns and contexts, which leads one to ask: When is environmentalism not environmentalism? Whose environmentalism gets realized? And how, in this regard, might we become more open, imaginatively and politically, to the concerns, histories, and futures of other entities, both sentient and not?

#### NOTES

1. Philip D. Morgan, “Introduction,” in *Sea and Land: An Environmental History of the Caribbean*, edited by Philip D. Morgan, J. R. McNeill, Matthew Mulcahey, and Stuart B. Schwartz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 1–18. The intersections of colonial and environmental politics are explored from multiple angles in Elizabeth

- DeLoughrey and George Handley, eds., *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), and Nathan K. Hensley and Philip Steer, eds., *Ecological Form: System and Aesthetics in the Age of Empire* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018).
2. Ramachandra Guha, *Environmentalism: A Global History* (New York: Longman, 2000), 3 (emphasis original).
  3. James Winter, *Secure from Rash Assault: Sustaining the Victorian Environment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 8.
  4. Allen MacDuffie, "Charles Darwin and the Victorian Pre-History of Climate Denial," *Victorian Studies* 60, no. 4 (2018): 545.
  5. Barbara Leckie explores ways of conceptualizing temporality in relation to climate change, including both recent notions such as hyper-objects and slow violence and Victorian approaches such as those found in the realist novel. Barbara Leckie, *Climate Change, Interrupted: Representation and the Remaking of Time* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022).
  6. Throughout the past century, allowing nonhuman elements of nature rights or personhood has been an important field of discussion—environmentally, philosophically, and legally. See, for example, Henry Salt, *Animals' Rights Considered in Relation to Social Progress* (1892; Clarks Summit, PA: Society for Animal Rights, 1980); Christopher Stone, "Should Trees Have Standing?—Towards Legal Rights for Natural Objects," *Southern California Law Review* 45 (1972): 450–501; and Ariel Rawson and Becky Mansfield, "Producing Juridical Knowledge: 'Rights of Nature' or the Naturalization of Rights?" *Nature and Space* 1, nos. 1–2 (2018): 99–119.
  7. John Clare, "The Lament of Swordy Well" (1824–32), in *Major Works*, edited by Eric Robinson and David Powell, 147–52, lines 41–44 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
  8. Salt, *Animals' Rights*, 21.
  9. Clare, "Swordy Well," lines 193–96.
  10. "Swaddywell," Langdyke Countryside Trust, accessed Oct. 25, 2022, <https://langdyke.org.uk/welcome-to-langdyke-countyside-trust/lct-reserves/swaddywell>.

