

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Journal of the National Collegiate Honors  
Council –Online Archive

National Collegiate Honors Council

---

Spring 2005

## Seeing Nature: Ansel Adams in the Human and Natural Environments of Yosemite

Megan McWenie

University of Arizona, mcwenie@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nhcjournal>



Part of the [Higher Education Administration Commons](#)

---

McWenie, Megan, "Seeing Nature: Ansel Adams in the Human and Natural Environments of Yosemite" (2005). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council –Online Archive*. 161.  
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nhcjournal/161>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the National Collegiate Honors Council at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council –Online Archive by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

# **Portz-Prize-Winning Essay, 2004**



MEGAN MCWENIE

Portz Prize-Winning Essay, 2004

# Seeing Nature: Ansel Adams in the Human and Natural Environments of Yosemite

MEGAN MCWENIE

UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

Wallace Stegner once hailed the legacy of Ansel Adams as bringing photography to the world of art as a unique “way of seeing.”<sup>1</sup> What Adams saw through the lens of his camera, and what audiences see when looking at one of his photographs, does indeed constitute a particular way of seeing the world, a vision that is almost always connected to the natural environment. An Ansel Adams photograph evokes more than an aesthetic response to his work—it also stirs reflections about his involvement in the natural world that was so often his subject. Audiences experiencing his work participate in a deliberate conception of wilderness, the national parks, and especially Adams’s ultimate inspiration, Yosemite. Much has been made of Adams the “legend,” the “master,” and the great icon of creative photography, but this aggrandizing obscures the man behind a mask of greatness. While Adams was undoubtedly a master of both the art world and environmental activism by his middle age, during his youth he was a great equivocator. He bounced from school to school, from music to photography, from mountaineering to poetry. At different points in his adolescence and early adulthood, it seemed as if he might devote himself fully to any of these pursuits. Why then did he choose photography? Why did the natural world become the most recurrent subject before his camera? How did these choices influence Adams’s cosmic vision of the natural world, a vision that would shape the minds of generations of Americans?

The answer is a complicated one, with roots in family upbringing, economic realities, artistic philosophy, and personal ethics. His art emerged from a tangled maze of influences but was firmly rooted in the valley floors and mountain peaks of Yosemite National Park. Here Adams encountered a unique locale through which to define his relationship to both human society and the natural environment. He was able to do so because Yosemite was an amalgamation of two seemingly opposite settings, where wilderness and civilization, human intellect and the natural scene united in a distinctive mixture that maintained permeable boundaries and wary co-existence. From the parallel worlds of human and wild space, Adams synthesized his own vision of Yosemite—an image he popularized with generations of Americans. His

<sup>1</sup> John Russell, “Ansel Adams, Photographer, Is Dead,” *New York Times*, April 24, 1984.

## SEEING NATURE: ANSEL ADAMS

photographic images of Yosemite, however, deliberately did not include the human element that had been so important in creating the man that Adams became. The tension between the Yosemite that shaped Adams and the image of Yosemite that he offered to the world is indicative of broader dichotomies in the way Americans intellectualize human and wild environments as separate spaces.

In Adams's first visits to Yosemite, he was very much the city kid coming to a conveniently transposed urban environment amid the natural splendor of a national park. Adams first got the urge to visit the Sierra when sick in bed. Confined within the four walls of a darkened room, the self-described "hyperactive" fourteen-year-old funneled all his nervous energy into reading James Hutchings's *In the Heart of the Sierras*. The imaginative youth "became hopelessly enthralled with the descriptions and illustrations of Yosemite" and with its "romance and adventure"; Yosemite represented a place of excitement and vigorous action for the teenager. He compelled his parents to make Yosemite that year's vacation destination, and the Adams family became a model of typical American tourists seeking their annual entertainment. In June of 1916, Ansel and his parents "boarded the early morning train in Oakland, bound for Merced and El Portal. The car was full of people—fanning elders, active and inquisitive children."<sup>2</sup> Traveling by train and bus, surrounded by middle-class vacationers like themselves, the Adams family arrived via modern transportation into a "natural" world where all the comforts of urban civilization were replicated. They stayed in Camp Curry, a concessionaire of the National Park Service, in Tent 305. It may not have been their comfortable home in San Francisco, but it offered an experience not too far from the conveniences of the city. Writing to his father the next summer, Adams's description of arduous hikes into the high country appear on Camp Curry stationery, featuring a picturesque view of Yosemite Valley with majestic trees surrounding tents, playing courts, and fashionably attired travelers; the caption reads, "Tennis and Croquet at Camp Curry," no doubt appealing to the vacationer seeking the outdoor experience with the maximum in human comforts.<sup>3</sup> How is it then that the young tourist in this not-so-wild nature became the Sierra enthusiast?

Adams's transformation from vacationer to seasoned outdoorsman is a story of "coming to belong," of becoming a recognized part of the human community in Yosemite. The human society at Yosemite was a unique juxtaposition of permanent settlement, transient population, and wilderness locale. These seemingly irreconcilable forces fluctuated with the season and the popularity of outdoor recreation. Although the National Park Service was created by Congress to "conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects" of the nation, Yosemite National Park often functioned in ways not compatible with the protection of scenery and natural objects.<sup>4</sup> Permanent human constructions in Yosemite were obvious steps away from

<sup>2</sup> Ansel Adams, *Ansel Adams: An Autobiography* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1985), 8, 41, 42.

<sup>3</sup> Ansel Adams (AA) to Charles Adams (CA), 22 June 1917, Correspondence, Ansel Adams Archive (hereafter AAA), Box AG 31:1:1, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson.

<sup>4</sup> "A Brief History of the National Parks Service." *National Parks Service Net*. 16 June 2003. U.S. Department of the Interior. [http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/online\\_books/kieley/index.ht](http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/online_books/kieley/index.ht)

MEGAN MCWENIE

this principle. Entrepreneurs operating concessions like the Stoneman House, the Awahnee Hotel, Camp Curry, and Best's Studio joined the employees of the newly formed National Park Service to make up the year-round population of Yosemite. Some had lived there for decades, like David and Jenny Curry, who had arrived in 1899, or Adams's future father-in-law, Harry Best, who settled in Yosemite in 1902.<sup>5</sup> Park service employees were likely to live there for a few years before relocating to another position. Besides these permanent residents, there was also a large population of outdoor enthusiasts, many of them members of the Sierra Club, who spent significant time in the park. They either stayed in the facilities of the concessionaires or, more likely, camped themselves in excursions to the farther reaches of the park and high country. This population was generally bound by an ethic of vigorous physical exploration of the Sierra in a manner conforming to a particular set of values about the preservation of wilderness. The least stable part of the human community in Yosemite was necessarily the tourist element, which could swell the park's population by the thousands, and eventually millions, in the summer months, leaving it almost unpopulated in the winter. Adams began his integration into the Yosemite community as a member of the last group. He eventually joined the ranks of Sierra Club members who spent their summers there before finally becoming a permanent resident after his marriage in 1928.

Returning each summer after that initial visit in 1916, first with his mother and then as an independent adolescent, Adams moved away from the tourist label by demonstrating to the more permanent fixtures in Yosemite a devotion to the outdoor experience and a growing sense of what was appropriate behavior in this distinctive locale. His letters to his father back home in San Francisco detail his enthusiastic exploration of the natural world outside the busy confines of the Valley.<sup>6</sup> With youthful pride, Adams proclaims, "In 9 Days I have walked 145 miles...I have been to the top of Nevada Falls 5 times and lugged my two cameras and tripod to the top of North Dome and back in 4 and one half hours."<sup>7</sup> Adams delighted in these long treks through the wilderness and in his increasing knowledge of the trails around the Valley. That personal commitment to becoming familiar with Yosemite also gained him the respect of the pillars of the Yosemite community. While Adams was there in 1918, another vacationer got lost hiking, and the owners of Camp Curry asked him to join the search party. A letter to his father detailing this event captures Adams's pride in the Currys' recognition of him as more capable in the wilderness than some green tourist.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Alfred Runte, *Yosemite: The Embattled Wilderness* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 92-93.

<sup>6</sup> The term "the Valley" here refers specifically to the Yosemite Valley, the main tourist destination in the much larger Yosemite National Park. This term mirrors Adams' own language in describing Yosemite Valley.

<sup>7</sup> AA to C&OA June 4, 1918, Correspondence, AAA. For elaboration on Adams' hiking and exploring activities while a teenager in Yosemite see AA to CA & Olive Adams (OA), 30 May 1918; AA to CA, 21 April 1920; AA to CA & OA 27 April 1920; AA to CA, 23 June 1923, etc., Correspondence, AAA.

<sup>8</sup> AA to CA, 4 June 1918, Correspondence, AAA.

## SEEING NATURE: ANSEL ADAMS

Adams had become a local fixture, familiar enough with the territory to be considered an expert, and it was this ability that gained him the notice of experienced mountaineers like Frank Holman, the Park Superintendent, and members of the Sierra Club. He was only seventeen, but Adams felt as if three summers in Yosemite had made him a man. His growing command of mountaineering introduced him to a select group of people who also shared in this privileged knowledge. While Adams was no swaggering braggart, his letters express a sense of personal pride in being accepted by the (mostly male) masters of the mountains. In 1919, Adams learned that the custodian position at the Sierra Club's LeConte Memorial Lodge was opening, so he joined the organization and won the job. Adams applied partly as a way to finance his yearly return to Yosemite in the summer, but also because his contact with Sierra enthusiasts was increasing as he became less and less a one-time tourist and more a member of the permanent Yosemite community.

Adams marked the summer when he started working in the LeConte Lodge at the age of eighteen as his first real encounter with wilderness, but this designation also highlights the paradox of a civilization encroaching upon the world of nature. Adams's introduction to the wilderness ideals of preservation began in LeConte Lodge. There, members of the Sierra Club would drop by throughout the summer for conversation or to give talks at the nearby amphitheater. The Lodge also boasted a library with books on mountaineering, geology, and conservation, many of which Adams read and reviewed in the *Sierra Club Bulletin*.<sup>9</sup> It was within the walls of a permanent human structure that wilderness as a defensible principle first formed for Adams. Here the built environment that he supposedly left behind in San Francisco resurfaced in the natural world. Adams spoke of getting the "mountain fever" while confined in that "miserable pile of bricks and bootleg – the city," but upon arriving in what would seem to be the opposite environment of the miserable city—Yosemite—he headed directly for another "pile of bricks" at the Lodge.<sup>10</sup> To deal with this seeming contradiction, Adams began to conceive of Yosemite as the natural world invaded by human structures, enterprises, and greed. But there was for him still some definite designation of wild land that could be found, if only one could get far enough from the excesses of civilization.

To guarantee a place apart for wilderness, Adams increasingly distinguished between "the Valley" and the "high country."<sup>11</sup> This attitude is especially evident in a letter from 1920, in which he compared the Valley to San Francisco: "The roads are like Market Street and Camp Curry like a city Hotel Lobby. I...get into the high

---

<sup>9</sup> For examples, see: Ansel Adams, "Review of *Anthology of Alpine Literature*," *Sierra Club Bulletin* 11, no. 3 (1922): 315-316; "On High Hills," *Sierra Club Bulletin* 24, no 1 (Feb 1929), 298.

<sup>10</sup> AA to Virginia Adams (VA), 11 March 1927, Correspondence, Ansel Adams Archive.

<sup>11</sup> Similar to the usage of the term "the Valley," "high country" refers to the higher elevations of Yosemite National Park, which the majority of tourists do not visit because of the steep hikes necessary to climb out of the Valley. High country is synonymous with "high Sierra" and simply "the Sierra" and will be used accordingly throughout this paper. It is important to note that whereas the Valley refers to a specific location within Yosemite National Park, high country can refer to any of the higher elevations of the Sierra Nevada mountain range, both inside and outside of park boundaries.

MEGAN MCWENIE

Sierra as fast as I can for the floor of the Valley is one big parking station, and I want to enjoy the upper country as much as I can before it follows in the path of commercialism that has spoiled the Valley.”<sup>12</sup> And so he sought out the high country under the tutelage of the old mountain sage Frank Holman, who made Yosemite and the Sierra his Spartan retirement spot. It was Holman who took Adams on his “first High Sierra Trip...my introduction to true wilderness.”<sup>13</sup> The increasing intellectual dichotomy Adams imagined between the Valley and the high country drew heavily on the opinions of the older man. The disgust Adams felt for the Camp Curry garbage burned in Stoneman Meadow stemmed in part from Holman’s disapproval of the situation. Adams wrote to his mother, “Mr. Holman is so mad he could eat Supt. [Superintendent of Yosemite National Park] Lewis alive” and related his own anger thereafter.<sup>14</sup> Adams’s former admiration for Camp Curry as a pleasant vacation spot disappeared as he became more enmeshed in the community of Yosemite devotees.

The Sierra may have been his refuge from the corruption that too many people and too much development had brought to the Valley, but for all the moral superiority he expressed, Adams himself participated in the human infiltration. Besides his early residence at Camp Curry, which he eventually reviled for its desecration of nature, Adams continued to participate in the human alteration of Yosemite. On a plateau behind LeConte Lodge, he and Holman and a few regular visitors built a small camp complete with shelving units and a stove, but their semi-permanent construction was fifty feet above the disenchanting Camp Curry, closer to the Sierra’s purity than the Valley’s deformity.<sup>15</sup> Though they brought the built environment into the high country that he held sacrosanct, Adams’s improvements conformed to his understanding of acceptable behavior in the wilderness, behavior that kept it wild. This may seem contradictory, but Adams probably felt that his building was a slight infringement when compared to the development that tourism and industry promoted, like in Camp Curry. To gain insight into how Adams adopted this way of thinking, it is important to consider the dominant influences that contributed to his idea of wilderness.

Adams’s original desire to join the Sierra Club was a literal fulfillment of the club’s initial mission statement of 1892: “To explore, enjoy and render accessible the mountain regions of the Pacific Coast.”<sup>16</sup> The Sierra Club made the mountains accessible to him by providing him a job in Yosemite, thus allowing him to finance his stays in the park and his enjoyment and exploration of the Sierra Nevada. Only slowly did a secondary, but ultimately more influential, purpose of the club begin to act on Adams: the dissemination of a philosophy of how one should relate to nature. While he was never the adulating admirer of John Muir that many of his fellow members were, as an active member Adams could not have escaped exposure to the principles of preservation expounded by that great prophet of wilderness.<sup>17</sup> Recalling

<sup>12</sup> AA to CA, 2 June 1920, Correspondence, AAA.

<sup>13</sup> Ansel Adams, *Ansel Adams: An Autobiography*, 48.

<sup>14</sup> AA to OA, 16 July 1920, AAA.

<sup>15</sup> AA to CA, 10 July 1920, AAA.

<sup>16</sup> Renée Haip, “Ansel Adams: Forging the Wilderness Ideal,” in *Ansel Adams, New Light: Essays on His Legacy and Legend*, ed. Michael Read, 75-83 (San Francisco: Friends of Photography, 1993), 75.

## SEEING NATURE: ANSEL ADAMS

in his autobiography the isolation of the Sierra, “where one can come to terms with solitude” as a transforming experience, Adams echoed Muir’s basic premise of the restorative value of the personal experience in wilderness.<sup>18</sup> If Adams did not advertise himself as a disciple of Muir, he was obviously familiar with his writings and outlook. Perhaps he could never relate to the aura of John Muir as the “Great Man” and preservationist icon because, unlike many fellow Sierra Club members, Adams never met Muir before the club’s founder died.

Adams did relate more closely to some of the other larger-than-life personalities in the Sierra Club with whom he had personal contact. Adams credited his “first idea of conservation as such” to his first meeting with William Colby—who followed Muir as leader of the Sierra Club—when Adams was seeking entry into the organization and work at LeConte Lodge. Colby invited Adams to accompany the more veteran members for a few days on the annual Sierra Club High Trip in 1920. Traveling with the giants of the Sierra Club—prominent businessmen, eminent scholars, acclaimed mountaineers—at the age of eighteen, Adams experienced his “basic introduction to the conservation world.” The ideas that he had read about in the LeConte library came to life in the environment that had fostered them. Ideas on the page became vivid when they emanated from the men and women who wrote the books that Adams had read and that had shaped the very values of the conservation movement. Adams recognized in later life that this world had to be expressed “in different terms from the natural world, because the conservation world is the world of people.”<sup>19</sup> Even when hiking up a granite face thousands of feet above and many miles distant from any permanent human structure, the conservationists brought the human world with them into the wilderness. And how could they avoid this incursion, these revelers in nature? For all their principles of defending nature, most still lived in San Francisco or other cities and came to Yosemite for their dose of the wild.<sup>20</sup>

While Colby provided Adams with early opportunities, it was Joseph LeConte II whose generosity was more influential with the young Sierra Club inductee. LeConte, the son of the famous Berkeley geologist for whom LeConte Lodge was named, was a respected explorer and topographer in his own right. In 1924 and 1925, LeConte invited Adams to accompany his family to Kings Canyon to explore the Sierra outside of Yosemite. LeConte was valuable not only in providing this broadening experience for Adams, but also as an early model of the mountain photographer. The evolution of Adams as an accomplished photographer is evident in

---

<sup>17</sup> Biographer Mary Street Alinder notes that Adams did not consider Muir a “mentor” in *Ansel Adams: A Biography*, (New York: H. Holt, 1996), 29. For a contrasting discussion of Muir’s influence on Adams’s wilderness philosophy that takes Alinder’s analysis into account, see Jonathan Spaulding, *Ansel Adams and the American Landscape: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 50.

<sup>18</sup> Ansel Adams, *Ansel Adams: An Autobiography*, 48.

<sup>19</sup> Ansel Adams, *Conversations with Ansel Adams*, interviewed by Ruth Teiser and Catherine Harroun (Berkeley: The Regents of the University of California, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, 1978), 588, 594.

<sup>20</sup> For the most detailed account of these trips, see Anne Hammond, *Ansel Adams: Divine Performance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 6-10.

MEGAN MCWENIE

his early pieces in the *Sierra Club Bulletin*. In the early 1920s, dozens of photographs by Adams in this publication show beautiful Sierra scenes. Other pieces by both LeConte and Adams detail their Kings Canyon excursions. Adams's photographs from this period capitalize on the same elements of size and distance that are evident in LeConte's pieces. Over time, Adams would surpass his mentor by achieving a distinct creative vision in his work, but he owed much to the tutelage of this older mountaineer.

While Colby and LeConte may have been awe-inspiring models of the conservationist cause, the campfire—as the center of Sierra Club indoctrination—made the deepest impression on the young Adams. At the campfire, initiates would be treated to the particular mythology of the Sierra Club. They might hear “the legend of Ansel Adams' mule,” learn about “the ethics of our primitive cafeteria,” or recognize the hikers who scorned donkeys as “the real elite.”<sup>21</sup> Besides these amusements and entertainments, the campfire was a place for reflection on the wilderness around them. Here Adams would have heard the exchange of competing views on conservation, preservation, and the national parks. At the campfire he secured the friendship of Cedric Wright, who had previously been a slight family acquaintance but who became a fast friend on these Sierra Club outings. The campfire, which seems so fundamental to the wilderness experience, again draws our attention to the collapsing boundaries between the human and natural worlds.

The campfire was the intellectual center of human incursion into the wild, where the exchange of ideas and the replication of civilization, albeit only slight, occurred. How did the Sierra remain wild with packers, campers, and donkey trains? Writing about the 1931 High Trip, Adams unwittingly exposed this paradox in his figurative writing for, in preparing a fire, “you are aware of the rich magic of the Sierra dusk; the world flames with consuming fiery light and quickly smoulders to ashes of cold and amethystine gray.”<sup>22</sup> In the human action of creating a campfire, the elements of the natural world around Adams began to take on human characteristics as it warmed shivering hikers and facilitated the dissemination of ideology. What had been the pristine nature of the “Sierra dusk” became tainted with the “consuming fiery light” of the human presence in the natural world. The fire not only destroys wood collected by the campers for fuel, but it also leaves a physical scar on the wild in the residue of soot and ashes. The physical invasion of the campfire is also a location for the intrusion of human ideas, intellectual exchanges that often concerned the notion of pristine wilderness while simultaneously despoiling that wilderness with their very presence in it. This might not be a glaring violation, such as those perpetrated by Camp Curry, but the Sierra Club campfires that Adams participated in still blurred the lines between the human and natural environments. Adams's language reveals the

---

<sup>21</sup> For discussions on the importance of the campfire outside of Adams's own correspondence and recollections, see: Jesse M. Whitehead, “With the Sierra Club in 1927” *Sierra Club Bulletin* 13, no. 1 (1928), 11; Jonathan Spaulding, *Ansel Adams and the American Landscape: A Biography*, 54; Jesse M. Whitehead, “With the Sierra Club in 1927,” 14; Ansel Adams, “Retrospect: Nineteen-thirty-one,” *Sierra Club Bulletin* 17, no. 1 (1928), 2; Ansel Adams, *Conversations with Ansel Adams*, 233.

<sup>22</sup> Ansel Adams, “Retrospect: Nineteen-thirty-one,” 2.

## SEEING NATURE: ANSEL ADAMS

persistence of the conflict that he sought to leave behind in the Valley—the inundation of wilderness by the supposedly separate human world.

For all his devotion to the Sierra as his place of annual retreat and the hub of his personal relationships, Adams offered little commentary on his personal feelings towards Yosemite in either his early writings or photographs. From his first summer in Yosemite at age fourteen until he began writing to his friend Virginia Best in 1922, his letters were mostly directed to his father or occasionally to his mother or aunt. These messages are hardly distinguishable in their repetition of similar details of day-to-day existence: that he was happy and safe, had enough funds or didn't, went on hikes X, Y, and Z, and was getting great photos. The meticulous accounts of Adams's hiking excursions were primarily concerned with distance, navigation, and destination, but not at all with the environment traversed. His photographs from this period, many of which he sent along with his letters home, present an accurate and pleasant recording of the hikes, but there is as yet no real creative spirit in these pieces. The most revealing commentary he offered on the world around him came in a letter to his father about a storm, in which there was "something very wonderful" that seemed "to have done me more good physically and mentally, than the finest walks in the sunshine." Adams broke off this discourse by closing: "Well, there are some things that cannot be put into words."<sup>23</sup> Indeed, he was unable to articulate any feelings he might have had on the Sierra to his parents; perhaps the barrier of Victorian formality that he attributed repeatedly to them in his autobiography prevented such openness.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps located as they were in the urban world of San Francisco, Adams felt that his parents would not understand his connection to the wilderness of the Sierra. As for his photographs, Adams himself noted that, "A great deal of my early work, to the best of my knowledge and belief, had really no creative intention except to record a lot of beautiful things I saw."<sup>25</sup> The vast majority of his photographs before the late 1920s, many of which appeared in issues of the *Sierra Club Bulletin*, captured appealing scenes while conveying as little as his letters did. But this reticence to articulate his feelings on Yosemite would diminish as his relationship with Virginia Best grew. Correspondingly, his verbalization to Virginia of these feelings on nature would parallel Adams's simultaneous development of a defining principle to guide the creative content of his photographs.

The banal details of Adams's letters to his parents became introspective emotions in his letters to his future wife, Virginia. Although not yet engaged to Virginia, in a postcard to her in 1922 he was able to say more than he ever had to his parents, reflecting on "The remoteness of these lovely places...it is all a delicious procession of unearthly experiences discounting civilization and chronological time."<sup>26</sup> Here is the first articulation of what Adams valued in Yosemite besides hiking and beautiful

<sup>23</sup> AA to CA, 30 June 1920, AAA. For examples of Adams's writing to his parents, see Boxes AG:1:1:1 and AG:1:1:2 which contain all "Family Correspondence."

<sup>24</sup> For example: Ansel Adams, *Ansel Adams: An Autobiography*, 10, 34, 41, 80.

<sup>25</sup> Ansel Adams, *Conversations with Ansel Adams*, 320.

<sup>26</sup> AA to VB, 17 July 1922, *Ansel Adams: Letters and Images, 1916-1984*, ed. Mary Street Alinder (Boston: Little, Brown, Co., 2001), 22.

## MEGAN MCWENIE

scenery: the separation from civilization that the remote reaches of the Sierra offered to him. As he and Virginia become more deeply involved, engaged for the first time in 1923, Adams was able to confide in her these evolving attitudes toward the natural environment. While he could record the smallest geographical movements of his treks through the Sierra for his parents, only with Virginia could he give a reason for those journeys, namely that Adams felt “All aspects of nature lead to elevation and knowledge.”<sup>27</sup> Adams later attributed this openness to feeling “...a rightness about the two of us. We were comfortable together. My letters of the period express...an introspective analysis at a simple, but deeply felt level.”<sup>28</sup>

Adams’s comfort with Virginia originated in part from their common interests: music, art, and Yosemite. As the daughter of Harry Cassie Best, a landscape painter operating as a concessionaire in the park since 1902, Virginia had grown up in Yosemite amid the grandeur of granite monoliths and the operations of everyday human business.<sup>29</sup> In his choice of confidante and bride, Adams clearly chose someone who belonged to Yosemite, but to which Yosemite? Virginia might have represented for him either the commercial center of the Valley (Virginia’s home) or the ideal wilderness of the high Sierra. Perhaps Adams forged a third alternative: that Virginia was a part of the world, far from urban development, that he was beginning to think of as more his home than his native San Francisco. Although Yosemite would also become important to Adams as the primary source of his personal income, he conceived of Yosemite as home because it was the location of Virginia and the natural world. This physical grounding in Yosemite as a place where he definitively belonged would soon become related to Adams’s developing philosophy of both art and conservation.

In his early twenties, Adams began to look beyond the traditional Sierra Club campfire rhetoric on wilderness in an attempt to crystallize his own personal philosophy. Unsatisfied with Muir as a foundation upon which to build his own principles, Adams nevertheless found his philosophical muse within the Sierra Club. While Adams was heavily influenced by the living legends of the Sierra Club like Colby or LeConte, it was from a member of his own generation, Cedric Wright, that he would discover a broader philosophical context in which to situate his feelings about the natural environment. Twelve years Adams’s senior, Wright was still one of the Sierra Club’s young set; he was as well known for his prominence in San Francisco art circles as he was for his affiliation with the Sierra Club. He and Adams connected over their mutual passion for the music profession and amateur photography as well as their enjoyment of intellectual sparring and the discovery of new thinkers in the world. Through Wright Adams learned of authors like Edward Carpenter who offered new approaches to wilderness and life that older members of the Sierra Club were unlikely to know or appreciate. Art historian Anne Hammond identifies Wright as the most probable owner of the copy of Carpenter’s *Towards Democracy* that Adams

---

<sup>27</sup> AA to VB, 22 Sept 1925, *Ansel Adams: Letters and Images, 1916-1984*, 23.

<sup>28</sup> Ansel Adams, *Ansel Adams: An Autobiography*, 80.

<sup>29</sup> Mary Street Alinder, *Ansel Adams: A Biography*, 53. Alinder credits Yosemite as the deciding factor in Adams’s eventual choice of Virginia as his bride after their broken engagement and flings with other women, 56.

## SEEING NATURE: ANSEL ADAMS

borrowed to take with him into Kings Canyon with the LeContes in 1925.<sup>30</sup> In Kings Canyon, away from the riotous fun of the Sierra Club outings, Adams had the opportunity to pursue Carpenter's words in relative solitude; in some dramatic synthesis of personal isolation, the power of the high country, and the ideas expounded by Carpenter, a life-changing experience emerged for Adams. Here the worlds of human intellect and wilderness collided as Adams brought philosophy with him into the high country, and he left this setting with a new understanding of wilderness.

Adams committed this experience to the page in writing to his fiancée; he sent his new ideas on wilderness back to what was the ultimate image of the natural world for Adams: Virginia in Yosemite. To her he proclaimed that "the Carpenter book has established a real religion in me." Adams credited this spiritual discovery to "Reading it, as I have done, in the mountains."<sup>31</sup> Carpenter became for Adams a spiritual foundation for the collection of loosely associated ideas on human existence and the natural order that he had synthesized from his parents, friends, icons, and fellow Sierra enthusiasts. Adams's deep connection to the Sierra and wilderness finally gained a philosophical articulation: "I look on the lines and forms of the mountains and all other forms of nature as if they were but the vast expression of ideas within the Cosmic Mind."<sup>32</sup> *Towards Democracy* offered more than just a justification for wilderness; for Adams, Carpenter also provided a guiding principle for the relation of wilderness to Adams's other great passion in life, artistic expression. Art historian Anne Hammond identifies Carpenter's principle of the "continual transformation of all things" as "one of the cornerstones of Adams's philosophy of process."<sup>33</sup> Adams saw this transformation of all things in nature as constituting a unity in and of itself that was gratifying to the human soul. In an exemplary poetic paean to sea and earth, Carpenter proclaims, "Great sea—whose music continues to-day the same as then...O grasses shivering just for all the world as now...changed are your words O grasses...go forward, go ye ever forward." The elements of nature here are the same as in the past, yet they change in their movement forward through time, and this leaves Carpenter "satisfied."<sup>34</sup> This idea of process became integral to Adams's photographic technique, as other Carpenterian themes would govern Adams's relationship to the most recurrent subject before his camera, the natural scene.

As Adams's philosophical conception of wilderness—building on Sierra Club tradition and Carpenter's theories—began to solidify, so too did his dedication to photography as a serious creative and professional endeavor. After 1925, Adams came to the realization that music was not a viable career path, so he redirected this artistic impulse into his passion for photography. This new artistic venture had grown simultaneously with his love of Yosemite. He had received his first camera during his first summer there, a Kodak Box Brownie, which he used ceaselessly, perfecting his

<sup>30</sup> Anne Hammond, *Ansel Adams: Divine Performance*, 9.

<sup>31</sup> AA to VA, 3 Aug 1925, *Ansel Adams: Letters and Images, 1916-1984*, 22.

<sup>32</sup> AA to VA, 22 Sept 1925, *Ansel Adams: Letters and Images, 1916-1984*, 23.

<sup>33</sup> Anne Hammond, *Ansel Adams: Divine Performance*, 10. For further explication of Adams's philosophical debt to Carpenter, read Hammond's first chapter. She also usefully distills Carpenter's theoretical premise into a good summary from his very poetical and scattered text.

<sup>34</sup> Edward Carpenter, *Towards Democracy* (New York: M. Kennerly, 1922), 178.

MEGAN MCWENIE

craft.<sup>35</sup> Writing to Virginia in 1927 he announced: “My photographs have now reached a stage when they are worthy of the world’s attention. I have suddenly come upon a new style.”<sup>36</sup> This new style that Adams had stumbled upon is the subject of much celebration by historical commentators; on April 17, 1927 Adams shot *Monolith, The Face of Half Dome, Yosemite National Park*, pushing his photography from hobby to art. Adams recalled this “first true visualization” in his autobiography as depicting “not the way the subject appeared in reality but how it *felt* to me and how it must appear in the finished print.”<sup>37</sup> Critic Anne Hammond gives the best representation of what Adams accomplished in *Monolith*; in combining the “cliff-face with a fragment of the Sierran panorama that included the distant Tenaya peak, Adams conflated in a single image Yosemite Valley with the High Sierra.”<sup>38</sup>

In *Monolith* Adams managed to collapse the boundaries between the Valley and the Sierra—symbols of human society and wilderness preserved—despite his tendency to conceive of these two locales as separate. *Monolith* was also the fulfillment of the creative desire Adams first expressed to his father in 1920: to “interpret the scenes hereabout through an impressionistic vision. A cold material representation gives one no conception whatever of the great size and distances of these mountains.”<sup>39</sup> Adams was able to offer that interpretation of natural grandeur to the world by publishing the photograph as a frontispiece in the *Sierra Club Bulletin* in 1931 and in countless reproductions throughout his life. What had been impossible at age eighteen became Adams’s talent at twenty-five; those seven intervening years had equipped Adams with a keener connection to Yosemite and a definitive philosophical approach to it that made *Monolith* possible.

Forging ahead into photography as a profession, Adams made two crucial decisions: he chose creative photography over commercial, and he chose the natural scene as his primary subject. While Adams accepted commercial assignments throughout his career, the bulk of his commercial work is from his early years before his creative endeavors generated enough income to support his family. Adams saw commercial work as a means to an end, for his eventual goal was to achieve the life of an artist not subject to any employer who might interfere with Adams’s artistic vision.<sup>40</sup> This artistic impulse was closely tied to the spiritual affirmation Adams found in the writings of Edward Carpenter, who articulated the achievement of an elevated state of being through connection to the unity of universal transformation. For Adams, that universality was in the natural scene. Carpenter’s ideas allowed Adams to fuse his twin passions of artistic expression and wilderness experience into a single impulse that constituted a path through life. It is then no surprise that Adams’s photographs were primarily concerned with the natural scene. In his autobiography, Adams wrote that this was intentional, that he had “chosen to stress”

<sup>35</sup> Ansel Adams, *Ansel Adams: An Autobiography*, 43.

<sup>36</sup> AA to VA, 25 April 1927, *Ansel Adams: Letters and Images, 1916-1984*, 30.

<sup>37</sup> Ansel Adams, *Ansel Adams: An Autobiography*, 60-61. This particular photograph is treated at length by Alinder, 58-49; Hammond, 41-42; Spaulding, 66-68.

<sup>38</sup> Anne Hammond, *Ansel Adams: Divine Performance*, 12.

<sup>39</sup> AA to CA, 8 June 1920, Correspondence, Ansel Adams Archive.

<sup>40</sup> Ansel Adams, “Commercial Photography,” *Ansel Adams: An Autobiography*, 130-149.

## SEEING NATURE: ANSEL ADAMS

nature in his career. But an even more calculated choice on Adams's part seems to have been his depiction of pristine wilderness to the exclusion of any human presence.<sup>41</sup> Adams further stated in the preface to his autobiography "that the worlds of nature and of people have been closely involved."<sup>42</sup> While this statement may seem to foil all attempts to argue that Adams did not conceive of boundaries between the human and natural environment, the broader body of his writings do not support his general adherence to that notion. Reflecting later in life, he may have seen people and nature as involved, but this does not negate the separation he envisioned between them throughout most of his life. Despite this recognition in his autobiography, Adams continued to convey a sense of separation between human society and the last bastions of wilderness, whether that designation could apply to Yosemite as a whole or merely the high country.

In choosing to show only that smallest part of his beloved Yosemite in his creative works—that which was most wild and pristine—Adams set up a particular way of seeing the national parks, and even more broadly the natural environment, as divorced from the human world. Renée Haip affirms this power in Adams, whose "photographs depict the national parks as Americans believe them to be—as 'wilderness areas.' Adams' images present an ideal; they build expectations within us."<sup>43</sup> Devoid of human traces, Adams's photographs are no less artistic achievements, but they do take on a different significance in their historical influence. If they can make people see the parks as "wilderness," audiences are liable to forget the very human communities that often exist in them, communities in which Adams was an active member. Historian Alfred Runte, who is no great fan of Adams as a cultural figure, notes that Adams's art "lured millions of Americans to Yosemite in hopes of duplicating the monumental images that he...found so compelling."<sup>44</sup> But in visiting Yosemite, or any site Adams photographed, visitors cannot crop their visual perspective as Adams the photographer could, ignoring the human presence in the natural environment. Standing at the exact spot where *Monolith, The Face of Half Dome* was photographed, one would see the vista captured by Adams but would need only to look left into the Valley below to see a small human settlement at the heart of a national park.

Gazing at a similar mountaintop panorama in Yosemite at the turn of the twentieth century, John Muir asked William Colby, "Won't it be wonderful when a million people can see what we are seeing?"<sup>45</sup> Millions upon millions have enjoyed the captivating views of Yosemite since Muir asked this question, his prophecy fulfilling itself many times over. But the masses that come to enjoy the wilderness and isolation that Muir so valued and that Adams so ideally represented in the images he offered to the world have eroded the wildness of Yosemite. This deterioration can in

---

<sup>41</sup> In the hundreds of photographs by Adams published in the *Sierra Club Bulletin* capturing natural scenes of the Sierra, only one reveals any human presence, a photograph of hikers summitting Drawbridge Peak against a snowy mountainside.

<sup>42</sup> Ansel Adams, *Ansel Adams: An Autobiography*, vii.

<sup>43</sup> Renée Haip, "Ansel Adams: Forging the Wilderness Ideal," 75.

<sup>44</sup> Alfred Runte, *Yosemite: The Embattled Wilderness*, 7.

<sup>45</sup> Ansel Adams, *Ansel Adams: An Autobiography*, 244.

## MEGAN MCWENIE

part be attributed to the intellectual distinction between the human and natural worlds that Adams represented in his photographs, and which the American public readily consumed. Many continue to see Yosemite and other wild lands in the United States as they are represented in Ansel Adams photographs. They ignore the entanglement of the human and natural worlds that was so present in Adams's own life. Why do these distinctions, ignored or otherwise, matter? They matter because Ansel Adams's vision is a cultural phenomenon, both as recognizable popular art and as a way of thinking about the natural world that was his subject. The very act of projecting an artistic work to an audience is a human act that takes place within the boundaries of civilization; even if its subject is nature, the work of art is human.

While Adams's photographs open up a space within that civilization for the promotion of the preservation of wilderness, they simultaneously invade the supposedly wild with the intrusion of human intellectual discourse. In the very act of promoting a vision of wilderness preserved, Adams's photographs expose the role that human beings play in positing the value of preservation and their involvement in the actual application of those values. By participating in the cultural exchange about the worth of wild lands in the ways Adams did, we involve ourselves in wilderness just as much as when we physically enter nature. Human beings bring their environment with them, whether in the form of intellect, companionship, a sleeping bag, or a backhoe. Comfortable distinctions like the one Ansel Adams makes between the Yosemite Valley and the High Sierra trap current Americans into an idealized vision that makes it easy to overlook what is actually happening in the wilderness that vision celebrates. Recognizing the varieties of ways in which the human environment and natural world are involved, as Adams did not, might allow us to generate a new understanding of wilderness that will continue to protect the fundamental worth that Adams and generations of Americans have placed upon nature preserved.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adams, Ansel. *Ansel Adams: An Autobiography*. Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1985.
- . *Conversations with Ansel Adams*. Interviewed by Ruth Teiser and Catherine Harroun. Berkley: The Regents of the University of California, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, 1978.
- . Correspondence. Ansel Adams Archive. Center for Creative Photography. University of Arizona, Tucson.
- . "Kearsarge Lake and Kearsarge Pinnacles." Photograph. *Sierra Club Bulletin* 12 (1926): Plate 67 facing 220.
- . "LeConte Memorial Lodge—Season of 1923." *Sierra Club Bulletin* 12 (1924): 83.
- . "Parmelian Prints." Advertisement. *Sierra Club Bulletin* 13 (1928): 107.
- . "Review of *Anthology of Alpine Literature*," *Sierra Club Bulletin* 11, no. 3 (1922): 315-316.
- . "With the Sierra Club." *Sierra Club Bulletin* 23 (1924): 21-27.

## SEEING NATURE: ANSEL ADAMS

- Adams, Charles. Correspondence. Ansel Adams Papers. Center for Creative Photography. University of Arizona.
- Alinder, Mary Street. *Ansel Adams: A Biography*. New York: H. Holt, 1996.
- , ed. *Ansel Adams: Letters and Images, 1916-1984*. Boston: Little, Brown, Co., 2001.
- “Bedrock Geology of the Yosemite Valley Area, Yosemite National Park, California.” *United States Geological Survey*. 18 October 2000. U.S Department of the Interior. 8 February 2004. [http://geology.wr.usgs.gov/docs/usgsnps/yos/I\\_1639.html](http://geology.wr.usgs.gov/docs/usgsnps/yos/I_1639.html).
- “A Brief History of the National Parks Service.” *National Parks Service Net*. 16 June 2003. U.S. Department of the Interior. May 2, 2004. [http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/online\\_books/kieley/index.htm](http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/online_books/kieley/index.htm).
- Carpenter, Edward. *Towards Democracy*. New York: M. Kennerly, 1922.
- Ellis, Dorothy. *Ahwahnee, Yosemite National Park, California*. San Francisco: Johnck & Seeger, 1935.
- Haip, Renee. “Ansel Adams: Forging the Wilderness Ideal.” In *Ansel Adams, New Light: Essays on His Legacy and Legend*, edited by Michael Read, 75-83. San Francisco: Friends of Photography, 1993.
- Hammond, Anne. *Ansel Adams: Divine Performance*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002.
- Hutchings, James M. *In the Heart of the Sierras*. Oakland: Pacific Press Printing House, 1886.
- Marshall, R.B. *Administrative Map of Yosemite, California*. Washington, DC: United States Geological Survey, 1910.
- Matthes, François. *Geologic History of the Yosemite Valley*. Washington, DC: GPO 1930.
- and Edward Douglas. *Map of Yosemite Valley, Yosemite National Park, California, Mariposa County*. Washington, DC: United States Geological Survey, 1938.
- Newhall, Nancy. *Ansel Adams: The Eloquent Light*. New York: Harper & Row, 1980.
- Runte, Alfred. *Yosemite: The Embattled Wilderness*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990.
- Spaulding, Jonathan. *Ansel Adams and the American Landscape: A Biography*. Berkley: University of California Press, 1995.
- . “Yosemite and Ansel Adams: Art, Commerce, and Western Tourism.” *Pacific Historical Review* 65 (1996): 614-639.
- . “The Natural Scene and the Social Good: The Artistic Education of Ansel Adams.” *Pacific Historical Review* 60 (1991): 15-42.
- Topographic Map of Yosemite National Park, California*. Washington, DC: United States Geological Survey, 1932.
- Westerbeck, Colin. “Ansel Adams: The Man and the Myth.” In *Ansel Adams, New Light: Essays on His Legacy and Legend*, edited by Michael Read, 9-15. San Francisco: Friends of Photography, 1993.
- Whitehead, Jessie M. “With The Sierra Club in 1927.” *Sierra Club Bulletin* 13 (1928): 10-17.

MEGAN MCWENIE

Wright, Cedric. "Trail Song, Giant Forest and Vicinity: 1927." *Sierra Club Bulletin*  
13 (1928): 20-23.

—. *Words of the Earth*. San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1960.

\*\*\*\*\*

The author may be contacted at

[mcwenie@gmail.com](mailto:mcwenie@gmail.com)

