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More Information

Introduction

Ever since I have known him, my ecologist husband has owned a well-worn cardboard bookmark; I first came across it tucked, appropriately enough, into his copy of the Brundtland Commission's report, *Our Common Future* (1987).[1] The bookmark was a gift from his parents and its pencilled inscription is still just visible on its reverse: this is also appropriate, not only because of the familial sentiments it expresses, but because my in-laws' commitment to self-sufficient life helped to lay the foundations for my husband's professional, academic, and personal commitment to the environment, which have, in turn, encouraged mine. I noticed the bookmark, a now somewhat tattered strip of cardboard, for its faded epigram: 'We have not inherited the Earth from our fathers; we are borrowing it from our children.' Described as a 'Native American saying', these words are accompanied by a banner featuring a pastiche of indigenous American art (now torn off from my husband's well-used bookmark) and an illustration of three people in a canoe (Fig. 1). Of course, clad in the fly-fisherman's uniform of khaki fishing vest and bucket hat, the paddlers are not themselves characterised as indigenous; indeed, their apparent whiteness identifies them as 'mainstream' Americans enjoying their country's wilderness while managing, in their bark canoe, to exemplify a romantic, 'noble savage' wisdom. That said, the bookmark's folksy sense of Americana is intended to be decontextualised as far as geography goes (my in-laws no doubt purchased it in a bookshop in Wales, where they live) and its three illustrated figures (a grandfather, father, and child) signify the three generations of 'fathers', 'children', and the text's inclusive 'we' who inhabit the middle ground. The main point of the keepsake is to locate its modern reader, wherever she may be, in intergenerational terms, reminding her of her part in a bargain of posterity.

[1] World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future* (Oxford University Press: 1987).

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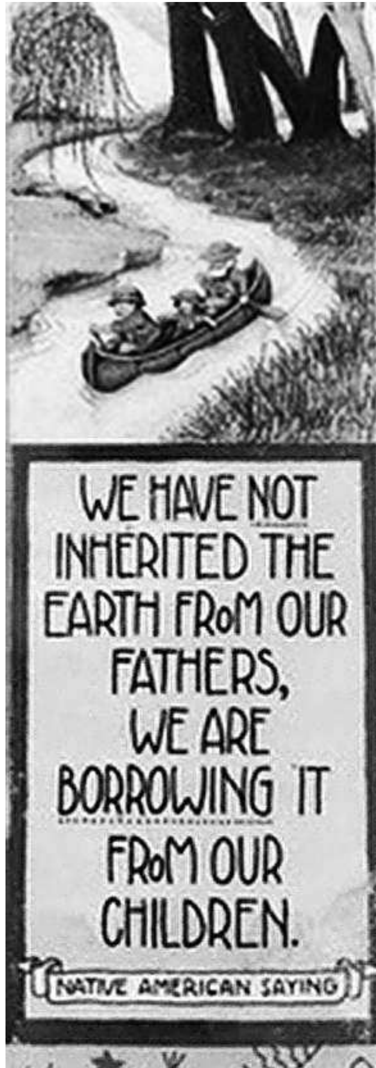

Figure 1: Mary Engelbreit, 'We Have Not Inherited the Earth from Our Fathers' © Mary Engelbreit Enterprises, Inc.

It is not the bookmark's quaint and cutesy appeal but its self-consciously wise aphorism that is so striking. The cynic who suspects that it is not a Native American saying would be right. The special attraction of these

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words has meant that they have been quoted and requoted in various forms over the past three decades, and their provenance has proven surprisingly portable. Meticulous research by the writer who blogs as Garson O'Toole shows that the sentiments were first expressed by activist-author Wendell Berry; writing in 1971 about protecting the Red River Gorge in his beloved Kentucky, Berry declared: 'I speak of the life of a man who knows that the world is not given by his fathers, but borrowed from his children; who has undertaken to cherish it and do it no damage, not because he is duty-bound, but because he loves the world and loves his children.'[2] The publication of Berry's words in *Audubon* magazine soon after led to its misattribution to John James Audubon, and when Dennis Hall, an official at Michigan's Office of Land Use, adapted them without citation in 1973, he was erroneously credited also.[3] Similarly, Australian Environment Minister Moss Cass's use of it in a speech to OPEC in 1974 – inserting the grander phrase 'inherited the Earth' to replace the idea of being 'given' the world – meant that the adage has sometimes been ascribed to him.[4] From the 1980s onwards, the phrase was quoted in speeches and reprinted on book jackets and in report bylines – by, among others, representatives of the United Nations Environment Programme and the World Wildlife Fund.[5] Paul and Anne Ehrlich attributed it to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and an article in the *Christian Science Monitor* assigned it to environmentalist Lester Brown of the Worldwatch Institute.[6] The *Los Angeles Times* asserted that it was an Amish saying; US Secretary of State James Baker named Ralph Waldo Emerson as its author; and the US Council on Environmental Quality claimed the source to be Chief Seattle.[7] If Mary Engelbreit, the artist responsible for the bookmark along with countless other epigrammatic adornments of greeting cards and calendars, chose sometime in the 1990s to describe this as

[2] Garson O' Toole, 'We Do Not Inherit the Earth from Our Ancestors; We Borrow It from Our Children', *Quote Investigator: Exploring the Origins of Quotations*, http://quoteinvestigator.com/2013/01/22/borrow-earth/#note-5296–1; Wendell E. Berry, *The Unforeseen Wilderness: An Essay on Kentucky's Red River Gorge* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1971), p. 26.

[3] Wendell E. Berry, 'The One-Inch Journey', *Audubon* (May 1971), 4–11; Dennis Hall, 'The Land Is Borrowed from Our Children', *Michigan Natural Resources*, 44.4 (1975), 2–3.

[4] O'Toole, 'Inherit the Earth'.

[5] United Nations Environment Programme, *Annual Review 1978* (London: UNEP Earthprint, 1980); Lee M. Talbot, 'A World Conservation Strategy', *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, 128.5288 (July 1980).

[6] Paul and Anne Ehrlich, 'The Politics of Extinction', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 37.5 (1981), 26; Ed Jones, 'Saving the Soil – by Private Initiative', *Christian Science Monitor* (5 January 1983), 23.

[7] Frank Riley, 'John Muir's Legacy Still Strong in Glacier Country', *Los Angeles Times* (14 Aug. 1988), 5; Ralph Keyes, 'Some of Our Favorite Quotations Never Quite Went that Way: Did They REALLY Say It?' *Washington Post* (16 May 1993), L10.

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Native American, one can only assume that her decision was partly a matter of canny merchandising and partly the same kind of genuine, unchecked error made by many others.[8]

At first glance, the sentiment seems to strike a chord of environmental concern, and it is easy to see why differing versions have proliferated even as they have been attributed to sufficiently venerable and quotable sources. The idea that our relationship with the biosphere is automatically a matter of posterity is a powerful one, and this quotation in particular achieves several important rhetorical tricks. It collapses a web of obligations – primarily, between species – into a single intergenerational strand of time. We are not construed as guardians of the environment for the environment's sake but are explicitly called on to steward it for a vastly distant future, even as we are reminded of our debt to those in the past; we are thus placed in a grand historical chain of obligations. More importantly, this version of environmentalist posterity brings future generations into the immediate purview of parental love. Even as the call to stewardship seems to trail off into the reaches of time, its use of synecdoche – the modelling of our attitude to future generations on our responsibilities to our offspring – replaces the terror of sublime infinity with the sentimentality of parental caring, sheltering, and nurturing. From Berry's original expression of it through its many incarnations, the primal, emotional punchline is that (every)man loves his children.

Such rhetorical manoeuvres are discernible in a wide range of late twentieth- and twenty-first-century cultural texts and artefacts, from media reportage to cinema, from popular science to poetry. Indeed, this parental rhetoric of posterity is possibly one of the most prevalent tactics in contemporary environmentalist discourse. Unsurprisingly, this rhetoric has turned ubiquitous with the deepening sense of global environmentalist crisis in this century in the face of anthropogenic climate change, part of an age of unprecedented human impact on the biosphere increasingly referred to as the Anthropocene. It is, therefore, simultaneously an expression of and response to the worries called forth by climate change. It frames our climate change concerns as a fear for future (human) generations and particularly for the most immediate of those – our offspring. It seems, too, that it allows us to convince ourselves that parental care is the obvious

[8] Mary Engelbreit, www.maryengelbreit.com. But Engelbreit should not be readily dismissed as racially insensitive: she gained attention for producing an anti-racist (and parentally themed) image in response to the police shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014; Diana Reese, 'Michael Brown's Mother Inspires Controversial Artwork by Mary Engelbreit', *Washington Post*, 25 August 2014.

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More Information

and most effective solution to climate change: if we just cared more about our children, we would be motivated to save them and everything would be all right.

The discourse of environmentalist crisis in the Anthropocene is peppered with such references to parental obligations to posterity, creating a sense of transcendence and timelessness on the one hand and conjuring up elemental feelings of care and love on the other. It is what, for example, gives especial power to British poet Ruth Padel's haunting climate change poem, 'Slices of Toast' (2007), an effective piece of environmentalist poetry thanks to its evocation of the poet's parents and child. The poem's lyrical description of environmental crisis is occasioned by a warm winter's day that is 'almost too warm'; it begins with memories of the colder winters of childhood and ends with worries about the future world.[9] Anxieties about disruptions in ocean flows, melting polar icecaps, and deadly weather events segue into the poet's memory of events at a public lecture by environmentalist James Lovelock: 'A woman in the auditorium asks: *If all you say / is true, what should we be teaching our children?*', to which Lovelock's deflated and defeated response is simply, '*I don't know. I really don't know*.'[10] All then turn out to be addressed, along with a final, unanswerable plea, to the poet's daughter. For if, indeed, all Lovelock says is true, then, 'the only answer is *commando skills*. / Fight to the death for any high ground you're standing on / my darling.'[11] The poem ends, self-aware but helpless all the same: 'I know the Thames Barrier, small waters / of our particular rivers, and this terrible readiness / to worry about your own family first, may be the least / of our problems but I think *my daughter, my daughter, / how is she going to deal with this?*'[12] The shift from planet to child may in rational terms be an abrupt one – it is 'a question' that Lovelock 'hadn't faced before' – but it flows, affectively speaking, with utter ease.[13] The repetition of '*my daughter*' strikes a note with the reader because of what the poet realises is everyone's 'terrible readiness' to think of the environment in terms of posterity.

The question that haunts Padel's Lovelock is evident in many other popular calls to environmental action. It is transformed in such rhetoric into a reason to act, a rationale for changing our ways in the present to make a better life for those in the future. The film *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) ends with Al Gore's affecting words to the audience: 'Future

[9] Ruth Padel, 'Slices of Toast', *London Review of Books*, 29.5 (8 March 2007), 31.
[10] Ibid., 31; original emphasis. [11] Ibid., 31; original emphasis. [12] Ibid., 31; original emphasis.
[13] Ibid., 31; original emphasis.

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generations may well have occasion to ask themselves, "What were our parents thinking? Why didn't they wake up when they had a chance?" We have to hear that question from them, now.'[14] Meanwhile, climate scientist James Hansen has titled his book on global warming *Storms of My Grandchildren* (2009) and includes photographs of those grandchildren at various points in the book. In his preface, beneath an image of his granddaughter at two, he opines: 'I did not want my grandchildren, someday in the future, to look back and say "Opa understood what was happening, but he did not make it clear".'[15] More recently, Hansen has joined with a group of twenty-one young people in Eugene, Oregon, to take legal action against the government of the United States; *Juliana* v. *United States* is a suit against governmental inaction on climate change on the grounds that this represents a violation of the constitutional rights of future adults (and, indeed, future humans, as Hansen's status as a plaintiff is both on behalf of his granddaughter and as guardian for future generations).[16] For Gore, Hansen, and others, 'we' have a parental duty to not just one generation but to countless many.

The affective appeal of parenthood gives a seeming common sense to environmentalist attitudes to posterity; hence the rhetorical certitude of Gore's closing remarks, Hansen's concerns, and Padel's pathos. But, as I hope to show in this book, the use of posterity as environmentalist rationale is not without its logical inconsistencies and ethical conundrums. The elision of non-human environment with human posterity is not something to be done lightly. For one thing, there are conflicting needs at stake: not just between the non-human biosphere at large (if such a thing can indeed be imagined) and the human species in its entirety, but among diverse non-human and human populations of the world. For another, even if these differences were somehow magically accounted for, there exists considerable difficulty in apprehending and measuring our obligations to fellow humans into the distant future, not to mention balancing present needs against these. The framing of posterity as parenthood – not just the expression of environmental obligations as a matter of posterity but the alignment of these with the language and norms associated with parenthood – is both an ethical response to these complexities and

[14] *An Inconvenient Truth*, dir. David Guggenheim, perf. Al Gore (Lawrence Bender Productions, 2006).
[15] James Hansen, *Storms of My Grandchildren: The Truth about the Coming Climate Catastrophe and Our Last Chance to Save Humanity* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), p. xii.
[16] 'Landmark U.S. Federal Climate Lawsuit', Our Children's Trust. www.ourchildrenstrust.org/us/federal-lawsuit

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More Information

a rhetorical overlay that glosses over their difficulty. That is, this rhetoric and the ethics that underpin it place the seemingly irresolvable questions around the environment and the future, and the anxieties that ensue from these, within the comforting frame of affection, love, and responsibility, distilling them down to the ostensibly universal concerns of parenthood. They attempt to transform, in other words, the unknowable into the knowable.

In spite – or perhaps because – of this, the parentally charged rhetoric and ethics of posterity are vulnerable to critique for their shortcomings and shortcuts. And, thus, even as it affords expressive space to parental accounts of posterity, the creative and cultural discourse around climate change (art, literature, film, and so on) is also the place where these might be open to critique. Probably one of the most prominent strands of such discourse is now being called climate change fiction, the novel being, even in an age of visual and digital media, an enduringly popular art form. In novels that deal with climate change, there are certainly instances in which representations of parental care are employed for their psychological purchase on the reader. At the same time, however, rather than celebrating such a position, many novels reveal this rhetorical manoeuvre to be based on a problematic ideal, riddled with ethical inconsistencies and bearing the burden, unsuccessfully, of collective climate change anxiety. That is, such fiction does not simply use the child as a convenient signifier for the future; it just as often actively interrogates this symbolic use of the child and the norms it calls forth, particularly scrutinising the narrowness of these expectations and showing them to be predicated on anthropocentric and politically conservative stereotypes to do with gender, sexual orientation, race, and economic privilege.

Thus, while the rise of 'posterity-as-parenthood' rhetoric is the premise – and, indeed, spur – for this book, its main argument is that contemporary climate change fiction does not necessarily reproduce this rhetoric unquestioningly, nor does it utilise it merely to assuage climate change anxiety (though, importantly, it does this to some extent). Rather, a striking number of climate change novels take the opportunity to query the adequacy of the parental response to a climate-changed world and, in some instances, replace this with radical versions of posterity that might be fitter for purpose in such a world. For climate change and other manifestations of this epoch have engendered something like a loss of innocence towards notions of selfhood, identity, care, and sympathy. But the critical knowledge that climate change has disclosed – the disruption it brings to humans' place in the world – is knowledge that is not confined to

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More Information

academic critique and philosophical esotericism. This new knowledge is discernible in the conversations, representations, and entertainments to be found in that relatively vernacular form of art, the climate change novel. I therefore suggest that it pays to scrutinise such fiction for the insights it yields. What this book seeks to achieve, then, is a critical consideration of the climate change novel and the self-reflective light that it sheds in the shadow of the Anthropocene.

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