

## Introduction

### *Imagination and Nature, 1808*

In early fall 1808, English adventurer Thomas Ashe arrived in Philadelphia and began preparing for a trip across the Appalachians and down the Ohio River on one leg in a journey of some ten thousand miles across North America. His account of this experience, published two years later in a volume titled *Travels in America*, presents a strange mix of travelogue, autobiography, natural history, and romance based on an amazing set of experiences that began in England and continued through Ireland, Switzerland, France, Prussia, Portugal, Holland, Corsica, the Isle of Man, and North America. Ashe's leaps from country to country and from occupation to occupation, as he tells it, were prompted by escapades with women inconveniently related to his superiors: Melanie, the daughter of his merchant-boss; Nora, the mistress of an English earl; Seline, "one of the fairest daughters of Vevay in Switzerland." Destitute at the end of this exhausting train of new places and occupations, Ashe, like so many others, turned to America as his "future lot."

From Baltimore, he traveled west in 1799, purchased a "wretched farm" and a black woman named Faveen, and launched into another new life as an American pioneer. He was afflicted by fevers, attacked by a panther, harassed by Indians, and bitten by a rattlesnake, thereby conforming, as he said, "to the customs and manners of an ordinary frontier settler." Faveen bore him two children but, after a few years, Ashe grew tired of his life as "a mere demi-savage" and once again abandoned his mistress and his occupation. He moved to Washington and then to Montreal, where he met Canadian naturalist Sir John Johnstone. Fascinated by Johnstone's cabinet of curiosities, Ashe adopted a new occupation, inquiring into the "earth, its animals, vegetables, minerals, and other productions." He

hunted the fields and shores around Montreal for shells and fossils, and in less than six months he could expatiate upon “every instance in which the hand of the Deity was conspicuous.” Soon, he thought, his name would be “known throughout all the nations of the earth,” and this is why he set his sights on the Ohio Valley in 1808.<sup>1</sup>

While in Canada, Ashe had come across a publication by Charles Willson Peale, owner of the Philadelphia Museum, who, with his sons, had recently exhumed the bones of a mammoth in the bogs of upper New York. This consummate natural curiosity captured Ashe’s imagination: Here was evidence of a monstrous beast that roamed the woods a thousand years ago, an animal as “cruel as the bloody panther, swift as the descending eagle, and terrible as the angel of night,” Ashe wrote, pirating his material from Peale’s museum pamphlet. Having fixed on a new goal, he set out for Big Bone Lick near the mouth of the Kentucky River, where according to reports, hundreds of mammoth bones could be gathered with relatively little effort.<sup>2</sup>

From Philadelphia, he traveled westward by horseback and, in early October, once again found himself mingling with the backcountry folk of the American West. His assessment of this pioneering society was harsh but not uniform. “I assure you,” he wrote, “that when I expressed the supreme disgust excited in me by the people of the United States, the ladies were by no means included in the general censure.” At one stop, the daughter of the tavern keeper showed him to his room after the evening meal, and Ashe entreated her to tarry: “Her person was tall and elegant; her eyes were large and blue; her features regular and animated and expressive of a pride and a dignity which the meanest clothing . . . could neither destroy nor conceal.” In the tradition of the traveling naturalist, he queried her about the “natural curiosities in the neighbourhood, the face of the country, manners, books, &c.” and, in the tradition of the traveling raconteur, he posed the equally foreseeable question: “By what accident has one so lovely in person, so improved in understanding, and so delicate in mind, become the inhabitant of these . . . gloomy woods?” His companion explained that her father was an Irish nobleman who took refuge in America and in his abominably provincial situation took

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Ashe, *Confessions of Captain Ashe, . . . Written by Himself* (London, 1815), Vol. 2, pp. 54, 56, 64–9, 105–6, 109, 111–15, 120–9, 133–8, 191–6, 201.

<sup>2</sup> Ashe, *Confessions*, Vol. 2, pp. 196–200; Thomas Ashe, *Travels in America, Performed in 1808, for the Purpose of Exploring the Rivers Alleghany, Monongahela, Ohio, and Mississippi* (Newburyport, 1808), p. 4. See “Skeleton of the Mammoth Is Now to Be Seen at the Museum,” *Broad-sides, American Philosophical Society* (hereafter APS), 1801.

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to drinking. His wife died of a broken heart and this, in turn, condemned the well-bred but lonely daughter to a life of “unmerited misery” in the Pennsylvania backcountry.<sup>3</sup> This exchange confirmed Ashe’s judgment that wilderness living was incompatible with true civilization.

A few days after this encounter, Ashe was overtaken by nightfall on an Allegheny ridge, “where the road was narrow and bounded by frightful precipices.” The way ahead, he wrote in his *Travels*, promised only “a sudden and rapid death” but to go back seemed no less perilous: “wolves, panthers, and tiger cats were at hand to devour me.” Faced with this Hobson’s choice, he bedded down on the mountain, there being “less of fatal certainty in it.” As he hunkered down beside his horse, “clouds of owls” rose from the valleys and “flitted screaming” about his head, and the distant howls of the wolf “reverberated from mountain to mountain.” Startling images flooded his mind. “Every tree, shrub, plant, and vegetable harboured some thousands of inhabitants, endowed with the facility of expressing their passions, wants, and appetites in different tones and varied modulations.” When the howling finally stopped, he imagined a scenario unfolding down the canyon: a deer, perhaps hearing the hellish cries of the wolf at hand, “turns, stops, and trembles; his eyes fill; his flanks heave; his heart bursts, and he dies the moment before the monster rushes upon him.” Toward daybreak, a new specter broke upon Ashe’s sleepless mind: a panther, lurking in the brush, would “never . . . be . . . heard till in the act of springing on his victim, when he utters a horrid cry.” Somehow Ashe survived this nocturnal ordeal, and day dawned with the sound of a whippoorwill. The “noisy . . . world now withdrew and left to Nature a silent solemn repose.”<sup>4</sup>

Ashe’s English readers no doubt found these sublime flights of fancy compelling, but Americans were not much amused by his clouds of owls and lurking panthers. Although his *Travels in America* was widely read, American reviewers uniformly dismissed it as an “extravagant episode” written by a man with a “natural appetite for the marvelous.” Geographer John Bristed, writing in 1818, enumerated the various writers who fell short of his own precise descriptions and insisted that “the silliest of these” was the “*soi-disant* military officer” Thomas Ashe. Another pronounced *Travels* nothing more than “prejudice and invective,” and still another

<sup>3</sup> “Travellers in America,” *Niles’ Weekly Register* 2 (April 18, 1812): pp. 94, 114; Ashe, *Travels*, pp. 12–13; Ashe in Henry T. Tuckerman, *America and Her Commentators, with a Critical Sketch of Travel in the United States* (New York, 1864), p. 204.

<sup>4</sup> Ashe, *Travels*, pp. 15–18.

found his account so “void of truth as to deprive him of all claim to veracity.” Christian Schultz, who passed through the Ohio Valley in 1810, decided after reading Ashe’s work that it was, in his opinion, concocted wholesale from *The Pittsburgh Navigator*, a pilot’s guide to the Ohio River; “nor does he [Schultz] believe that any such person ever travelled the route pretended to be described.” In fact, Schultz was at least partly wrong, because another critic discovered Ashe subsequently tutoring children in French in Cincinnati under the name of Arville. This, he added, “is the same man, who afterwards, to the astonishment of those who knew him at Cincinnati, published three volumes of *Travels*, which have become in America almost proverbial for their extraordinary and gratuitous lies.”<sup>5</sup>

Ashe’s next moves are something of a mystery. A decade or so earlier, Cincinnati’s most prominent gentleman-naturalist, Dr. William Goforth, spent four days at the nearby Big Bone Lick collecting a wagonload of fossil bones and teeth, which George Turner of the American Philosophical Society thought to be the remains of “no less than six nondescript quadrupeds, most of them gigantic!” Hoping to sell the collection, Goforth shipped it upriver to Pittsburgh, where a representative from the American Academy of Arts and Sciences described it in 1793 in terms much like Turner’s. In 1804, the collection caught the eye of Thomas Jefferson, who was then engaged in a debate with European naturalists over the relative size and vigor of American and European fauna. In a show of national pride, Jefferson instructed Meriwether Lewis to stop at Big Bone Lick on his way west to the Louisiana Territory to gather more mammoth bones. Jefferson stored Lewis’s bones in the East Room of the White House and dispatched American Philosophical Society President Casper Wistar and later University of Pennsylvania Professor Benjamin Smith Barton to Pittsburgh to procure those gathered by Goforth. However, by then, according to the *American Quarterly*, Goforth’s collection had “attracted the attention of a foreign swindler named *Thomas Arville*, alias *Ashe*, who obtained permission of the owner to ship them to Europe for exhibition.” The doctor apparently never heard from Ashe again.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Tuckerman, *America and Her Commentators*, p. 203; John Bristed, *The Resources of the United States of America* (New York, 1818), p. 4; John Palmer, *Journal of Travels in the United States of North America, and in Lower Canada, Performed in the Year 1817* (London, 1818), pp. iii; 293n; Christian Schultz, *Travels on an Inland Voyage Through the States of New-York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Ohio, Kentucky, and Tennessee* (New York, 1810), Vol. 1, p. v. See *North American Review* 3 (July 1816): p. 230.

<sup>6</sup> American Academy of Arts and Sciences *Memoirs* 1 (Part 1, 1793): p. 119; Thomas Jefferson to Benjamin Smith Barton, October 10, 1796, Benjamin Smith Barton Papers, Correspondence, Pennsylvania Historical Society; *American Quarterly* in *North American*

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Ashe stowed his “grand collection of stupendous bones” in the hold of a river vessel and continued down the Ohio. He explored the Wabash, Mississippi, and Missouri rivers gathering more natural curiosities, among them the remains of a “huge carnivorous animal” that was clearly, in Peale’s borrowed words, as “cruel as the bloody panther, swift as the descending eagle, and terrible as the angel of night.” Ashe next stopped in Natchez, hoping to sell his augmented collection for \$10,000. Samuel Brown, another American Philosophical Society member, rushed to the city to negotiate but, by this time, the collection was on its way to New Orleans. Brown proceeded southward but sent a message east to Philadelphia: “Send one of the . . . Peales or some other confidential person to the Big Bone Lick where I am confident a most valuable collection might be procured at a trifling expense.”<sup>7</sup>

From New Orleans, Ashe shipped out for Liverpool but, on his arrival, the customs-house officials imposed a steep duty on his collection and refused to allow it ashore. Short of funds, Ashe was forced to consign his six tons of “first-rate curiosities” to William Bullock, a well-known Liverpool museum proprietor, “for the . . . contemptible sum of two hundred pounds.” The indomitable explorer continued to capitalize on his collection by delivering public lectures at the Liverpool museum. On the mammoth bones he noted some teeth marks, clearly indicating that nature had “formed some huge carnivorous animal” capable of subduing even this enormous beast. He displayed the remains of the great predator he procured on his western travels: a creature of “inexpressible grandeur and sublimity,” some sixty feet long and twenty-five feet high, whose clawed foot, “possibly of the order of *ferae*,” suggested a predator, he told his enraptured audience, “cruel as the bloody panther, swift as the descending eagle, and terrible as the angel of night.” Having unveiled this ultimate curiosity of nature, Ashe retired to a garret to compose a memoir far more curious than any set of mammoth bones tucked away in a Liverpool museum.<sup>8</sup>

*Review* 3 (July 1816): p. 230; *Monthly American Journal of Geology and Natural Science* 1 (October 1831): pp. 161–2; Zadok Cramer, *The Navigator; Containing Directions for Navigating the Monongahela, Allegheny, Ohio, and Mississippi Rivers* (Pittsburgh, 1811), pp. 117–18; Palmer, *Journal of Travels*, p. 100; William Newnham Blane, *An Excursion Through the United States and Canada During the Years 1822–23* (London, 1824), p. 132.

<sup>7</sup> Ashe, *Travels*, p. 42; Samuel Brown to Thomas Jefferson, n.d., Caspar Wistar Papers, APS; Joseph Kastner, *A Species of Eternity* (New York, 1977), p. 129.

<sup>8</sup> *Monthly American Journal of Geology and Natural Science* 1 (October 1831): pp. 161–2; Ashe, *Travels*, pp. 7–8, 4–44; Ashe, *Confessions*, pp. 204–5, 210, 215–16; Palmer, *Journal of Travels*, p. 100.

The reasons for Ashe's flights of fancy are hard to fathom: Was he, as some suggested, a compulsive liar? Did he embellish his natural history to attract readers? Was he exaggerating these wilderness terrors to discourage emigration from England? Perhaps it was Ashe, who collected much of his data from locals, who was gullible, a possibility suggested by his relation to a Native American named Cuff, who guided him through the Ohio Valley. Each night before bedding down, Cuff, who was obliged to call Ashe "master," would find a way to turn the campfire conversation to rattlesnakes, a creature Ashe feared more than any other in America, adding details "sufficient to appal the stoutest heart." A child of the Enlightenment, Ashe ridiculed the "sorcery and supernatural power [that] gains great dominion over every savage mind" – a perspective he no doubt shared with Cuff – but he was fully prepared to believe that Indians like his companion could establish a "tyranny . . . over rattle-snakes" through supernatural means. Each night after Cuff expounded on his favorite bedtime topic, Ashe would command him to perform "certain rites and incantations, in the manner of his country, and which had the faculty of checking the advances of snakes." Cuff readily obliged, inscribing a circle around the campsite with a stick and dropping a precise number of carefully chosen leaves on the circle. He concluded with three "infernal yells" and then, "under a decided impression . . . of safety," fell asleep beside the fretful Ashe.<sup>9</sup>

### The Search for Meaning in Nature

Whether fantasy or fabrication, Ashe's account brings into focus the gap between nature as it was and nature as the early nineteenth-century naturalist saw it. Ashe is one of many scientific travelers who crossed the eastern continent between 1730 and 1850. Some, like Ashe, were mere dilettantes, whereas others dedicated their lives to understanding nature. Eclectic observers, they commented on everything from antiquities to zoology, including, as with Ashe, the human condition in this wilderness environment. Mark Catesby, John and William Bartram, François-André Michaux, Henry Schoolcraft, Alexander Wilson, Charles Lyell, Thomas Nuttall, John James Audubon, and, of course, Meriwether Lewis are only the best known among hundreds of like-minded explorer-naturalists, and each interpreted the natural landscape according to a combination of detached observation, scientific speculation, and unlicensed imagination.

<sup>9</sup> Ashe, *Travels*, pp. 136–7, 243.

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Ashe's tale was extravagant, but no account was free of what New York's Gouverneur Morris called "the influence of exaggerated description." According to Morris, the encounter with unexplored landscapes could easily unhinge the intellect: "Those awful forests which have shaded through untold ages a boundless extent," he wrote, invariably "dazzled the eye of reason and led the judgment astray." Even Schultz, so disparaging of Ashe's night on the Appalachian ridge, found himself trembling at the "distant howlings" of the wolves in circumstances similar to those Ashe experienced. At one point, he and his companions found the wolves "becoming such near neighbours that we began to recollect all the dreadful tales and disasters which we had heard upon our travels." He cut himself a "good cudgel" and spent the night banging on a log to "make as much noise as we could, in order to let the wolves know we were not afraid of them." Accounts like these highlight the difficulty of separating science and imagination in the era of continental exploration. In the light of day, the Appalachian forest looked different to Ashe and Schultz, and to another generation, traveling under less threatening circumstances, the American wilderness would look different yet again.<sup>10</sup>

If these first scientific encounters with nature in America so dazzled the eye and bewildered the judgment, why should we take them seriously today? This was a question that nagged Charles Sprague Sargent in 1889 as he composed his thoughts for an introduction to the collected works of America's great pre-Darwinian botanist, Asa Gray. "The value of these papers . . . is historical only," Sargent wrote. "All that they contain of permanent usefulness has already been incorporated in standard works upon the science." The rest, he implied, had been eclipsed by the convulsion in thinking brought on by publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859. In a period "marked by the gradual change of ideas among naturalists upon the origin and fixity of the species," Sargent concluded, Gray's scientific insights, so novel and exciting when he wrote them down in the 1850s, were either stale scientific truisms or blatant error.<sup>11</sup>

In fact, there are important reasons for returning to these early naturalists, even though their works are tinged by imagination and outdated by the Darwinian revolution. First, their achievements constitute an

<sup>10</sup> Gouverneur Morris, *Notes on the United States of America* (Philadelphia, 1806), p. 22; Schultz, *Travels on an Inland Voyage*, p. 162. See Calvin Colton, *Tour of the American Lakes and Among the Indians of the North-West Territory in 1830* (London, 1833), p. 33.

<sup>11</sup> Asa Gray, *Scientific Papers of Asa Gray*, compiled by Charles Sprague Sargent (Boston, 1889), pp. iv–v.



important benchmark in our national experience. In the years between Mark Catesby's explorations in the 1730s and those of John James Audubon a century later, scientists produced the first detailed account of the state of nature in America – its rocks, minerals, climates, plants, animals, birds, insects, fish, and diseases, among other things. Although laced with imagination, this was the foundation for our scientific – and popular – understanding of the continent. It summarizes America's search for meaning in nature and, given the complexity of this continental field of study, it was no mean accomplishment. Ashe's claim to have traveled some ten thousand miles by foot, horse, and boat was not as extravagant as some of his boasts and, in a saner moment, he reflected that "whoever dares to compose the history of nature [in America] should first pass a night where I did; he would . . . there learn that though gifted with a thousand years of life, and aided by ten thousand assistants, he still would be hardly nearer to his purpose."<sup>12</sup> Not only was the West scientifically uncharted, but in 1808 it also was unmapped and often dangerous. More than clouds of owls and lurking panthers awaited these footsore naturalists in the western wilderness.

Although we fancy our love of nature to be a modern development, its origins lie in the myth-laced scientific tomes left by these explorer-scientists. These were the writers who fixed the idea of nature in the American mind and placed it at the core of our national consciousness. Their taxonomies revealed the tremendous diversity of this vast continental wilderness, and their journals interpreted its economic and cultural significance. Their explorations helped forge what historian Clarence Glacken called a "feeling for nature" – a people's understanding of the natural environment communicated through art, literature, and other public venues.<sup>13</sup> The art and literature of the Romantic period were important statements of this feeling, but it was the scientific explorer in the trans-Appalachian West who provided the imaginative appraisal that set the tone for these cultural expressions.

Second, the science that emerged from this assessment was far more enduring than Sargent would have us believe. These naturalists absorbed the great imaginative ideas of the pre-Darwinian age – the balance of nature, the transforming sublimity of the primeval landscape, the purpose,

<sup>12</sup> Ashe, *Travels*, p. 17.

<sup>13</sup> Clarence J. Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley, 1969), pp. 27, 173.



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order, and unity inherent in creation – and made them American. These ideas satisfy a deep-seated need to understand our relation to nature, and their application to the American landscape was an important development in our cultural history. “The idea that nature is orderly, that its order is rational and effective, that it is for the most part a stable, self-equilibrating order, is the most precious idea modern science has given us,” environmental historian Donald Worster wrote.<sup>14</sup> Clearly, it is important to understand how this idea became part of the national idiom.

Finally, and most important for our purposes, this search for meaning in nature takes us to the roots of the American conservation movement. At the turn of the twentieth century, America emerged as a leader in forest, wildlife, and wilderness conservation, having created the world’s first national parks, its first public game refuges, its first national forests, and its first full-blown preservationist and conservationist ideologies. Despite the global importance of these achievements, the history of American conservation is poorly represented. Its chronology is usually reduced to a few obvious benchmarks involving well-known literary and artistic figures like Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, James Fenimore Cooper, and George Catlin, and a handful of conservation pioneers like George Perkins Marsh, Gifford Pinchot, and John Muir. Yet this litany of a few dozen careers in conservation begs the question: Can such a world-shaping idea flow from such a thin national tradition? It seems unlikely, but if we add to this the early naturalists who voiced a collective concern for the natural landscape in the first half of the century, a fuller story emerges. Conservation, as it turns out, is more deeply embedded in American history than we might imagine.

America’s conservation giants drew upon three essential ideas that first took shape in the minds of their early nineteenth-century predecessors: a practical concern for protecting those species of birds, animals, and trees deemed useful to human society; a romantic appreciation for the beauty of natural form and primitive landscape; and a close understanding of the complex biological interdependencies that sustain all natural systems. These themes – commercial utility, romantic attraction, and ecological necessity – became the foundation for turn-of-the-century conservation, and they are so ingrained in our environmental consciousness today that we hardly give them a second thought. To understand their origins and

<sup>14</sup> Donald Worster, *Nature’s Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (New York, 1977), p. ix.

evolution, we must turn to the pre-Darwinian era, where they were formulated and popularized as part of the process of creating a natural history of America.

Environmental historians have all but ignored this corpus of pre-Darwinian scientific literature, partly because it *is* pre-Darwinian and partly because they often fail to see beyond the simple taxonomical compilations so common to this era. Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind*, the most significant modern survey of the American idea of nature, hardly mentions natural history apart from Thoreau, and Donald Worster's *Nature's Economy* likewise relies on Thoreau to represent the American pre-Darwinian naturalist tradition. The reasons for this neglect have to do with the widespread impression that pre-Darwinians saw the world as frozen in time and compartmentalized in arrangement – as a list of parts rather than as a set of organic relations. Natural history was a cataloging exercise, its goal being “simply to describe, name and classify the diverse riches of nature,” as historian Martin Rudwick puts it. Raymond Stearns notes in his sweeping *Science in the British Colonies of America* that early naturalists pursued three primary objectives: collection, classification, and nomenclature.<sup>15</sup> In this view, scientific exploration was little more than an epic quest to fill out the list of American species.

Absent the environmental historian, these early naturalists have been left largely to literary biographers, who typically focus on one individual and examine a personal and subjective relationship to nature, an exercise that tells us much about the inner geography of the explorer but little about the physical or cultural geography through which the explorer traveled. Scientific biographers, also active in this field, tell us more about the physical and intellectual milieu, but they seldom take the explorer's subjectivity seriously. Most assume a positivist framework that locates the individual in a general transition from natural philosophy to empirical science. Like Sargent, these biographers see the scientist emerging out of the shell of the “old-style, romantic naturalist” and dismiss the shell as a matter of mere “historical” interest. As science moves inevitably toward

<sup>15</sup> Martin Rudwick, “Minerals, Strata, and Fossils,” in N. Jardine, J. A. Secord, and E. C. Spary, *Cultures of Natural History* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 269; Raymond Phineas Stearns, *Science in the British Colonies of America* (Urbana, 1970), p. 6. See Ella M. Foshay, *Reflections of Nature: Flowers in American Art* (New York, 1984), pp. 29, 30–1; James P. Ronda, “Dreams and Discoveries: Exploring the American West, 1760–1815,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd ser. 46 (January 1989): pp. 145–62, 146.