

Rivers and the River

America the Beautiful. It's one of the few national bromides I've never dismissed. When Europeans probed the New World, God knows what they actually saw. They must have been stunned. Great chunks of Eurasia had been cultivated for so long that vestal landscapes were likely unknown. Adriaen van der Donck, a Dutchman in mid-seventeenth-century New Netherland, lacked the Puritanical wilderness jitters terrorizing English settlers to his east. Reflecting upon what was then the North River, now the Hudson, he admitted his incompetency "to describe the beauties, the grand and sublime works, wherewith Providence has diversified this land," noting simultaneously—without the irony the identical divergence commands today—the commercial potential locked in that same sublimity. There are "brooks having many fine falls," Van der Donck went on, "which are suitable for every kind of milling work . . . [and] the oak trees are very large; from sixty to seventy feet high without knots, and from two to three fathoms thick." Since Van der Donck's time, this blend of the poet's awe with the shipwright's necessity has wreaked great anxiety in the American soul, as with the advent of heavy industry and an abundance of wild land, our relationship to nature has grown increasingly complex, poisoning us always between the urge to protect and the need to destroy.

The land, of course, wasn't unknown to human hands, only looking that way to newcomers. Natives regularly burned forest understories to promote game browse, and though less visibly than Europeans, they tilled soil, particularly in what is now eastern America, growing mostly corn, squash, and beans. By and large, though, the land was pure. A healthy Native reciprocity with nature, combined with a lack of industry, kept humans of the Americas far more inclusive in the natural world than the Europeans that came to them. Dimensional

lumber, molten ore, industrial tanning solution—these and others were largely unknown to the New World, but the clash came, and when it did, the Natives weren't above their own fractious stirrings. Tribes of the Iroquois and Algonquin—among the first to encounter Europeans—did much to extirpate beavers and other wildlife in order to get their hands on the axes, guns, booze, cloth, and other goods that must have seemed dropped from heaven. Neither Native cultures nor their landscapes were ever the same, a trend that tracked westward. Nature was seen as resource, and accordingly demolished. Murkier currents, however, shadowed the European juggernaut. The natural world's beauties—subtle, soothing, terrifying—stayed the destruction somewhat, and throughout this period to today America the Beautiful has endured.

Not long before our child was born, Karen and I saw Paul Stamets speak in Manhattan. A bearded man in a floppy hat, Stamets looks like he's been studying mushrooms all his life and has. Working the old-growth forests of Washington and Oregon, he's discovered properties in mycelium that could potentially cure many ills, among them bioterrorist threats such as small pox and anthrax. "I'm a patriotic American primarily for one reason," he said. "We still have old-growth forests," a thought that hit hard. From its origin, America has had enough regard for its wilderness to have pulled through two centuries of unfettered industry with large tracts either untouched or on the mend. Much of this has to do with nature's resilience, but much else with the nation's pelagic theology, the need to walk outside and say "My God," and it's for this, if for other things, that we're truly gifted.

Rivers, of course, are endemic to terrain, to life too, and America is rich in rivers. Flowing water runs in great quantities here, thatching us like capillaries, and where it doesn't the big waters—the Missouri, Colorado, Green, Rio Grande—live in our imaginations. From Huckleberry Finn and *Shenandoah* to "Proud Mary" and David Byrne, from Faulkner's *Old Man* to Nick Adams' "Big Two-Hearted River" to sad, screeching Ned Beatty in *Deliverance*, rivers feed American culture as much as they water its land. Like any American male under fifty, I've probably watched *Apocalypse Now* thirty times, all in my teens. If Do Lung River isn't in America, it dwells in American minds, at least in generations of its boys. My dad watched it too, having recognized the film's theft of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. "Whenever you're

reading a book,” he said, “and come across moving water, get your pencil out. A river is never just a river.”

Rivers draw people for many reasons. Water, yes, but much else. The Euphrates, the Nile, the Jordan, the Tigris—these and others live in humanity’s collective mind because people sat upon their banks and wove a story, stirred by moving water. “I’ve known rivers,” Langston Hughes wrote, “Ancient, dusky rivers / My soul has grown deep like the rivers.” Rivers are of water, and water is the source, and scarcely a creature has lived that hasn’t pondered its origin. Norman Mclean, then, might speak for all life:

Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world’s great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs.

I am haunted by waters.

Oceans receive rivers, and just as all water flows in and out of the sea, all literature seems to flow from one man, Herman Melville, who delved origin like no one else. At *Moby Dick’s* outset, he fingers water as the source of human wonder:

There now is your insular city of the Manhattoes, belted round by wharves as Indian isles by coral reefs—commerce surrounds it with her surf. Right and left, the streets take you waterward. Its extreme down-town is the battery, where that noble mole is washed by waves, and cooled by breezes which a few hours previous were out of sight of land. Look at the crowds of water-gazers there.

Circumambulate the city of a dreamy Sabbath afternoon. Go from Corlears Hook to Coenties Slip, and from thence, by Whitehall, northward. What do you see?—Posted like silent sentinels all around the town, stand thousands upon thousands of mortal men fixed in ocean reveries. Some leaning against the spiles; some seated upon the pier-heads; some looking over the bulwarks of ships from China; some high aloft in the rigging, as if striving to get a still better seaward peep. But these are all landmen; of

week days pent up in lath and plaster—tied to counters, nailed to benches, clinched to desks. How then is this? Are the green fields gone? What do they here?"

What they did there was contemplate, for even as it relaxes, water terrifies, reveals as it disassembles. We come to it for answers, if not as mad as Ahab, then certainly with the same questions.

Physically and mythically, some rivers are bigger than others. I pushed a canoe into Henderson Lake having scant knowledge of the Hudson beyond a general understanding that it has swayed much of American history. Melville, after all, wasn't describing the ocean, but where the Hudson and Atlantic push into one another. Though he set his book in far-flung whaling grounds, he drew much from Hudson imagery, knowing this river infused the American character. Nearly a third of the Revolution's battles, after all, were fought inside this watershed, and from Henry Hudson to the steamship to Finch Pruyn to Thomas Cole to Pete Seeger, the Hudson is fogged with import.

Many people take this all the way, dubbing the Hudson "America's River," a tag I can't quite apply. The Mississippi, for instance, is certainly a prime competitor, and as words make up much of what we are, nothing eclipses Abe Lincoln's news after the Battle of Vicksburg. "The Father of Waters again moves unvexed to the sea," he wrote, communicating far more than a Northern victory.

Personally, as well, it's difficult to live outside your own experience. "We love the things we love for what they are," Robert Frost ends his tribute to an ephemeral New England rivulet, "Hyla Brook." I grew up near the Hudson in Connecticut, but hardly went near it. People didn't do that in the 1970s. As a kid, I once thumbed a *Mad* magazine. They'd sketched Evel Knievel swimming the Hudson, saying for his greatest stunt he should cross it. His gasping face lay amid trash and poison barrels and dead, three-eyed fish, telling all. Karen's mother, too, grew up in Glens Falls, and scarcely knows the river that defines it. In the mid twentieth century, she said, no one went there, or barely mentioned it. As in Houston, where they say the refinery stench smells like money, if befouling the Hudson was contingent to a strong economy, then that was good enough. I spent my time on other waters, hunting, fishing, and trapping with my father at a family cabin in Pennsylvania's Endless Mountains. I know myself and my dad and the world-at-large, then, through the creeks and springlets there,

some no wider than a human leg. These creeks are more salient to me than the Mississippi, which I've only seen from a couple bridges.

Myth, though, is hard to escape, and there it is, the Hudson, a boulder among pebbles. I had one sense of this. We crossed the Hudson countless times on our way to Pennsylvania, over the Newburgh-Beacon Bridge, the only time I ever saw it. Once, alone with my father, he looked upstream, where summer twilight streaked the wide, breezy water. It almost looked clean. "You can really see why he thought he'd found it," he said. I didn't know what he meant, but even before I asked, his inflection had said enough. This river was more than a filthy canal.

Over time, the Hudson seeped into me, as it does consciously or not to most Americans. If I can't call it America's river, it certainly is an emblematic register of our past, present, and future, given its four-hundred-year settlement. From trappers' first contact with Natives to its primacy in the Revolution to connections with whaling, logging, and the Erie Canal, the Hudson is vital to understanding both Colonial and early American history, not to mention it as the locus for much of the nation's artistic origins and the birth of the frontier myth. Following the Civil War, as well, this textured account doesn't stop. Hard industry rose and fell here in the form of brickyards and paper mills, quarry blasting and iron mongering, General Electric and General Motors, and it contributed to the early computer revolution with IBM's Poughkeepsie operation. Stemming from this, and central to present-day tribulations, is the discord between modern convenience and environmental destruction, and the Hudson represents nothing if not this friction's topography.

Racial unrest, too, pervades the Hudson, which saw a contentious event in 1987 Newburgh, as well as slavery and points along the Underground Railroad. Presidents have been reared in the Hudson Valley, agriculture has flourished and waned, risen again, while a nuclear plant still operates twenty-four miles from New York City. The Hudson saw the surge of ethnic political machines in the nineteenth century, the first federally mandated Environmental Impact Statement at Storm King Mountain, and Benedict Arnold's West Point treason, where today's officers prepare for the country's divisive wars. The river, then, is a place to sift the American experience, and to do it by canoe was more luck than I could ask. Having spent five months with a daughter at my side, I convinced myself the trip wouldn't be

much over her life span. Soon after, I strapped the new canoe to my brother-in-law's minivan then drove with him up the Taconic Parkway, over to I-87, and on into the Adirondacks, intermittently feeling that the free life had never left me.