

## **Review: Earth Repair: A Transatlantic History of Environmental Restoration**

By Marcus Hall

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Marcus Hall. *Earth Repair: A Transatlantic History of Environmental Restoration*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005. 310 pp. ISBN 0-8139-2341-7. US\$45.99 (trade cloth).

Hall has walked in the footsteps of the great George Perkins Marsh, and then continued to follow the route that those footsteps might have taken if Marsh had, by some miracle, survived until the present day. Doubtless, others might have different visions of the path that Marsh might have continued to develop, but Hall writes with sensitive scholarship and achieves a very credible overview of the historic directions of environmental restoration.

Probably most environmentalists have heard of Marsh as the author of *Man and Nature* (1864): the monumental text which opened up the worldwide concern about and debate upon man's impact on the environment. Probably few today have returned to that volume or know about the total corpus of Marsh's scholarship. A lawyer, politician, diplomat, linguist and scholar, Marsh became the great conservationist thinker of the century. Unlike many United States scholars, he believed that a great deal could be learned from other countries. He focused upon Italy, which was to become his second homeland, arguing that differences rather than similarities made transnational insights so important. The end result was that he was recognised as a great analyst and mentor in both countries and exerted a very significant influence upon both, especially in relation to landscape and land resource management.

Hall provides an invaluable review of the history of ideas underlying land restoration. Marsh started with the assumption that people were the primary agents of land degradation, and hence should accept the central responsibility in restoration, however that was defined. Moreover, he argued that nature could not by itself repair the damage caused by human beings. But he remained optimistic that if we were prepared to commit ourselves, setting out to thoughtfully repair the damage we had caused, we could eventually do so, even though it might not be possible to totally return the land to its original condition. He also challenged the prevailing idea that intelligent, conscientious humans improved natural systems, arguing that many such endeavors actually damaged the land, not only directly, but unexpectedly, unknowingly and unintentionally. He wrote, in *Man and*

*Nature*, "I have more than once alluded to the collateral and unsought consequences of human action as being often more momentous than the direct and desired results" (Hall, p.37).

I find it interesting that both Marsh, and in his footsteps, Hall has made a significant contribution to unraveling the underlying meanings of many familiar terms that are applied quite differently in different cultural settings. Thus 'nature' in the United States is seen as being wild and in fact, is often simply seen as almost synonymous with 'wilderness', a term and usage not commonly heard elsewhere. On the other hand, 'nature' in Europe is seen as the ordered layout that results from thousands of years of human action. Given these differences, restoration in North America might well be termed *re-wilding* and that in Europe as *re-naturing* or even *reparative gardening*.

So, I recommend this book to those concerned to arrive at a much better understanding of our basic assumptions about nature and the environment. From a practitioner perspective, it adds to the small number of recently published seminal texts that together provide a basis for better theory and practice about land restoration. It adds to the already excellent bases provided by Kendle & Forbes and since by Higgs (See my review in *EGJ*, 20).

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