

**Review: Pilgrimage to Vallombrosa: From Vermont to Italy in the  
Footsteps of George Perkins Marsh**

By John Elder

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John Elder. *Pilgrimage to Vallombrosa: From Vermont to Italy in the Footsteps of George Perkins Marsh*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006. 282 pp. ISBN:0-8139-2576-2 (cloth: acid-free paper) \$US29.95.

George Perkins Marsh, generally regarded as one of America's first environmentalists, wrote the influential conservation treatise *Man and Nature* (1863) which helped inspire the environmental movement. John Elder traces his path in Italy, where Marsh served as an American diplomat, and chronicles his effect on subsequent environmental writers.

*Man and Nature* is a conservation classic which Elder references while trying to calculate the impact Marsh had on others. Elder and Marsh, who was born there in 1801, are both Vermonters. Elder now teaches English at Middlebury College. Elder's trip to Italy on a Fulbright scholarship was a means to reflect upon the experiences of Marsh, who sought to restrain human actions that would lead to the demise of the natural environment that they depended upon.

Elder writes: "Marsh's most important gift was his acuteness of physical observation and his ability to bring all his learning to bear on the lineaments of a particular landscape. He was a looker and remembered. Gazing out over a deforested, eroded landscape in the Mediterranean world, he at once remembered the ancient civilization that had flourished there before destroying its soil and silting in its harbor and recalled the careless cutting around his Woodstock home that had already displaced many farmers and ruined the fishing. Describing both regions, his intent was to help his readers visualize the inevitable effects of their actions unless they were quickly reversed" (p. 224).

Elder's book is also a public pilgrimage to gather from Marsh's experiences lessons that apply to modern problems; he finds arguments in the works of Marsh that might successfully (perhaps more so than a "radical" preservationist) convince a modern, mainstream audience to change. "From Marsh's stories, as from the Greek myth and the Apache narrative, emerges the same insight: we human beings *are* the potential catastrophe from which we seek to protect the wilderness and diversity of the world. From which we ourselves must be protected. We are the perpetually hungry hunters and the restless loggers. This is the context within which the concept of stewardship needs to be cultivated, as opposed to any sense of moral obligation or of sophisticated approaches to "managing the earth" (p. 225).

Elder's prose is inspiring and sophisticated, as he maps out three landscapes: environmental history, poetry, and natural landscapes. One finds here appreciation of the natural environment, and emotionally evocative prose. One leaves the book convinced that action needs to be taken; if not for the rest of the creatures we share the world with, then at least for ourselves.

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