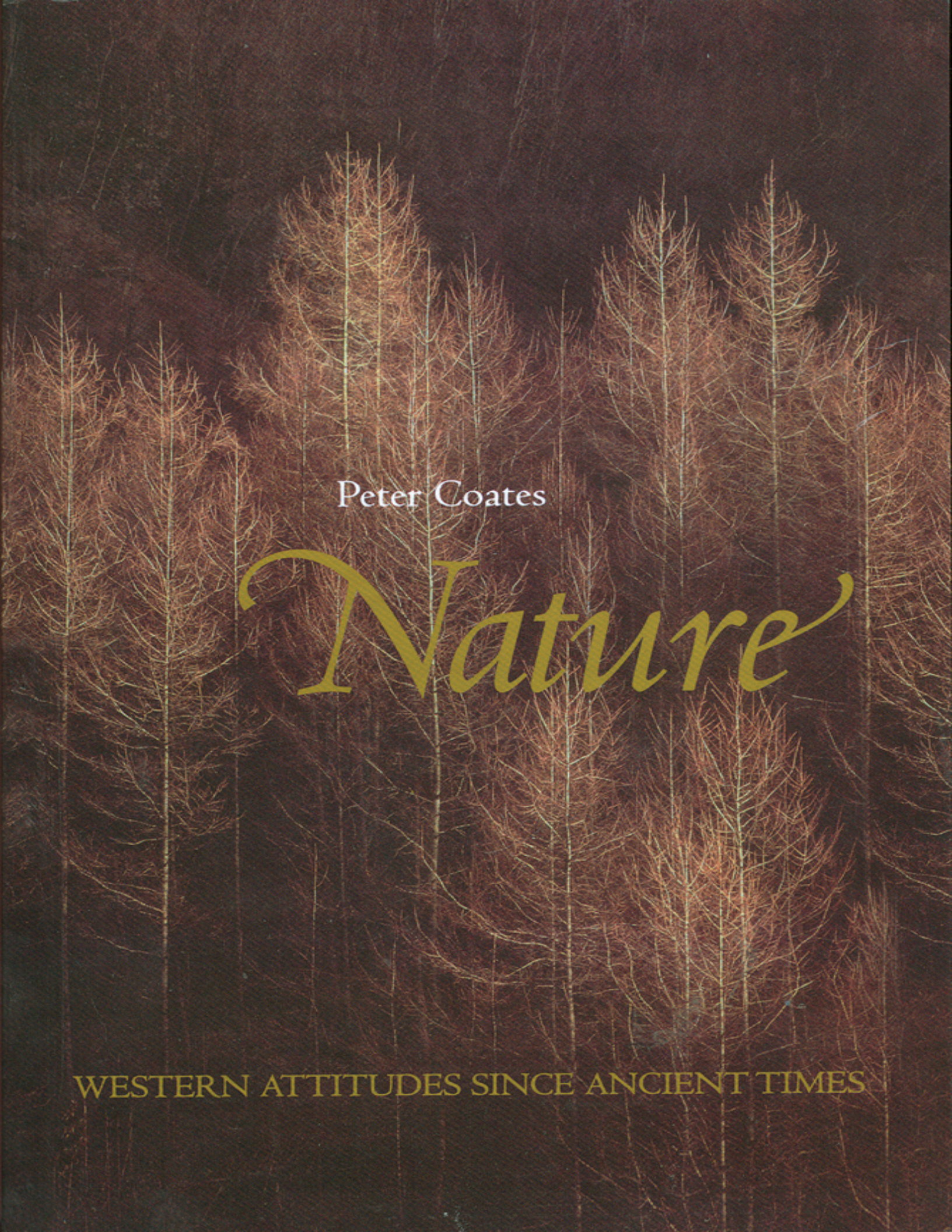

Peter Coates

Nature

WESTERN ATTITUDES SINCE ANCIENT TIMES

Table of Contents

Nature

Western Attitudes since Ancient Times

PETER COATES

Polity Press

First published in 199 by Polity Press in association with Blackwell Publishers Ltd.

Editorial office:

Polity Press

65 Bridge Street

Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Marketing and production:

Blackwell Publishers Ltd

108 Cowley Road

Oxford OX4 1JF, UK

Published in the USA by

Blackwell Publishers Inc.

Commerce Place

350 Main Street

Malden, MA 02148, USA

ISBN 0-7456-1655-0

ISBN 0-7456-1656-9 (pbk)

ISBN 978-0-7456-6597-9 (epub)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library and has been applied for from the Library of Congress.

Preface and Acknowledgements

It has been a terrific educational experience to read so many books and articles in my research for this book. I have never formally studied ancient history and had not given much thought to the Middle Ages since I was freshman at the University of St Andrews, where I recall sweating over an essay on the twelfth-century renaissance. (I don't think I even mentioned 'Nature' – which may explain the poor mark it received.) I then became an Americanist to escape the remorseless and increasingly stale diet of British and European history I had been fed between the ages of 11 and 20. But over the past few years (as I hope this book demonstrates), I have recovered my appetite for 'old world' history.

At first I thought I might undertake a global study. But the anonymous reader who vetted the original proposal thought that, despite the brag, it sounded suspiciously like Western history 'with occasional discussions of the "rest" '. So 'better to be honest and modest'. That was excellent advice, and this is now essentially a history of the Western world. Yet even within these geographical and cultural constraints, it has been necessary to restrict my coverage largely to Britain and the United States, sometimes venturing into France, Germany and Italy.

Some historians will consider a transnational perspective reckless enough. Others may be even more alarmed by the broad timescale. I can think of no better defence than Felipe Fernandez-Armesto's retort to those biased towards narrow chronological coverage. In the preface to *Millennium*, he envisages some future galactic museum, in which 'Diet-Coke cans will share with coats of chain mail a single small vitrine marked "Planet Earth, 1,000–2,000, Christian Era" … The distinctions apparent to us, as we look back on the

history of our thousand years from just inside it, will be obliterated by the perspective of long time and vast distance.'[1]

This book assumes no previous knowledge on the part of its readers and makes no claim to original scholarship. *Nature* is a synthesis that aims to provide undergraduates and the general reader with an accessible introduction to some of the central features and debates of environmental history, confirming (I hope) its status as one of the most enthralling and worthwhile current pursuits within historical studies.

I am extremely grateful to my colleagues Tony Antonovics, Christopher Clay, Tim Cole and Ian Wei for taking the time to review various portions of the manuscript that fell within their areas of expertise. Sensitive to the introductory nature of the book and my need to maintain a central argument uncompromised by too much qualification and attention to messy detail, they offered comments and suggestions that were invariably helpful. The manuscript also benefited from Janet Moth's astute copy-editing. Any errors of fact or judgement that remain are of course entirely my own responsibility. I should also like to thank the inter-library loan staff at Bristol University Library for procuring a steady stream of materials, as well as the Department of Historical Studies for granting a period of study leave in the autumn of 1996 that advanced the project substantially.

Over the past seven years I have come to know and cherish a variety of local spots in addition to the distant places (such as Alaska) that I usually focus on but to which I get much less frequently these days. Writing this book has helped me develop a sense of place here in the West Country. I am fortunate to live in a region sprinkled with some of the places that feature in my account. Our children Giuliana and Ivana accompanied us on all our excursions, though doubtless there were times when they would have

preferred to stay at home watching a Disney video. And, once we got there, they were obviously far more interested in the earwigs, fox droppings, dewy spider webs, white heather and dripping fiddleheads of bracken than in their father's musings as to whether the grassy sheep tracks of the Quantock hills above Holford had changed much since Coleridge and Wordsworth strolled there in the summer of 1797, a time Wordsworth recalled in *The Prelude*: 'That summer, under whose indulgent skies, upon smooth Quantock's airy ridge we roved, unchecked, or loitered 'mid her sylvan combs.'[2] But when our daughters, to whom I dedicate this book, are old enough to read Coleridge and Wordsworth, I hope they will remember their childhood visits to this inspirational place.

Peter Coates

Notes

1 Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, *Millennium: A History of Our Last Thousand Years* (Bantam, London, 1995), p. xiii.

2 *The Poetical Works of Wordsworth*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (Oxford University Press, London, 1950 [1904]), p. 588. The view across the Bristol Channel to Wales definitely contains more than it did in the 1790s – notably Hinkley Point nuclear power station, a huge box that gleams in the sun to the north-east when you reach the moorland heights.

1

The Natures of Nature

An elemental juxtaposition of nature and culture is deep-seated and pervasive in Western thought, with ‘nature’ frequently serving as shorthand for the natural world and the physical environment. This polarity is enshrined in many book titles, witness George Perkins Marsh’s *Man and Nature* (1864) and Arthur Ekirch’s *Man and Nature in America* (1963). Nature is often presumed to be an objective reality with universal qualities unaffected by considerations of time, culture and place, an assumption especially evident in appeals to nature as a source of external authority (witness the ever popular saying ‘Nature knows best’). This elementary character is encapsulated in an advertisement for water-filter cartridges that shows a tumbling waterfall. The caption reads, ‘like nature, Brita is beautifully simple’.

Twenty years ago, however, Raymond Williams called ‘Nature’ ‘perhaps the most complex word in the [English] language’. ‘I’ve previously attempted to analyse some comparable ideas, critically and historically’, he had reflected a few years earlier; ‘among them were culture, society, individual, class, art, tragedy. But I’d better say at the outset that, difficult as all those ideas are, the idea of nature makes them all seem comparatively simple.’ ‘Any full history of the uses of nature’, he warned, ‘would be a history of a large part of human thought.’[1] In 1938 Ernest Robert Curtius listed fourteen ways in which a single aspect of nature, its personification as the goddess Natura, operated in Latin allegorical poetry alone.[2] The layers have

never ceased to accumulate since Roman times and the strata of meaning are now bewilderingly dense and convoluted.

There is evidently a vibrant cultural history of nature that belies its deceptive simplicity and ahistorical charm. That we are becoming increasingly aware of it is suggested by recent titles such as Alexander Wilson's *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscapes from Disney to the Exxon Valdez* (1992), I. G. Simmons's *Interpreting Nature: Cultural Constructions of the Environment* (1993) and William Cronon's *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature* (1995). Accordingly, nature has been variously considered both part of us and quite apart from us, nurturing and dangerous, animate and machine-like, spiritual and material. Nature, like us, has a history.

I have tried to render this introductory survey for the non-specialist manageable by restricting its focus to the Western world, crudely defined as Western Europe and North America. (If we discount coverage of ancient Greece and Rome, however, European coverage effectively shrinks to Britain and Germany.) Even within these geographical and intellectual confines, it has proved impossible to follow a sequence that gives equal attention to each region and era. Initial chapters are chronologically organized. Thereafter, while remaining reasonably faithful to chronology, I have opted for a more thematic approach.

This introductory chapter outlines the major categories of meaning that have informed Western thought about nature since ancient times and which will be pursued in various historical contexts. It moves on to delineate the various ideological and material factors that have influenced human perceptions of, attitudes to and uses of nature, notably religion and ethics, science, technology, economics, gender and ethnicity. This is undertaken with specific reference to the establishment of human control over the natural world,

the stages in the emergence of dualistic, or so-called ‘homocentric’ and ‘anthropocentric’, thinking (i.e. the separation of people and culture from nature, and culture’s elevation above nature) and, not least, the attribution of responsibility for our contemporary ecological predicament.

Historians of attitudes to nature face many of the issues confronting other historians of ideas. Lynn White’s famous essay of 1967 on the role of the Judaeo-Christian tradition in shaping Western attitudes to nature drew an explicit connection between belief and behaviour.[3] But how far do intellectual transformations precipitate material changes? Moreover, do seminal thinkers stand apart, or do they essentially express the views of the less articulate? Then I examine another cluster of themes: the evolution of an appreciation and admiration of and affection for certain aspects of the natural world in various non-monetary senses; the growth of an awareness of how people can alter the natural world for the worse as well as for the better; and the expression of dismay and concern over the consequences of these actions – not to mention the formulation and execution of remedial action. The final section explores the historiography of writing about nature.

Interpretations and representations of ‘nature’: towards a historical nature

Understandings of nature in the Western world can roughly be divided (with some inevitable overlap) into five historically important categories: nature as a physical place, notably those parts of the world more or less unmodified by people (as in ‘unspoiled nature’) – and especially those threatened by human activity; nature as the collective phenomena of the world or universe, including or excluding

humans; nature as an essence, quality and/or principle that informs the workings of the world or universe; nature as an inspiration and guide for people and source of authority governing human affairs; and, finally, nature as the conceptual opposite of culture.

The essential starting-point, therefore, is to recognize that ‘nature’ has both concrete and abstract meanings. The next vital step is to appreciate that, for the larger part of Western history, the first meaning – nature as a physical place, which is also currently the dominant one – has been subordinate to the others. You do not need to have heard of the government organization English Nature, nor to have visited one of its properties, to figure out that this is a body charged with the conservation of England’s natural environment. Our basic understanding of nature today derives from the Romantic ‘nature poets’ of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, who took nature to mean, in Raymond Williams’s phrase, ‘what man has not made, though if he made it long enough ago – a hedgerow or a desert – it will usually be included as *natural*’.[4]

Nature in this sense is usually thought of in tandem with ‘poetry’, ‘lover’ and ‘conservation’. Recent surveys of the British public’s taste in poetry have revealed the tenacity of nature poetry’s appeal. The top ten British poems (based on a BBC TV poll of 7,500 people), compiled as part of National Poetry Day in October 1995, included William Wordsworth’s ‘Daffodils’ (1815), which was ranked as the fifth favourite, followed by John Keats’s ‘Ode to Autumn’, with Wordsworth still Britain’s third favourite poet. A poll of 1,790 Classic FM listeners in 1997 confirmed the popularity of Wordsworth’s ‘Daffodils’, placing it in top position.

Moreover, the British poet James Thomson’s characterization of ‘gay’ green as ‘Nature’s universal robe’ in ‘The Seasons’ (1730) has been adopted, if unwittingly, by the entire Western environmental movement: note the

names of political parties established on ecological principles – Greens, Grünen, Vertes. Many laypeople may be surprised to learn that *Nature* (founded in 1869) is not the organ of an environmental organization but the leading journal of the Western scientific community. (Yet even in this instance Wordsworth was influential. The first issue took its epigraph from the poet's lines 'To the solid ground of Nature trusts the Mind that builds for aye.')[5]

Reflecting recent preoccupations, books with the phrase 'nature conservation' are those most frequently encountered when searching a library database using 'nature' as the keyword. By becoming identified with Wordsworth's daffodils and a synonym for physical environments and ecosystems (as in Robert Ricklefs's *The Economy of Nature: A Textbook in Basic Ecology* (1976)), 'nature' has been impoverished. This overview seeks to recover some of nature's richness and complexity by heeding a wider and older history of attitudes and approaches.

The definition of nature as material creation in its entirety informs a leading work produced before the advent of the 'age of ecology' in the 1960s: R. G. Collingwood's *The Idea of Nature* (1945). Collingwood's idea of nature as the universe and the cosmos in the broadest possible sense can be traced to ancient Greece and Rome. The intellectuals Collingwood discusses took their cue from Titus Lucretius, the Roman poet and philosopher (99–55 BC), who, in his *De Rerum Natura* (On the Nature of Things), conceived of nature as the cosmic setting for human life – from the firmament to the changing seasons. This Lucretian approach can also be found in C. F. Von Weizsäcker's *The History of Nature* (1951), a work of astronomy by an atomic physicist, with chapters on infinity, the heavens and the stars, and the age and spatial structure not only of the universe, earth and life but also of the soul. The ancients were engrossed by the

relationship between the laws of nature and the laws of God (asking questions such as ‘does each blade of grass represent a separate divine act?’) rather than by the impact of human activities on nature as we understand it.

By the fifth century in Greece, a personified nature (Natura) had become an object of piety in its own right, endowed with a moral purpose and meaning independent of mankind.[6] Nature was also personified as the creative force within the universe – the immediate cause of phenomena. Sometimes the ancient Greeks personified nature more explicitly in female form, a practice still evident in our invocation of ‘Mother Nature’. These are the origins of a singular, capitalized Nature, indicating how closely nature as essence or principle is related to nature in the plural as the totality of matter. That the Lucretian view remained at the heart of scientific understanding is suggested by the definitions of nature favoured by the seventeenth-century British chemist Robert Boyle: ‘that on whose account a thing is what it is’ and ‘the phenomena of the universe/or/of the world’.[7] And, as is suggested by the title of a book about the atomic physicist Niels Bohr and the philosophy of quantum physics – *The Description of Nature* (1987) – and confirmed by the aforementioned title of the premier science periodical, it remains integral.

In Lucretius’s view, man’s body made him part of nature, but his mind set him apart and equipped him to investigate nature’s workings. The difficulty of distinguishing clearly between humans and other animate life forms was highlighted by the use of nature to refer to innate qualities. This sense of the word is still conveyed in expressions such as ‘the nature of the beast’. But the idea of nature as essence often extended to human characteristics such as an individual’s disposition, as in the characterization of a person as ‘good-natured’. This understanding could be extended to shared physiological features or mental

attributes, as in ‘human nature’. The latter usage in particular conveys the sense of nature as a generic, unalterable feature and fixed order; thus we speak of ‘natural’ (i.e. born) leaders or of someone gifted at sport or music as ‘a natural’. Accordingly, to ‘denature’ something means to change or remove its essential qualities, though in practice we usually only speak of the adulteration of alcohol in this sense.

The equally venerable idea of nature as instructor was evoked in the 1790s by the sign that hung over the front door to Charles Willson Peale’s natural history museum in Philadelphia, introducing ‘the great school of nature’. At the museum’s back entrance, another sign referred to ‘the book of Nature open … a solemn Institute of laws eternal’.[8] In this respect, nature has become part of a Manichaean division of the world into good and evil. This privileging of nature as superior ‘other’, a place of escape from the overbearing ‘works of man’, cultivated by the pastoralists of the classical world and perfected by the eighteenthcentury Romantics, suggested that everything would work out fine and everyone would be happy if only we obeyed nature’s unambiguous instructions.

Nature is in some senses an irrevocable dictate: we have little choice but to respond to ‘the call of nature’. Nature is also incontrovertibly indifferent to human fate. But the ‘laws of nature’ are formulated by certain groups for specific purposes. Nature has been attributed with approved human values and ideals to validate and raise above debate particular visions and ideologies. The Nazis, for instance, regarded war as society’s natural state, while a naturist recruitment film of the 1950s was entitled *Naked, as Nature Intended*. During the 1992 campaign for the Republican Party’s presidential nomination in the United States, Pat Buchanan described the AIDS disease as ‘nature’s retribution’ against what he saw as a strikingly unnatural

practice. Buchanan was reiterating the thirteenth-century views of Thomas Aquinas, for whom homosexual intercourse was unnatural because animals did not engage in it. Yet over the past few decades scientists have monitored instances of same-sex attraction in the animal kingdom.[9]

If, following the original Greek definition in all its catholicity, nature is deemed to be everything material that exists, then, strictly speaking, nothing can be unnatural. However, the distinction between the natural and the unnatural (or artificial) is invariably made and, while nature has no conceptual opposite, we usually think of it as human culture. Indeed, without a concept of culture as the works of humankind, there can be no concept of nature. Many ancient Greek thinkers assumed that the original condition of mankind prior to social and political organization was a state of nature governed by natural laws. Depending on your standpoint, humanity had either fallen from this state of grace, where it had been unencumbered by institutions, or had risen beyond its barbaric confines through the salutary mechanisms of culture and human laws.

A fundamental issue for Aristotle in the *Physics* was the distinction between natural entities whose essence is innate – things that do what they do themselves – and artificial entities whose essence derives from an external source: the artist who sculpts a rock, the stonemason who builds a house. Hence the difference between a marble cliff and a statue, a stone and a doorstep. The nineteenth-century American transcendentalist writer Ralph Waldo Emerson summarized this broad division of the world into the created and the creative (culture and man) on the one hand and the uncreated (nature) on the other: '*Nature*, in the common sense, refers to the essences unchanged by man; space, the air, the river, the leaf. *Art* is applied to the mixture of his will with the same things, as in a house, a canal, a statue, a picture.' Emerson sought a further distinction, however,

derived from German idealism, between ‘me’ (spirit, soul, mind, maker, i.e. consciousness) and ‘not me’ (world, body, matter, the made, i.e. phenomena): ‘Philosophically considered, the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul. Strictly speaking, therefore, all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME, that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body, must be ranked under this name, NATURE.’[10]

The various meanings of nature discussed so far, with the exception of Emerson’s, are all more or less predicated on nature’s essentialism, the separation of nature and culture, and nature’s superiority or inferiority to culture. But precisely which aspects of culture are most responsible for setting people apart from nature? The answer for the ancient Greeks was reason; for Christians it has traditionally been spirit. Early twentieth-century existentialist philosophy, by attributing supreme freedom and autonomy to the individual, posited the widest distance between people and nature. Yet commentators since ancient Greek times have also been alert to the ambiguities in this relationship. Humans are part of nature in so far as we rely on it for food, water and shelter and have the same bodily functions as other creatures. Moreover, gradations of the natural and the cultural have been established, not least by European conquerers, who situated the indigenous peoples of Africa and the Americas much closer to nature than themselves, classifying them as ‘natural’ because of the absence, to the European eye and mind, of civil polity and other trappings of a universally defined civilization.

The suburban lawn may seem an unlikely choice but it illustrates nicely the clumsiness of the received categories of nature and culture. We might conclude that, while grass seed and blades of grass are part of nature, they enter the realm of artifice through their collective identity as a lawn. Yet the seeds themselves are completely domesticated,

bred for shade tolerance, for instance. Does the lawn become more natural, however, if dandelions, daisies and moss – the spontaneous 'products of nature' – establish themselves?

Furthermore, many ostensibly natural features are products of human choice. We actively manage nature to keep it in a desired state. On Dolebury Warren, a National Trust property in Somerset's Mendip hills, scrub is hacked down to maintain grassland. Lose the open cover and grazing sheep, and wildflowers and butterflies will disappear. We wish to enshrine what is in fact a transitional ecosystem, not because nature has endowed grassland with special significance, but because we prefer this particular version of nature. The internal dynamic is working to restore a wild condition – not a pleasing prospect for most visitors.

Other environments perceived to be unaltered are the less deliberate outcome of human agency. Discussing the impact of felling and grazing on upland tree cover, the Chinese philosopher Mencius (*c*.372–289 BC), declared: 'To these things is owing the bare and stripped appearance of the mountain, and when people now see it, they think it was never finely wooded. But is this the nature of the mountain?'[11] Those Germans who tour the Scottish highlands and islands in search of Western Europe's 'last wilderness' are usually unaware that 'the nature' (*die Natur*) is the product of environmental degradation. Much of today's moorland once supported the great Caledonian forest, which survives only in patches. Samuel Johnson appreciated this during his Scottish tour in the eighteenth century, drawing attention to a plantation of ash trees at Armadale on Skye 'because it proves that the present nakedness of the *Hebrides* is not wholly the fault of Nature'.[12]

The Norfolk Broads, one of England's most treasured recreational and ecological resources, also emerged from

unlikely beginnings. Scholars used to think they were an original feature (as many vistors may continue to believe). Prior to the early 1950s, the Broads were considered the relic estuaries of rivers clogged with silt and peat. They are really an industrial landscape gone wild – a flooded pit. The sheerness of the sides of the waterways indicates that the Broads were a series of enormous holes (turbaries) left by 300 years of peat extraction, while the irregular chains of islets represent baulks of peat that separated the diggings, and served as footpaths.[13] Documentary evidence has confirmed these origins; there was precious little woodland to serve the fuel needs of this densely populated part of thirteenth-century England. A rise in sea level towards the end of the thirteenth century was a likelier reason for their abandonment than a fall in peat demand.

Not that the Broads are now static. The waterways are gradually filling in – a natural process of siltation exacerbated by the erosion from motorboat wash – and returning to woodland. Nature's dynamism and redemptive tendencies raise profound questions for those seeking to preserve nature. If such beauty and ecological value can come of such unpromising beginnings, why worry about environmental desecration? And if change is the only constant in the natural world as well as in human society, where is the urgency or sense in trying to preserve in perpetuity something both relatively recent and likely to change of its own accord anyhow?

Some natural environments are so carefully contrived that casual observers often fail to appreciate the degree of cultural selection involved. This is especially true of the parkscapes crafted in eighteenth-century England, when an ideal vision was imposed on nature's provisional arrangements. Man-made nature – nature as artefact, scenery and landscape – is the main focus of chapter 6.

John Stuart Mill once referred to the word ‘unnatural’ as ‘one of the most vituperative epithets in the language’.[14] Conceptions of what is natural have been reinforced by recent innovations in agribusiness. During the BSE (mad cow disease) crisis that afflicted the British cattle industry in 1996, it was not only advocates of organic farming like Prince Charles who expressed the view that feeding sheep offal to herbivores was the ultimate unnatural practice, an inexcusable contravention of nature’s laws. In 1997 Bristol University students’ union debated the motion ‘this house would not eat a square strawberry’, while a London market-stall owner interviewed on television asserted that genetically engineered tomatoes were simply ‘not natural’.

Natural foods, by contrast, are defined as those without additives in the form of artificial colourings, flavourings, sweeteners or preservatives. Nature becomes a byword for authenticity, and advertising relies heavily on the association between nature, purity, simplicity and goodness. Notwithstanding the recent conspicuous wave of corporate ‘green advertising’, this deployment of imagery drawn from nature has been a standard sales device since the 1920s. At that time, images of nature were used for purposes of reassurance, to smooth the way for modernity and to soften its shock.[15] Nowadays, they are deployed to seduce customers disenchanted with modernity. Nature can sell cigarettes, cars and shampoo as effectively as can sex.

Up to a point, nature exists only as a mental and linguistic construct. As C. S. Lewis has mused:

> If ants had a language they would, no doubt, call their anthill an artifact and describe the brick wall in its neighbourhood as a *natural* object. Nature in fact would be for them all that was not ‘ant-made’. Just so, for us, *nature* is all that is not man-made; the natural state of anything is its state when not modified by man.[16]

Yet an autonomous physical reality that we can directly encounter – and on which we can observe our impact empirically – undeniably exists 'out there', transcending cognitive and linguistic processes. '*We can never perceive the world directly*', explains Ty Cashman, '*but our actions always affect the world directly*. The actions of our bodies *directly* move, disturb, change, refashion parts of the world.'[17]

We have not made the natural world but we have, in a sense, created nature. Not even the most slavish of postmodernists would deny the existence of an apple, a frog or a snowdrop. But what they signify is indisputably a function of culture, which converts the raw materials of the physical environment into nature. Thus it is more accurate to talk about representations of nature rather than reflections. 'Reflections' suggests direct transmission of meaning, whereas culture, speaking through language, defines reality rather than reporting what already exists. A frog may be real, but can we describe one without interpreting it? Is it possible to look at a daffodil without thinking of Wordsworth's famous poem? Or to contemplate a redwood without summoning John Muir's paeans to nature's cathedrals? Neil Evernden argues that a 'forest may be a mythical realm or a stock of unused lumber, but either way, it is able to serve a social function. It is, in that sense, never *itself* but always *ours*.' As Marjorie Hope Nicolson reflects, 'we see in Nature what we have been taught to look for, we feel what we have been prepared to feel'.[18]

Moreover, apparently universalist notions are provisional and contingent in that they can invariably be grounded in particular circumstances and traced to specific sources. You do not need to speak the postmodernist language of mediation, negotiation, construction and contestation to appreciate that nature's meaning is not inherent but varies

according to context and derives from convention. ‘What is touted as universal’, explains a feminist geographer, ‘is really, to borrow [Thomas] Nagel’s phrase, a view from nowhere (and of nowhere).’[19] Universally applicable and measurable, non-ethnocentric definitions of the qualities of wild and tame in nature, for instance, cannot be provided. As the nineteenth-century Oglala Sioux, Chief Luther Standing Bear, explained: ‘We did not think of the great open plains, the beautiful rolling hills, and winding streams with tangled growth, as “wild”. Only to the white man was nature a “wilderness” and only to him was the land “infested” with “wild” animals and “savage” people. To us it was tame. Not until the hairy man from the east came … was it “wild” for us.’[20]

Western attitudes to nature and the natural world may depend on a range of variables, but some largely timeless verities stick out. Since classical times, nature has been a source of wealth and amusement for aristocrats and royalty (particularly through hunting), and a fount of joy, beauty, solace and inspiration for poets, while for the majority of people (especially pre-industrial) it has been a challenge to surmount and a set of raw materials out of which to wrest a living.

Diagnoses of the intellectual roots of misconduct

The search for those fateful junctures at which people removed themselves from nature, formulated anthropocentric views, became aware of humanity’s authority over nature and started to abuse their power has absorbed scholars in various disciplines over the past quarter-century. Anthropologists have traditionally thought of gathering communities as nature-bound, with hunting –

involving the use of tools – leading to greater control and environmental impact. The beginnings of plant cultivation and domestication of animals in the so-called Neolithic Revolution (the changes actually unfolded over thousands of years) are conventionally identified as the first major step in human separation from the rest of nature. Commentators with a more overtly environmentalist agenda, who talk of 'alienation' from nature rather than simply our separation from it, have characterized this evolutionary stage as a disastrous estrangement and colossal fall from ecological grace. Clive Ponting's *A Green History of the World* (1991) typifies the anguished view of our tenure on earth as a remorseless, intensifying saga of environmental woe and waste as human numbers have spiralled out of control and successive societies have refused to accept nature's carrying capacity.

Other scholars downplay the significance of the agricultural revolution as a seminal divide. Agriculture is usually considered an exclusively human activity, yet other creatures also manipulate nature to their advantage. African termites 'farm' fungus in a loose sense of the word, while other ants enter into reciprocal 'agreements' with certain flowering plants to disperse their fruits and seeds, gaining food and nesting sites in return. Accordingly, some have identified the invention of fire as humankind's great leap forwards (or backwards), for it facilitated cooking, habitat manipulation for hunting, land clearance and the working of clay and metal.[21]

Ponting's highly materialistic account, focusing on relationships between population, food and energy resources, and the problems of disease, overcrowding and poverty, leaves little room for intellectual history. In so far as he engages with attitudes to nature, Ponting views the course of Western thought as a largely unmitigated disaster. Many analysts opt for this linear, declensionist approach.

The American ecophilosopher George Sessions traces the anthropocentric hegemony back to Socrates, who believed that philosophy should concern itself mainly with people. After Socrates, according to this model of incremental decline, came Aristotle, who taught that everything in nature existed for people. This thrust was extended by Judaeo-Christianity, consolidated by Renaissance humanism and intensified by the scientific and technological revolutions, which marked the culmination of the reduction of all natural phenomena to quantifiable, inert entities.[22]

Others prefer to single out a particular phenomenon as the primary root of all evil. Some insist that ecological abuse began in earnest with the advent of capitalism in Europe, spreading outwards to taint the rest of the world (see chapter 5). The scientific revolution has been advanced as the critical stage in the emergence of Western confidence in the human ability to actualize the control over nature to which people aspired (see chapter 4). Those looking for the original source of this desire rather than its materialization have pinpointed the Judaeo-Christian God's injunction to man (Genesis) to 'fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth'. The sheer weight of citations in environmentalist literature suggests that White's thesis is the most influential of all diagnoses (see chapter 3).[23]

Anna Bramwell goes too far in dismissing these efforts to assign responsibility (and blame) as the 'varied conspiracy theories' of the 'manichaean ecologist'.[24] Nevertheless, we are hard pressed to find a single doctrine of man–nature relations in any era, let alone a straight-forward descent over time from unity and harmony with nature. The modernist who assumes that greater conceptual unity prevailed in apparently less complex, more religious, times

will be disappointed. A number of attitudes, notions and orientations invariably coexist in often messy contradiction. The prominence of different ideas and trends has of course varied according to historical circumstances. To indicate a series of shifts with a cumulative net effect is certainly less dramatic and perhaps also less satisfying than to home in on one particularly marked watershed. However, it is more serious history. One thing at least is certain: no human society has ever lived completely inside nature or outside of environmental change.

The role of ideas

Do ideas, ethics and values derive from how we make a living or do our ideological constructions shape the way we live? For most historians of the ideas and ethics of nature, their status is normative, providing a general context for how we behave rather than dictating our actual behaviour. Actual behaviour is more often a direct function of population pressure, a given level of technology, or a particular economic mode of production. The reaction of Soviet theorists in the 1970s to White's thesis that the modern environmental crisis is rooted in Western religion provides a taste of the debate between idealists and materialists. These communist ideologues rejected cultural explanations because, as Marxist structuralists, they believed that underlying economic structures (the base) explain the surface phenomena of ideas and beliefs (the superstructure). In their view, culture is an epiphenomenon or secondary symptom that simply expresses ideas shaped by economic forces.[25]

Ideas are certainly materially determined in that they do not arise in a vacuum (at least not those that become influential). It was not the sheer brilliance of Bacon's and Newton's ideas that ensured their acceptance (see chapter

4); there has to be a societal predisposition and correspondence between the dominant economic system and the ideas that a society endorses. Recognition of the interplay between idealist and material factors renders bluntly phrased, ‘chicken and egg’-style questions such as whether medieval peasants feared nature out of respect or because they lacked the hardware to impose their authority rather redundant. Nevertheless, beyond stating the obvious – that both levels of explanation must be taken into account – the nature of their interaction remains enigmatic. All we can safely say, perhaps – and this is not a cowardly shirking of the issue – is that ideas and material factors are intertwined in a dialectical relationship from which neither can be extracted or defined in isolation. In this relationship, there is no ‘other’.

Because figuring out the relationship between idealism and materialism is so confounding, environmental historians have tended to focus on one aspect to the exclusion of the other. ‘We have either had studies of ecology and economy, or studies of ideas of nature’, William Cronon explains; ‘too rarely have we had the three together.’[26]

The emergence of a feeling for nature

Tender feelings for nature can readily be located in most Western societies from ancient times: witness the quantity of books whose titles start with the phrase *The Love of Nature among the* … or *The Development of the Feeling for Nature among the* … However, these usually turn out to be literary histories and, in many instances, nature and natural phenomena simply served imaginative writers as convenient metaphors. Besides, the approach of literary historians is often indiscriminate. Writing at the turn of the

century when a ‘cult of nature’ was sweeping Germany (see chapter 8), Alfred Biese dwelt on Christopher Columbus’s deep ‘love for Nature’. He quotes Fernandez de Navarrete’s paraphrase of Columbus’s utilitarian reaction (in his so-called diary) to the majestic pines he encountered on Caribbean islands in 1492 (‘he perceived that here there was material for great store of planks and masts for the largest ships of Spain’), and various other passages expressing wonder and astonishment. ‘[A]ll this shews a naive and spontaneous delight in Nature’, concludes Biese, a remark bound to astonish contemporary environmentalists, for many of whom Columbus is a peerless ‘eco-villain’.[27]

What I mean by the development of a feeling for nature is the shaping and expression of preferences for particular aspects of the natural world. We continually evaluate nature, prioritizing some species and places over others (the perceptual geographer Yi-Fu Tuan has coined the term ‘topophilia’ to describe how we are drawn to certain features).[28] Once identified, these animals and sites may become favoured species and reserved spaces, ranging from ancient sacred groves and medieval hunting chases to twentieth-century national parks and wildlife preserves.

Chapters 7 and 8 address aspects of this history: namely, the contribution of Romanticism and evolutionary theory to ecology and environmentalism, and ‘non-elite’ interest in nature and ‘the outdoors’. The reader will need to look elsewhere, however, for a proper account of the evolution of the conservation and environmental movements since the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries respectively. The related histories of natural history, ecological science and environmental ethics also lie beyond my scope. Bear in mind too that there is no necessary overlap between ‘environment’/’ecology’ and ‘nature’.[29]