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"To Arouse Interest in the Outdoors" : The Literary Career of Enos Mills

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"I am usually considered an authority on many things out of doors." Few Americans in the early years of this century would have disagreed with this statement by Enos Mills. During nearly two decades after 1904 he wrote scores of articles for general circulation magazines including Atlantic, Harpers, World's Work, McClure's, The Saturday Evening Post, and Colliers. He also contributed regularly to country life magazines such as Suburban Life, Sunset, Country Gentleman, Craftsman, and Country Life itself, and to children's magazines like American Boy and Youth's Companion. Over these years, Mills also published thirteen books and prepared two more, most of them collections of nature essays about Colorado's "Rocky Mountain Wonderland." By 1920, one national magazine listed him with Charles William Beebe, Henry Fairfield Osborn, and other eminent scien-
tists as one of America's eight leading naturalists. Other journalists acknowledged him as a leading authority on national parks and on the wildlife of the Rockies. At his death in 1922, some ranked him with Henry David Thoreau, John Burroughs and John Muir as one of those American writers who had chronicled "the unseen events of inaccessible valleys and hillsides.'"

A small, wiry man with the energy of a perpetually wound spring, Mills in fact built not one but four related careers around his accomplishments as a self-taught natural historian. In his twenties, he supported himself as a mountain guide in Estes Park, Colorado, in his thirties and forties as an innkeeper interested in the growth of Colorado tourism. Beginning in his forties, after 1910 he also made himself an influential lobbyist and spokesman for the country's national parks. In his own mind, the overarching connection among these diverse public activities and his writing was the desire to introduce Americans to their natural environment. In his own words, his chief aim was "to arouse interest in the outdoors.'" As a hotel owner, a promoter of tourist facilities, and proponent of the establishment and active use of national parks, he sought to make the western mountains directly accessible to middle-class Americans. At the same time, he worked to make an understanding of the same natural environment available to anyone who took time to read his essays and books.

Since most Americans in the early decades of the century knew Mills only in this latter role, it is worthwhile to analyze his development as a writer to see how it may have both influenced and reflected Americans' attitudes toward their natural heritage. Mills' literary career falls into three somewhat overlapping stages. His choice of subjects in each period, his use of literary techniques, and his changing ideas about the interaction of man and nature were influenced by his efforts to make a living and to establish a reputation. During his early adulthood from the late 1880s until 1905, he explored the Colorado Rockies and other parts of the West, established himself as a businessman, and undertook a self-directed apprenticeship as a writer. The dozen years from 1906 through 1917 brought success as a popular nature writer, a national clientele for his Long's Peak Inn, and a position within the inner circle of national park advocates. From 1918 to 1922, a series of problems in his public career, and a late marriage that transformed his personal life, coincided with a new maturity as a writer in technique and ideas.'"
FOR HISTORIANS interested in examples of self-made men on the late nineteenth-century frontier, the life of Enos Mills is almost too good to be true. Born near Fort Scott, Kansas, on April 22, 1870, Mills moved alone to Colorado at age fourteen in search of improved health. He supported himself initially by summer work at Estes Park hotels and off-season jobs on nearby ranches. Work on survey parties introduced him to the variety of western landscapes from the Front Range to the Pacific. As Mills experimented with different avenues to self-sufficiency, he also worked for a time as a night foreman at the Anaconda Copper Mine in Butte, Montana.

None of Mills’ travels broke the spell which the Colorado Rockies had laid on him as a teenager. In the depression years of the 1890s, he returned to claim a homestead in the high open valley which flanks the eastern slope of Long’s Peak six miles south of Estes Park. For the remainder of Mills’ life, the Front Range was his one constant companion as he began to train himself for solitary careers as mountain guide and writer. By the turn of the century, scores of ascents of Long’s Peak and other mountains had made him a sought-after guide who could earn twenty-five dollars per day from climbing parties. In 1902, he decided to turn his knowledge of the region systematically to advantage and purchased the ramshackle Long’s Peak Inn, where guests would now be able to enjoy, along with the mountain air, his services as a guide.

In a direct outgrowth of his new role as a businessman, Mills became an active promoter of Colorado tourism. He helped to organize the Estes Park Improvement and Protective Association and praised the “live wire” attitude that built the road up Big Thompson Canyon. For the Denver Republican in 1905 he described the “wild and lovely scenes” locked almost unknown in the deep mountains. Would not good roads, he asked, mean much “financially and otherwise”? to the people of Colorado? During the next decade he also consistently advocated the “vast importance” of allowing automobiles into the region systematically to advantage and purchased the ramshackle Long’s Peak Inn, where guests would now be able to enjoy, along with the mountain air, his services as a guide. 

and current information of interest to potential visitors, it gave him an opportunity to advocate “beautiful and efficient improvements . . . to develop the region so that it would appeal to people as a place of recreation or to live in.”

The Story of Estes Park can be considered the final practice piece for a writer who had worked to develop his skills through a decade of self-disciplined work. He served his first apprenticeship in journalism between 1896 and 1899 as a part-time correspondent for the Denver Times and Rocky Mountain News, reporting social gossip of the resort season in Estes Park for 1/3¢ per word. In the first years of the new century he placed signed articles in local newspapers—the Denver Times, the Denver Republican, the Loveland Reporter. He put hard work behind these initial successes, following the textbook model for a writer by keeping a loose-leaf notebook in which he recorded and grouped his observations for possible essays. He also learned enough about photography to be able to supply competent illustrations for his magazine submissions. During the winters of 1903-1904 and 1904-1905, he supplemented his income from the Inn by tramping the mountains of Colorado checking conditions of snowfall and timber for the Colorado State Engineer. Keeping in mind his ambitions as a writer, he compressed masses of observations and incidents into simple and compact reports on which he would later draw.  

The SEVERAL strands of Mills’ career came together after 1905 to give him a decade of unquestioned success. He made his first sales to national magazines in 1904 and collected a number of his early pieces as Wild Life on the Rockies, his first book with an eastern publisher, in 1909. Additional collections followed at two-year intervals—The Spell of the Rockies in 1911, In Beaver World in 1913, and Rocky Mountain Wonderland in 1915. His growing reputation as a magazine journalist certainly helped Mills to attract guests to Long’s Peak Inn, the hostelty rebuilt, after a fire in 1906, 


5. Enos Mills to Denver Times, May 13, 1899; Rocky Mountain News to Enos Mills, May 17, 1897, May 11, 1899; Enos Mills to L. G. Carpenter, Nov. 5, Dec. 8, 1903, February 20, March 1, 9, May 26, September 26, December 20, 1904, February 4, 1905, all in the Mills Papers.
with gnarled and weathered wood from the slopes of the mountain. In turn, the inn gave him contacts with public figures who could be helpful for launching a literary career. At various times he entertained Samuel Bowles of the Springfield [Massachusetts] Republican, William Allen White of the Emporia [Kansas] Gazette, George Horace Lorimer of The Saturday Evening Post, and Jane Addams of Chicago.

Of particular importance was Lorimer, who was a regular summer guest for several years in the early 1900s. Letters from Lorimer to Mills between 1910 and 1919 discuss not only story ideas but also their personal friendship, the possibility of meetings while Mills was in Philadelphia, and the dedication of Rocky Mountain Wonderland to Lorimer. The friendship and the assurance of a reliable market surely helped Mills as he worked to define his literary talents.

During his first years of achievement as a writer, Mills had a variety of opportunities to try out ideas for new magazine sketches. Guests at the inn could expect fireside nature talks and impromptu monologues on anything from geology to the dangers of overeating as Mills led them along the trails of the Front Range. His initial success in writing for Colorado newspapers and national journals also opened a supplementary career as a lecturer on natural history. A major address on Colorado forests to the Denver Chamber of Commerce in 1905 was followed by talks both in and out of the state.

For the next four years he became an itinerant lecturer on the forests and wildlife of the West. For several months each winter he spoke almost daily at colleges, high schools, women’s clubs, libraries, chambers of commerce, and social organizations. On January 31, 1907, for example, the Denver Times reported that Mills had recently returned from a speaking tour which took him to thirty cities; by midsummer he claimed to have made a total of 500 talks in twenty-seven states. A typical itinerary, for October through December 1908, included fifty-four stops at St. Cloud, East St. Louis, Dubuque, Tuscaloosa, Tuskegee, Live Oak, Gainesville, Tallahassee, and dozens of other towns scattered through the Middle West and South. Despite the burdens of travel, Mills found satisfaction in publicizing the joys of nature, telling an interviewer for the St. Paul Dispatch that “My work is this—I want to save the forests.... This is my life. It isn’t as though it were drudgery. It is pure joy.”

Evidence of Mills’ abilities at the podium is sparse in the scattered press clippings and notices of his lectures, gathered by the naturalist from the back pages of newspapers in Des Moines, Louisville, and other towns along his route. It is suggestive, however, that he was asked, at the National Parks Conference in Washington in 1917, not only to deliver a major address but also to entertain attending children with what Stephen Mather called his “inimitable bear stories.” From the listed topics, it is also clear that many of his lectures were sketches for later articles or fragments of essays already drafted. In scores of dim auditoriums he learned and practiced the techniques of tight structure, fast pacing, and liberal use of short anecdotes that were equally valuable for holding an audience or for catching the attention of a reader.


8. The itinerary is taken from the Mills Papers, which also contain several folders on his tours and the response. Also see Denver Times, January 31, 1907; transcripts of articles from Denver Times and St. Paul Dispatch, June 1906; and Enos Mills to Lydia Phillips Williams, March 6, 1906, all in Mills Papers; Enos Mills to John Muir, July 30, 1907, John Muir Papers, Pacific Center for Western Historical Studies, University of the Pacific, Stockton, Ca.

The self-sufficient young Enos Mills about 1890.

That Mills focused his essays around his own experiences seems to have been a source of early appeal, judging by reviews published through 1915. The Dial’s review of Wild Life on the Rockies, for example, noted the “delightful revelation of the author’s personality” while the Sierra Club Bulletin picked out as central themes his apparent indifference to danger and his delight in natural beauty.10 Many early reviews emphasized one or the other of these aspects of Mills’ essays. Readers could expect either “thrilling stories” of “perilous moments” with the “dash of great adventure” or writing marked by “imaginative style,” “sympathetic sentiment,” and a “strong strain of the poet.” The reaction of the New York Times to Rocky Mountain Wonderland was typical: “It is his lonely journeys through the mountain wilderness that most deeply stir the emotions and arouse the imagination.”11

To create these “thrilling stories,” Mills made his articles small wilderness adventures detailing his own dangerous encounters with the harsh forces of nature. His nature writing became easily accessible through a combination of two popular literary forms of the early twentieth century. The heights of the Rockies were the favored setting, the lonely winter the favored season. Avalanches, killing cold, winds strong enough to lift a crawling man, storms thick enough to confuse the sight—these were the hazards Mills met and lived to write about. In this strange world above timberline, lowland rules no longer applied. What was warming sunshine in the mountain valleys became a deluge of light which could sear unprotected eyes into blindness. A gully-washing rainstorm could make the air at 12,000 feet an electrical sea imagined below; as electrical waves swept by Mills they “snapped, hummed, and buzzed in such a manner that their advance and retreat could be plainly heard.” The effect on a hiker was virtual paralysis. “Every muscle was almost immovable,” wrote Mills. “I could climb only a few steps without weakening to the stopping-point. I breathed only by gasps, and my heart became violent and feeble by turns. I felt as if cinched in a steel corset.”12

Mills found the adventure of mountaineering in the ability to foresee and cope with these strange forces of the heights. He delighted in recounting how he walked the high cliffs and snow cornices without causing a slide, how he rode an avalanche and survived, how he played games with a grizzly. “Wind Rapids on the Heights” told of his encounter with 170 mile-per-hour winds on the slopes of Long’s Peak. Strong enough to lift, turn, and slam his prostrate body, the currents of air were a challenge, “an invisible, unresting contestant who occasionally tried to hurl me over a ledge or smash my bones against the rocks.” Without any need but the test of his abilities, he experimented at 13,000 and 14,000 feet with the pattern of the winds. Where were the eddies, the undertows and whirlpools? Where did the steady currents flow? At one point he let the wind carry him up a narrow gorge, using all his strength to hold on and prevent being tossed up and over the top like a piece of paper. To prove his knowledge of a new force, he let the wind itself push him across the last steep incline below the summit. “It was seriously splendid to play with these wild winds,” he wrote


later. "There is no greater joy than wrestling naked-handed with the elements."13

Mastery over nature to Mills might mean riding the winds. It might also mean control of detail. In "Snow-Blinded on the Summit" he told of three days without sight on the continental divide. Life depended on "planning the best manner to get along." The theme of the essay is simple: "temporary blindness is a good stimulus for the imagination and the memory—in fact, is good educational training for all the senses."14 The details were all-important. The distribution of trees, the patterns of moss and lichen, the expected topography could all give directions. The different echoes from his shouts could make a picture of the landscape. Here too, however, survival was a personal triumph, a test that revealed something about the power of a man's faculties and wits.

MANY OF MILLS' essays, however, were series of observations on natural history that lacked the ready-made structure of personal adventure. Looking for instruction as he began to write seriously in the early years of the century, he might well have turned to the techniques of the "nature-fakers." Ernest Thompson Seton, Charles G. D. Roberts, and William J. Long among others wrote "biographies" of wild animals. Frequently they combined observations of a number of animals into the adventures of a single animal-hero and, for good measure, described the thought processes of the composite. The result was "psychological romance constructed on a framework of natural science," often with the intention of pointing out morals for human life.15 Older writers like Burroughs and influential voices like Theodore Roosevelt might call for the return to purity of observation and simplicity of presentation, but a public clamoring for nature essays wanted a chance to "read themselves into the role of animal hero after the manner of all fiction."16

The initial compromise Mills tried was to avoid artificial plotting; he used extended metaphors comparing natural phenomena to human artifacts or activities. In describing a frozen waterfall as "a wondrous array of columns, panels, filigree, fretwork, relief-work, arches" he might as well have been a tourist of a generation past excited to literary effort by the Garden of the Gods. Each tree in "Rocky Mountain Forests" represented a different personality with the comparison carried through appearance, attitude and activity. The "grizzled old pine," like an old man in the autumn of his life, shared the slopes with the silver spruce, "the queen of these wild gardens." Aspens were playful children:

Usually you find a number of little aspens playing together, with their leaves shaking, jostling, jumping—moving all the time. If you go near a group and stop to watch them, they may, for an instant, pause to glance at you, then turn to romp more merrily than before. And they have other childlike ways besides bare legs and activity. On a summer day, if you wish to find these little trees, look for them where you would for your own child—wading the muddiest place to be found. They like to play in the swamps, and may often be seen in a line alongside a brook with toes in the water, as though looking for the deepest place before wading in.17

On the porch at Long's Peak Inn.

"The Story of a Thousand Year Pine," published first in World's Work in 1908, reprinted in Wild Life on the Rockies, and then issued as a short book, was an entire essay structured around an extended metaphor. The story is the autobiography of a yellow pine translated by Mills from its growth rings, an "accurate diary" of its own "personal experience." Decades of life on an even tenor alternate with serious injuries: the loss of arms to heavy snow, curvature of the spine from some burden while young, scarring by fire and through trail blazes on its flanks. Beyond the obvious trials of its life the tree had "stood patient in his appointed place," had "enjoyed the changing of the seasons ... boomed or hymned in the storm or in the breeze."18

The most important model for Mills in this more lyrical writing was John Muir. Muir also used the literary device of treating plants as sentient beings, with references to "active plant people ... bright and cheery" and to the "wide-awake enthusiasms" of yellow pines in the wind.19 Like Muir, Mills was a romantic who found much of the value of nature in its ability to stir uplifting emotions and who professed that "the clearest way into the Universe is through a forest wilderness." Where Muir could claim that in the wild country "nature's peace will flow into you as the sunshine into the trees" and refer to the "spring gladness of the blood when red streams surge and sing in accord with the swelling plants and rivers," Mills likewise found that "a climb in the Rockies will develop a love for nature, strengthen one's appreciation of the beautiful world, and put one in tune with the infinite."20 At his most expansive, Mills filled his early essays with "the occult eloquence of the tongueless scenes," with "wild reveries" and "raptures that nature has within me stirred."21

The relationship with Muir was one that Mills continuously emphasized. He repeatedly referred to an accidental meeting with Muir on the sand hills west of San Francisco in 1889. As Mills later described the encounter, Muir had drawn him out about his early interest in natural history and encouraged him to organize and write down his observations. "He incited me to the purposeful use of what I knew concerning the outdoors," he wrote thirty-two years later, "and stimulated my efforts and my interest in geology, flowers and scenery, and their relation to humanity."22 Later correspondence shows that Mills took Muir as a model for his active lobbying in the cause of conservation. In addition, Mills dedicated Wild Life on the Rockies to the Californian, sprinkled references to him through his writings, and was close enough to the Sierra Club circle to publish an obituary tribute to Muir in the Sierra Club Bulletin.23 Almost certainly Mills was pleased when readers and reviewers picked up the implied analogy: "What John Muir was to the Sierras, Enos Mills is to the Rockies."24

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22. Quote in Enos Mills to Fred L. Holmes, June 21, 1921, Mills Papers. Also see Enos Mills to Mrs. Lydia Phillips Williams, March 6, 1906, Mills Papers.
Mills posed with other dignitaries at the dedication of the long-sought Rocky Mountain National Park, September 4, 1915. Left to right: Robert Sterling Yard, parks public relations officer; Alfred Lamborn (behind Mills); Mills; F. O. Stanley; Congressman Ed. Taylor; Mrs. John Sherman of Illinois; Colorado governor George Carlson.

During the same decade in which he was building a successful business and extending his reputation as a popular writer, Mills also established himself as a leading advocate in the national conservation movement. In 1909 he initiated a six-year campaign for the creation of a national park to embrace Long's Peak. For this “strenuous and growth-compelling occupation” he organized mass meetings and petition drives, made speeches, and secured publicity through The Saturday Evening Post. Despite scattered opposition of local real estate interests and questions raised by the Forest Service, the campaign picked up support from Denver newspapers, the Denver Chamber of Commerce, the Colorado Mountain Club, the state Democratic Party, the General Assembly, and the state delegation in Congress. The act setting aside Rocky Mountain National Park passed in January 1915. At the park dedication in September, Mills enjoyed the honor of chairing the ceremonies that marked what he called “the achievement of my life.”

During the Rocky Mountain Park campaign, Mills had demonstrated a pragmatism in tailoring his sales talks to the interests of his audiences. For easterners unfamiliar with Colorado he described the beauties of the high peaks and urged the patriotic effects of recreation on national health, but for Coloradans he analyzed the economic benefits of a tourist attraction. Even after its establishment, Mills was eager to total the statistics on park visitors and to call for improved facilities. In turn, Coloradans acknowledged the practical as well as the scientific side of Mills. As local author Arthur Chapman put it...


in 1920, "his writings have done more to establish Colorado as a public playground than all the tons of railroad resort literature ever published. If the state had capitalized Enos Mills it would have realized many hundred percent on its investment."

Work for Rocky Mountain Park brought Mills into contact with the group then mounting the successful campaign for an independent National Park Service. Although the Coloradan always felt himself somewhat an outsider, he played an important part in publicizing the issue and securing space in newspapers and magazines. When Woodrow Wilson signed the necessary legislation in 1916, Mills could feel that he had made his second major contribution to national parks within two years. At the National Parks Conference in Washington in January 1917, he certainly seemed a member of the inner circle which also included Stephen Mather, Horace Albright, Robert S. Yard, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., Gilbert Grosvenor of the National Geographic, and J. Horace McFarland of the American Civic Association.

Mills' most ambitious book yet stemmed directly from his involvement in the Park Service effort. The publication in 1917 of Your National Parks simultaneously marked his attempt to confirm himself as the spokesman for national parks and climaxed the middle stage in his career as a writer. In this general introduction to the new National Park System, he ventured beyond his accustomed subject matter of the Colorado mountains. Copying the mixed format of John Muir's earlier description of Our National Parks, he included specific descriptions of the history and character of twenty parks and general chapters on "The Spirit of the Forest," "Wild Life in National Parks," "In All Weather," "The Scenery in the Sky," and the career of John Muir. Most reviewers, asserting that Mills had written the standard introduction to the growing park system, concentrated disappointingly on the practical information and cited the appendix of lodging and transportation costs. Only the Sierra Club Bulletin recognized that in the more general chapters Mills gave "freer rein to the more imaginative style that we have come to recognize as his own." Indeed, these sections of Your National Parks sum up in typical rhapsodic prose the Mills conviction that "in the heights dwell a bigness, a strangeness, and friendliness not felt in the earth's lower scenes."

In other important ways, however, Your National Parks marked a turning point in the evolution of Mills as a writer. Several sections introduced new ideas which would dominate his later work. The six-point platform he defined in his discussion of "Park Development and New Parks" thus listed the need to establish an independent board of National Park Commissioners, the need to maintain vigilance against the Forest Service, and the need to forbid private concessions and monopolies of park services, all issues to which he devoted himself passionately in public campaigns and lobbying. More importantly, the chapter titled "National Parks the School of Nature," and other passages, developed the idea of scientific nature study based on the parks and attacked the sort of "humbug imagination" not content to take the facts of natural history at face value.

In the last five years of his life, Enos Mills became a better and more interesting writer, and at the same time turned away from the arena of public affairs. At the age of forty-eight, he married Esther Burnell, an artist who had fallen in love both with Enos Mills and with the mountains that seemed to be his special possession. Marriage in 1918 and the birth of a daughter in 1919 brought a combination of emotional security, emotional demands, and financial responsibilities for a man who had been fiercely self-sufficient since adolescence. At the same time, the Long's Peak Inn felt the competition of new hotels in Estes Park, the impact of wartime inflation, and then the postwar depression of 1920-1921 that cut national spending on recreation and transportation. Perhaps it was worries about sagging registrations that persuaded Mills to lend legitimacy to the adventures of "The Modern Eve" in 1917. In this stunt sponsored by the Denver Post, a purported University of Michigan student named Agnes Lowe donned a leopard skin and ventured forth from the Long's Peak Inn for a well-publicized week in the wilderness, after coaching from the great naturalist himself.

Economic pressures contributed as well to a deep rift between Mills and other park advocates over policies on park expansion and transportation. Mills wanted an open fight to transfer the Mount Evans region from the Forest Service and annex it to Rocky Mountain National Park. Public officials such as Stephen Mather, the Director of the new Park Service, and his assistant Horace Albright were interested in compromise and conciliation of conflicting interests. When Albright sought behind-the-scenes negotiations in 1918, Mills attacked him in angry letters and denounced him to associates. Two years later, Mather's decision to award a franchise for automobile transportation within Rocky Mountain Park caused Mills to vent his outrage in newspaper articles and letters to Congressmen and constituents.

servationists. His former ally, he wrote in the New Republic, was a “non-resident King,” an autocrat who hoped to secure his arbitrary power by “farming these parks out to monopolies.” Although the transportation franchise inconvenienced guests at his own Inn, Mills also saw a higher principle at stake. At a time when many visitors to Rocky Mountain National Park arrived by train, he believed that limitation of in-park motor transit to a single firm limited public access to the outdoors and undermined the purpose of the park system.

To the new bureaucrats of the National Park Service, the argumentative Mills seemed a troublesome relic whose claim to special importance interrupted the implementation of nationwide policy. The superintendent of Rocky Mountain Park and administrators in Washington replied that Mills was abusing his public reputation to further his private business, to bolster his book sales, and to dictate policy. The parks establishment also cut references to Mills from official publicity and assigned the role which Mills had sought as chief publicist to Robert S. Yard. Only a severe injury in a New York subway accident and Mills’ resulting death in September 1922, ended a court test that Mills had forced, and terminated the dispute that had alienated him from many of his friends both in Colorado and the East.

Since most of the battle with the Park Service was fought in private letters, legal briefs, and obscure newspapers, the broader public continued to know Mills through his books and articles. With his literary reputation and markets still secure, Mills as a writer had the opportunity to follow some of the themes hinted at in Your National Parks. For example, he moved away from his previous tendency to let metaphor substitute for precise understanding. Adventures of a Nature Guide (1920) and Waiting in the Wilderness (1921) show a stronger willingness to take nature on its own terms with neutral and detailed descriptions. His sketches contain less affectation and cuteness, fewer elaborate comparisons, more data on natural processes. “White Cyclone” and “Snow Slides” detail the effects and side-effects of an avalanche as observed by a mountain hiker. “The Arctic Zone of the High Mountains” describes an ecological system without resort to literary effects. In “An Open Season on Nature Stories,” Mills ridiculed the false beliefs about animal behavior beloved of anthropomorphizing writers and took his stand in favor of scientific precision.

“Trees at Timberline” from Adventures of a Nature Guide offers a typical contrast to the “Thousand Year Pine” or “Rocky Mountain Forests.” Mills weighs the effect of snow, cold, and dryness in determining the alpine vegetation patterns. Metaphors now are for enlivening a paragraph, not for structuring an essay. Trees may still “seize every opportunity or opening,” but the openings themselves are described objectively. One example is the unadorned description of the origins of a long, hedge-like growth of trees extending along a high slope:

A lone boulder about six feet in diameter at the west end of the hedge had sheltered the first tree that had grown up to the leeward of it. Then another tree had risen in the shelter of this one, and still others in order and in line eastward, until the long hedge was grown. The straight line of the hedge west to east showed that the high winds always were from the same quarter. The front of this hedge was the diameter of the boulder, and the farther end, about two hundred feet away, was about a foot higher.


Each summer thousands of shoots and twigs grew out on the top and sides, but each succeeding winter the winds trimmed them off.²⁶

Two other collections of later articles also reject the opportunity to overdramatize the “thoughts” of the animals which provide their subject matter. The essays in The Grizzly, Our Greatest Wild Animal (1919) are chains of observations one or two paragraphs long which are linked only by a common theme: hibernation, diet, territoriality, play. Territorial behavior also provided the unifying theme for Wild Animal Homesteads (1923). The several articles written between 1919 and 1922 deal with the definition of territory by individual animals, with patterns of migration and trail making, and with methods of sensing intruders and protecting territory. Without regard for narrative drama Mills interrupted or dropped descriptions of animal behavior as soon as the subjects passed out of his observation. For the first time he also included map diagrams reconstructing specific behavior patterns such as the summer migrations of a beaver or the home territory of a grizzly.³⁷ As a self-made and self-taught man, Mills lacked systematic training in natural science, but the scientific impulse to order and categorize data was clearly present in these later essays.

The new emphasis in Mills’ later work was evident to many readers. The New York Times review of Waiting in the Wilderness called him a “scientist among the Rockies . . . a naturalist with considerable knowledge of geology.”³⁸ Other readers referred to the close and extended observations on which he based his essays, called his writings “source books” on the facts of natural history, or noted that his “short, staccato sentences . . . conveying much of the real beauty of nature in her best moods, seemingly are often transcribed from field notes.”³⁹

GENERALIZING FROM his own attitudes and experiences as a Rocky Mountain guide and building on the educational possibilities of wilderness parks, Mills also developed the idea of the nature guide which he had mentioned in Your National Parks. Whether children or adults, he thought, every party hiking in state or national parks should be accompanied by a knowledgeable escort able to explain the sights of the day in terms of general principles of geology, botany, and zoology. The aim of the nature guide was not simply to identify particular species, but rather to demonstrate the interrelationships in ecological systems. In Mills’ words, the guide “illustrates the principles of pollination, evolution, glaciation, migration of birds, mutual aid, and the fundamental forces of nature wherever he goes. He deals with the manners and customs of bird and animal life—the determining influences of their environment and their respondent tendencies.”⁴⁰

Specifically, the goal of nature guiding was to arouse interest in the outdoors and to educate the public to the support and proper use of parks. In turn, parks could become important factors in the public educational system, for the underlying task of the nature guide was to convince people to open themselves to new ways of using their eyes and ears. The guide would be a trained naturalist, preferably a college graduate who viewed the job as a permanent professional commitment. Under his direction one could be introduced to “enriching knowledge” and to the “breadth of vision that comes from a close con

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A nature guide is a naturalist who can guide others to the secrets of nature. Every plant and animal, every stream and stone, has a number of fascinating facts associated with it... every species of life is fitted for a peculiar life zone. The way of these things, how all came about, are of interest. Touched by a nature guide the wilderness of the outdoors becomes a wonderland. Then, ever after, wherever one goes afield he enjoys the poetry of nature.

In advocating the future of nature guiding as a "nation-wide and distinct profession," Mills enunciated an idea of wide popular appeal which tied the national interest in outdoor recreation to the classroom-oriented nature study movement. Apart from Mills' own informal "trail school" and nature guiding out of the Long's Peak Inn, the first nature guide service in the national parks was offered at Stephen Mather's suggestion in Yosemite in 1920 by Harold C. Bryant and Loye Miller. At that time the educational director for the California Fish and Game Commission, Bryant had previously given lectures on an informal basis at Yosemite in 1918 and conducted nature walks at Lake Tahoe resorts in 1919. Campfire lectures by naturalists at Glacier and Yellowstone were expanded to include field excursions in 1921 and other national parks followed with their own programs. The Park Service appointed Ansel F. Hall of its Yosemite program as its first Chief Naturalist in 1923. Bryant in 1925 opened the Yosemite School of Field Natural History to train high school and college teachers, scout leaders, state park employees, and interested citizens in the art of nature guiding. He followed its success five years later with the establishment of an educational division within the National Park Service.42

Mills himself never enjoyed the satisfaction of participating in the implementation of his idea. At the 1917 conference, Mather described Mills as a leading expert on the new subject of nature guiding although warning that its development would necessarily receive low priority in the first years of the Park Service. Three years later, after the Mills-Mather friendship had dissolved in acrimony, Mather turned to the young Bryant rather than Mills to conduct the experiment with the new program. Bryant adopted Mills' terminology in calling his Yosemite program a "Nature Guide Service" and graciously acknowledged Mills as a pioneer who had helped to define the concept and had offered "the first adventure in nature guiding, as such, in a national park," but the enmity between Mills and Park Service administrators blocked the writer-naturalist's active participation.43 The Coloradan had to remain content with the praise of journalists who saw the nature guide idea as his special contribution.44 The first Park Service naturalist hired for Rocky Mountain National Park was a New York high school teacher who presented thirty-one lectures and twenty-seven field trips in the summer of 1923, the year after Mills' death.45


THE ROLE of Enos Mills in the evolution of the nature guide idea suggests some larger reasons why his career has fallen into relative obscurity. In his day-to-day affairs, he never overcame his youthful habits of solitude, or developed the capacity to work easily with people of differing ideas and interests. The intense energy and drive which carried him successfully through the dangers of the high country could quickly turn to quarrelsomeness within the confines of meeting halls and committee rooms. As a self-made businessman and self-taught writer and naturalist, he also trapped himself into narrow definitions of his goals and abilities. In the uncompromising drive to defend the purity of his positions, Mills alienated important Colorado conservationists, civic leaders, and members of the national parks establishment, few of whom were able to give wholehearted support to his own definition of the cause. His long vendetta against the Forest Service may also have cut him off from influence on men like Arthur Carhart and Aldo Leopold, who first developed their theories of wilderness preservation as Forest Service employees.

Mills also locked himself into a career as a popular writer committed to an audience and a format not suitable for the extended exploration of ideas. His books usually appeared in the spring to be purchased for summer afternoons, and readers valued him for his regularity and reliability. Many in his usual audience surely agreed with a Sierra Club reviewer that "to say that the book ... was written by the late Enos A. Mills is introduction enough." As a magazine essayist, he was accustomed to packaging each new idea or observation in a brief and informal article, writing in a style readable by children as well as adults. He wrote for the present rather than the future and was more skilled at introducing subjects than at developing them. At the same time, it is indicative of his relative confidence in his writing abilities that the same Enos Mills who constantly picked fights with neighbors and bureaucrats never needed to engage in literary feuds.

Changes in Mills' personal life over the years influenced changes in the perspectives and even the materials of his writings. Until the middle of the 1910s, he drew largely on his life as a solitary explorer during the 1890s and early 1900s. He described trees, rocks, animals, and sometimes himself, but other people entered only as intrusions into the natural system. In the years around 1920, however, he increasingly drew on new travels in the East, on dealings with his guests, and on perspectives from his wife, who was as much an avid amateur naturalist as Mills himself. These later essays explored new ideas and admitted other human beings as legitimate participants in the drama of the mountains.

In a sense, Mills' strengths and limitations make his career especially useful evidence on the development of American attitudes toward nature, for he was a market-oriented writer who responded to the public's interests. Roderick Nash, Hans Huth, Paul Shepard, and Earl Pomeroy have all pointed out that Americans in the nineteenth century approached the outdoors with a romantic sensibility, applying preconceived categories and looking for the picturesque and sublime in nature. The middle decades of the present century, in contrast, have brought increasing acceptance of the ecological perspective most clearly articulated by Aldo Leopold.

Mills stood out among American nature writers of the early twentieth century as one whose ideas grew. He slowly freed himself of the need to overdramatize his observations of the outdoor world and to overdramatize his observations of the outdoor world and to overdramatize his observations of the outdoor world and to overdramatize his observations of the outdoor world and to overdramatize his observations of the outdoor world and to overdramatize his observations of the outdoor world and to overdramatize his observations of the outdoor world and to overdramatize his observations of the outdoor world and to overdramatize his observations of the outdoor world and to overdramatize his observations of the outdoor world and to overdramatize his observations of the outdoor world and to overdramatize his observations of the outdoor world and to overdramatize his observations of the outdoor world and to overdramatize his observations of the outdoor world and to overdramatize his observations of the outdoor world and to overdramatize his observations of the outdoor world and to overdramatize his 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