

Nature, Stories,
and Rituals

Nature Writing in American Literature: Inspirations, Interrelations, and Impacts of California Authors on the Deep Ecology Movement

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This essay provides an overview of the interrelationships within a group of writers who can be seen as supporters of deep ecology movement principles. The main writers I will discuss are John Muir, Mary Austin, John Steinbeck, Robinson Jeffers, and Gary Snyder. I will support the claim that these writers form a coherent deep ecological stream in Californian as well as American literature, whose source is grounded in the actual properties of the land where they dwelled. The impact their writings left in the shape the deep ecology movement from the 1960s forward will be explored. In this paper I will elucidate the role each of the writers in the formulation of a philosophy which supports and furthers the deep ecology movement culturally and socially.

The Uninterrupted Stream

It does not come as a surprise that the relationship between the individual writers was that of affinity. They knew the work of their predecessors and contemporaries. They also drew inspiration from and responded to each other's work. Regarding John Muir, he has been often referred to as a pioneer whose life and work served as a model for many an environmentalist. It is thus not surprising that the activists

Mary Austin and Gary Snyder drew sustenance from Muir's legacy. Besides hailing Muir as a campaigner, they also acknowledged his poetic vision, a vision that elevated the non-human world into its rightful plane and ascribed to it a significant role. Austin deliberately followed Muir's footsteps by adopting and expanding on the theme of the fundamental unity of the inner and outer landscapes. Although Austin lacked the notion of community life grounded in and harmonized with the natural environment in Muir's work, she felt strong affinity with him. She associated herself with John Muir, insisting that "John Muir and I have established a literary tradition for dealing with the American scene on the Western scale which will not soon be discarded."¹ This tradition is deeply embedded in the physical milieu of the region, especially in the deserts and mountains of California.

Robinson Jeffers added yet another important element to the mosaic of the environments portrayed by California writers: the rugged coastline of the Big Sur and the immense waters of the Pacific Ocean. Although Austin was briefly Jeffers' neighbour during one of her prolonged stays in Carmel between 1914 and 1924, they did not meet until as late as 1930. Yet, they had known of each other much earlier. Curiously enough, the mutual respect and even inspiration between these two writers has gone largely unnoticed by literary scholars. Perhaps the only analysis of the interaction between Austin and Jeffers is that of Carmen Lowe. In her "Where the Country of Lost Borders Meets Jeffers Country: The Walking Woman of Robinson Jeffers and Mary Austin," she convincingly argues that Jeffers modeled his "The Loving Shepherdess" on Austin's "The Walking Woman."² In 1929, when Jeffers was working on this poem, he wrote Austin the first of the series of letters in which he expressed his admiration for her writing. At the end of the same year, Austin repaid the compliment to Jeffers by hailing him publicly as "a poet of Greek dimensions."

John Steinbeck also lived in the proximity of Robinson Jeffers for some time, but never actually met him. Jeffers' poetry had a powerful effect on Steinbeck in the early 1930s. If Jeffers drew inspiration from Austin, the same can be said about Steinbeck with respect to Jeffers. The young novelist was fascinated as well as challenged by Jeffers' poetry. Robert DeMott's introduction to the 1995 Penguin edition of *To a God Unknown* presents a whole range of arguments in support of the claim that this novel by Steinbeck was a variation on the motifs on Jeffers' earth-based mysticism, especially as it was rendered in the 1927 epic *The Women at Point Sur*.³ Later, Steinbeck admitted that the urge to rewrite what was called the Jeffers country was an important impetus for his work. What is also remarkable is that he conceded that his

literary “rival” deserved to win the Nobel Prize more than any other American author.⁴

The last of the quintet of the writers, Gary Snyder, has actually synthesized most of the elements which were of prime importance in the work of his four predecessors. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that he has made references to all of these authors. With the exception of Mary Austin, all of them have strongly influenced Snyder’s work at different stages of his career. As Snyder himself acknowledges, had it not been for Muir’s *My First Summer in the Sierra*, he would have avoided the overcrowded Yosemite and the Sierras in general for much longer than he did in actuality. Snyder also recognizes the significant inspiration of Muir’s simple life in the wilderness.⁵ The first echoes of Muir in Snyder’s poetry can be identified in his *Riprap* (1959), where the poet meditates upon the interaction between man and rock. Later, he even made explicit allusions to Muir in his poems such as “The Market” (*Six Sections from Rivers and Mountains without End Plus One*) and above all the often-quoted “John Muir on Mt. Ritter” (*Myths and Texts*).

On similar grounds as Muir, Snyder also speaks favourably about the contribution of Mary Austin to the formulation of the idea of wilderness. In his *The Practice of the Wild* (1990), Snyder conceives of her as a vanguard of non-expansionistic and non-anthropocentric thinking, a woman who was able “to hoist the sails that are filling with wind today.”⁶

If Austin hoisted the sails, Jeffers’ role in Snyder’s view could be best described as that of a steersman who directs the course of the ship. Snyder has frequently cited Jeffers as a major influence on his career, especially in its initial phase. Whereas in *The Real Work*, he describes Jeffers as a prophet of America, a pessimistic version of Walt Whitman,⁷ in the 1992 interview for *Hungry Mind Review*, Snyder maintains that “[T]he mapping of the Far West, or of the Pacific slope, is not all that old. One could say that it pretty much begins with Robinson Jeffers, who is an inspiration and, to some small extent, an irritant to us all.”⁸ Snyder already encountered Jeffers’ poetry in the early 1950s; he even used the droppings from his work at the historic Six Gallery reading in 1956. The rock-centred imagery of Robinson Jeffers is undoubtedly echoed in poems such as “Out of the soil and rock” and “Geological meditation.”⁹ The above mentioned irritation over Jeffers’ elitism creeps into Snyder’s mind and poetry later, for instance in his “Word Basket Woman”:

Robinson Jeffers, his tall cold view
quite true in a way, but why did he say it
as though he alone
stood above our delusions, he also
feared death, insignificance,
and was not quite up to the inhuman beauty
of parsnips or diapers, the deathless
nobility at the core of all ordinary things.¹⁰

Interestingly enough, neither the immense body of Snyder's own work nor the secondary sources reveal anything about the poet's relationship with John Steinbeck. However, when asked directly about the novelist, Snyder answered as follows: "I read Steinbeck from childhood on, starting when *The Grapes of Wrath* first came out. I read *The Sea of Cortez*, etc.—yes I was influenced by him, especially by his sense of California and the west coast."¹¹

The Ripening of Deep Ecology Seeds in California

Can the writers I am discussing really be regarded as harbingers of the deep ecology movement and its philosophical and literary development? To answer this question, it is necessary to begin exploring in the 1960s, when the theoretical foundations for ecological philosophy, including deep ecology, were laid. Fortunately, hindsight has made it possible for some of the key theorists of the deep ecology movement to look back at the initial stage of this ecophilosophical branch. That is why the task of unearthing the "prehistory" of deep ecology is not merely a matter of inferring and decoding hints. The sources of inspiration have been disclosed by many a participant in the deep ecology movement.

The enormous amount of theoretical work related to supporting deep ecology makes it virtually impossible to scrutinize every single piece of writing. Nevertheless, a close reading of several representative texts, which happen to have the expression *deep ecology* in their titles,¹² reveals the fact that John Muir, Robinson Jeffers, Gary Snyder, and to a lesser extent Mary Austin, figure here as notable influences on this ecophilosophical platform. Before demonstrating the effect of the authors upon the seminal texts of deep ecology, it might be helpful to

present a succinct overview of the course of events that preceded and followed Arne Naess's 1972 coining of the term *deep ecology movement*.

It was the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962 that brought ecology onto the stage in the United States. It is important to realize that her treatment of the issue was not purely scientific, but she was also conscious of the cultural dimension of the ecological crisis. The same can be said about a host of scholars who contributed to this debate in the course of the 1960s. What is striking is the fact that a significant number of those who took part in this nation-wide debate were based in California. Among them belong Lynn White Jr., Paul Shepard, David Brower, Paul Ehrlich, Garrett DeBell, and Roderick Nash. It is thus legitimate to claim that California stood at the forefront of the green revolution whose integral part was the non-anthropocentric outlook.

After this spontaneous wave culminated in the first Earth Day in 1970, it slowly began to withdraw from the public domain but did not disappear. In fact, the debate concerning the roots of and solutions to the ecological crisis gradually moved to the academic arena, which inevitably led to the "greening" of a whole range of fields of study. The first truly ecophilosophical conference, titled "Rights of Non-Human Nature," was held in Claremont, California, in 1974. It was also a watershed event because of its interdisciplinary nature, whose common denominator was the rights and values of the non-human world. It follows that some of the participants, so far largely isolated within the limits of their respective fields, encountered kindred spirits and started long-lasting alliances. Among others, the conference included Gary Snyder, George Sessions, and Joseph Meeker. It is the same Joseph Meeker who wrote *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology* (1972), where he first connected the disjointed science of ecology with literary studies. The role of this eminent literary scholar does not end here, though.

When recounting the beginnings of the deep ecology movement, both Dolores LaChapelle and Warwick Fox underscore the importance of Sessions' meeting with Meeker.¹³ It was Meeker who told Sessions about the "founder" of the deep ecology movement, Arne Naess, and connected the two philosophers. Sessions immediately started corresponding with Naess, which resulted in a long-lasting friendship. Even more importantly, George Sessions and his ex-colleague from Humboldt State University, Bill Devall, took up the task of both disseminating and developing deep ecological thought in North America. So, it can be said that the seeds of deep ecology were sown by

Naess in Norway but, thanks to the unremitting care of Sessions and Devall, they found the most fertile ground in the United States and, above all, California. The formulation of the eight basic principles of deep ecology by Naess and Sessions in California's Death Valley in 1984 can thus be interpreted as a symbolic confirmation.

Where Literature and Deep Ecology Meet

To elucidate the link between the works of literature and the deep ecology movement, a short list of some of the most respected theorists associated with deep ecology needs to be made. Naturally, the focus will be on the three foremost figures of deep ecology, Arne Naess, Bill Devall, and George Sessions. Yet, there are other remarkable figures who can be also credited for the broadening of deep ecology's horizons with literature.

It may be surprising that California writing has also inspired two prominent deep ecology supporters in Australia, namely Warwick Fox and John Seed. In his *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology: Developing New Foundations for Environmentalism* (1988), Fox recognizes the influence which writers such as Muir, Jeffers, and Snyder exert on the current form of deep ecology. Fox also reuses several lines by Jeffers, which have been quoted in *Deep Ecology* by Devall and Sessions. What is noteworthy is that there is no reference to the particular piece written by the poet in either of the books. Unlike his fellow deep ecology supporter, John Seed identifies Jeffers' poem by which he opens his influential essay "Anthropocentrism."¹⁴ The title of the poem in question is "A Little Scraping"; it deals with the beauty and excellence of the Big Sur which was then (1930s) being transformed by the construction of Highway 1. Last but not least, Jeffers is quoted in another significant paper by Del Ivan Janik, titled "Environmental Consciousness in Modern Literature: Four Representative Examples," which was reprinted in *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century*. Janik selects the lines from the poem "The Answer", in which Jeffers celebrates the "organic wholeness . . . not man/ Apart from that."¹⁵

"Not man apart," this simple phrase has achieved the status of a slogan in the deep ecology circles. However, it is not Del Janik but the leading personality of the American environmental movement in the post-Second World War period, David Brower, who takes most credit for that. As a passionate admirer of Muir and Jeffers, he stood behind the decision of the Sierra Club to publish two photography books accompanied by excerpts from the works of Muir and Jeffers

respectively.¹⁶ The Jeffers publication was titled *Not Man Apart* (1965). Furthermore, shortly after founding Friends of the Earth in 1969, Brower began to publish a newsletter of the organization whose name was also *Not Man Apart*. Last but not least, it should be pointed out that the phrase “man apart” apparently derived from Jeffers, has been used as a buzzword by many other participants in the deep ecology debate, including Peter Reed, Val Plumwood, and Arne Ness.¹⁷

Green politics did not stand apart either. The two renowned architects of Green politics in the United States, Charlene Spretnak and Fritjof Capra (both based in California), drew from the deep ecology movement. Warwick Fox and George Sessions agree that while compiling the program of the American Greens, Spretnak and Capra used the platform principles of deep ecology. The relevance of that with regard to literature lies in the affinity of both Spretnak and Capra for the work of Gary Snyder. While Capra sees in Snyder the personification of the deep wisdom of ecology,¹⁸ Spretnak pays remarkable tribute to Snyder in the collection of essays and personal reminiscences of the writer titled *Gary Snyder: Dimensions of a Life*.¹⁹ In the same book, Dave Foreman, the founder and leader of the radical movement Earth First!, also expresses respect for Snyder and his vision. Earth First!, that is to say, was for some time regarded as an activist wing of the deep ecology movement.²⁰ In his most famous book *Confessions of an Eco-Warrior* (1991), Foreman acknowledges the pivotal role of Muir, Austin, and Snyder in undermining the narrowly utilitarian attitude of conservationists.²¹ Snyder himself even writes a laudatory blurb on the back of this book describing it as essential reading. Yet, it would be unfair not to say that Foreman was primarily inspired by another nature writer of the West, Edward Abbey. Having said that, however, it should be added that Abbey’s literary models were Robinson Jeffers and John Steinbeck.²²

As for the Norwegian “founding father” of the deep ecology movement, Arne Naess was well aware of the fact that kindred spirits in the literary world could often capture the essence of deep ecology intuitions and feelings better than trained philosophers. No wonder that he himself found philosophical sustenance in poetic works. What is relevant with respect to this thesis is Naess’s familiarity with the California environment, both natural and academic. Naess was a visiting professor at the University of California at Berkeley in the late 1930s and also at the University of California at Santa Cruz in the 1970s. It was thus inevitable that Naess would come across some of the California nature writers. In his “The Deep Ecological Movement: Some Philosophical Aspects,” Naess also refers to John Muir,²³ whereas Sessions’ “Arne

Naess and the Union of Theory and Practice,” tells the story of Naess’ integration of Jeffers’ poetry into one of his courses.²⁴

Last but not least, the roles of the two well-known California advocates and propagators of the deep ecology movement, Bill Devall and George Sessions, need to be examined. In their joint-publication *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered* (1985), in the somewhat diverse company of inspirational figures, they list Muir, Austin, Jeffers, and Snyder quoting whole (sometimes unreferenced) passages from their works. It is not necessary to go far to get the reasons for the absence of John Steinbeck in this list. As Bill Devall himself admitted in private correspondence, Steinbeck expresses his own ecosophy in *The Sea of Cortez* and, therefore, “not including Steinbeck [in *Deep Ecology*] was a sin of omission.”²⁵ However, Devall’s favourite writer was undoubtedly John Muir, whose work he promoted in articles as well as reviews of books on Muir.²⁶ The article that should be mentioned is “John Muir as Deep Ecologist,” in which Devall documents Muir’s impact on the deep ecology movement and also points to the affinity with Jeffers and Snyder.²⁷

Regarding George Sessions, he started as a big Muir fan. Yet, Devall’s publications on Muir made him redirect his attention to Robinson Jeffers. But before that, Sessions was able to convince his friend, Michael P. Cohen, author of what is arguably the best (researched) biography on Muir, to label Muir as the “Taoist of the West.” Given the prolific nature of Sessions, the articles in which he discusses the literary pioneers of deep ecology are plentiful. It will perhaps suffice to state that he devotes a lot of space to Muir, Jeffers, and Snyder in the introductory sections of two important anthologies: *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology* (1993) and *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century*. He devotes considerable space to these three authors in the unpublished, but all the more remarkable paper “Deep Ecology in California.”²⁸ While he has written a few general as well as in-depth studies on Jeffers,²⁹ he focused predominantly on publicizing and interpreting the ideas of Gary Snyder.

It is worth noting that Sessions, like many other people, learned about Snyder via Jack Kerouac’s *The Dharma Bums* (1958), in which the protagonist, Japhy Ryder, is modeled on Gary Snyder. In fact, Sessions first saw Snyder ten years later at Humboldt State University. In the 1970s, they saw each other at different meetings on a more regular basis, which ultimately resulted in a close bond between the two. From 1979 onwards, Sessions has been repeatedly invited to Snyder’s place, where he took part in discussions on various eco-spiritual topics, deep ecology included. In his essay “Gary Snyder: Post-Modern Man,”

Sessions describes one of his stays at Kitkitdizze as “a somewhat magical and overwhelming experience.”³⁰ He openly admits that Snyder was an “inspiration and mentor” to him, and highlights the “great deal of anthropological and bioregional information” by which Snyder opened up new dimensions to him.³¹ Sessions’ numerous references to Snyder have not passed unnoticed by other scholars. In his influential study *The Idea of Wilderness* (1991), Max Oelschlaeger titled the section on Snyder “Poet Laureate of Deep Ecology.” What is even more striking is that in the footnote, Oelschlaeger confesses that “Sessions in particular has influenced me to see and read Snyder as the poet laureate of deep ecology.”³²

The paragraphs above suggest that the works of the five writers were an important component in both the postulation and promotion of the platform principles of the deep ecology movement. It is also apparent that each of them impacted the movement in a different way. While the impact of Muir, Jeffers, and Snyder was quite direct, the manner in which Austin and especially Steinbeck influenced deep ecological thought was mostly indirect. To support this claim, the effect of Steinbeck’s writing on Edward Abbey, who greatly inspired *Earth First!*, can be given as an illustrative example. Be it as it may, it is safe to say that deep ecology supporters often reached out to literature in search of a cogent expression of the non-anthropocentric worldviews which are based on the knowledge generated by the science of ecology and deep knowledge of place. After all, as Devall and Sessions write in *Deep Ecology*, “ecological consciousness seems most vibrant in the poetic mode.”³³

What should be emphasized is that Devall, Sessions, and the other proponents of the deep ecology movement did not only draw on the eloquent writings of the authors, but they also restlessly disseminated those writings or at least excerpts from them. David Brower’s *Not Man Apart* arguably did more than any other work to bring Jeffers back to readers at a time when the poet was largely neglected by literary scholarship. While Brower can be credited with the increase in popularity of Jeffers and Muir among both the general readership and literary scholars, Sessions deserves credit predominantly for drawing attention to the authors in academic circles. In this respect, his friendship with Cohen and Oelschlaeger played an important role. But Sessions’ influence was not restricted only to these two academics. References to his name, often associated with Sessions’ interpretation of the writers in question, can be found in many ecocritical studies.

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Notes

¹ Austin, 1930, p. 432.

² Lowe. 2000.

³ DeMott 1995.

⁴ Ibid. xxxi.

⁵ Snyder & Killion. 2002.

⁶ Snyder 1990. p. 127.

⁷ Snyder, 1980, p. 56.

⁸ Quoted in Murphy. 1995, p. 93–94.

⁹ Snyder, 1986.

¹⁰ Snyder, 1992, p. 371.

¹¹ Snyder, 2004. Steinbeck's lesser known book, co-authored by Edward Ricketts, *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* (1941) has been the focus of numerous ecocritical studies. So far, the most remarkable collection of essays examining the green aspect of Steinbeck's writing has been *Steinbeck and the Environment*, edited by Susan F. Beegel, Susan Shillinglaw, and Wesley N. Tiffney, 1997. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.

¹² These books include Bill Devall and George Sessions. *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered*. 1985. Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, the rather broadly-focused anthology by Michael Tobias (Ed.). *Deep Ecology*. 1988. San Marcos: Avant Books, and two more relevant anthologies: Alan Drengson and Yuichi Inoue (Eds.) 1995. *The Deep Ecology Movement: An Introductory Anthology*. 1995. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, and George Sessions (Ed.). *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century*. 1995. Boston and London: Shambhala.

¹³ See Dolores LaChapelle. *Rapture of the Deep: Concerning Deep Ecology and Celebrating Life*. 1988. Durango: Kivaki Press, and Warwick Fox. *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology: Developing New Foundations for Environmentalism*. 1995. New York: State University of New York Press.

¹⁴ John Seed. 1985. Anthropocentrism. in Appendix E in Devall and Sessions. *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered*. Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith. Also in John Seed, Joanna Macy, Pat Fleming, and Arne Naess. 1988. *Thinking Like a Mountain: Towards a Council of All Beings*. Philadelphia and Santa Cruz: New Society Publishers.

¹⁵ Quoted in Del Ivan Janik. 1995. Environmental Consciousness in Modern Literature: Four Representative Examples. In *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century*. Ed. George Sessions. Boston and London: Shambhala.

¹⁶ In terms of California literature, Brower was not only a fan of Muir and Jeffers. He also considers Steinbeck and Austin as his predecessors. See David Brower, 1998, p. xi–xii. It is likely that Brower would have also listed Gary Snyder if Snyder had not been the author of the afterword to this anthology, and also perhaps Brower saw him as a contemporary or successor rather than a predecessor.

¹⁷ All the three papers in question were reprinted in Nina Witoszek and Andrew Brennan 1999.

¹⁸ See for instance Fritjof Capra. 1982. *The Turning Point: Science, Society, and the Rising Culture*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 412.

¹⁹ Spretnak, 1991.

²⁰ In the early 1990s, Earth First! was taken over by anarchists who broke with the ideas of deep ecology. As a result, Dave Foreman and Bill Devall, among others, resigned from the organization.

²¹ Foreman, 1991.

²² See, for instance, Peter Quigley. 2003. Carrying the Weight: Jeffers's Role in Preparing the Way for Ecocriticism. *Jeffers Studies* 6.2, and Donna Seaman. 2002. Many Shades of Green, or Ecofiction is in the Eye of the Reader. *TriQuarterly* 113.

²³ Naess, 1995.

²⁴ Sessions, 1992, pp. 73–76.

²⁵ Devall, Bill. 2004. Re: California landscapes and origins of deep ecology. E-mail to Petr Kopecký. April 1.

²⁶ See, for example, Bill Devall's reviews in *Earth First!*. 21 June 1986. 17 and 24–25.

²⁷ Devall, Bill. 1982. John Muir as Deep Ecologist. *Environmental Review* 6.1, 63–86.

²⁸ Sessions, George. 1990. Deep Ecology in California. Archives of the Department of Philosophy. Sierra College. Rocklin, California, 1–17. This paper provides the most comprehensive overview of California's place in the recent history of deep ecology.

²⁹ Sessions' most thorough study concerning Jeffers is titled Spinoza and Jeffers on Man in Nature. *Inquiry* 20.4 (Winter 1977), 481–528.

³⁰ Sessions, 1991, p. 366. Sessions' participation in the Ring of Bone Zendo is also briefly discussed in Katsunori Yamazato. 1993. Kitkitdizze, Zendo, and Place: Gary Snyder as Reinhabitory Poet. *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 1.1, 51–63.

³¹ Quoted in Warwick Fox, 1995, p. 67.

³² Oelschlaeger, 1991, p. 437.

³³ Devall and Sessions., 1985, p. 102.