

Deerslayer with a Degree

by John Tallmadge

The day we killed the rattlesnake it was beautiful in New Mexico, hot and clear with a fresh wind rippling the sage. I was hiking with a group of Boy Scouts who had come from New Jersey to experience the wild West at Philmont, a vast ranch once owned by the founder of Phillips Petroleum. We were led by a swaggering young scoutmaster who was going bald while making a good start on a paunch. He hiked at the front, followed by a gang of big boys from his own troop who lorded it over the small, skinny guys like me. I hated them with the vivid, silent hatred normally reserved for my fifteen year old body.

Still, it was thrilling to be two thousand miles from home, hiking along a dry, rocky trail with nothing on either side but scrub oak and yucca. No power lines, no sidewalks, no apartment buildings, no cars anywhere in sight – nothing but pure, clean air and wide open spaces. I loved the heft of my backpack stuffed with food and gear, the solid grip of my hiking boots, the sense that I could go for days and walk many miles without needing anyone's help.

Suddenly, a commotion broke out in front. The scoutmaster shouted, "Rattlesnake! Give me rocks!" The big boys were pointing at something down in the yucca, yelling and pelting away. I crowded up with the rest, clutching my own rock. But I was too late. The scoutmaster was already poking the dead snake with his staff. It was a small snake, no more than twenty inches long. He lifted it, limp and bloody as a rag, and held it aloft with a grin. The big boys cheered. The rest of us dropped our stones and fell back in line. We had killed the great serpent. The hike resumed.

I had never seen a rattler, but I had read about them in Scout books. I knew they were poisonous and knew how to treat a bite. I was prepared for that. But I was not prepared for stoning a snake to death. Part of me felt a righteous glow at having made the

trail safer for those who would follow; snakes were poisonous, after all. But this one had not attacked, merely challenged us with its rattle. It was a little snake. It had been overwhelmed by the mob we had suddenly become. Crushed, lynched. I was alarmed at my eagerness to take part, to grab a rock and get in my own throw. I wanted to belong, even though I really hated those guys. I wanted to feel like cheering with the rest. I wanted to feel affirmed and excited. But all I felt was disappointment and shame.

The hike went on, the weather stayed beautiful, but this trip was not turning out as I had hoped. I had been dreaming about the wilderness for years, feeding on *National Geographic*s and Davy Crockett movies. Those were the days when all the young boys wore coonskin caps and made flintlocks out of broom handles. It took very little imagination to transform a cinder block wall into the ramparts of the Alamo, where Davy fought off the Mexicans, or the scrubby maples of a vacant lot into the woods where Hawkeye and Chingachgook stalked murderous Hurons to rescue the beautiful Judith Hutter.

Hawkeye, or Deerslayer, was my favorite, romantically illustrated by N.C. Wyeth in an old, frayed edition my father had owned as a boy. Deerslayer lived a wild, free, and natural life in the woods, far from the settlements with their poverty and filth. He found his own food, made his own clothing, took care of himself, and never had to answer to anyone. He was strong and capable, adept in frontier skills and woodsy lore. A great hunter, he killed with a single shot but only for food. I could not imagine him stoning a snake, or anything else. Best of all, his virtue and eloquence came not from parents, school, or church, but solely from life in the woods. He was trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient (to higher laws), cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent (to no church but nature and nature's God). Pure and uncompromising, he always did the right thing. No wonder the dark, tempestuous Judith had fallen for him.

Of course, she was not altogether pure herself, so when she hinted at marriage, he had to decline. He had to go back to the forest where he could be free to rescue other innocents in distress. To a fifteen year old boy, this logic seemed impeccable. Marriage and settling down were not compatible with a heroic vocation. They interfered with your purity and siphoned off valuable energy necessary for deeds. The great thing about nature was that it provided for all your needs but never argued or lectured or went off in a huff. It never told you to pick up your underwear. You could not hurt its feelings. You could count on it in a way you could never count on people.

The best thing about Deerslayer was that he always seemed to be fully in control. He could move freely among all social classes, even crossing the color line in his friendship with Chingachgook (one of whose names, I recalled, was the Great Serpent). Deerslayer could deal with the soldiers at the fort, the settlers, the Indians, even Judith's rich and mysterious father with equal dexterity and poise. He seemed immune to seduction, despite Judith's attentions and Harry's envy. He kept his cool amid every danger or hardship. Neither his judgment nor his strength ever faltered.

In short, Deerslayer was everything that I was not, and that's what made him so appealing. He lived alone and free; I lived in a house packed with parents and siblings. He lived in the woods; I lived in the city, and not just any city, but sprawling, dingy, endless north Jersey. Deerslayer was a dead shot; I had never held a gun and hated the thought of hunting. Deerslayer was strong and graceful; I couldn't hit a baseball or sink a basket; I was more interested in science and poetry than sports. As for women, Deerslayer always stayed cool as a moose, while I was sizzling and frying with hormones. I could never, ever have turned down Judith Hutter, not that she would ever have noticed me.

Deerslayer's wilderness was attractive because it promised freedom from having to deal with women and having to compete with men. It was an arena for a kind of manhood that seemed accessible to small, self-conscious boys who lacked the killer instinct necessary for manly careers in sports, warfare, big business, or organized crime. I had hoped that the

Philmont trip would put me in touch with the Deerslayer life, or at least some remnant of it, but things were not turning out that way. Instead, with the scoutmaster and his bully boys and the murder of the snake, it was beginning to look as if the home rules still applied.

In those days, Philmont was organized as a network of base camps scattered among creeks and ridges along the east side of the Sangre de Cristo Range. Each camp had a resident staff and programmed activities; you hiked from one camp to another and did their activities, typical Scout stuff like knots, wildlife, Indian lore, gold panning, or physical fitness. After a week of this, I was programmed out. I looked forward to free time at the end of the day when I could hunt fossils along the ridges above camp. It was quiet there, and the native plants hadn't been stomped to death.

We arrived at our last camp ahead of schedule, after running out of food when our iodine-treated water turned everything blue. That meant two days of archery and NRA hunter safety instruction, including practice with a .3006 rifle. Fed up, I stayed in the tent while the others went off to shoot. But they brought back some good news. There was an alternative to archery: we could climb a mountain just outside the ranch property. It was Baldy Peak, at 12,800 feet the third highest peak in New Mexico. We'd have to start before dawn to make it back by dark. There were even abandoned mines and a ghost town halfway up where anyone who got tired could stop and rejoin the group on the way down.

I remember cooking breakfast by the dawn's early light, then setting off across the creek and into the trees where a fence marked the ranch boundary. On the other side, wild flowers grew knee-high, startlingly lush after the shopworn grass around camp. We hiked upstream for hours, passing beaver ponds where big trout lazed in shadows, climbing rock slides into dark spruce forests broken by aspen glades. By the time we reached the ghost town and stopped for lunch, the scoutmaster and his boys were sweating and out of breath. They decided to stay while the rest of us went on.

So it was the small but wiry guys who found the old mine tunnels and the misty meadow strewn with rusting implements, who followed the steep mining road through stunted firs to the tree line and on to the snowbank from which the creek issued, and then climbed lichened talus fields to the summit from which we could see a hundred miles in every direction. It was my first mountain and far bigger than anything in New Jersey. Our whole route was visible. We could see all the way east to the great plains baking in golden sun, or westward across numberless ranges mossy and green as a rumpled blanket until blue distance obscured the view. From this height every human structure shrank away into the landscape and disappeared. It looked as if the land had never been touched. It felt as if we were seeing America for the first time, as if this were the first time anyone had seen it. No wonder Deerslayer had chosen a life in the woods!

But this moment was equally precious because the little guys had prevailed over the scoutmaster and his gang, not by beating them at sports or in a fight, but by overcoming our own fear and fatigue. We had made it, and our victory had deprived no one else of a chance to win. Best of all, we did not have to kill anything. Reaching that summit not only cleansed me of shame for the murder of the snake but also sealed in my mind an image of wilderness as a scene for benign yet heroic action. Here was an arena where manhood could be achieved without violence. I practically ran down that mountain. When we met the rest at the ghost town, they looked a bit sheepish even while bragging about the abandoned saloon they had found. I listened and smiled and paid it no mind. I knew I was tougher than they were.

From then on, wilderness and manhood were always linked in my mind, so naturally I looked to the woods for college. I chose Dartmouth because it was way up north and had strong outdoor traditions coupled with excellent academics. Imagine a world-class library with black bear sighted only ten miles away! Back in the 1960's, Dartmouth was an all-male school with a vigorous weekly routine: you hit the books hard for five days and then

exploded on weekends. Exploding demonstrated your manhood, and there were three acceptable ways to do it: you could get laid, get drunk, or get out. There was only one way to get laid or drunk, but there were two ways to get out: you could go on a road trip (which meant getting laid or drunk), or you could go to the mountains. Needless to say, I went to the mountains a lot.

Dartmouth carefully cultivated the image of the rugged outdoorsman who was also smart and sophisticated, who smoked Gauloises and could judge a fine Beaujolais while paddling upstream and quoting Keats to a lissome damsel in the bow. Such a one would be equally at home on Wall Street or on the Allegash, a picture of total success. I loved this image! It was only years later that I realized that it was simply a greener version of what all the Ivies were selling: admission to an elite. Dartmouth's pitch was based on the model of male success that I had absorbed from the Boy Scouts and from books. The Dartmouth Man was strong, brave, smart, eloquent, self-reliant, and free of female constraints, yet unlike the citified men of Yale, Harvard, or Princeton, he was also skilled in the outdoors. He could move among all classes by virtue of a complete and well-rounded education that relied on wilderness as well as books. He was Deerslayer with a degree.

In a democracy, the true aristocrat is not the born blue-blood, but the one who can move freely among all groups or classes. Politicians like Bill Clinton have long recognized this fact; even Thoreau hints at it when he says that a man is rich in proportion to those things he can afford to let alone, or that the true walker is one who is at home everywhere. I found the Dartmouth model of manhood very affirming. It worked for me. I liked the feeling of being a cut above. If I was with intellectuals, I could talk like a woodsman, and if I was among soldiers, laborers, or woodsmen, I could think like a scholar. You could always be one thing or the other, and thus restricted to none.

When I began studying wilderness writers in graduate school, I found that most of them seemed to be following this archetype. Thoreau might have lived in the woods, but his Harvard education shielded him from what Samuel Johnson called "the idiocy of rural life"

as effectively as Mrs. Emerson's pies assuaged his hunger. Muir lived in Yosemite for six years as a tramp naturalist, successfully deflecting the advances of Thérèse Yelverton, countess and romance writer, while preaching his glacial gospel to all and sundry; his cabin contained books by Emerson, Gray, and Milton that he had encountered during his years at the University of Wisconsin. Abbey lived in the desert in a trailer, dreaming of mystic revelations and raw sex while commiserating with cowboys in local bars about the decline of the West; he had a master's degree in philosophy and had already published three western novels.

These writers all lived in nature as single men with advanced degrees who found affirmation in wildness and celebrated it in books. They were moralists interested in purity of one kind or another, social critics dedicated to changing the world through writing or activism. Their words and ideas laid the foundations of the wilderness ethic that still undergirds environmental politics in America. And their vision of manhood, so deeply intertwined with these ideas about nature, was not one I seriously questioned until I reached middle age, married, and settled down to raise my kids in the city. Even today, I struggle with it, for I love wilderness and remember not only my first mountain, but all the others. I still love the wilderness writers and remember how their works, and the pilgrimages that they inspired, have enriched the lives of my students. But I have come to believe that we need new models of manhood if we are to achieve durable, sustainable, and honorable relations between human culture and the rest of life, especially here in North America.

What are the consequences of constructing manhood on the model of Deerslayer with a degree? Think first about the ideal of wilderness that it projects. Deerslayer's wilderness was still vast and full of game, but also a theater of war among native tribes and the European powers who supplied, polarized, and exploited them. It was a bloody, dangerous, and unstable place, dramatic and heroic, but also doomed by the advancing frontier. The future, even in Cooper's novel, belongs not to the virtuous and heroic

woodsman, but to the venal men of civilization, represented by the officers of the fort and the contemptible Hurry Harry. It is out of this world that the novel is written, nearly a century after the events it purports to describe. Cooper published *The Deerslayer* in 1841. Five years earlier, Emerson had published *Nature*, in which he had depicted the American pioneer as a type of Homeric hero. And four years later, in 1845, Thoreau set off for Walden to live a wild and literary life.

Thoreau's wilderness, like Cooper's and Emerson's, is an ideal constructed on Romantic principles, according to which virtue, strength, eloquence, and piety are absorbed through the skin from Nature itself. It is a kind of "back formation" that bears only superficial resemblance to the real, historical thing. Unlike Cooper's, however, Thoreau's wilderness has been purged of hostile natives and dangerous beasts. Even on his long trips to the Maine woods, Thoreau never encounters a bear or a wolf, and the remnant Indians have been coopted and marginalized by Yankee culture. Violence and killing are no longer required for the woodsy life, which makes purity and virtue much easier to maintain. It is easier to have visions if you don't have to keep watching your back.

In short, the wilderness of Thoreau and his successors is a sanitized landscape. It does not menace the traveler the way the upper Missouri or the Rockies menaced Lewis and Clark. By the time Thoreau, Muir, and the rest appear on the scene, the scene itself has long been cleared of grizzlies and Indians by epidemics, hunters, and pioneers assisted from time to time by the U.S. Cavalry. The wilderness celebrated by our leading environmental writers is a landscape created by the decimation of big fierce animals and recalcitrant native tribes. North America never was the place described by the Wilderness Act, where "the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man is a visitor who does not remain." Humans have lived here since the Pleistocene. The timeless, enduring wilderness with all its Edenic attributes is a dream inflicted upon the landscape by genocide. It does not correspond to reality. To deny that history is to live in a kind of bad faith.

The problem with the Deerslayer model of manhood is that the bad faith at its core compels us to repeat a pattern of repression and denial through violence. We have to keep killing the rattlesnake again and again. But whether the goal is visions or victims, wilderness always has to be someplace remote and exotic, someplace *different* from where we conduct our normal lives. Otherwise, how could woody lore and adventures confer distinction? You can't be a true aristocrat in a democracy, crossing class lines at will, unless the lines are there in the first place. The color line, the educational line, the line between wilderness and culture must all be maintained. This means that wilderness must be kept at a distance, shut up in national parks or forests, in order for us to idealize, worship, or benefit from it as a scene of instruction. You don't achieve manhood by camping out in the backyard.

Both these aspects of wilderness – the purged landscape, the remote Eden – have little to offer anyone who aspires to a sustainable, ongoing, ecologic relation to land. They do not invite intimacy, inhabitation, or interdependence. The landscape does not ask you to live there, do your work there, or give anything back in return for its spiritual or economic gifts. Humans are visitors who do not remain. The real wilderness man is one who passes through, an adventurer or explorer who carries off trophies in the form of knowledge, summits, stories, or even wounds, but who never assumes any burden of responsibility toward the land. Manhood becomes a matter of achievement and identity, rather than relation or reciprocity.

As for women, nature offers a poor substitute despite the eroticized rapture that runs through much male nature writing. Someone once cracked that Thoreau could get more out of two hours with a chickadee than most men could get from a night with Cleopatra. Perhaps he was right; at least the chickadee wouldn't argue, quote the classics, or embroil him in politics. Meanwhile, along comes Abbey exclaiming that he wants to possess the whole landscape of Arches National Park as one might desire and possess a beautiful woman while, in the next breath, declaring his dream of a hard and brutal mysticism in

which the naked self merges with the Other and yet somehow survives intact, separate etc. One can imagine the look on his lady's face.

The trouble with purity, especially male purity in this vein, is that it never changes. It doesn't lead to anything. It doesn't make room for the Other, whether animal, vegetable, or female. A manly ideal that substitutes nature for women and purity for relation offers no wisdom for a generative life, no guidance for relationships apart from a strict and formal code. Relationships tend to be messy and ambiguous, but they are also potentially fertile. Mature, adult relationships are organic and alive. They evolve: that's why they endure. They are never a sure thing, but they last as they grow. Of course they can't be "pure," but they offer the only hope for sustaining and renewing the world.

As a mature man, I remember with fondness and gratitude my own initiatory experiences in the wilderness. The trip to Philmont was only the beginning of a long sequence of journeys to places as rich, challenging, and diverse as the White Mountains, the High Sierras, the Wind Rivers, or the Boundary Waters. It is tempting, I admit, to fetishize wilderness out of nostalgia for the extravagant desires and actions of youth. But we have to remember that Deerslayer, for all his virtues, remains unfulfilled as a man. He has no home, no family, no children. He reminds us, curiously, of comic book heroes with bulging muscles and fabulous powers who keep saving the world but have no close friends and never get a date. Like Superman, Deerslayer is overdeveloped but undersexed. At some point, somehow, he will have to grow up. Or not – in which case he'll turn into a sterile, grumpy old man, Natty Bumppo of *The Prairie* who spends his time in a rocking chair dreaming bitterly about the passing of the frontier.

I believe that wilderness, even the purged wilderness of today, can still offer profound initiatory experiences to young men, especially if they are informed by a rich understanding of natural and human history. But how can we preserve such benefits while avoiding the sterility and bad faith that lie in wait for Deerslayer with a degree? Above all,

we need role models for mature and generative manhood as well as for youthful heroism and purity. And we need guides for moving from one stage of life to the next. These require, I believe, a reconfiguration of attitudes toward nature, women, and the wisdom of tribal cultures. Fortunately, many of today's male nature writers have begun to explore such paths, and the results are very promising.

The Deerslayer model of manhood construes nature as a scene for heroic action. Whether the goal is meat or discovery, victory or insight, nature is set over against a protagonist who is only passing through. But today's male nature writers have begun to explore alternative ways of imagining and relating to landscape that emphasize interaction, inhabitation, and reciprocity. I call these forms of husbandry, though they embrace far more than conventional agriculture. Wendell Berry, for example, writes tellingly of farming, local economies, and the importance of community life in a vision of nature that embraces both wildness and human work. The essays of Gary Snyder and Scott Russell Sanders speak to the value of homesteading and household work carried out as part of a place-centered devotional practice. When Aldo Leopold writes of splitting and burning good oak to warm his shack, then spreading the ashes under his apple trees where, come spring, they will be transformed into fruit for both his family and the squirrels, he exemplifies how mindful interaction with the landscape can feed both body and soul. Richard Nelson, who practices subsistence hunting in Alaska, celebrates the joy of participating, consciously, in the gift economy of nature, where all life comes from other life. These forms of attentive interdependency require intimate engagement and reciprocity with the land, rather than heroic struggle or violent confrontations. They are forms of learning, the enactment (rather than the formation) of identity.

Restoration ecology is a promising trend in this new husbandry, for it seeks to cultivate not merely a handful of privileged species, but an entire biota. To do this requires a great deal of knowledge, not only of individual species (many of which have no human use), but also of the ways they interact with each other in space and time. It also requires long-

term devotion to a landscape. It is interesting to notice how many of today's nature writers live on recovering landscapes and engage in some form of restorational work. Replanting pine woods and prairie flora on the sand farm that he acquired for delinquent taxes brought Leopold his "meat from God." Snyder settled on a Sierra ridge near abandoned gold diggings. John Elder celebrates the return of wildness to Vermont's Green Mountains while practicing sustainable, low-impact forestry in his own hundred-acre woods. Restoration work of this kind, which requires both material and spiritual devotion, offers a powerful model for generative manhood.

Today's male nature writers also address their relations with women in ways more complex and nuanced than those of classic wilderness writers. Eros is neither projected, sublimated, nor shunned, but embodied and embraced. Gary Snyder's poetry is full of the earthy, organic sexuality typical of the 60's counterculture. Wendell Berry celebrates marriage as correlative to the loyal, fruitful relationships he aspires to build with land and community. Scott Russell Sanders and John Elder explore the challenges and rewards of fatherhood enacted not only in household and community, but also in wilderness journeys with their children. For all these men, wives and families play a central role in their mature sense of identity and their relationships with land. Marriage and household are key metaphors in the vision of a sustainable, personal ecology.

Finally, contemporary nature writers have recuperated indigenous wisdom and values to a degree not seen since Thoreau's writings on Maine. In the century after Thoreau, American nature writing tended to ignore or caricature Native American cultures. Gary Snyder was one of the first environmental writers to recognize, learn from, and celebrate Native American myths and customs; he envisions a "future primitivism" that blends the "Old Ways" of tribal peoples with the wisdom of modern science and scholarship. Barry Lopez's encounters with Arctic people reveal the resourcefulness, dignity, strength, and virtue that indigenous life ways can foster. Some of his best stories depict how respectful attention to the land and its creatures can produce mental health by bringing the individual's

"inner landscape" into accord with the order and ecological coherence of the "outer landscape."

Other writers have explored ways to participate more directly in native culture. Richard Nelson began his career as an anthropologist conducting ethnographic studies of Inupiat, Kutchin, and Koyukon hunters. He spent many years living and studying with tribal elders, learning the techniques and rituals of hunting and eventually coming to appreciate viscerally their spiritual sense of the landscape as living and aware. Nelson's own practice of subsistence hunting draws heavily on the wisdom of his native teachers but also on the ecological perspectives of western science. It is an ingenious syncretism that, while developed and practiced in Alaska, could provide a model for personal ecology elsewhere.

Another writer involved with indigenous cultures is ethnobotanist Gary Paul Nabhan, who has spent years working with dryland farmers in the Sonoran desert. Nabhan has devoted himself to understanding native foods and traditional farming practices, disseminating his research results to all resident cultures. He leads seed prospecting expeditions to native gardens, both current and abandoned, and he takes people on "food pilgrimages" where they rely on a local, traditional diet and then, at the end, ritually stomp on boxes of modern foods like white bread and potato chips that have been implicated in high rates of diabetes and heart disease. This work not only provides a rich harvest of stories, but also empowers native communities while identifying valuable new crops (the jojoba bean is perhaps the best known example). One might call such a practice "restoration anthropology."

The version of manhood celebrated by these writers in their poems, essays, and stories has much in common with the old archetype of Deerslayer with a degree, yet also key differences that point toward generativity. Like Cooper's hero, these men are all physically strong, adept in the outdoors, and full of woodsy lore. They aspire to a principled life, and they are gifted with words and stories. On the other hand, they have all made a commitment to inhabit the landscape, not merely pass through it on the way to

adventures; they live in place as householders and citizens. They relate meaningfully and honorably to women. They maintain marriages and families, and they are involved with children. Many of them engage in teaching and activism, as if determined to give something back. Many live on recovering land and are working at restoration. Many are involved in working with and learning from native people. They are in touch with wildness, not only through heroic journeys but also through attentive engagement with the modest, local landscapes in which most of them actually live. They offer a model of mature manhood as a practice of reconciliation, where traditional antagonisms (human or wild, native or alien, male or female) are finally overcome.

Faced with a rattler, it's hard to imagine any of these men casting the first stone.