

INTRODUCTION



A NOVEL PUBLISHED in the late nineteenth century, *Looking Backward*, 2000–1887, offered a highly influential glimpse into America’s urban future. The whole nation would move into cities reorganized into a socialistic paradise where everyone received the same income and lived together in harmony. Science and technology would meet every human need and enhance happiness and freedom. The novel’s hero, Julian West, recalled an older America where an elite few had monopolized the wealth, where cities had been plagued by strikes, crimes, and poverty, and where residents had lived lives filled with unrest, anxiety, and bewilderment. To the hero, that old urban world was only a dark memory.

Looking Backward quickly jumped to the top of the best-seller list. By the end of 1891, it had sold almost half a million copies, a success suggesting that fin-de-siècle Americans were eager to hear remedies for the problems they sensed around them. While the majority might not have agreed with author Edward Bellamy’s socialist vision, they did like his confident promise of a stable and prosperous urban future free of social ills.¹

There was, however, one highly desirable feature hardly mentioned in that utopia: the presence of nature. Only once in 470 pages did Bellamy envision

some sort of nature inside the city: “Miles of broad streets, shaded by trees and lined with fine buildings, for the most part not in continuous blocks but set in larger or smaller enclosures, stretched in every direction. Every quarter contained large open squares filled with trees, among which statues glistened and fountains flashed in the late afternoon sun.”² The twenty-first-century Boston in Bellamy’s fantasy was rich, clean, healthy, organized, and comfortable, full of human-constructed majesty and technical miracles, but he did not give many details about the future relationship of city people to nature.

For contemporary environmental reformers like Frederick Law Olmsted, Charles S. Sargent, and Charles Eliot, all of whom wanted to bring nature into the American city, the future Bellamy depicted must have seemed a little pale and vague, lacking the vitality of nature and the charm of the native landscape. In the wrenching upheaval brought by economic forces, these reformers all worried more than the novelist did about the deleterious impact on the natural world caused by modern civilization, the alienation of urban residents from nature, and the dull artificiality of much of urban life. In contrast to Bellamy, they set out to ease not merely the social tensions of an urban, capitalistic age but also the tensions between human beings and nature.³

This vision of a greener future for America’s cities was not merely the dream of a few isolated individuals. It was also the project of an extraordinary weekly magazine called *Garden and Forest: A Journal of Horticulture, Landscape Art, and Forestry*. The magazine came into being on 29 February 1888, only one month after the thunderous appearance of *Looking Backward*, and it ceased publication on 29 December 1897. Among its voices were Olmsted, Sargent, and Eliot, along with many other contributors. Like Bellamy’s novel, the magazine *Garden and Forest* criticized the social system and aimed to improve it, but, unlike the “fanciful romance” (as Bellamy called his novel), *Garden and Forest* argued strenuously that nature’s presence, with its beauty and resources, was not only necessary but also desirable for an urban age. In other words, for Bellamy, whose design of a future urban society found favor among many of his contemporaries, a clean, tidy, but faceless urban landscape was merely the setting for social, political, and economic reforms; such a landscape was merely a backdrop rather than the focus of reformers’ attention. For many others, nature needed plenty of space, and well-protected space, in an urban civilization.

The magazine’s central focus was how to civilize the nation by creating a

more harmonious fit of cities into their natural habitat. The founders of *Garden and Forest* offered no succinctly expressed philosophy or programmatic vision, nor any label for their effort. Yet it is possible to distill their core ideas and to give a name to their common environmental philosophy—the “city natural”—and see the magazine as the founders’ principal organ of thought and influence. Although related to the later City Beautiful movement, the “city natural” ideal promoted a unique aesthetic and cultural vision for America.

Influenced by the contemporary Beaux-Arts movement, the City Beautiful movement originated in the last few years of the nineteenth century and reached its peak in the first decade of the new century. Its most spectacular statement was the White City, built in Chicago for the World’s Columbian Exposition in 1893. The chief architect and planner of that famed architectural expression, with its Venice-inspired Court of Honor and Grand Basin, was Daniel Burnham, and he followed his triumph of the White City with his 1909 Plan of Chicago, perhaps the most influential document in the history of American urban planning. The scale of the plan, like the White City, was monumental, and both were meant to suggest the very antithesis of the wild beauty of nature.⁴

In 1901, Charles Mulford Robinson, the most articulate proponent of the City Beautiful movement, published a manifesto, *The Improvement of Towns and Cities*; two years later, he wrote *Modern Civic Art, or, the City Made Beautiful*, and thus gave the movement an official name. In the latter work, Robinson claimed that a new age of the city was coming, an age of cities made beautiful by large-scale planning. The ideal urban appearance Robinson envisioned looked very much like Bellamy’s projection for Boston in 2000, with colossal buildings, grand plazas, and wide road systems. Although, unlike *Looking Backward*, Robinson’s plan of beautification emphasized parks, parkways, and a park system, these elements were “ornaments” for the city and their purpose was to decorate a constructed elegance, not to reestablish a connection between urban people and nature in the new age.⁵

Although distinct in time and ideal, the City Beautiful movement and the “city natural” vision had many overlapping projects and shared leaders. The key figure in the latter, for example, was Olmsted, who, William Wilson points out, made three major contributions to the City Beautiful movement. First, Olmsted transformed the idea of a park from an isolated, single urban space to a more ambitious park and boulevard system with multiple functions

inside cities. Second, he taught Americans to see the social and moral values of parks and helped make natural beauty a central theme of the movement. Third, his insistence on professional planning helped legitimize the role of expertise in urban planning.⁶

But the main emphasis among City Beautiful advocates was on promoting architectural grandeur. Transforming America's cities into splendid statements of empire, improving the built environment, and impressing the world with the nation's vision and enterprise was their main project, not integrating nature into the city. The city, those advocates said, should manifest order, harmony, and dignity through imposing clusters of artifacts—grandiose structures arranged along wide avenues, as Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann had done in modernizing Paris in the 1860s. The fundamental ethos underlying the City Beautiful movement was a celebration of the nation's scientific, artistic, economic, and technological power.

In contrast, what we can call the “city natural” ideal was focused on bringing nature into the city and the city into nature. Even though this ideal also endorsed scientific and artistic intervention and implied some control over natural processes, it maintained a deep love and respect for nature and its laws. Instead of transforming the city into “a vast desert of houses, factories, and stores, spreading over and overwhelming the natural features of the landscape, as lines of sand dunes, advancing from the seashore, overwhelm and obliterate the woods and fields,” in the words of Sylvester Baxter, secretary of the commission of the Boston Metropolitan Park System and one of the major contributors to *Garden and Forest*, this urban ideal intended to make the city more natural and thus more deeply humanizing and civilizing. The appearance of the city was only part of the concern. Beyond that, the city natural movement saw urban society as a whole and addressed the interdependence and interaction among various natural and cultural forces.

Four themes dominated the magazine's environmental focus over its decade-long publishing history. First was the belief that all people, whatever their class or gender, need nature—its resources and its beauty—in their lives, although this need may vary some from group to group and individual to individual. It should be the obligation of a civilized society to acknowledge, defend, and cultivate everyone's ability and right to satisfy that need in his or her life. The second belief was that urbanization threatened to deny people the means of satisfying that need for nature, and it was up to planners and ar-

chitects to design cities in better ways to overcome this threat and make cities fulfilling places to live. Third was the idea that nature can be experienced in gardens as well as wilderness. Within the confines of the city, the experience of natural gardens is most appropriate, with “gardens” ranging from the potted plant on the window ledge to the grand urban park of carefully organized but still naturalistic beauty. The fourth idea was that city people should take an interest in the fate of nature far away, doing things to support national forests and parks and to protect natural resources for present and future generations. In its essence, the magazine envisioned inclusive environmental planning that centered on the city but reached out to rural areas and wild places.⁷

This book examines that “city natural” vision through a close analysis of *Garden and Forest*. It presents a careful reading of all its contributors, many of whom are not well known today or have not been recognized as important figures in the nation’s environmental tradition. Charles S. Sargent, founder and director of the Arnold Arboretum at Harvard, and William A. Stiles, a *New York Tribune* editorial writer, were the magazine’s editors and are central to this work. But the magazine had hundreds of other contributors, including landscape architects Olmsted and Eliot, foresters Bernhard Fernow and Gifford Pinchot, botanists Charles E. Bessey and Sereno Watson, nursery experts Thomas Meehan and Edward Orpet, journalists Sylvester Baxter and Jonathan B. Harrison, the art critic Mariana Van Rensselaer, the horticulturist Liberty Hyde Bailey, and many amateur nature lovers. Although these people came from diverse social and educational backgrounds, they shared a set of common values: a firm belief in democracy, a commitment to scientific progress, and a devotion to nature.

By weaving together its twin images—gardens (representing a tamed nature) and forests (representing a wilder nature)—*Garden and Forest* was a unifying voice among environmental reformers. Like others of the period, the magazine called on government to protect the country’s natural heritage and manage its natural resources, especially forests, through scientific and efficient methods. Thus, the magazine anticipated an important aspect of the Progressive Era of the first decade or two of the twentieth century: the conservation movement. At the same time, the magazine expressed a “back-to-nature” attitude that sought a more natural life through preserving nature in, around, and even far away from cities. Some contributors were concerned about modern industrial society encroaching on spiritual freedom, while others were more

concerned with the physical health and well-being of urban residents or with restoring masculinity to what they perceived to be a more effete generation.

Thus, the magazine's topics spanned a wide spectrum, from the discovery of new plant species to the cultivation of a single kind of ornamental plant, from the introduction of new techniques in horticulture and agriculture to theoretical discussions of botany, from the defense of urban parks to the preservation of wild primeval scenery, from aesthetics to utilitarian values. Rather than providing a single utopian blueprint, as Bellamy had done, the intention of *Garden and Forest* was to spur practical reforms in government policy, urban design, planning processes, and public opinion.

The magazine had only a "modest circulation," according to its editor, and it ceased publication partly due to financial difficulties.⁸ But its influence was not confined to its limited number of subscribers or short lifespan. Other newspapers and magazines, such as the *New York Times*, the *New York Tribune*, and the *Century*, reprinted many of its articles. The magazine's arguments and schemes were frequently quoted as authority or provided stimulus for further discussions in meetings, conferences, and college classrooms. *Garden and Forest* helped redefine two traditional fields, botany and horticulture, and shape two fledgling professions, landscape architecture and forestry. But above all, in its brief life the magazine helped lay the foundations for a broad and diverse environmental movement that would far outlive it. That movement, like the magazine, represented an important intellectual synthesis—on the one hand, romanticism's celebration of natural beauty and, on the other, the modern scientific spirit. Finding no necessary conflict between aesthetic sentiment and scientific practice, the magazine and its contributors attempted to integrate nature into civilization as a progressive social value.⁹

Any magazine has what might be termed its own unique soul, mind, belief, and impact. Compared to an individual person, it might have more inner conflicts, but a magazine can also reflect the ethos of a society better than any single man or woman. A single writer can deviate from his or her society's norms or be otherwise unrepresentative, but a magazine must recruit an audience and must mirror common sentiments. Editors play a pivotal role in a magazine, for they are responsible for recruiting that audience and giving it what it wants. Meanwhile, contributors, who may come from different social and educational backgrounds, are at least motivated by similar interests and

purposes when they write for the same magazine. Thus, compared to a biography of an individual person, a biography of a magazine displays a wider and fuller picture.¹⁰

To study the biography and ideas of a magazine, one needs to pay attention to its social, cultural, and political context. One must also learn about those individuals who constitute its collective voice: what is their social status, education, professional identity, or interaction, and what is their motivation for writing? One must then identify and analyze the major themes that recur in its pages. Finally, the historian of a magazine should explore the relationship between the magazine and its readers, especially its influence on the development of thought in a particular time period.¹¹

The collective voice of *Garden and Forest* in environmental history has already been recognized to some extent. All its issues, for example, have been digitized by the Library of Congress, which provides free online access. Although the magazine has not heretofore been the subject of a comprehensive study, in 2000 the Arnold Arboretum published a special issue on *Garden and Forest* in its magazine *Arnoldia*, which collected six short essays discussing the magazine from different perspectives. Sheila Connor gave a brief introduction to the magazine, its connection with the Arnold Arboretum, main contents, and major contributors. Char Miller focused on its relation to American forestry and pointed out that it was in *Garden and Forest* that the ethos of the modern conservation movement, “this assertion of professional specialization, . . . linked to the slow but significant growth of public support for an increased federal intervention in forestry management,” was first expressed. Ethan Carr analyzed how the magazine elevated landscape architecture to the status of a fine art and argued that, “in an era before a professional organization or academic instruction existed in the field of landscape architecture,” *Garden and Forest* “took on aspects of both.” Phyllis Andersen evaluated William Stiles’s role in editing the magazine and sketched his career as an urban park advocate. Stephen Spongberg explored the magazine’s contribution to botany and its close relationship with the notable botanists in the nation. Mac Griswold reviewed its influence in horticulture and argued that the stance taken by the editors and contributors of *Garden and Forest* in American horticulture was democratic and balanced, one that intended to make farmers and growers “actively involved in and the beneficiaries of, scientific horticulture.”

This book has been greatly informed by the arguments made in those *Arnoldia* essays and tries to expand their analysis into a more full and complex picture of the magazine.¹²

Garden and Forest has also been mentioned or discussed in various environmental histories. For example, in *Forest and Garden: Traces of Wildness in a Modernizing Land, 1897–1949*, Melanie Simo borrows her title from the magazine; however, she deliberately starts her book when the magazine ceased publication because she thinks that the demise of the magazine signaled the end of a unified era in American environmental thinking. She makes the useful point that *Garden and Forest* was a unique attempt to gather professionals from various fields, along with amateurs, to discuss nature's role in American civilization. Its legacy continued through the first half of the twentieth century, when people from different disciplines were still trying to talk to one another and when overlapping concerns with both cultivated landscapes and wilderness could still be found. But Simo indicates that the post-*Garden and Forest* era was a time when the conflicts and tensions among different environmental groups grew deeper and more intense. As part of that fragmentation, professionalization and specialization became increasingly distinct and separate from amateur environmental concern. Some of the important contributors to *Garden and Forest*, such as Frederick Law Olmsted and his sons, as well as Charles Eliot and Gifford Pinchot, still play important roles in Simo's story, but she is less interested in the contents of the magazine than how the issues it raised progressed in later years.¹³

Some of the magazine's more prominent contributors have attracted the attention of historians and other scholars. For instance, there are biographies of Sargent, Olmsted, Bailey, and Pinchot. But aside from these famous names, most of the magazine's contributors remain unknown or forgotten today. Famous or not, the contributors were all "environmentalists" before "environmentalism" had a name. They all had an intimate acquaintance with nature, a sincere love of natural beauty, and a genuine commitment to constructing a new harmony between nature and culture.

Furthermore, by examining this magazine, we discover a more complicated foundation for American environmental thought than we have fully realized. Earlier syntheses, by ignoring the magazine, have diminished our understanding of how large a place the city occupied among early environmental thought and how rich, diverse, and wide-ranging was its understand-

ing of urban people's relation to nature. In his still-influential essay "From Conservation to Environment: Environmental Politics in the United States since World War Two," Samuel Hays drastically foreshortens the appearance of urban concerns in the American environmental movement. Even while admitting that there were other aspects to the country's first wave of reform, Hays argues that "the theme of management efficiency in physical resource development dominated the scene prior to World War II and natural environment programs continued to play a subordinate role." After World War II, however, when consumption replaced production as the focus of the economy, the movement was transformed. Conservation, he argues, gave way to environmentalism, which aimed at improving the quality of life, especially urban life. Later, in his important book on postwar environmentalism, Hays uses the phrase "beauty, health, and permanence" to summarize the characteristics of the later movement, implying that these were not important themes in the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries.¹⁴

Other historians, in contrast, have argued that this interpretation is too simple and does not give enough attention to early urban activists. Perhaps the most prominent challenge to Hays's interpretation of change has been Robert Gottlieb's *Forcing the Spring*, which aims to provide "a broader, more inclusive way to interpret the environmentalism of the past as well as the nature of the contemporary movement." An impressive galaxy of diverse faces and causes finally get their due in Gottlieb's account, but he shifts attention too radically from "protection or management of the natural environment" to "the environmental consequences of industrial activity." A concern for "beauty" and "permanence" almost disappears from his book, leaving mainly the issue of "health," and a purely medical idea of health at that, as the core of American environmentalism. He virtually ignores another group of urban reformers who conceived of "health" in broader terms, following William Stiles's argument that "open spaces are quite as essential to health and comfort" as buildings (or hospitals). For urban environmentalists of the late nineteenth century like Stiles, the health of nature and the health of people were intertwined, and human health required green spaces and natural beauty as much as unpolluted air and water.¹⁵

Thus, a study of the magazine challenges the standard distinction historians have made between urban environmental issues and wilderness enthusiasm, between preserving natural beauty and conserving natural resources,

and between reformers interested in urban beauty and those interested in urban health. By showing that the main contributors to *Garden and Forest* formed a collectivity, a mutually supportive group, the present book argues that this national campaign, launched in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, was not so fragmented in the beginning as it became later. Similar to the integrated landscape these early environmentalists hoped to construct, the American environmental movement was before 1900 a multifaceted one, unifying urban and rural spheres and joining together both aesthetic and utilitarian approaches.¹⁶

Finally, this study sheds light on modern controversies over what nature means to Americans. Rather than seeing nature as a single place or a single object, the magazine's contributors regarded it as a primeval force of many dimensions, functioning at different levels in human life. Nature as wilderness implied an area where nature was the predominant power, where human traces might be found but where their influence did not overwhelm the natural order or change the trajectory of evolution. The city stood at the other end of that spectrum of places: an environment where built elements predominated but where nature still existed and was essential for human development. The magazine argued that people needed all these aspects of nature in their lives.

Therefore, the magazine raised questions that endure to this day and that are still relevant to environmental thinking. To what extent and in what forms should nature exist in cities? Should we try to integrate more trees, grass, clean air, and fresh water into cities, or is doing so merely a fantasy of the American middle class imposed on other urban dwellers? Is a need for nature shared by all people in all times and places? Since urbanization is still an ongoing process across the world, it becomes more urgent than ever to answer these questions.

More than ever, the United States is a highly urbanized country, and most of its citizens do not live close to the earth or get their living from working directly in nature. They buy and consume the products of nature, but for most citizens the natural world is an abstraction or a distant place that is difficult to know or understand. Few seem aware that cities, like farms, are part of the natural world and must follow the laws of nature and respect its limits. For an urbanized society, the place and meaning of nature in human life re-

mains uncertain but vital and critical. We cannot get “out of nature” and live somewhere else. But as the magazine and its contributors understood, we can choose whether our city homes and jobs will allow nature and humans to thrive as one, or we can turn our cities into bleak, dispiriting, and ultimately unsustainable places.