

The “Invention” of National Park in America: The American Wilderness, Nationalism, and Imperialism

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Abstract

For the nineteenth-century Americans, “national park” was a brand-new idea. It was usually defined as wild places protected for public use, resort and recreation. It was George Catlin who used the term “national park” for the first time and it was Frederick Law Olmsted who took a leading role in formulating the park concept. Most critics consider that both Catlin and Olmsted invented national park idea in order to preserve the American wilderness; therefore, such an invention is “an evidence of embryonic concern in the United States for the rights of native peoples” and the rights of nature (Runte 238). Different from the readings of these critics, this paper will point out that the establishment of an American identity is Catlin’s real concern. Behind Catlin’s and Olmsted’s environmental discourses, there exists evident nationalistic rhetoric and imperialist ideology. In other words, their writings are not really concerned about the rights of the Indians at all.

This paper attempts to explore the intricate relations of environmentalism, nationalism and imperialism in Catlin’s and Olmsted’s texts. It will be divided into five parts. The first section is “Prologue.” In the second section, the paper will examine the definition of the word “wilderness.” In the third section, the paper shall explore the links between the invention of national park idea and the creation of an American identity. Next, the paper will examine the links between the invention of national park idea and American imperialism. Finally, I will make a conclusion in the last part of the paper.