

NATURE AND CULTURE**Historical Visions From the Redwood Coast***Gabrielle Barnett*

Between 1870 and 1930, an era of voracious old-growth redwood consumption, several Americans wrote texts positioning California's coastal redwoods at a crossroads of nature and history. Authors with interests as diverse as the poet Walt Whitman, Pacific Lumber Company publicists, and the preservationist John Merriam all imagined redwoods as having a special ability to improve human culture, based on the trees' relationship to both nature and history.

Whitman's "Song of the Redwood Tree" anticipates the founding of a new society on America's west coast. Speaking alternately as a dying redwood and in his own voice, Whitman prophesies that clearing the old-growth redwood forest, which he witnessed in Mendocino county, will produce a civilization that fulfills "the promise of thousands of years, till now deferred." Penned in 1873, shortly before a massive westward migration of labor and capital brought industrial-scale logging to Northern California, Whitman's poem announces a utopian vision for post-Civil War America. Whitman notes that the poem's main theme is the termination of the redwood "race," who have prepared everything for their replacement by a great people.

Pacific Lumber Company (PALCO) invested in an advertising campaign to build its market for redwood products almost 50 years after Whitman first published "Song of the Redwood Tree." When redwood appeared on the national market as a new kind of wood around the turn of the century, the California Redwood Association and individual lumber companies began promoting both redwood's ability to resist change and the lumber's up-to-date look. Many of these advertisements suggest that the mythic immortality of the living redwood tree would persist in modern redwood products. PALCO, in particular, positioned its product as a trustworthy bridge between past and future, nature and culture.

Living redwoods acquired value as important artifacts in the emergent fields of paleontology and paleobotany during the same era that PALCO advertised the advantages of redwood lumber. Between 1890 and 1919, paleobotanist John Merriam conducted pioneering studies of the natural history of the Pacific Basin. The redwoods' link to the fossil record fascinated Merriam, who read the trees as evidence of a vital connection between nature and history, between present moment and distant past. A series of essays and speeches written by Merriam between 1920 and 1940 promised that preserving some old-growth redwoods would help make both nature and history whole.

To help place this redwood rhetoric in the context of a larger modernist discourse about nature and history (and to explain important differences among the respective visions of Whitman, PALCO, and Merriam), I turn to Walter Benjamin's materialist philosophy of history: the proposal that, with the advent of modern capitalism, phenomena start passing through a multi-phased life-cycle driven by society's appetite for innovation—and innovation's shadow, obsolescence. To flesh out this "life-cycle," Benjamin playfully switches and combines the semiotic categories of "nature," "history," and "myth." I will

argue that the texts in question provide evidence of how attitudes towards the coastal redwoods can be understood in terms of the Benjaminian life-cycle.

In Benjamin's terminology, nascent "wish-images" mature into "commodity fetishes" only to ossify as cultural "fossils," and finally fade away as "ruins." In the texts I have selected, redwoods participate in all four stages of this capitalist life-cycle. Whitman understands the redwood forest in terms of a relationship between nature and history which Benjamin would call a "wish image." Pacific Lumber Company's representation of the redwoods makes a fetish of the trees, though from today's vantage point the fetishes of the 1920s are revealed as fossils. Finally, Merriam placed the old-growth redwood forest at an intersection of nature and history that Benjamin discusses in terms of the ruin.

Foreseeing Modernity

Whitman's redwoods embody both distant past and nature. Personified as rulers of the Pacific region, his Redwoods are "century-lasting, unseen dryads," and "heir of the past so grand"; the wood spirits leave their "haunts of a thousand years." Perhaps because of the Redwoods' great age, Whitman places them outside history, making nature, or the West coast, a mythic, unchanging realm. The redwoods have known only "Nature's calm content." Redwood land "comes from Nature's long and harmless throes, peacefully builded thence" because the natural past is "silent, cyclic chemistry/ The slow and steady ages plodding." Whitman contrasts this picture of natural history with human history; the region is neither "wan from Asia's fetiches/ Nor red from Europe's old dynastic slaughter-house." Without "murder-plots of thrones," "wars" and "scaffolds," the west coast is "virgin land," "unreck'd by man." In other words, by ignoring the history of Northern California including the presence of Russians and Mexicans, as well as U.S. citizens and indigenous peoples, Whitman constructs redwood country as mythic and purely natural.

Modernity brings change to these redwoods; Whitman positions modernity as "arriving" throughout the poem, acknowledging the beginning of change, but deferring its completion to some time in the future. Whitman explicitly links redwood logging with the "new" and "modern," which he connects, in turn, to a vision for American society. The redwoods yield to "the deities of the modern." Whitman sees "the New arriving," and "the genius of the modern, child of the real and ideal/ Clearing the ground." His dying redwood dedicates the cleared land "To the new culminating man." To make room for "new society," the "new empire," the "hidden national will" and "the true America," the redwood spirits ecstatically withdraw from the forests and mountains of the West from "the Cascade range to the Wahsatch." The passing of their "race" enables the new, modern American to "build a grander future." Whitman clearly identifies this future with the early modern age: he imagines trans-Pacific shipping, "populous cities, latest inventions, the steamers... the railroads, ...[the] farm, with machinery."

Whitman acknowledges that the redwood's song is a death chant, but romanticizes the relationship between forest and the modern Americans who kill it. Instead of simple replacement or displacement, he imagines some kind of incorporation, which allows the new to share the positive qualities of the old. The redwoods clearly abdicate for the "superber race," but several obscure lines follow, which suggest that the redwoods (and nature in general) will become part of the newcomers: "in them ourselves..../ In them [the natural West].... /To be in them absorb'd, assimilated." Thus, in the West, people become like the

trees. “Here may he hardy, sweet, gigantic grow, here tower proportionate to Nature”; “here laugh with storm or sun... here fill his time/ To duly fall.”

By weaving redwoods into his image of an ideal new society, Whitman gives meaning to the destruction of the old-growth redwood forest ecosystem, and reconciles his animistic spirituality with faith in progress, modernity, and America’s future. By making the redwoods into representatives of a mythic, natural past that is absorbed into a utopian, ultra-modern society which has not yet materialized, Whitman makes them part of a wish image: a “new world, indeed, but long prepared,” or “The new society at last, proportionate to Nature.” According to Susan Buck-Morss, wish images take the form of utopian visions of the future inspired by images of the distant past. Combining the ultra-new with symbols associated with prehistory, myth, or nature, they avoid what we usually think of as history—the chronological, documented recent past. Wish images are symbols that anticipate utopia, or express utopian desires, particularly a “desire to ‘return’ to a mythic time when human beings were reconciled with the natural world.”

Prepared by the mechanisms of nature rather than by cultural, political, social, or economic history, Whitman’s modernity seems to spring directly from the natural American West. Metaphorically, its roots bypass recent history to tap soil that has been inhabited only by giant trees. Throughout the poem, Whitman expresses desire for a society that is peaceful and stable—qualities Whitman associates with the natural past, rather than the historical past. He expresses desire for a brand new start with deep roots. And he expresses a desire to consume nature on a large scale without destroying it, for a reconciliation between the natural world and progress.

Immortalizing Modernity

PALCO’s redwoods, like Whitman’s, belong to the mythic, unchanging, natural realm. In one PALCO booklet, a mill-bound redwood refers to itself as “I, who thrived by nature’s law.” Another catalogue speaks of the “the romance of the trees ..., standing unassailable against fire, flood and insect attack, almost against Time itself.” Redwood is “impregnated by nature against decay.” An engraving entitled “A Few Historical Occurrences During the Growth of a California Redwood Tree” aligns the redwood with nature, which it historicizes by superimposing a vertical timeline on and around a towering redwood. Images of Hagia Sophia and “the rule of Justinian” sit at the base of the trunk. Major events in the political history of Western civilization, such as the crowning of Charlemagne and the signing of the Magna Carta ascend up the trunk. Implicitly, the redwood lives outside the historical realm. Even though the redwoods are “hundreds or perhaps thousands of years old,” none of the events depicted represent North Pacific coast history. The engraver borrows historical references from other parts of the world to mark the natural passage of time that corresponds to the lifetime of a redwood tree.

PALCO’s redwood product advertisements accept modernity as a fact of life; they assume that America has arrived in the modern era and is there to stay. PALCO literature emphasizes the “modernness” of redwood by comparing it favorably to concrete and other contemporary building materials. It acknowledges the demand for up-to-date materials and for a contemporary look: a trim, functional appearance. Other early-century redwood product advertisements promise redwood’s ability to withstand the instability of modern life, stressing the wood’s durability in both physical and aesthetic terms. A redwood home would

afford security to homeowners in the face of the rapid change associated with modern culture.

But where Whitman represents the arrival of modernity in terms of human resettlement, these advertisements, in more than one instance, use technology to signal modernity. In the timeline, for example, streaks of script radiating from a lightning bolt that hovers in the upper right quadrant of the engraving near the Redwood's crown spell a series of trade names that stand for technological innovations and their human inventors: Marconi, Bell, Edison, Morse, Tesla, Roentgen, and Lord Kelvin. The center of the bolt reads "Power * Light * Heat * Whatnot." In another document, a poem reminiscent of Whitman's "Song of the Redwood Tree" references a similar set of trade names. A redwood bound for the sawmill proclaims:

—now o'er my crest
Ethereic songs "Marconi" sings—
Beneath "Bell" talks with busy zest
"Morse" flashes on electric wings—
"Wright's" planes rush by....
The "Baldwin" horse invades my soil
By daring men and vapor driven.

In this passage, human operators appear only as secondary characters; the phrase "by daring men and vapor driven" makes people the equivalent of steam, leaving the main action to the engine.

This technological focus establishes a complex relationship between modernity, nature, and history. Modernity's intrusion into PALCO's redwood region does not displace nature, as it does in Whitman's poem. Where Whitman imagines the spirits that animated his premodern, prehistoric redwood landscape fleeing, Leaver envisions animated technology joining a personified redwood. Bell talks, Marconi sings, planes rush, the Baldwin horse invades. In this scenario, inventions like steam power, electricity, and mechanical flight realize the fantasy that non-living things might move without biological agents pulling or carrying them. PALCO suggests that machines—"new nature" or "second nature," to borrow terms coined by Susan Buck-Morss and members of the Frankfurt School—can co-exist with "first nature." Humans have created this new nature by harnessing the energy of "first nature," represented in the engraving by lightning, in the poem by "vapor."

Though modern technology functions here as "new nature," PALCO literature recognizes its historical origin. The timeline ignores technology, except as implied by architectural achievement, from late Antiquity through the Enlightenment. In contrast, as the timeline arrives in the industrial age, technological developments appear more and more prominently. "Franklin and the electric spark," "Fulton's steamboat," "Stephenson's locomotive" and "Darwin" all compete for space near the Redwood's crown. Thus, the engraving suggests that technology starts to dominate history sometime in the 19th century. In visual terms, early 20th century technology, positioned in the sky next to the redwood's crown, has the same stature as the redwood itself.

The arrival of modernity means change for nature, in PALCO's vision as well as in Whitman's, but the PALCO literature envisions neither displacement nor death. The two

thousand-year-old redwood of the PALCO poem “must yield to puny man’s rough way.” “Man subdues the lightning to his will” reads the caption under the engraving’s lightning bolt. In the PALCO scenario, modern man dominates nature and uses his power to operate machines that allow him to venture further into the natural redwood realm: imagined, in this case, not just as a geographic region, but also as sky and underground. After yielding to humans, PALCO’s redwoods become part of human society. But where Whitman acknowledges death as a prerequisite for this incorporation, PALCO denies both the fact and significance of the redwoods’ death. In the final verse of the poem the redwood explains:

E’in then I shall not die—but change
 To things of beauty that shall grace
 The home, the mart, in widest range
 In age-long tenure, worth and place.

Reading death as metamorphosis from natural being to cultural artifact participates in the same line of thought as the fantasy of the animated machine. If modern technology can animate things, then biological death becomes irrelevant. Animated machines turn trees into forest products, which can then be re-animated. This association allows PALCO and redwood consumers to imagine that qualities of immutability, longevity, and durability—associated with myth and nature as well as living redwoods—will be preserved and transferred, via the redwood product, into the cultural sphere. Redwood products will last “in age-long tenure,” unlike ordinary objects which wear out, go out of style, or otherwise lose their value over time.

The implications of the fantasy of immortal redwood commodities extend to history itself. The durability of redwood products defies the inherent ephemerality of history, as well as the natural distinction between life and death. Redwood products bring the eternal present of nature into the historical sphere, freeing consumers from the historical process of change. If one understands the arrival of modernity in terms of the particular relationship between technology, nature, and culture expressed by Leaver’s poem, then the arrival of modernity means the end of history. History culminates with modernity, and modernity becomes an eternal present. History becomes mythic, and redwood products function as a sign of this shift.

In Benjaminian terms, where Whitman constructed a wish image, PALCO makes a fetish of redwood. Fetishes differ from wish images insofar as they substitute a claim of arrival for an indication of direction. The very same objects that function as wish images when read as signs of longing become fetishes when mistaken for literal answers: “symbol turns into fetish, and technology, the means for realizing human dreams, is mistaken for their actualization.” Whereas a wish image leaves open the question of how people will transform the material world into its utopian form, a fetish implies that the transformation is complete. Happiness becomes a matter of owning the right thing. Theorists, from Karl Marx to Susan Buck-Morss, have regarded fetishized commodities as a problem, because they keep people, who might otherwise be working towards much-needed social change, in thrall to capitalism’s consumptive compulsion.

The PALCO material provides a particularly instructive example of commodity fetishism because its assumptions about history, nature, technology, modernity, and capitalism clearly correspond to those outlined in the theoretical literature. Benjamin built his

concept of the commodity fetish on a foundation laid by Karl Marx, who observed that inanimate objects seem to acquire animate qualities when separated from their human producers in the capitalist market. Georg Lukacs extended Marx's theory by noting that in the capitalist workplace, humans, and abstract concepts like time, are "reified," or treated as extensions of things. This confusion of animate and inanimate—a central issue within the theory of fetishism—runs throughout the PALCO material. Lumber is treated as a metamorphic stage in the tree's life cycle. Inanimate technologies acquire animate qualities, largely because human workers who operate the machines are left out of the picture. The role of the market is also easy to identify in the PALCO material. The tree becomes a redwood product: a beautiful and useful commodity with both domestic and market value, according to Leaver's poem. Implicitly, Pacific Lumber Company's milling, advertised as state-of-the-art technology elsewhere in PALCO literature, is the mechanism by which nature is transformed into something the market understands.

Susan Buck-Morss elaborates on the relationship between fetish, history, nature, and myth sketched in the work of Benjamin, associating the fetish with "mythic history" or the "arrested form of history." She also correlates mythic history with a dream of eternal nature, in which the fetish is a "reified form of new nature." By depicting redwood as a building material which transfers the mythic, eternal present from the realm of nature to culture, PALCO advertisements make a fetish of it. In this fetishized form, redwood appears to be a newly discovered, ancient, natural material with the power to transform history, stabilize culture, and defy death. In short, the wish image of immortality becomes the fetishized desire that advertises redwood commodities, particularly the redwood home. In short, the PALCO material makes a fetish of redwood products by celebrating the novelties of the early 20th century as permanent fixtures in the socio-economic landscape. Though the redwood home advertisements do recognize both historical change and the instability of consumer fashions, they market redwood as an antidote to this reality. The advertisements assure consumers that redwood products are different, because of their special nature. They claim that the nature of redwoods will stop history, arresting it in its early modern form.

Benjamin's scheme of the commodity life cycle reminds us that no product can remain a fetish for long. Using the image of the fossil to "disclose the essence of 'new nature' [technology] as transient [and] fleeting," he emphasizes the obsolescence built into the market. By focusing on cultural fossils—products made out-of-date by changes in fashion or technology—Benjamin reminds us that the material culture of the present moment, which seems natural to those acculturated to it, has a decaying "prehistory." But as fossils, this obsolete material can also function as a sign of hope: as a reminder that history survives within the present. In the words of Susan Buck-Morss, "fossilized commodity remains are not merely failed material... [but also] historical clues. They are signs of the potential for change as well as signs of extinction and death.

From the vantage point of the early 21st century, old redwood product advertisements, as well as old logging equipment and old redwood products themselves, are fossils. Most of the technological innovations cited in the PALCO literature have become obsolete, just as the technologies celebrated in Whitman's poem—bull-team, chain, jack-screw and broad-axe—had been displaced by the Baldwin horse, steam-powered yarding equipment, and steel cable rigging by the 1920s. Today, of the trade names listed in Leaver's poem, only Bell remains in daily use; compact disks, jet engines, automobiles, fiber optics,

and microwave reflectors have replaced the older transportation and communications technologies. In the logging industry, gasoline-powered chainsaws, tractors, feller bunchers, helicopters, skidders and yarders took the place of machines fueled by water vapor long ago. These old advertisements warn us of the danger of fetishizing our own technological innovations: paperless communication, roadless logging, biotechnology. They can also provide signs of hope for a different future.

Preserving the Past

John Merriam's redwoods represent ancient nature within a meta-narrative that differs significantly from those of Whitman and PALCO. Where the latter associate nature with stasis, or cyclical change, Merriam associates it with extinction, species succession, and evolution: expressions of one-directional change. Where Whitman and PALCO contrast nature with history, Merriam envisions "historical nature": a natural world shaped by the same kind of linear trajectory as cultural history. In an essay blending regional natural history with personal experience, published in 1928 as "Forest Windows," redwoods figure in his vision as a "living link in an epic of history." In this essay, the redwoods enable Merriam to open up "one of the most fascinating chapters in the story of life." In this story, driven by progressive geological and biological change, the redwoods provide rare evidence of biological continuity. Thus, when Merriam fixates on the redwood species, he understands their longevity as an exception to nature's ephemerality, not as the epitome of nature's eternal, immortal, cyclical, or unchanging character.

Merriam works with a different time scale than Whitman and PALCO. To establish the age of the redwoods, he considers the trees "in the setting of *their* history" (my italics), which predates the start of human history, rather than against a setting of Western civilization. Merriam depicts modern redwoods as members "of a splendid race that was many millions of years in developing to its present majestic stature," where Whitman understood the redwoods as inheriting a domain of a mere "thousand years." Fossil remains and petrified trees considered against evidence of geological activity (such as volcanic deposits, streambed erosion, and seabed uplift) help Merriam compose a picture of the Northern California region at an earlier moment on the evolutionary timeline. When the first flowering plants were spreading over the earth and mammals were "slowly learning to outwit the dinosaurs," Merriam's redwood "tribe" was "widely distributed." Noting that the ferns in the forest understory have ancestors predating those of the redwoods, reaching back "not for epochs simply but for eons," Merriam establishes that the historical era of the redwoods is not equivalent to a natural, or biological "always," though it does reach back to the distant past.

For Merriam, evidence of prehistory, not modernity, represents novelty. A recently excavated petrified redwood known as "Monarch of the Forest," as well as shells and whale bones exposed where the South Fork of the Eel River cuts through sedimentary rock layers near Garberville, California, represent the freshly discovered past. Throughout "Forest Windows," Merriam tempers the excitement of discovery with a sense of loss; there's always a gap, a sense of disconnect, from the distant past on which he focuses. His awareness of natural history translates into heightened awareness of impermanence; Merriam recognizes that even the ground on which he stands once lay under ocean; "the immediate spot on

which we stood had lain beneath an ocean whose waves swept smoothly over it....” The record contained in the rocks allows Merriam to chart the dark, impenetrable realm that serves as metaphor for forest, past, and the unknown throughout the essay. Nonetheless, the record is clearly incomplete; Merriam works with mere fragments, or traces, of former life. Despite his enthusiasm for the redwoods and the role they play in reconstructing natural history, he repeatedly uses phrases like “relics,” “surviving remnant,” “rare examples” and “just sufficient... to tell us.”

In the context of this paleontological investigation, living redwoods turn the prehistoric past from intellectual abstraction into tangible reality. Merriam contrasts touch with speech to explain the visceral historical connection that living redwoods provide. “While ancient castles may tell us of other ages... living trees like these connect us as by handtouch with all the centuries they have known,” he writes. The redwood touch heals the sense of disconnect, rupture, or loss that characterizes the usual state of affairs for Merriam: “The time they represent is not merely an unrelated severed past; it is something upon which the present rests, and from which living currents still seem to move.”

Merriam relates an anecdote that captures the way his experience of the living redwood forest completed his vision of both history and nature. When lost in reverie in a redwood grove, he “almost questioned whether it might not be a wood of early time that spread itself before me... it seemed almost that one should search in the ferns for the moving neck of a dinosaur...” When his companions inquire why they should not expect to find descendants of dinosaurs browsing amongst the redwoods, Merriam’s reason, briefly, gives way to desire:

I saw clinging to ... a great redwood an uncanny shape with lifted head, and tail that wrapped about the tree. Instead of the carefully stated philosophic answer, I replied: I have never seen a dinosaur alive—unless I see one now.

Merriam’s vision of the redwoods was haunted by a creature he knew should not be lurking about, but which appeared as he lost himself in time and a desire to see what he knew used to be. The phantom dinosaur completed a mental picture of the wholeness of nature, and the wholeness of time: a picture in which dinosaurs, as well as redwoods, survived the ages.

Merriam explicitly articulated the way his experience of the redwoods, combined with his knowledge of evolution, revealed time and history as continuous whole: “It was as if in these trees the flow of years were held in eddies, and one could see together past and present,” he wrote. Or, “in swift panorama the history of these trees and of their surroundings as I knew them passed before me, stage after stage from the remote past.” Visits to the redwood forest took Merriam to a place where prehistory and the present intersected, allowing him to experience time as an unruptured whole.

Though Merriam speaks very little of modernity in his essay, he does identify himself as the product of the early 20th century. To explain the temporal disorientation he experiences in the redwood forest, he refers to dislocation produced by travel, which he assumes will be familiar to his readers: “As on a journey when it is today New York, yesterday Washington, tomorrow Boston, ... you hesitate a moment to be certain whether it is Washington, New York, or Boston in which you find yourself...” This passage lets the

reader know that it was possible, but still unnerving, to visit three major cities of the Eastern seaboard on successive days. An introductory passage places his first visit to the Eel River redwoods within the fairly narrow window of time when Highway 1 through the Redwood region was under construction: “suddenly we swung from the highway ... into primeval redwood timber. The car quieted as its wheels rolled over the leafy carpet.” In short, Merriam takes modernity, and modern travel, as a given. Modernity is clearly part of his world, but doesn’t warrant the fanfare that PALCO gives it.

Though primarily concerned with reconstructing the past, Merriam does address the future at the end of “Forest Windows.” In the final paragraph he writes, “You seem to turn from the clear story of a moving past to see the future rising from it through the miracle of never-failing light.” Merriam discovers this light which has “poured down” for “unnumbered eons” when he looks up to the forest canopy and past it. Phrases like “beyond the forest,” “the world outside,” “the region beyond,” and “looking out” link the temporal shift to a spatial change of focus. (Like Whitman, Merriam sees the future emerging directly from the past. Unlike Whitman, Merriam shies away from social prophesy, leaving the future vague and open-ended.) Merriam envisions the continuity of life (or in more precise biological terms, the process of photosynthesis): he implies that the light will continue to descend “to mingle with the clouds of verdure, and build itself into the unfolding life of the forest.”

For Merriam, the biological past literally remained alive in living redwoods, promising a continuum from the past through the present into the future. Thus, where Whitman imagined that incorporating logged redwood lands into modern society would maintain a connection between past and future, Merriam, and his colleagues who founded Save the Redwoods League (SRL) argued for the necessity of protecting living redwoods. But instead of positioning preserved redwoods as “pure” nature outside culture, SRL symbolically incorporated them into the socio-cultural fabric through a memorial grove dedication program. This highly successful program, initiated with the dedication of the Bolling Grove in 1921 (and still active today) identifies discrete groves within forest acreage purchased for preservation, and dedicates them to individuals, or groups.

The many memorial grove dedication ceremonies sponsored by SRL in the 1920s make the symbolic crossover between nature and culture clear. As spectacular individuals, notable groves, or viable forested watersheds, dedicated living redwoods serve as memorials to people. The ceremonial dedication process transfers the natural longevity of redwoods into the realm of cultural history. Once they are named for people, ancient redwood groves become a sign of the possibility of protecting historical memory—of keeping the spirit, or memory, of the dead alive. As Merriam suggested at the dedication of the Franklin K. Lane Memorial Grove (the Lane Grove), the participants hoped that the living presence of the trees might lend vitality to the spirit of the deceased: “So the memorial ... will honor him as a continuing living force exerted day by day and year by year upon the lives of those who come to know the message which these trees will carry.”

Merriam’s remarks also attest to the reciprocal influence of people on trees. At the Lane Grove dedication, he explained that

In dedicating this grove ... we are carrying into the vital personalities of these great trees some portion of the influence which [Lane] has exerted upon us... Added to the dignity and

nobility with which nature endowed them, there come now to these members of the forest the honor and responsibility of carrying into human life.

In other words, the ceremonies serve a dual purpose: working against historical amnesia by reintegrating people into the natural historical continuum, and protecting the future of the redwood species by integrating trees into cultural history. Through the grove dedication program, segments of forest are ritually imprinted as cultural markers in order to protect them as a nature preserves. After a dedication ceremony, these redwoods become emissaries of the modern era as well as of natural prehistory. They bring evidence of Merriam's present into the unknown future, as well as their own message about natural history. As modified by grove dedication ceremonies, the named grove—often visibly, though unobtrusively, marked with a dedication plaque—can no longer be mistaken for “primeval” nature.

The dedication ceremonies help prepare both people and the redwoods for an unknowable future. Unlike Whitman's future, Merriam's is neither predetermined nor visible; “We have faith both in the trees and in the generations of men following us that what is established here today will continue through time into which as yet our vision fails to reach,” he proclaimed at the Lane Grove dedication. When thinking about the future, Merriam stresses the need to take action in the present to ensure that the future is not impoverished:

A wide reach of opportunity for accomplishment is open to those who see that, small though their part may be, they have a place in that progressive movement of the world in which present links itself to past and future; who ... experience the joy of knowing that the heritage which they pass on is not less than what they have received.

As an advocate for redwood preservation, Merriam was not content to leave the future to its historical or natural destiny. He saw a choice between assisting the continuity between past from future by protecting the redwood species, or bringing about their extinction.

In some ways, the redwood preservation movement that flourished in the 1920s appealed to the same association between redwoods and immortality as PALCO's redwood product promotions. To sell the idea of redwood preservation to the public, SRL linked Redwoods' natural longevity and durability with the desire for cultural stability. Merriam suggests that people use redwood memorials to link future generations to the past, where PALCO suggested that people weather the changes wrought by modernization in a redwood home. However, Merriam never suggests that redwood preservation will stop the flow of time, arresting history in an eternal modern present. He hopes to secure a stable future for both the living redwood forest and the memory of specific human beings as history progresses into the unknown future. Merriam does not try to use redwood preservation to stop history, but rather to stop the dissipation of cultural memory and the destruction of historic nature.

The redwoods don't form a “wish image” for Merriam because his understanding of nature, and of the redwoods' place in nature, are historical. Paleontology undoes the myth of natural, undifferentiated, cyclical time. And though Merriam's understanding of the fossil record informs his interest in the redwoods, he does not read the forest as a fossil in the Benjaminian sense. The trees are still living and they are still the dominant species in the forest, not yet outdone by the competition. Unlike both the PALCO publicists and Whitman, Merriam reads the redwoods within the context of an understanding of the relationship between nature and history that Benjamin references with the image of the ruin.

Benjamin understood ruins as decaying structures that no longer hold sway over the collective imagination. Both fossils and ruins reference the past, but where the fossil suggests an old organic form filled in and preserved by something inorganic and solid, the ruin suggests an old inorganic structure broken down and partly dissipated by the forces of nature. Where the fossil functions as a sign of the survival power of the past, as well as a reminder of extinction, the ruin is a sign that everything will decay and dissipate. The ruin is a reminder that nature will reabsorb the remains of history. The ruin challenges the fetish, or mythic history, by illuminating history as a process of decay rather than arrival. It challenges the progressive, positivist, myth of history by reading “history as process of relentless disintegration.”

Although Merriam doesn’t overtly share Benjamin’s critique of a positivist understanding of history, his attempt to use the preservation of old-growth redwoods as a means of securing a viable connection between past and future does rest on an understanding of modernity as ruin. Participants in the memorial grove program were concerned with the dissipation of cultural memory rather than with the decay of material culture. Preserving redwoods as memorial groves combined the approaches of historic preservation and monument building; halting the process of decay and dissipation of old edifices to retain a connection to history on the one hand, and marking transient history with something permanent, on the other. Moreover, the project focused on monumental old-growth trees and “cathedral” groves—the forest’s ancient survivors, valued for their combination of old age and vitality. In retrospect, it’s tempting to read the memorial grove approach, which preserved spectacular trees and exceptional groves, rather than a viable forest ecosystem, as accepting the redwood forest itself as a ruin, in a partial state of dissipation. Although preserving a large tract of redwood forest as a national park was part of Merriam’s vision and the initial dream of the League’s leadership, the shorter term goal of “securing and protecting representative areas of primeval forest,” was where the SRL met its early success.

Conclusion

Different understandings of nature, history, and their relationship shape the various readings of the redwood presented by Whitman, PALCO, and Merriam. Based on the redwood’s extraordinary longevity and grandeur, the poet, the capitalist, and the botanist attribute the species with potential for transforming the modern cultural sphere. For Whitman the potential is realized through sacrificial death, for PALCO through commodification, and for Merriam through a preservation program. Some of the differences between their respective visions might be explained by changes in the condition of the redwood forest and redwood lumber industry between 1873, when Whitman wrote, and 1928, when *Scribner’s Magazine* published Merriam’s essay.

In 1873, when Whitman wrote, the axe, hand-saw and bull-team were still the technologies redwood loggers used. Whitman used the redwoods to link modernity—located in the foreseeable future—to a distant, natural past that preceded the historical trajectory of human culture. For Whitman, the historical moment when North Americans began logging redwoods on a mass scale marked the moment when a utopian, mythic past intersected with human history. This understanding of nature and history enabled him to rationalize the physical extinction of the redwoods as necessary for the initiation of a new utopian era.

Fifty years after Whitman published “Song of the Redwood Tree,” the social utopia Whitman had prophesied was materializing as company towns and suburbs. The transcontinental nation Whitman had imagined was ruled by the market, which made or broke king timber, in whose employment his “average spiritual man” risked life and limb. Though “forests had become less obviously important to most Americans and more distant from them in their everyday lives,” Americans were rapidly absorbing and assimilating giant redwoods as commodities. Some provided materials for use within the redwood region, but most were “scattered across America in the form of railroad ties, bridge timbers, silos, posts, shakes, shingles, sidings, ceilings, [and] doors.”

That was the era when Pacific Lumber Company advertised redwood products as part of a vision of technological fetishism. The company positioned modernity—the newly arrived present—as the end point of cultural history. This company advertised redwood commodities, and modern technology which produced them, as transcending the ephemeral nature of history, promising to stop the cycle of innovation and obsolescence that affected producers and consumers in capitalist society.

It was the same era when Merriam, as a spokesperson for the early Redwood preservation movement, tempered enthusiasm about modernity with concern about the losses and ruptures between past, present, and future that modernity implied. For Merriam, nature, as well as culture, was historical. His visits to the redwood forest took him to an intersection of prehistory and modernity that made time whole; the idea of redwood preservation embodied a hope of remaining connected to both the natural and cultural past as history progressed. The redwoods’ representation of both nature and history created hope for a recognizable future; in our own time, they continue to do so.