

The Garden as Safety Valve

The Homestead Act failed to help the Eastern urban laborer as woefully as it failed to help the farmer in the West. This failure was less important than the frustration of the frontier farmer's effort to acquire land, but it shows equally well how poor a tool the agrarian tradition was for dealing with nineteenth-century industrial society. American agrarians had long maintained that the West, the free lands beyond the frontier, would operate as a safety valve to keep down social and economic conflict in the East. The best known exponent of this notion was Horace Greeley. His constant emphasis on it, in the *New York Tribune* and on the lecture platform, is the basis for his great but not wholly deserved reputation as a spokesman for the westward movement. Greeley's famous slogan, "Go West, young man, go forth into the Country" dates from 1837, when he turned to the plan of encouraging emigration westward as means of relief from the poverty and unemployment caused by the Panic.¹ In 1846, when he adopted Evans's National Reform program, he showed his loyalty to agrarian tradition by prophesying that the operation of the safety valve would establish an independent, substantial yeomanry on the public domain.² A typical explanation of Greeley's theory appeared in the *Tribune* in 1854:

Make the Public Lands free in quarter-sections to Actual Settlers and deny them to all others, and earth's landless millions will no longer be orphans and mendicants; they can work for the wealthy, relieved from the degrading terror of being turned adrift to starve. When employment fails or wages are inadequate, they may pack up and strike westward to enter upon the possession and culture of their own lands

on the banks of the Wisconsin, the Des Moines, or the Platte, which have been patiently awaiting their advent since creation. Strikes to stand still will be glaringly absurd when every citizen is offered the alternative to work for others or for himself, as to him shall seem most advantageous. The mechanic or laborer who works for another will do so only because he can thus secure a more liberal and satisfactory recompense than he could by working for himself.³

The general notion embodied in this paragraph is very old and at various times has been invoked by writers of every possible political orientation. Frederick Jackson Turner found a version of it in a statement made by Governor John Winthrop of Massachusetts Bay in 1634.⁴ It appeared in the eighteenth century in discussions of British colonial policy, to persuade the authorities that there was no danger of a significant development of manufacturing in the American colonies. The London merchant Joshua Gee, for example, wrote to the Council of Trade and Plantations in 1721 that colonists would not be attracted into manufacturing even though abundance of good workmen had emigrated to America.

The reason is plain [he argued], there is so much an easier subsistence to be made, where land is of so small a value, by a little farm and a small stock of cattle, that most of them slight manufactories, and even in New England (the poorest of all the Colonies and the fullest of people) those few that do work will have near five times as much for manufacturing nails and other things, as is given for manufacturing in England⁵

Sir William Keith, royal customs official and Governor of Pennsylvania and Delaware, urged the British government in 1731 to make a grant of land for a colony beyond the Alleghenies on the ground that without such a new outlet for their energies, the colonists would be forced into manufacturing by a glut of tobacco, rice, and corn.⁶ The anonymous author of the preface to the London edition of John Bartram's *Observations* (1751) used a similar argument to urge the central government to encourage frontier settlement in America.⁷ In the same year Franklin stressed the idea in his *Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind*, again with the intention of influencing British policy. "Labour will never be cheap here," he wrote, "where no Man continues long a Labourer for others, but gets a Plantation of his own. . . ." ⁸

With the establishment of American independence the bearing of this kind of economic analysis was altered. The criterion of policy was no longer the interests of British merchants. Instead, a developing American nationalism embraced the humanitarian conception of the West as a refuge for the oppressed of all the world. George Washington wrote with unaccustomed playfulness to Lafayette at the end of the Revolution:

I wish to see the sons and daughters of the world in Peace and busily employed in the . . . agreeable amusement of fulfilling the first and great commandment — *Increase and Multiply*: as an encouragement to which we have opened the fertile plains of the Ohio to the poor, the needy and the oppressed of the Earth; anyone therefore who is heavy laden or who wants land to cultivate, may repair thither & abound, as in the Land of promise, with milk and honey⁹

A similar conception of the function of the West furnished Jefferson with a perfectly logical basis for revising his theoretical hostility to the growth of industry in the United States. In 1805, when he was contemplating a new edition of the *Notes on Virginia*, he wrote that he planned to qualify several expressions in the nineteenth chapter which attacked manufacturing. These expressions, he said, applied only to "the manufacturers of the great cities in the old countries, at the time present." In Europe the poverty of urban laborers had begotten a depravity, a dependence and corruption which would make them undesirable citizens in a republic. But America had not yet reached the condition of Europe, because of the fortunate influence of free land:

As yet our manufacturers [that is, industrial workers] are as much at their ease, as independent and moral as our agricultural inhabitants, and they will continue so as long as there are vacant lands for them to resort to; because whenever it shall be attempted by the other classes to reduce them to the minimum of subsistence, they will quit their trades and go to laboring the earth.¹⁰

Such a hopeful conception of the role of the West is one of the principal foundations of the myth of the garden. It occurs on every hand, and in a wide variety of forms through most of the nineteenth century. New England industrialists, for example, were accused of trying to restrict westward emigration in order to maintain a surplus of laborers and keep down wages. It was such

a charge by Senator Robert Y. Hayne in 1829 that led to the famous Webster-Hayne debate.¹¹ Hayne's colleague in this forensic encounter, Thomas H. Benton, developed the charge against New England at length, inveighing against

the horrid policy of making paupers by law — against the cruel legislation which would confine poor people in the Northeast to work as journeymen in the manufactories, instead of letting them go off to new countries, acquire land, become independent freeholders, and lay the foundation of comfort and independence for their children.

Eastern mill owners, he declared,

are now realizing what was said by Dr. Franklin forty-five years ago, that they need great numbers of poor people to do the work for small wages; that these poor people are easily got in Europe, where there was no land for them, but that they could not be got in America until the lands were taken up. . . . This resolution, which we are now considering, is the true measure for supplying the poor people which the manufactories need.¹²

Twenty years later Congressman Josiah Sutherland of New York opposed the Homestead Bill for reasons exactly like those Benton had attributed to factory owners. The bill, he said, would take labor from the manufacturing states to the land states, increasing the cost of labor and thus the cost of manufactures.¹³

Karl Marx accepted the same theory about the relation between the status of American laborers and free land.¹⁴ It formed an important part of the radical tradition in this country, especially through the influence of George Henry Evans and his National Reform movement.¹⁵ Evans's safety-valve theory became official Republican doctrine in the 1850's when the party adopted the homestead principle. One of the earliest groups that used the name "Republican" was formed at Ripon, Wisconsin, in 1854 by Alvan E. Bovay, who had been a close associate of Evans before he moved West.¹⁶ Horace Greeley made strenuous efforts to publicize the safety-valve doctrine as an argument in favor of the party. In 1859 he published a stirring appeal in the *Tribune*: "Laboring men! remember that the Republican is the only national party committed to the policy of making the public lands free in quarter-sections to actual settlers, whereby every worker will be enabled to hew out for his family a home from the virgin

soil of the Great West."¹⁷ To cite only one other Republican spokesman, Senator James R. Doolittle of Wisconsin declared in 1860: "I sustain this [homestead] measure . . . because its benign operation will postpone for centuries, if it will not forever, all serious conflict between capital and labor in the older free States, withdrawing their surplus population to create in greater abundance the means of subsistence."¹⁸

But the Homestead Act did not make an end of unemployment and social problems. On the contrary, the three decades following its passage were marked by the most bitter and widespread labor trouble that had yet been seen in the United States. Recent scholars have accordingly raised the question whether the public domain ever operated as a safety valve for eastern laborers, and the trend of the discussion has been strongly toward the conclusion that the theory, at least in the form endorsed by Greeley and his associates, had very little foundation.¹⁹ Unemployed workmen in eastern cities were not ordinarily able to go West and succeed as farmers. They seldom had the money needed to transport their families to the free public lands and to feed and shelter them until a crop could be made; and even if such a worker managed to establish himself on a western farm, he was not likely to succeed without skills that could be obtained only through long apprenticeship. Franklin had seen the West as a refuge for the laborer "that understands Husbandry"²⁰ — a simple matter perhaps in the fertile Ohio Valley during the eighteenth century but a very difficult one after the Civil War on the sub-humid plains. Frontier settlers usually were farmers of some experience from nearby states. Except for European immigrants who were taken to the West by railway companies and other agencies with lands to sell, few settlers on the agricultural frontier came directly from eastern industrial centers.

But if the theory of the safety valve was largely false, how can we account for its almost universal acceptance during the nineteenth century? The question is a difficult one if we take into account only the facts of frontier settlement. The prevalence of the belief is easier to account for, however, if we realize that it was an important part of the myth of the garden of the world. The doctrine of the safety valve was an imaginative construction

which masked poverty and industrial strife with the pleasing suggestion that a beneficent nature stronger than any human agency, the ancient resource of Americans, the power that had made the country rich and great, would solve the new problems of industrialism. Just as the theory that rain follows the plow was the myth of the garden expanded to include meteorology, the safety-valve theory was the form taken by the myth on the plane of economic analysis.

True or not, the theory was a two-edged weapon. Useful in the hands of humanitarian reformers who wished to open up opportunities for the poor and the exploited, or for Westerners who wished to foster the rapid development of their region, the theory had the disadvantage of implying that the future prosperity of the nation depended on the availability of land open to settlement. So long as the supply of land could be considered practically limitless, the theory of the safety valve could be invoked without risk to prove the uniquely fortunate destiny of America. But if opportunity, happiness, social harmony, and even liberty itself depended on the presence of free land beyond the frontier, what became of these values in the event that the available land should after all prove to be limited in extent? The doctrine of the safety valve implied that in these circumstances American society would become like crowded Europe. The ills of the Old World, which had been depicted with an invidious energy by men who insisted on the unprecedented good fortune of the United States, would become the ills of the New. The growth of population that had once seemed the surest omen of a glorious future for the American empire would become a curse on this side the Atlantic as Malthus had declared it was in Europe.²¹

Jefferson had hinted at such an outcome. The people of the United States will remain virtuous, he wrote to James Madison from Paris in 1787, as long as they are primarily agricultural, and this will be the case while vacant lands are available in any part of America. But when the lands are exhausted, Americans will "get piled upon one another in large cities, as in Europe, and go to eating one another as they do there."²² Jefferson of course thought that day was comfortably remote. The first Americans

who considered the closing of the safety valve imminent were Southern apologists for slavery searching for flaws in the Northern cult of free labor. As early as 1836 Thomas R. Dew of William and Mary College raised the question of what would happen when the supply of free land ran out:

the time must come [he said] when the powerfully elastic spring of our rapidly increasing numbers shall fill up our wide spread territory with a dense population — when the great safety valve of the west will be closed against us — when millions shall be crowded into our manufactories and commercial cities — then will come the great and fearful pressure upon the engine

This pressure would lead to class war:

then will the line of demarkation stand most palpably drawn between the rich and the poor, the capitalist and the laborer — then will thousands, yea millions arise, whose hard lot it may be to labor from morn till eve through a long life, without the cheering hope of passing from that toilsome condition in which the first years of their manhood found them, or even of accumulating in advance that small fund which may release the old and infirm from labor and toil, and mitigate the sorrows of declining years. . . .

When these things shall come [Dew inquired of the propertied men of the North] — when the millions, who are always under the pressure of poverty, and sometimes on the verge of starvation, shall form your numerical majority, (as is the case now in the old countries of the world) and universal suffrage shall throw the political power into their hands, can you expect that they will regard as sacred the tenure by which you hold your property? I almost fear the frailties and weakness of human nature too much, to anticipate confidently such justice.

The probable result was indeed lurid:

First comes disorganization and legislative plunder, then the struggle of factions and civil war, and lastly a military despotism, into whose arms all will be driven by the intolerable evils of anarchy and rapine.²³

With its allusion to the example of Rome and its gloomy realism, this is hardly in the key of the optimism that was the official American attitude in the period of manifest destiny. The Southerners were a minority of dissent from the doctrine of progress which underlay so much Northern and Western thought. In 1857 the Virginian George Fitzhugh asserted in his *Cannibals All!* that the social tensions resulting from population increase as

the West was settled would force the North to resort to slavery as a means of controlling an insubordinate and menacing laboring class.²⁴ A writer for the *Southern Literary Messenger* in the following year predicted that increase of population, by causing pressure on the available means of subsistence, would bring to the North a chain of grisly evils — mobs and violence in the cities, pulpits defiled by fanaticism and political passions, legislation tainted by demagoguery.²⁵

A celebrated letter from Lord Macaulay written in 1857 to an American biographer of Jefferson developed the same theme. Macaulay asserted that Jeffersonian democracy was feasible only in a society possessing a boundless extent of fertile and unoccupied land. When the United States should be as thickly populated as England, "You will have your Manchesters and Birminghams, and in those Manchesters and Birminghams hundreds of thousands of artisans will assuredly sometimes be out of work. Then your institutions will be fairly brought to the test." Having made the grievous error of giving the ballot to everyone, the upper classes would then be powerless to prevent legislation confiscating their property. Like the Southern apologists for slavery, Macaulay foresaw a Roman decadence for the American democracy:

Either some Caesar or Napoleon will seize the reins of government with a strong hand, or your republic will be as fearfully plundered and laid waste by barbarians in the twentieth century as the Roman Empire was in the fifth; with this difference, that the Huns and Vandals who ravaged the Roman Empire came from without and that your Huns and Vandals will have been engendered within your own country by your own institutions.²⁶

In passages like these the overtones of the phrase "safety valve" become apparent. The valve affords safety for the property of the rich against the potential violence of the poor, who are withheld from their vandal attack on the possessions of others by being enticed away to the West. It is worth recalling that Greeley urged his homestead program as an alternative to strikes, which he considered foolish and unnecessary when the worker had the opportunity to settle on his own farm from the public domain.

The antidemocratic tendency of the notion of the safety valve comes out very explicitly in Melville's *Clarel* (1876). Rolfe, the

"straight" American, is discussing the destiny of the United States with Ungar, the "clouded man" and "malcontent," an expatriate Confederate veteran who expresses many of the ideas of Dew and Fitzhugh.

Those waste-weirs [says Rolfe] which the New World yields
To inland freshets — the free vents
Supplied to turbid elements;
The vast reserves — the untried fields;
These long shall keep off and delay
The class-war, rich-and-poor-man fray
Of history. From that alone
Can serious trouble spring.

But Ungar, in the manner of the *Southern Literary Messenger*, refuses to accept this flattering unction. History moves faster in modern times; the slumberous combustibles are sure to explode, and before very long.

'Twill come, 'twill come!
One demagogue can trouble much:
How of a hundred thousand such?
And universal suffrage lent
To back them with brute element
Overwhelming?

A Thirty Years' War between the classes is fated; its probable sequel will be a dead level of rank commonplace, an Anglo-Saxon China which for Ungar (if indeed not for Melville himself) is significantly located in the West, on the vast plains where the garden of the world had been expected to materialize. There, in an almost explicit contrast with the confident earlier prophecies of a Western flowering of the arts and of civic virtue, the American society of the future will "shame the race / In the Dark Ages of Democracy." Even Clarel's companions are jolted into half-agreement with him:

Nor dull they were in honest tone
To some misgivings of their own:
They felt how far beyond the scope
Of elder Europe's saddest thought

Might be the New World sudden brought
In youth to share old age's pains —
To feel the arrest of hope's advance,
And squandered last inheritance;
And cry — "To Terminus build fanes!
Columbus ended earth's romance:
No New World to mankind remains!"²⁷

9. Shannon, *Farmer's Last Frontier*, Statistical Table, p. 418.
10. Representative George W. Julian, 31 Cong., 2 Sess. *Congressional Globe*, Appendix, p. 136 (January 29, 1851).
11. Helene S. Zahler, *Eastern Workingmen and National Land Policy*, pp. 34-35.
12. Henry George, *Our Land and Land Policy, National and State* (San Francisco, 1871), pp. 34-35.
13. *Atlantic Monthly*, XLIII, 328, 330 (March, 1879).
14. *Ibid.*, XLIII, 336.
15. *Other Main Travelled Roads* (1892, 1899, 1910), Sunset ed. (New York, n. d.), p. 102.
16. *The Man with the Hoe and Other Poems* (New York, 1899), p. 17.

CHAPTER XIX. THE MYTH OF THE GARDEN AND REFORM OF THE LAND SYSTEM

1. Powell's program is described in Walter P. Webb, *The Great Plains*, (New York, 1931), pp. 353-356, 419-422.
2. John Wesley Powell, *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region of the United States* (Washington, 1878), pp. 25-45.
3. Powell's proposals for reorganization of the surveys are discussed at greater length in my article, "Clarence King, John Wesley Powell, and the Establishment of the United States Geological Survey," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XXXIV, 37-58 (June, 1947), and in Harold H. Dunham, *Government Handout: A Study in the Administration of the Public Lands* (New York, 1941), pp. 66-68.
4. "Geographical and Geological Surveys West of the Mississippi," 43 Cong., 1 Sess. House Report No. 612, p. 53.
5. Charles Schuchert and Clara Mae LeVene, *O. C. Marsh, Pioneer in Paleontology* (New Haven, 1940), p. 249.
6. 45 Cong., 3 Sess. House Miscellaneous Document No. 5, in Vol. I, p. 2.
7. Dunham, *Government Handout*, pp. 69-73.
8. The important and voluminous Report of the Commission is 46 Cong., 2 Sess. House Executive Document No. 46, in Vol. XXII. The fate of the Report in Congress is discussed by Dunham, *Government Handout*, pp. 83-84.
9. Delegate Martin Maginnis, 45 Cong., 3 Sess. *Congressional Record*, VIII, Part 2, p. 1202.
10. Representative Thomas M. Patterson, *ibid.*, VIII, Part 3, Appendix, p. 219.
11. *Ibid.*, VIII, Part 3, Appendix, p. 221.
12. *Ibid.*, VIII, Part 2, p. 1211.

CHAPTER XX. THE GARDEN AS SAFETY VALVE

1. Roy M. Robbins, "Horace Greeley: Land Reform and Unemployment, 1837-1862," *Agricultural History*, VII, 18 (January, 1933).

2. *Ibid.*, VII, 25. Further documentation of Greeley's agrarianism is provided by Roland Van Zandt in "Horace Greeley, Agrarian Exponent of American Idealism," *Rural Sociology*, XIII, [411]-419 (December, 1948).
3. February 18, 1854. Quoted by Carter Goodrich and Sol Davison, "The Wage-Earner in the Westward Movement. I. The Statement of the Problem," *Political Science Quarterly*, L, 179-180 (June, 1935).
4. *The Frontier in American History* (New York, 1920), p. 62.
5. *Calendar of State Papers, Colonial Series, America and West Indies, March, 1720, to December, 1721*, p. 473.
6. *Ibid.*, Volume for 1731, p. 90.
7. John Bartram, *Observations on the Inhabitants, Climate, Soil . . . and Other Matters Worthy of Notice. Made by Mr. John Bartram, in his Travels from Pensilvania to Onondago, Oswego and the Lake Ontario* (London, 1751), p. v.
8. *Writings*, ed. Albert H. Smyth, III, 65.
9. *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources*, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick, 39 vols. (Washington, 1931-1944), XXVIII, 206.
10. *Writings*, ed. Andrew A. Lipscomb, 20 vols. (Washington, 1903-1904), XI, 55. To "Mr. Lithson," Washington, January 4, 1805.
11. 21 Cong., 1 Sess. *Register of Debates in Congress*, VI, 34 (January 19, 1830).
12. *Ibid.*, VI, 24 (January 18, 1830).
13. 32 Cong., 1 Sess. *Congressional Globe*, Appendix, p. 737 (April 22, 1852).
14. *Capital. A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production*, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (London, 1912), pp. 794-800.
15. Helene S. Zahler, *Eastern Workingmen and National Land Policy*, pp. 10, 23-24, 29, etc.
16. John R. Commons, "Horace Greeley and the Working Class Origins of the Republican Party," *Political Science Quarterly*, XXIV, 484 (September, 1909).
17. Quoted from the *New York Tribune*, November 7, 1859, in *DeBow's Review*, XXVIII, 253n. (March, 1860).
18. 36 Cong., 1 Sess. *Congressional Globe*, p. 1631 (April 10, 1860).
19. Representative recent articles: (1) *Contra* the safety-valve theory: Carter Goodrich and Sol Davison, "The Wage-Earner in the Westward Movement. I. The Statement of the Problem," *Political Science Quarterly*, L, 161-185 (June, 1935); "II. The Question and the Sources," *ibid.*, LI, 61-116 (March, 1936); Fred A. Shannon, "The Homestead Act and the Labor Surplus," *American Historical Review*, XLI, 637-651 (June, 1936); Clarence H. Danhof, "Farm-Making Costs and the 'Safety Valve': 1850-60," *Journal of Political Economy*, XLIX, 317-359 (June, 1941). (2) *Pro* the safety-valve theory: Joseph Schafer, "Some Facts Bearing on the Safety-Valve Theory," *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, XX, 216-232 (December, 1936); "Concerning the Frontier as a Safety Valve," *Political Science Quarterly*, LII, 407-420 (September, 1937); "Was the West a Safety Valve for Labor?" *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XXIV, 299-314 (December, 1937). Fred A. Shannon seems to me to have established the falsity of the idea in

his most recent article on the subject, "A Post Mortem on the Labor-Safety-Valve Theory," *Agricultural History*, XIX, 31-37 (January, 1945).

20. *Writings*, ed. Albert H. Smyth, III, 65.

21. Joseph J. Spengler, "Population Doctrines in the United States. I. Anti-Malthusianism," *Journal of Political Economy*, XLI, 433-467 (August, 1933); "II. Malthusianism," XLI, 639-672 (October, 1933).

22. *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. H. A. Washington, 9 vols. (Washington, 1853-1854), II, 332.

23. "An Address, on the Influence of the Federative Republican System of Government upon Literature and the Development of Character. Prepared to be Delivered before the Historical and Philosophical Society of Virginia," *Southern Literary Messenger*, II, 277 (March, 1836).

24. *Cannibals All! or Slaves without Masters* (Richmond, 1857), p. 61.

25. "R. E. C.," "The Problem of Free Society," *Southern Literary Messenger*, XXVII, 93-94 (August, 1858).

26. Quoted in Richard C. Beatty, *Lord Macaulay, Victorian Liberal* (Norman, Oklahoma, 1938), pp. 366-369. The letter was addressed to R. S. Randall.

27. *Clarel. A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land*, 2 vols. (New York, 1876), II, 524-527. The allusion to the god Terminus is apparently a reminiscence of Benton's speech on the occupation of Oregon in 1825: ". . . the ridge of the Rocky mountains may be named without offence, as presenting a convenient, natural, and everlasting boundary. Along the back of this ridge, the western limit of this republic should be drawn, and the statue of the fabled god, Terminus, should be raised upon its highest peak, never to be thrown down" (18 Cong., 2 Sess. *Register of Debates in Congress*, I, 712. Senate, March 1, 1825).

CHAPTER XXI. THE AGRICULTURAL WEST IN LITERATURE I: COOPER AND THE STAGES OF SOCIETY

1. *The Oak Openings; or, The Bee-Hunter*, 2 vols. (New York, 1848), I, 154.

2. *Ibid.*, I, 113.

3. *Westward Ho! A Tale*, 2 vols. (New York, 1832), I, 4.

4. Bushfield had been a companion of Boone (*ibid.*, I, 70); he was a loyal retainer of Colonel Dangerfield (I, 71); he felt crowded by the advance of settlement (I, 179-181); he wished to be able to fell a tree near his house for fuel (I, 184); and finally he fled to a remote military post on the Missouri River (II, 193).

5. *The New Pastoral* (Philadelphia, 1855), p. vi.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 208.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 215-217, 225, 233-234, 237.

8. *Little Alice; or, The Pet of the Settlement. A Story of Prairie Land* (Boston, 1863), p. iii.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 143.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 236.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 18, 67, 28.