

‘COME ROAM WITH ME COLUMBIA’S FORESTS’: REPRESENTATIONS OF THE FOREST IN ALEXANDER WILSON’S *THE FORESTERS*

LAURENCE MACHET

Université Bordeaux-Montaigne, France

Abstract. Scottish-born naturalist Alexander Wilson, best known for his multi-volume record of the work he did as America’s first ornithologist, *American Ornithology* (published 1808–1814), is also worthy of recognition for his long poem *The Foresters*, a semi-autobiographical work in which he recounts the journey he took on foot from Pennsylvania to Niagara Falls in 1804. In his poetic treatment of the forest, Wilson contrasts the traditional view of the wilderness (as evident in a typical natural history of the time) with a more nuanced or even apparently contradictory Romantic view of wild nature as sublime and potentially supernatural. The poem, whatever its literary merit, contains the kernel of what Wilson would explore in later writings: the beauty as well as the fragility of the forest and the wilderness; their destruction and his role in that destruction.

Key words: Romanticism, epistemological hunting, Native Americans, destruction of nature, wilderness, early American Republic

INTRODUCTION

Alexander Wilson is best known for his multi-volume work *American Ornithology*, volume I of which was first published in 1808, but he was also a poet. True to the love of poetry he had acquired as a youth in Scotland, where he published several poems, he turned to that genre to make an account of his travels to Niagara Falls and wrote *The Foresters*. In one of the very few essays devoted to the poem, Irving N. Rothman aptly describes it as ‘rambling in structure’ and varied in styles and purposes (Rothman, 1973: 242). As the subtitle (‘A Poem Descriptive of a Pedestrian Journey to the Falls of Niagara in the Autumn of 1804’) suggests, this epic, 2,219-line topographical poem details the two-month, 1,300-mile trek on which Wilson set out in late October 1804 with two companions, his nephew William Duncan and one of his students, Isaac Leech. They travelled for the most part on foot from Philadelphia to Niagara Falls via Ovid, in upstate New York, where Wilson and his nephew owned a farm. In December 1804, in a letter to his mentor, the naturalist William Bartram, Wilson recalls

the long circuitous journey [...] through trackless snows, and uninhabited forests; over stupendous mountains, and down dangerous

rivers; passing over, in a course of thirteen hundred miles, as great a variety of men and modes of living, as the same extent of country can exhibit in any part of North America. (Hunter, 1983: 225)

As another letter to his nephew seems to indicate, writing of the poem was well under way by February 1805:

The solitary hours of this winter I have employed in completing the poem which I originally intended for a description of your first journey to Ovid. It is now so altered as to bear little resemblance to the original; and I have named it the 'Foresters'. (Hunter, 1983: 231.)

Wilson kept working on the poem in the first half of 1805. Originally serially published in 1809–1810 in Joseph Dennie's *Port Folio*, the country's most important literary magazine, in print between 1801 and 1827, it proved so popular that it was later published as a book. It is the earliest known poem detailing the monumental wonders of the Niagara Falls, still very difficult to reach at the time. The Erie Canal was indeed completed only in 1825 and the Buffalo and Niagara Falls railroad opened in 1834. On a more personal level, the poem also marks a watershed moment in Wilson's life as it represents his first step towards creating the most complete illustrated account of the birds of America that had yet been attempted. As it turns out, the journey recounted in the poem was the first leg of an eventual 10,000 miles that he travelled during his research for *American Ornithology*, a work that is still considered the foundation of scientific ornithology. Describing himself as he is about to start on his journey, Wilson tells the reader that he is equipped with 'colours, paper, pencils' (Wilson, [1809] 1844: 211), further proof that he intended to draw the scenes he encountered. As he acknowledges in his letter to Bartram, after that first trip, Wilson felt 'more eager than ever to commence some more extensive expedition, where scenes and subjects entirely new, and generally unknown, might reward my curiosity, and where perhaps my humble acquisitions might add something to the stores of knowledge' (Hunter, 1983: 231).

In addition to depictions of the various places the three travelers stayed in and the natural beauty of the landscapes, the poem includes descriptions of the wildlife, with a special focus on the birds Wilson noticed. While providing multi-faceted views of the forests and hinterlands the travelers go through, the poem also chronicles the progression of human settlement along the Susquehanna River, and this topic of settlement is also prevalent in Wilson's letters to friends. With these descriptions, he shows his readers, people from an increasingly urban population, the value and complexity of the natural world. But throughout, Wilson wavers between his reinscribing a traditional view of the forest as a howling wilderness, a wild, dangerous, and frightening place meant to be conquered, and his offering a view of the forest as an untamed, but noble and welcoming part of the natural world. In this apparently paradoxical attitude he shares ideas inherent to the Romantic view of nature.

'...THROUGH FORESTS DEEP WE PASSED'

The forest Wilson invites his readers, those 'sons of the city' (Wilson, [1809] 1844: 208), to explore with him is first and foremost a hostile and frightening place and hence this invitation, as surprising as it seems, signals the poem's ambivalence from the very first line. Wilson's outlook is however congruent with the way colonists perceived the forest between the 17th and the 19th centuries. It was essentially an environment that caused insecurity and discomfort, that threatened the physical integrity of the settlers (Williams 1989: 11), an enemy that had to be conquered. Wilson thus predictably describes the forest as the haunt of dangerous wild beasts, and he repeatedly mentions 'howling' (Wilson, [1809] 1844: 224) or 'midnight' wolves (*ibid.*: 229) and 'bloody panthers' (*ibid.*: 224; 229) or 'skulking bears' (*ibid.*: 235). As etymologically Wilson uses the word *wilderness* to suggest the place of wild beasts, forest and wilderness seem almost synonymous. Death seems to be lurking everywhere, and even the trees themselves are threatening. Among those listed in the poem, Wilson mentions pines only generically but takes pains to be more specific with the other species of conifer present, 'hemlocks (that) quite shut out the day' (*ibid.*: 223). Here he may well be playing, and not too subtly, on the polysemy of 'hemlock', both a conifer and a lethal poison; this play on words echoes in the next line: 'Majestic solitudes; all *dead* and deep' (*ibid.*, my emphasis). The forest is a tomb-like place, tall lofty trees shutting out the light of the sun. Darkness and the power of imagination turn 'the groaning trees' (*ibid.*) into monstrous shapes that try to trap the travelers 'below dark drooping pines' (*ibid.*) until they aptly come to a place named 'Shades of Death' (*ibid.*: 222). This first impression of the forest is definitely that of a hostile environment for man, a place that humans have not yet managed to conquer or put to their use, a wilderness where the forces of nature transform the traveler who survives its real or illusory traps:

The forest is the antithesis of house and hearth, village and field boundary, where the household gods hold sway and where human laws and customs prevail. It holds the dark forbidden things—secrets, terrors, which threaten the protected life of the ordered world of common day. In its terrifying abyss, full of strange forms and whispering voices, it contains the secret of the soul's adventure... (Zimmer, 1975: 182)

In addition, as Roderick Nash points out, 'the idea of a habitat of wild beasts implied the absence of men' (Nash, 1967: 2), or at least of creatures that could be considered human. And, according to Wilson, these creatures can be responsible for gruesome massacres, 'fire, rapine, murder,' the 'bloody bands,' of 'blood-stained *savages*' (Wilson, [1809] 1844: 242, my emphasis). These descriptions definitely seem to fit that 'invention of the Indian as a beast of the wild wood and devilish fiend' (Bowden, 1992: 187). In several instances in the poem, Wilson systematically refers to the Natives as 'savages'. To call them 'Indians', as he does in some other sections of the poem, or to designate them by the names of their tribes would make them too human for the impression the poet wishes to convey.

As the word ‘savage’ comes from *silvaticus*, ‘wild’, literally ‘of the woods’, Wilson plays on both meanings to carry the notion that the wildness of the environment accounts for the Indians’ intractability. The wildness of their environment is reflected in the savagery of their behavior and the non-Native inhabitants of the forest are, as a result, constantly in danger of being contaminated by it. As Richard Slotkin puts it, ‘the Indian [was seen] as the human embodiment of the devilish essence of the wilderness’ (Slotkin, 1973: 201).

The subsequent idea that the forest has the power to dehumanize its non-Native inhabitants is quite common and Hector St. John de Crevecoeur anticipates the same fear when he writes in Letter III that ‘[B]y living in or near the woods, their [the back settlers’] actions are regulated by the wildness of the neighbourhood’, an environment which makes them ‘ferocious, gloomy, and unsociable’ (Crevecoeur, [1782]2013: 37). To both Crevecoeur and Wilson, then, the wilderness challenges man’s very identity as a social being:

Dead lie the lonely woods, and silent shore,
As nature slept and mankind were no more.
How drear! How desolate to ear and eye!
What awful solitudes around us lie! (Wilson, [1809] 1844: 264)

The permeability of the frontier between (white) civilization and (Indian) savagery and the subsequent risk of contamination inform some of Wilson’s descriptions of pioneer life. After crossing Tunkhannock’s stream, for instance, the three companions find accommodation at ‘a famished inn’ (ibid.: 231)

unshingled and without a door;
No meat, or drink, or bread, or liquor there;
As Afric’s wilds, of every comfort bare (ibid.).

The poet ridicules the place almost to the point of farce. In response to Wilson’s enquiring who his neighbors are, the owner replies ‘Why, the bears’ (ibid.). The poet notes that the travelers prepare their meals ‘like hungry wolves’, ‘hew down the wheaten loaf’ (ibid.) and end up sleeping in a ‘kennel’ (ibid.: 232), making the danger of animalization and savagery even more manifest. He also remarks that the ‘township’ lacks the attributes of civilization (mill and church, for example); their absence illustrates Frederick Jackson Turner’s idea that ‘the wilderness masters the colonist. [...] It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and moccasin. [...] In short, at the frontier the environment is at first too strong for the man’ (Turner, [1921] 1953: 4).

But there is a significant and marked difference, one that Wilson keeps coming back to and insisting on, between those men traveling or living in the hinterland and non-human animals. The humans have weapons, and this signals their superiority over the non-human animals. As Antoine Traisnel explains, ‘With technological progress, the dominance of the human over (other) animals became more pronounced, almost self-evident’ (Traisnel, 2012: 5). In one section of the poem, Wilson lists all the travelers’ artillery that is being admired

by one of their hosts. This scene not only signals dominance over animals but also celebrates the new powers of American manufacture. On that account, it is interesting to point out that Wilson felt he needed to add a note explaining that Dupont was 'A celebrated manufacturer of gunpowder, on the Brandy wine, whose packages are usually impressed with the figure of an eagle' (Wilson, [1809] 1844: 224). The use of the eagle imagery, the still relatively new national emblem, plays on feelings of national pride.

Our muskets glittering in the hunter's hand;
 Now poised, now levelled to his curious eye;
 Then in the chimney corner set to dry.
 Our clear, green powder-flasks were next admired;
 Our powder tasted, handled, rubbed, and fired;
 Touched by the spark, lo! sudden blazes soar,
 And leave the paper spotless as before
 From foaming Brandywine's rough shores it came,
 To sportsmen dear its merits and its name;
 Dupont's best Eagle, matchless for its power,
 Strong, swift and fatal as the bird it bore.
 Like Jove's dread thunderbolts it with us went,
 To pour destruction wheresoever sent. (ibid.: 224)

Thus, even though danger and death do lurk in the forest, it is humans who are in fact more often than not the agents of death. The implication is that they need to gain or defend the forest territory against the encroachment of wild creatures, including Indians.

The poem thus abounds in references to hunting, from the description of hunting trophies to gruesome killing scenes. In the early nineteenth century, wild game was still extensively killed for food and the forest is depicted as some kind of giant 'meat safe'. As a matter of fact, '[T]he forests of North America were rich in a variety of mammals and birds which provided an easy supply of food and later made hunting an important part of the colonists' domestic economy' (Saikku, 1990: 4). But in *The Foresters*, hunting goes beyond the mere act of providing food. The hunting scenes are described graphically, appealing to all the senses. They demonstrate man's clear superiority and skill with the technology and seem almost pleasurable for Wilson and his companions:

Two whirring pheasants swept across our path,
 And swift as lightning flew the fiery death.
 A cloud of quails in rising tumult soar;
 Destruction follows with resounding roar.
 From bough to bough the scampering squirrels bound,
 But soon, in smoky thunders, bite the ground;
 Life's gushing streams, their sable furs defile,
 And Duncan's stick sustains the bloody spoil. (Wilson, [1809] 1844: 243)

Even though Wilson's shooting may sometimes seem out-of-control and irrational to a 21st-century reader, it is a clear indication of the triumph of technology. Whereas Crèvecoeur suggests that guns also dehumanize those who use them by distracting them from what should be their primary mission as settlers, i.e. clearing and farming the land (Crèvecoeur, [1782] 2013: 37), Wilson seems indeed to argue that guns definitely give man superiority over the wild beasts of the forest. Nevertheless, as we will see in the next section, Wilson does waver between this vision of the forest as a place needing to be conquered and a place more peaceful, a place whose resources should be listed and cataloged.

'CRASHING FORESTS THUNDERING TO THE GROUND'..

Wilson systematically contrasts the wild forest with tamed nature, and presents its very wildness as a temporary state, meant to be changed by the hand of man. That is, just like his friend and mentor William Bartram before him, Wilson portrays conquered, useful, domesticated nature in a highly positive way, as 'the beneficent mother, the eternal, stable, quiet place of rest' (Bredeson, 1968: 87). His description of Bucks County, in Pennsylvania, for example, is a scene of pastoral bliss:

Through fertile Bucks, where lofty barns abound,
For wheat, fair Quakers, eggs, and fruit renowned;
Full fields, snug tenements, and fences neat,
Wide-spreading walnuts drooping over each gate;
The spring-house peeping from enclustering trees,
Gay gardens filled with herbs, and roots and bees,
Where quinces, pears, and clustering grapes were
With pondrous calabashes hung between;
While orchards, loaded, bending over the grass,
Invite to taste, and cheer us as we pass. (Wilson, [1809] 1844: 212)

With such enumeration Wilson points out the fertility of the land which, he argues, when tended carefully, provides plentifully for all, contrary to the 'bare black heaths' (ibid.: 209) of his native Britain. The implication is that, the natural potential being there, it is the settlers' responsibility to till the land; here Wilson silently alludes to Genesis: 'the LORD God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it' (Gen. 2:15).

The pastoral scenes dot Wilson's poetic landscape and stand in contrast to the dark, tall and seemingly indomitable forest. Wilson, who owned a farm in Ovid with his nephew, never quite loses his farmer's eye, continually appraising the land for its fruitfulness. In this sense, he is typical of an 'enthusiasm for nature in America during the pioneering period [that] almost always had reference to the rural state' (Nash, 1967: 33). As a result, according to Wilson, the successful, hardworking settler who manages both to exploit nature's

potential in the valleys and to conquer the wilds becomes a generous kingly figure presiding over his domain:

When lo, emerging from the opening wood,
 Midst narrow fields a little cottage stood!
 [...]
 The dame's kind looks already bade us rest;
 And soon the landlord, entering with his train,
 Confirmed her kindness over and over again;
 And now the table showed its welcome head,
 With cheering fare, and rural dainties spread;
 Green sparkling tea, obscured with floating cream;
 Delicious salmon from the neighboring stream;
 Nice cakes of wheaten flour, so crisp and good,
 And piles of honeycombs, ambrosial food! (Wilson, [1809] 1844: 246)

This pastoral scene clearly evokes the Promised Land, the land of milk and honey which is depicted in Exodus 3:8 and which here is a domestic enclave in the forest where the local produce, which is fit for the gods, guarantees self-sufficiency.

With its references to the advantages of cultivation of the land, *The Foresters* paints a portrait of America corresponding to the Jeffersonian agrarian ideal which postulates that free citizens involved in farming was the most egalitarian type of civil organization: 'Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever He had a chosen people, whose breasts He has made His peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue' (Jefferson, [1781] 1801: 244). This idea of the egalitarian is very similar to that which Crèvecoeur postulates in "What Is an American?" when he writes: 'Ye poor Europeans, ye, who sweat, and work for the great--ye, who are obliged to give so many sheaves to the church, so many to your lords, so many to your government, and have hardly any left for yourselves' (Crèvecoeur, [1782] 2013: 43). Wilson seems to echo this concept in *The Foresters* when he insists on the direct benefits each farmer can enjoy from working the land, without lord or clergy levying taxes:

Blest with the purest air, and richest soil,
 What generous harvests recompense your toil!
 Here no proud lordling lifts his haughty crest;
 [...]
 No thief in black demands his tenth in sheaves; (Wilson, [1809] 1844: 259)

For this egalitarian and pastoral ideal to be possible, the forest has to be cleared, a measure that, quite surprisingly, Wilson fully supports. He indeed was paradoxically seemingly promoting settlement, expansion and forest clearing while at the same time being scientifically interested in birds and deploring the loss of their habitat.

Long may your glittering axe, with strength applied,
 The circling bark from massy trunks divide,
 Or wheeled in air while the wide woods resound,
 Bring crashing forests thundering to the ground;
 Long may your fires in flaming piles ascend,
 And girdled trees their wintry arms extend;
 Your mighty oxen drag the logs away,
 Arid give the long hid surface to the day. (ibid.: 259)

The prime function of clearing the forest is to make space for fields and pastures, to clear the land for settlement and farming. But an additional and not altogether unwelcome side-effect of forest clearing is the disappearance of Indians, toward whom Wilson is quite ambivalent:

While fields of richest grain and pasture good
 Shall wave where Indians strayed and forests stood; (ibid.: 259)

By opposing wild nature and humanized agricultural land ('fields' that 'wave'), Wilson here turns Indians into natural objects that can be disposed of in the same way as trees. The implicit message is also that those Indians, even though they were 'sons of the forest' (as opposed to the 'sons of the city' of the poem's first line) were not able to improve their natural environment and thrive. Wilson's straying Indians echo the common notion of the 'roaming' Indian that 'prove(d) the non-agrarian qualities of all Indians, who could be dispossessed because of their failure to use the earth (usufruct) according to the Old Testament God's imperative' (Bowden 1992: 188). This idea of improving nature, a by-product of 18th century Enlightenment philosophy, probably guides Wilson in both his appreciation of European settlement and exploitation of nature as the 'Enlightenment continued the Scientific Revolution's project of mastering nature' (Wolloch, 2011: 4).

This idea may also account for Wilson's scientific interest in the forest as a reservoir of birdlife to be studied, dissected and cataloged. As Pamela H. Smith and Paula Findlen argue, during the Enlightenment the investigation of nature became an "active" science, pursued by practitioners belonging to various social classes, and it 'began to involve the body; the investigator of the natural world had to observe, record, and engage with nature' (Smith and Findlen, 2002: 16). This is exactly what Wilson did on his Niagara Falls trek, which was the prelude to his later expeditions in search of bird specimens. His seemingly gratuitous killing of a hawk sailing 'serene, secure, and eyeing the expanded scene' (Wilson, [1809] 1844: 217) is thus probably part of this quest, this scientific or 'epistemological' hunting, as Traisnel calls it:

The shifting valence of the hunt from martial to epistemological finds a burgeoning archive in the emergence of natural history museums and science institutions, which depended on the products of the hunt for their specimen collections. (Traisnel, 2012: 7–8)

Wilson, who provided wildlife specimens for Charles Willson Peale's museum in Philadelphia, certainly seems to be as valid an 'epistemological' hunter as John James Audubon, whom Traisnel chooses as his object of study.

Wilson's quest for knowledge could also take more peaceful turns, as he observed and recorded birds' feeding habits and migrations. He uses them, for instance, as time markers, to give his readers indications about the season by noting the presence of 'clouds of blackbirds' while 'far to the south our warblers had withdrawn' (Wilson, [1809] 1844: 210). The traveler's curiosity and interest in nature may thus signal a shift, or at least the underlying ambivalence that exists between exploitation of the forest's resources and appreciation of the forest *per se*. The poem seems indeed to build bridges between a rational, eighteenth-century view of the natural world and the budding American Romantic movement.

A 'ROMANTIC' (AND PATRIOTIC?) POEM

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, Romanticism places 'emphasis on feeling, individuality, and passion rather than classical form and order, and typically prefer(s) grandeur, picturesqueness, or naturalness to finish and proportion' (Online 1). *The Foresters* definitely presents the reader with the feelings of the speaker of the poem towards and reactions to the landscapes he crosses. From the start, he poses as the unfaltering hero who is going

To catch the living manners as they rose;
The exploits, fatigues and wonders to rehearse. (Wilson [1809] 1844: 211)

He even likens himself and his companions to 'Pilgrims' (ibid.: 221 or 246 for example) and, upon reaching Lake Ontario, the joy he feels is not unlike the one he felt when arriving in America years before:

Ontario is in view!
With flying hats we hail the glorious spot,
And every care and every fear's forgot.
So, when of old, we crossed the Atlantic waves,
And left a land of despots and of slaves,
With equal joy Columbia's shores we spied,
And gave our cares and sorrows to the tide. (ibid.: 265)

In the poem itself the speaker's persona is that of a guide whose mission it is to teach an increasingly urban population how to value wild nature. Its sublimity explains the multiplicity of reactions it could elicit among explorers, from an aesthetic appreciation to sheer terror.

In his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Edmund Burke defines and explains our appreciation of objects that defy the classical laws of aesthetics in nature: 'the aesthetic of the sublime is distinguished as involving a kind of 'negative' experience or oscillation of pleasure

and pain, attraction and repulsion, caused by a breakdown in the capacity of the imagination' (Cunningham, 2004: 550). Astonishment and terror in front of nature's wonders, Burke argues, induce an aesthetic emotion: 'The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is astonishment: and astonishment is that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror' (Burke, 1757: 95). The criteria of obscurity, vastness and terror, mentioned in Burke's definition of the sublime, are all present in *The Foresters*, and the word sublime itself appears repeatedly. Wilson's forest perfectly illustrates Cronon's definition of eighteenth-century wilderness as 'a landscape where the supernatural lay just beneath the surface [...] expressed in the doctrine of the sublime...' (Cronon, 1995: 73). By the very act of writing such a poem and by turning the forest into an aesthetic object, Wilson moves away from a purely rational natural history approach, a shift initiated by William Bartram in his *Travels* and one that can also be witnessed in sections of Wilson's *Ornithology*.

As early as the first years of the nineteenth century, enjoyment of the wilds and woods seems to have been an essentially urban phenomenon, possible only when distance and development made the forest less threatening. To view things in a slightly more cynical way, the wilderness could be enjoyed only by 'people whose relation to the land was already alienated' (Cronon, 1995: 80) as 'it was the privilege of those far enough removed from nature to be able to see it as scenic backdrop and not, as in the case of the plain dirt farmer, in the relationship of daily antagonist' (Bredeson, 1968: 89).

And indeed at the very beginning of the poem, Wilson addresses his urban readers directly:

Sons of the city! ye whom crowds and noise
 Bereave of peace and Nature's rural joys,
 And ye who love through woods and wilds to range,
 Who see new charms in each successive change;
 Come roam with me Columbia's forests through. (Wilson, [1809]
 1844: 208).

Thus, as Roderick Nash contends, 'appreciation of wilderness began in the cities' (Nash, 1967: 44). Distance from the forest, or from the wilderness in general, generates an appeal that it does not hold when the explorer is battling it. Besides, one can argue that in the early nineteenth century, the Romantic forest, silent and impenetrable, was a fabrication (Denevan, 1992: 418). Along with Williams and Denevan, Bowden contends that the impenetrable, primeval forest had already disappeared and was thus a literary construct (Williams, 1989: 33; Bowden, 1992: 188). Bowden adds that the motivation behind that fabrication was to downplay any agency the Indians may have had on the environment in order to justify dispossession (Bowden, 1992: 188). To an increasingly urban 19th century population then, the dwindling forest could become a desirable

literary and aesthetic object, as well as a place to be enjoyed, preserved and not just exploited or disposed of.

The sympathy created by distance may also account for Wilson's ambivalent treatment of Native Americans in the poem. The notion of ambivalence, in a colonial context, 'describes the complex mix of attraction and repulsion that characterizes the relationship between colonizer and colonized' (Ashcroft, 2007: 12). In some sections of the poem, Native Americans, the natural inhabitants of the forest according to Wilson, are presented as allies of the British during the War for Independence. Wilson implies that, as such, they deserved to be hunted down and killed, as happened during the Sullivan-Clinton expedition in 1779 that destroyed Iroquois villages and winter crops and saw members of the Six Nations relocate to Canada:

Thanks to the brave, who through these forests bore
Columbia's vengeance on the sons of gore
Who drove them howling thro' th' affrighted waste,
Till British regions sheltered them at last. (Wilson, [1809] 1844: 242)

However, when Indians are no longer perceived as a threat, Wilson can afford to sympathize with their fate and can express nostalgia at the loss of their habitat and traditional way of life:

Ah! melancholy scene, though once so dear
To the poor Indian haply wandering here,
Whose eye forlorn, amid the gushing flood,
Beholds the spot where once his wigwam stood,
Where warriors' huts in smoky pride were seen,
His nation's residence, his native green, (ibid.: 248)

Or:

Howe'er stern prejudice these woes may view,
A tear to Nature's tawny sons is due. (ibid.: 249)

As Slotkin maintains, 'Once the threat of real Indians was removed from proximity to American civilization and banished to the frontier, the mythicization of the Indian could proceed without the problems and complexities arising from the realities of Indian-white relations' (Slotkin, 1973: 356–357). Wilson's poem, just as Slotkin's passage suggests, switches to the singular, 'the Indian', and from the paradigm of the Ignoble to the Noble Savage. Once deprived of his dangerous character, the Indian came to embody pride, courage and adaptation to his environment, all the virtues that could make him a perfect American citizen (Cro, 1990: 102). Wilson's poem thus plays on the theme of the vanishing Indian, noble and brave but losing his freedom and his land (here, the vanishing forest), necessarily sacrificed in the making of America.

CONCLUSION

Because of Wilson's dual status as a naturalist and a poet, his representation of the forest is inherently ambivalent. In typical eighteenth century scientific reasoning, his forest is at worst an obstacle to agriculture, at best a place to be managed and exploited, and its Native inhabitants to be disposed of or displaced. But this rational and expansionist outlook collides with his Romantic vision of America's forests, and landscapes in general, as the repositories of some sort of national character jeopardized by development. Upon reaching the Niagara Falls region, a significant landmark in the French and Indian war and in the War for Independence, Wilson celebrates 'Columbia's stars' (Wilson, [1809] 1844: 270) and makes the Falls a national landmark. In a mere two lines, he also captures the tension that has run throughout the poem:

The right a wilderness of woods displayed,
Fields, orchards, woods, were on the left arrayed (ibid.)

Regret for what would soon be the country's past is never far distant and complicates Wilson's apparent unreserved endorsement of progress, making him a perfect illustration of Ekirch's assertion that 'No other nation equaled the American people in their paradoxical ability to devastate the natural world and at the same time mourn its passing' (Ekirch, 1973: 189).

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Laurence Machet (PhD English, Assoc. prof.) is currently working at the University Bordeaux-Montaigne, France. She is involved in a new project 'Indigenous Peoples and the Environment' and coedits academic journal *Elohi*. She is currently working on 18th century American travel writers in the Southeast. Email: Laurence.Machet@u-bordeaux-montaigne.fr