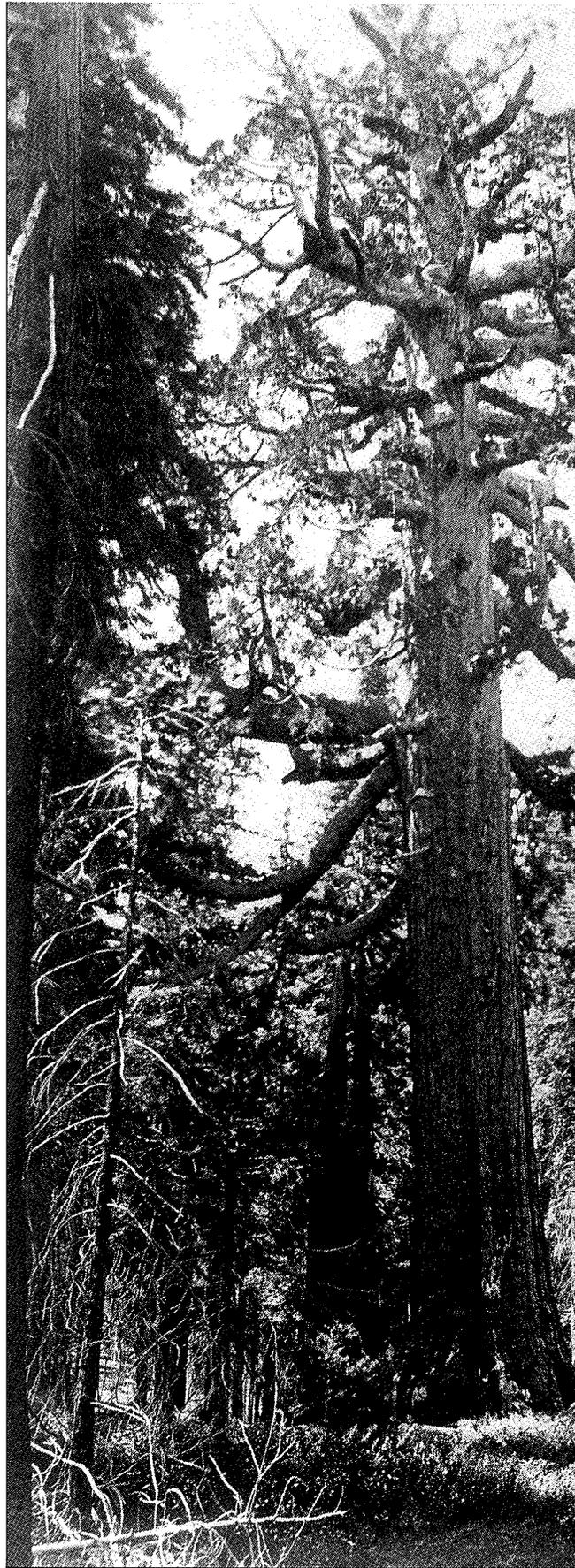
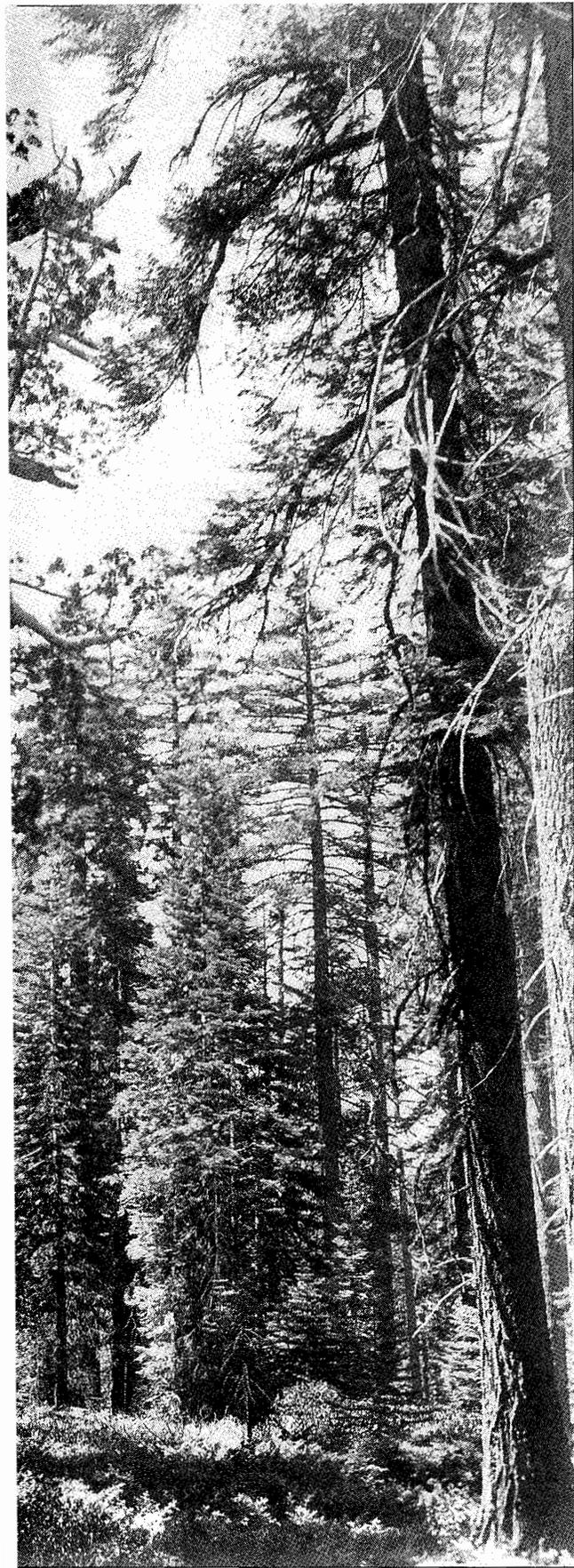

America's Verdant Cross

National mythologies are based as much on features of landscape as on heroic individuals, ideals, and great events. Simon Schama here tells how the "discovery" of giant sequoias in the 1850s helped to confirm America's sense of manifest destiny "at a time when the Republic was suffering its most divisive crisis since the Revolution."

BY SIMON SCHAMA

It was Augustus T. Dowd's big joke. On a spring morning in 1852 he had been after a wounded grizzly, meaning to finish the brute off and provide the men of the Union Water Company with fried bear for the rest of the week. That was his job. As he was tracking the animal through the woods of sugar pine and ponderosa, the flickering light gradually dimmed. Without any warning, Dowd abruptly came face to face with a monster. It was maybe 50 feet around and,





Grizzly Giant, by Carleton E. Watkins (1863)

as close as he could guess, nearly 300 feet high. It was a tree.

Of course, no one at Murphy's Camp would believe him. They were more likely to credit a giant bear than a giant tree, he supposed. And so he told them the next day that the biggest grizzly there ever was was lurking right there, deep in the woods. And when he took them right up to the strange thing, a cinnamon-brown tower etched with deep furrows up its whole length, cavities a man's arm could disappear into, not a branch below 50 feet and its crown invisible, he could point and jump about and crow and laugh: "Boys, do you now believe my big tree story? That's the grizzly I wanted you to see. Now do you believe my yarn?"

They did, and were quick, too, to figure out some way to profit from it. For the magnitude of what they beheld was not lost on a gang of laborers stuck out in the foothills of the western Sierra Nevada, digging canals and ditches for the mining camps of the Mariposa Estate. No one in Yosemite Valley in 1852 was there for the scenery; of that we can be sure. The miners who peopled the shacks and cabins that straggled over the hillsides were forty-niners whose dreams had soured. Panning the streams in the drenching days of spring, they survived by working for the soldier-explorer John C. Frémont, who set his mill machines to smashing quantities of quartz at the western end of the valley in the hope of extracting gold. It was not all high-altitude craziness. Some mines, such as Princeton and Pine-Josephine, gave up real riches, for a few years at any rate. The Frémont workers would take the extracted ore, set it with quicksilver into bricks, and then transport them

(with all due caution and security) to the bank vaults in San Francisco. From there they ended up, duly assayed, in the U.S. Mint.

Not much of this good fortune trickled down to the scrambling, violent crowd of Italians, Chinese, Mexicans, and Germans inhabiting the shacks and tents of the Mariposa. Along with the miners were the usual camp followers and hangers-on: hunters, loggers, ditchdiggers, cooks, and whores, many of them practicing more than one trade. But if their life was precarious, it was nothing compared to that of the Ahwahneechee Indians. As tribal cultures went, the Ahwahneechee were relatively sedentary (and therefore particularly despised by the Europeans), subsisting on black oak acorns, grubs, and on the trout scooped from the river, belly up, after the Indians poisoned the water with soapweed. The dazzling meadow-floor of the valley they called (in the Miwok tongue) *Ahwahnee*, or "gaping mouth." Although its white eulogists, such as John Muir, supposed it was untouched and Edenic, it looked the way it did because of the Indians' repeated set-fires, which cleared it of brush and opened the space for grazing. The Indians hunted a little too, and, driven from their food sources by the guns of the mining camps, they resorted to periodic raids to get some of their birthright back, and liquor and weapons too, if they could. Sometimes there was shooting and cutting. After one of these affrays, Major James D. Savage's Mariposa Battalion would thunder off after them, guided by Mono Indian pursuers, hounding the wretched Ahwahneechee from valley to valley until there were no more to be seen. The few who survived dispossession and dislocation called their tormentors *Yo-che-ma-te*: "some among them are killers."

Naturally, a more picturesque account of the etymology of the valley's name was needed. So the soldiers imagined that it derived from a Miwok term for "grizzly bear": *uzumati*. And the Big Trees in what became known as the Calaveras Grove were almost immediately treated as trophy: skinned, mounted, and displayed for bragging and for cash. In the summer of 1854 another ex-miner, George Gale, who saw gold in wood, rather than water or rock, picked out the biggest specimen he could find, 90 feet around at its base and known as the "Mother of the Forest." No sentimental respecter of maternity, Gale stripped the tree of its fragrant, dark-ridged bark to a height of 116 feet and shipped the pieces east, where they were stitched back together and the hollow giant shown as a botanical marvel. But a public already skeptical about P. T. Barnum assumed this, too, to be a crude hoax, along the lines of mermaids constituted from the head of a manatee and the tail of a salmon. The lines at the box office shrank and George Gale's fortune turned to fool's gold. Transcendentalists were delighted.

While jaded, cynical New York was refusing to suspend its disbelief, the learned botanical community knew better. The discovery of the Big Trees, originally reported locally in the *Sonora Herald*, was reprinted in the London *Athenaeum* and the English *Gardeners' Chronicle*. Lectures were given in short order at the Royal Society and the Société Botanique in Paris, British and French botanists (as usual) competing with each other to see who could come up with the clinching classification and nomenclature. The English, naturally, thought

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Section of Grizzly Giant, by Carleton E. Watkins (1861)

Wellingtonia gigantea would be fitting. But the French botanist Decaisne, believing the tree to be related to the California coastal redwood, the *Sequoia sempervirens*, decided instead on *Sequoia gigantea* for the giant of the Sierra. In actuality, the relationship is less close than might be supposed from casual observation. After it gets to 200 feet the Big Tree begins to expand its girth more than its height, while the redwood keeps on going well beyond an average of 300 feet. The former's needles are dark green sprays, the latter's blue and spiky. In fact, "sequoia" was an eccentrically inappropriate label for either species, being the name of a half-blood Alabama Cherokee (a.k.a. George Guess) who had invented a written language for the tribe. Its adoption by Asa Gray, the founder of Harvard University's botanical garden, and his New York colleague John Turrell, however, was of more

than purely taxonomic significance. As the author of the official state *Yosemite Book* explained in 1868:

It is to the happy accident of the generic agreement of the Big Tree with the redwood that we owe it that we are *not* now obliged to call the largest and most interesting tree in America after an *English* military hero.

The Big Trees were thus seen as the botanical correlate of America's heroic nationalism at a time when the Republic was suffering its most divisive crisis since the Revolution. To a skeptical Englishman who refused to believe that the bark he saw at the Crystal Palace at Sydenham was from a single tree, an American visitor took special pleasure in "assuring the Englishman that he had stood in the grove . . . that there were

even larger trees in it than this one, that in spite of the fact that the bark had been completely removed to the height of a hundred feet the tree was as green as any of the majestic fraternity." (It would not remain that way for very long.) "The Englishman gave one look of rage," the American tourist reported, "and bolted from the neighborhood."

The phenomenal size of the sequoias proclaimed a manifest destiny that had been primordially planted, something that altogether dwarfed the timetables of conventional European and even classical history. They were, their first observers thought (wrongly, again, for the less imposing bristlecone pines of the Sierras had not yet been dated), the oldest living things on earth. Even Horace Greeley, who saw them in 1859 and tried hard not to be impressed, was startled by the thought that they had stood upright "when David danced before the Ark; when Theseus ruled Athens; when Aeneas fled from the burning wreck of Troy."

In the first instance, though, it was the commerce of novelty, not the cult of antiquity, that took up the "Mammoth Trees." By the time James Mason Hutchings, the English-born publisher of *Hutchings' California Magazine*, took the first party of tourists to the Calaveras Grove in 1855, the botanical freak show was already well established. Iron pump augers were used to drill holes in trunks selected for felling, though even after they had been severed from the base, a further series of wedges levered the tree away from its upright, suspended position. The whole process could take five men three weeks (two-and-a-half days alone for toppling). "In our estimation," commented Hutchings without much conviction, "it was a sacrilegious act." But at the end was a half-million board feet of lumber and an instantaneous amusement park. A two-lane bowling alley was built (complete with protecting shed) along a planed-down surface of a trunk, and the stump of a felled sequoia

was made into a dance floor for tourists where, Hutchings tells us, "on the 4th of July, 32 persons were engaged in dancing four sets of cotillion at one time, without suffering any inconvenience whatever."

By the end of the decade, Hutchings had supplied the operational apparatus of scenic tourism in the Calaveras Grove. Travelers could get from Stockton to San Francisco either by a new railroad or by steamboat up the San Joaquin River. From Stockton they would use coaches and wagons via Copperopolis and Murphy's Camp. Hutchings could then accommodate them in the Mammoth Tree Cottage Hotel, a pretty building five miles from the grove boasting splashing fountains, a balustraded balcony, and appointments comfortable enough for the ladies, who were already beginning to visit the fabled woods.

Ironically, though, it was visitors (or, as they preferred to say, "pilgrims") from the East who transformed attitudes toward the sequoia groves, making them a place not just of curiosity but of veneration. The most important was the Boston Unitarian (and famous orator) Thomas Starr King, who in 1860 was dispatched to the Barbary Coast of California to minister to his denomination's First Church in San Francisco. King was a natural missionary and part of his vocation was to preach the virtues of the Union to Californians who might have been tempted by the demons of secession. But coming from the cradle of transcendentalism in New England, he found the lure of the Sierra Nevada irresistible, considering it both the visible face of divinity and the purest American habitat. His sermon "Living Waters from Lake Tahoe," for example, proclaimed that "this purity of nature is part of the revelation to us of the sanctity of God. It is his character that is hinted at in the cleanness of the lake and its haste to reject all taint." Moreover, by the time King took his vacation in the valley in the summer of 1860, a second and larger grove of Big Trees had been discovered, south of Calaveras,



In the Woods, by Asher Brown Durand (1855)

toward Mariposa itself, and King along with his high-minded friends and colleagues determined that the "wretched drudgery of destruction" that had overtaken the Calaveras trees should not be visited on the second forest. "The Mariposa stands," he wrote in his articles for the *Boston Evening Transcript*, "as the Creator fashioned it, unprofaned except by fire."

The Big Trees, in short, were sacred: America's own natural temple. "I think I shall see nothing else so beautiful till happily I stand within the gates of the Heavenly City," wrote Sydney Andrews in the *Boston Daily Advertiser*. And while Starr King assigned pagan

magic to the oak groves of Greece and Germany, "the evergreen," he noted, was "so much softer in [its] stock and far deeper and more serious in [its] music. . . . The evergreen is the Hebrew tree." And the dizzying thought that their age could be measured in millennia, and thus literally be coeval with the whole Christian era, only reinforced this sense of native holiness. "Tell me," King imagined himself whispering to the Big Tree, "whether or not your birth belongs to the Christian centuries; whether we must write 'BC' or 'AD' against your infancy?" And the correspondent of the *Boston Daily Advertiser*, in a rapture usually associated with tabernacle revival meetings (many of which, in mid-19th century New England, were being held in open-air groves), actu-

ally linked the nativity of the trees to the birth of the Savior:

What lengths of days are here! His years are the years of the Christian era; perhaps in the hour when the angels saw the Star of Bethlehem standing in the East, this germ broke through the tender sod and came out into the air of the Upper World.

The pious notion that the Big Trees were somehow contemporaries of Christ became a standard refrain in the hymns of praise. John Muir counted the rings on one martyr to the axe and discovered that "this tree was in its prime, swaying in the Sierra winds when Christ walked the earth." It was as if

contemporaneity banished geographical distance, that this immense botanical mystery was part of what Muir called the "Holy of Holies" in Yosemite. And like all things touched with divinity the sequoias were immortal, never actually decaying as they stood but falling only to the celestial forces of lightning-conducted fire, or the axes of infidel loggers. The crowns that had been stripped away by lightning were proof of the inconceivable antiquity that guaranteed that someday they would be struck by a bolt.

It was one of these blasted patriarchs that filled the frame of one of Carleton Watkins's glass-plate stereographs. More than any other images, Watkins's heroic prints shaped American sensibilities toward Yosemite and the Big Trees. They were not the first photographs of the valley. To drum up business, the ever-enterprising Hutchings had hired a painter, Thomas Ayres, and a photographer, Charles Weed, both of whose work was then engraved as promotional lures in *Hutchings' California Magazine*. Watkins had been working as a carpenter in San Francisco but had become known as an amateur daguerreotypist and photographer of the Mariposa mines and landscape, which had also attracted pioneers of the new medium such as Robert Vance and Eadwaerd Muybridge. In 1861 Watkins visited Yosemite and, using a "mammoth frame," created the icons of the valley: Half Dome, Cathedral Rocks, and El Capitan, along with parties of gentlemen and hoop-skirted ladies (including the widow of the British Arctic explorer John Franklin) demurely dining off wooden tables in the great outdoors. His Big Tree stereographs posed tiny figures, probably including the Mariposa guide, Galen Clark, against the immense trunk and captured the heroically mutilated quality of the "Grizzly Giant," storm-racked but defiant and enduring, a perfect emblem for the American public on the brink of the Civil War: a botanical Fort Sumter.

Watkins's pictures went on show at the

Goupil Gallery in New York in 1862 and were a phenomenal success. Those who had ridiculed George Gale's pieces of bark were now converted to the stupendousness of the sequoias. Oliver Wendell Holmes, writing in the *Atlantic Monthly*, extolled the pictures as fully the equal of the greatest productions of Western art and their subjects as the authentic, living monuments of pristine America. Suddenly Yosemite became a symbol of a landscape beyond the reach of sectional conflict, a primordial place of such transcendent beauty that it proclaimed the gift of the Creator to his new Chosen People.

Only the sense that Yosemite and the Big Trees constituted an overpowering revelation of the uniqueness of the American Republic can explain why Abraham Lincoln, in the midst of the Civil War, signing an unprecedented bill on July 1, 1864, granted them to the state of California "for the benefit of the people, for their resort and recreation, to hold them inalienable for all time." The bill, creating the world's first wilderness park, had been introduced by California senator John Conness, with the backing of Governor Frederick Low and the influential state geologist Josiah Whitney. And there is no doubt that the landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted (then thwarted in his plans for Central Park and working as the superintendent-manager of the Mines) also had an important role in its promotion. Named to the Yosemite Commission along with Galen Clark and Whitney, Olmsted issued his first report in 1865. It still contains the clearest articulation of public, federal responsibility for denying areas of natural beauty to the use of private enterprise.

It was the aura of heroic sanctity, the sense that the grove of the Big Trees was some sort of living American monument, a botanical pantheon, that moved Lincoln and Congress to act as they did. The impression of a pantheon was reinforced when the

mightiest sequoias began to be baptized as "Daniel Webster," "Thomas Starr King" (who also rated a mountain), and "Andrew Jackson." ("General Sherman" is still with us, the biggest vegetable in America.) The sequoias seemed to vindicate the American national intuition that colossal grandeur spoke to the soul. It was precisely because the red columns of this sublimely American temple had not been constructed by human hands that they seemed providentially sited, growing inexorably ever more awesome until God's new Chosen People could discover them in the heart of the Promised West.

There was another reason why the Big Trees seemed an American godsend. A generation earlier, the forest had been represented in the popular imagination as the enemy. The eastern woods, after all, had been the habitat of the godless Indian. To make a godly settlement, then, required that both the wilderness and the wild men be comprehensively cleared. Beauty lay in clearance; danger and horror lurked in the pagan woods. The clearances were so extensive and so indiscriminate, though, that even as early as 1818 President James Madison was protesting the "injurious and excessive destruction" of timber. To a generation reared on James Fenimore Cooper's forest romances, the miraculous appearance of *western* woodlands seemed a sign of God's forbearance, a second chance for America to understand the divinity inscribed in its landscape.

It did not strike the artist Albert Bierstadt as particularly hypocritical to paint the Big Trees as embodying *both* national magnitude and spiritual redemption. He had made his reputation as a landscapist largely as a result of having produced huge, grandstanding panoramas of the Rockies, based on sketches made on a western trip in 1859. Some were exhibited at the Goupil Gallery, and it seems likely that it was Watkins's stereographs that influenced Bierstadt and the popular writer and lecturer Fitz Hugh Ludlow to make the

trip to Yosemite in 1863. Ludlow's articles for the *Atlantic Monthly* perfectly reflect the quizzical easterner dryly scrutinizing Eden but then surrendering to transports of conversionary amazement. Reporting the sequoias, Ludlow begins with a mere statistical report of circumference but then confesses that "we cannot realize time images as we can those of space by a reference to dimensions within experience, so that the age of these marvelous trees still remains to me an incomprehensible fact." Accustomed as New Englanders were to their own scaled-down version of heroic botany, Ludlow nonetheless noted that some of the Mammoth Trees "had fulfilled the lifetime of the late Charter Oak (at Hartford) when Solomon called his master-masons to refreshment from the building of the Temple." By the same token, he thought it impossible for his fellow travelers (for Ludlow and Bierstadt were accompanied by two other painters, Virgil Williams and Enoch Wood Perry) to convey anything but a pygmy representation of the sequoias:

The marvellous size does not go into gilt frames. You paint a Big Tree and it only looks like a common tree in a cramped coffin. To be sure you can put a live figure against the butt for comparison; but unless you take a cane of the size of Haydon's your picture is likely to resemble Homunculus against an average tree and a large man against *Sequoia gigantea*.

Perhaps it was these daunting technical problems that account for the absence of surviving Bierstadt Big Tree paintings from this first trip to Yosemite. But when he returned from his second trip, 1871-73, Bierstadt evidently felt that there would be a market for grandiose icons of the veterans of the ancient American woods, for at least six such paintings are known from this period. His star as a fashionable painter was, however, already dimming, and every exhibition of new work was met with a merciless fusillade from the



Giant Redwood Trees of California, by Albert Bierstadt (1874)

critic of the *New York Tribune*, Clarence Cook, who upbraided Bierstadt for his addiction to vulgar, flashy, and visually meretricious effects. Directed at the immense light shows of

Yosemite, the criticism had much merit. But Bierstadt's Big Tree pictures were in fact aiming for something other than sheer magnitude. The diminutive figure set against *The*

Grizzly Giant, for example, obviously established the immensity of the scale for the beholder. But the pose was taken directly from Carleton Watkins's plates and reshot for the official Yosemite survey and guidebook, in which Watkins posed Galen Clark in front of that particular tree.

Clark had been appointed "guardian" of the protected Mariposa Grove under the terms of the 1864 California statute (which provided a niggardly \$2,000 a year for the maintenance of Yosemite's entire area). But he had also become, in the writing of the period, a symbol of the idealized affinities between American nature and American people: decent, hospitable, enduring, hardy, but also hiding great nobility and wisdom behind a weather-beaten exterior—Natty Bumppo with a library. Olmsted wrote admiringly that Clark "looked like the wandering Jew but spoke like a professor of belles-lettres." And Fitz Hugh Ludlow described him as

one of the best informed men, one of the very best guides I ever met in the Californian or any other wilderness. He is a fine looking stalwart old grizzly-hunter, a miner of the '49 days, wears a noble full beard hued like his favorite game, but no head covering of any kind since he recovered from a head fever which left his head intolerant even of a slouch. He lives among folk near Mariposa in the winter and in the summer occupies a hermitage built by himself in one of the loveliest valleys of the Sierra. Here he gives travelers a surprise by the nicest poached eggs and rashers of bacon, homemade bread and wild strawberry sweetmeats which they will find in the State.

Clark then was himself a grizzly, posed beneath the grizzly sequoia in the valley named for the grizzly bear. But the great column that towered above him, almost an

extension of his own heroic American personality, was deep red rather than gray, and above all it spoke of an elemental chronology: not the chronology of classical European civilization, but the chronology of wild nature, America's own time scale, inherited directly from the Creator, without the supervening mediation of human pretensions. The truly *venerable* nature of American history, as the explorer Clarence King put it after seeing the Big Trees, could be measured in what he called, oxymoronicly, "green old age." Earlier in the century, writers such as Charles Fenno Hoffman, traveling in the valley of the Mississippi, seemed to shame the American tourists who thronged Rome and Paris by comparing "the temples which Roman robbers have reared" and "the towers in which feudal oppression has fortified itself" unfavorably with "the deep forests which the eye of God has alone pervaded and where Nature in her unviolated sanctuary has for ages laid her fruits and flowers on His altar!" What was the Colosseum beside the immense and prehistoric Grizzly Giant, a nobler ruin than the Parthenon, the epitome of heroic endurance over millennia: scarred, burned, ravaged by time, and decapitated by lightning. And unlike those heaps of stone, the Giant was yet alive with the vigorous green shoots of a new age. It exactly linked prehistorical antiquity to American posterity. No wonder, then, that Bierstadt chose to exhibit his version of *The Great Trees, Mariposa Grove* at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, where it could proclaim that the first 100 years of the American Republic were but the political twinkling of an eye.

The Big Trees also proclaimed the sacredness of American time. And it is conceivable that Watkins's albumen print was not the only source for Bierstadt's heroic treatment of the ancient and weathered tree. It is distinctly possible that he would have seen Caspar David Friedrich's *Oak Tree in Winter* in the National Gallery in Berlin, which he had visited between the two trips



Kindred Spirits, by Asher Brown Durand (1849)

to Yosemite. Bierstadt might well have had an immediate understanding of, and particular sympathy for, Friedrich's own versions of arboreal salvation. He himself

had been born in Solingen, but had been taken to the United States as an infant and had grown up in the prosperous Massachusetts whaling port of New Bedford.

But like others of his generation, in particular the Hudson Valley painter Worthington Whittredge, he had returned to Germany for his studies. The center of their training, it is true, was the Dusseldorf Academy, which boasted the least Romantic and most studiously naturalistic techniques in landscape. But as art historian Barbara Novak has persuasively argued, it seems unlikely that the intensity of German Romantic idealism, still far from moribund, would not have rubbed off on a group of American artists who were, in any case, extremely prone to a kind of visual transcendentalism.

Both Bierstadt and Whittredge, during their time in Germany in the 1850s, produced a number of landscapes in which great trees (usually oaks) figure as both heroic and spiritual actors in the scenery. And it was not long after his return that Whittredge painted one of the most successful and powerful of all his landscapes, *The Old Hunting Grounds*. Backlit in exactly the Friedrichian manner, Whittredge's birches rise like fluted columns to the arched, darker foreground trees that frame the composition. The effect is obviously architectural, almost an illustration of the tradition which located the origin of Gothic pointed arches and vaults in the spontaneous interlacing of tree limbs. But the title of Whittredge's forest interior was not casually given, for the painting is also loaded with the spiritual associations standard to the Hudson Valley painters. A ruined canoe eaten with decay lies in pond water as a memorial to the Indians, banished and vanished, "whose hunting grounds" these once were. The broken stump and the trembling birch leaves, emblems of death and new life, echo the canonical, anthemlike quality of the painting. Along with two other equally famous American forest interiors, Whittredge's painting became the literal visual expres-

sion of the pious cliché of the "cathedral grove."

In his own *Giant Redwood Trees of California*, Bierstadt transposed this ecclesiastical reading of the primordial woods to a sequoia forest. Indeed, the trees look more like the *Sequoia sempervirens* of the coastal forests than the Big Trees, and the red light, reflecting off the bark, suggests the luminous dimness of the much denser, darker redwoods of Mendocino and Humboldt counties. But the painting reiterated all the standard motifs of sequoia iconography: antiquity, reverence, and magnitude. And instead of the sentimental, inanimate elegy for the vanished redwood redskin, Bierstadt includes three Indians, a brave with his son seated by the pool and a squaw returning with a basket on her back, a native American version of the Georgic idyll. Most crucially, the tepee-like triangular opening in the side of the foremost tree is evidently the Indians' dwelling place. It is the most literal translation of what John Muir (who himself underwent a kind of theophany in Yosemite) meant when he wrote of returning to the American woods as "going home." Bierstadt's painting is sylvan-domestic: the ancient residence of the most indigenous Americans.

Both Bierstadt's and Whittredge's paintings paid homage to the patriarch of all American forest interiors, Asher Durand. President of the National Academy of Design in New York, Durand was, in effect, the theologian of the second generation of the Hudson Valley school. By his lights, the whole point of landscape was expressive veneration. In 1840, during a trip to England, he had spoken of his decision not to become a minister of the church, "the better to indulge reflection unrestrained under the high canopy of heaven." His famous "Letters on Landscape Painting," published in *The Crayon*, had appeared in the same year that he exhibited *In the Woods*, which also featured birches bowed together in

Gothic inclination. It was the exact illustration of the diluted transcendentalism preached in his essays—American nature shaped as the archway to divinity:

The external appearance of this our dwelling place, apart from its wondrous structure and functions that minister to our well-being, is fraught with lessons of high and holy meaning, only surpassed by the light of Revelation. It is impossible to contemplate . . . [them] without arriving at the conviction that the Great Designer of these glorious pictures has placed them before us as types of the Divine attributes.

Durand's most famous painting—a virtual manifesto of Hudson Valley sublimity—was *Kindred Spirits*, conceived as a memorial to Thomas Cole, the founding father of the school, who had died in 1848. A fictitious composite of two of Cole's favorite sites—the Kaaterskill Falls and the Catskill Clove, drenched in a radiant, golden light—it was also a comprehensive inventory of its stock symbols and emblems. The broken tree in the foreground signified Cole's premature demise, the evergreens his immortality, the hanging rock ledge the precariousness of life, the eagle flying toward the horizon the liberation of soul from body, and the river the voyage of life, which Cole had himself made the theme of one of his most ambitious series of allegorical paintings. The very composition of the painting, a swooping circular route for the eye, somewhat reminiscent of Brueghel, was surely a formal expression of the cycle of eternity. Standing on the ledge are Cole himself, holding palette and maulstick, and the poet William Cullen Bryant, who had delivered the funeral eulogy for the dead artist at the Church of the Messiah in New York and whose own work testified not merely to kinship between like-minded souls but to the essential *naturalness* of American identity.

Bryant's poems (immensely popular in their day, almost unreadably plodding in

ours) revealed the American forests as the birthplace of the nation. To repair to the woods was to be reminded of two features of the national personality: its liberty and its holiness. An anthology published a year after Cole's death included two important poems in which the primitive antiquity of the forests was presented as a corrective to the national passion for novelty. In "The Antiquity of Freedom" the poet stands amidst "old trees, tall oaks and gnarled pines . . . / . . . In these peaceful shades / Peaceful, unpruned, immeasurably old / My thoughts go up the long dim path of years / Back to the earliest days of liberty." Freedom was not "as poets dream / A Fair young girl with light and delicate dreams," but a hoary warrior, "scarred with the tokens of old wars," in fact, a grizzly, cut about, blasted, and shaken, but always with the power to throw out new life. The woods, then, proclaimed the true natural constitution of free America, beside which a manmade document was merely the sapling of philosophical invention.

Even more important, though, the forest supplied America with the visible form of the primitive church:

The groves were God's first temples.
Ere man learned
To hew the shaft and lay the architrave
And spread the roof above them—ere
he framed
The lofty vault, to gather and roll back
The sound of anthems; in the darkling
wood
Amidst the cool and silence, he knelt down,
And offered to the Mightiest solemn thanks
And supplication.

The idea of the "venerable columns" and the "verdant roof" supplying the original place of worship and then suggesting the actual form of spiritual architecture in the Gothic already had a long tradition by the time Bryant got around to giving it an American accent. But in the New World it had a special resonance. James Fenimore Cooper



Hooker and Company Journeying Through the Wilderness from Plymouth to Hartford, 1636, by Frederic Edwin Church (1846)

begins one of his more successful *Leatherstocking* tales, *The Pathfinder*, with the reader suspended like an angel and looking west above the rolling canopy of the virgin forest:

an ocean of leaves glorious and rich in the varied but lively verdure . . . the elm with its graceful and weeping top; the rich varieties of the maple, most of the noble oaks of the American forest . . . forming one broad and seemingly interminable carpet of foliage that stretched away toward the setting sun until it bounded the horizon by blending with the clouds as the waves and the sky meet at the base of the vault of Heaven.

It is from this primordial vegetable matter, celestially sanctified and unspoiled as yet by the touch of man, that America was born, the writers and painters of the first native generation

proclaim. In so doing, they self-consciously turned their back both on the classical contempt for woodland barbarism and the long Puritan legacy that equated the forest with pagan darkness and profanity. Instead, for his first important painting the young Frederick Edwin Church chose for his American Moses the Reverend Thomas Hooker, in 1636 leading a flock westward, away from the heavy hand of Old World authority represented by the Bay Colony government. And the Promised Land, it is apparent, is a dense woodland, not forbidding or packed with heathen terror but a sanctuary in the literal sense of holy asylum. Its foliage trickles with sunlight; its waters run sweet and clear. It is the tabernacle of liberty, ventilated by the breeze of holy freedom and suffused with the golden radiance of providential benediction.