



Bridgewater Review

Volume 29 | Issue 1

Article 6

Jun-2010

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Ann Brunjes

Bridgewater State University, abrunjes@bridgew.edu

Recommended Citation

Brunjes, Ann (2010). Timothy Dwight Encounters the Indians: *Greenfield Hill and Travels through New York and New England*. *Bridgewater Review*, 29(1), 4-6.

Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol29/iss1/6

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Timothy Dwight Encounters the Indian: *Greenfield Hill and Travels in New England and New York*

Ann Brunjes

We live in a time when dire warnings about the imminent demise of the Republic are commonplace. Most recently, prominent leaders of the Republican Party have predicted “Armageddon” as a consequence of recently passed Health Care Reform legislation. Commentators across the political spectrum announce with great confidence that the end of the Republic is nigh.

A little historical and cultural perspective in these moments can be a healthful thing. Americans have feared for the future of the Republic since before there was a Republic. Late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Americans, much like twenty-first-century Americans, had a hard time imagining how a heterogeneous, mobile and growing population could be brought under one ideological and governmental roof. And for many prominent Americans in the early days of the nation, the lingering issue of the “Indian problem” posed its own peculiar challenges. Among the many writers struggling to come to grips with the role of Indians in the new Republic was Timothy Dwight (1752–1817), author, President of Yale College, and minister of the town of Greenfield, Connecticut. Dwight voiced his concerns through a variety of genres, including the pastoral-epic poem, *Greenfield Hill* (1794), and *Travels in New England and New York* (1822).

Greenfield Hill and the *Travels* reflect deep conflicts in Dwight’s vision for the future of America and the place of the Indian in that physical and imagined space. When the Indian appears in *Greenfield Hill*, his ghostly presence serves primarily to remind the audience of its current state of contentedness, the righteousness of American history, and the validity of its developing ideology. The landscapes and people Dwight both encounters and contemplates in the *Travels*, however, undermine and complicate this comfortable distancing. The dead and living Indians of western New York aren’t easily relegated to imaginative space. The ongoing, unrelenting



presence of the Indian serves as a reminder of the failure of the Republic to assimilate and absorb all its citizens, a failure that bodes ill for its future.

The *Travels* and *Greenfield Hill*, at their most uncomplicated moments, reflect Dwight’s undimmed optimism about America’s future. Dwight ties American ideals to American landscape, seeing in that landscape the dangers and possibilities facing the Republic. There is a consistency to Dwight’s aesthetic, a palpable pleasure in the sight of cultivated land, tidy town commons, clapboard farmhouses. Significantly, this landscape and social structure supplant the savagery embodied by earlier—i.e., Indian—cultures:

No more the captive circling flames devour;
Through the war path the Indian creep no more;
No midnight scout the slumbering village fire;
Nor the scalp’d infant stain his gasping sire:
But peace, and truth, illumine the twilight mind,

The gospel’s sunshine, and the purpose kind.

In the new, cultivated and bounded landscape, savagery and violence are obliterated; the landscape prompts in the imagination not scenes of violence, but vistas of peace and Anglo-American homogeneity.

This idealized representation of the Connecticut landscape and people, however, has a rippling undercurrent of defensiveness and anxiety. This bubbles to the surface most obviously in Part IV of *Greenfield Hill*, titled “The Destruction of the Pequods.” The chapter opens in a

haunted meditation on the presence of the dead:

Ah me! while up the long, long vale of time,
Reflection wanders towards th’ eternal vast,
How starts the eye, at many a change sublime,
Unbosom’d dimly by the ages pass’d!
What Mausoleums crowd the mournful waste!
The tombs of empires fallen! and nations gone!

Even the fresh American landscape is filled with the dead of the ages, whose presence makes it impossible for the poem to control what it represents. Like other white

American writers, in *Greenfield Hill* Dwight engages in what Renée Bergland describes as the removal of the Indian from the American lands to the American imagination. The Indians are gone, then, but not in the least forgotten, and their presence interrupts the poetic scenes of battle from the Pequot War. (Fought from 1634–1638, the Pequot War pitted an alliance of colonists, Narragansett and Mohegan Indians against the Pequot tribe.) This part of the poem contemplates, first, the rise and fall of Indian empire, in which the narrator justifies the practice of Indian “removal.” This is followed by a mournful disquisition on the lost souls of Indians, a fleeting, almost *pro forma* “haunting” of the narrator by the displaced Indians.

The poem frames the destruction of the Pequots as the necessary first step in the Americans’ eventual overthrow of the British Empire. Any qualms regarding the overthrow of this Indian “empire” are readily calmed by the claim that the Indians did not husband the land, and therefore had no legitimate claim to ownership of it, a typical argument employed by the colonists to justify the massive land-grab of settlement. Thus, Dwight’s imagining of the landscape before English colonization is primarily a landscape of absences:

No charming cot imbank’d the pebbly stream;
 No mansion tower’d, nor garden teem’d with good;
 No lawn expanded to the April beam;
 Nor mellow harvest hung it’s bending load;
 Nor science dawn’d; nor life with beauty glow’d;
 Nor temple whiten’d, in th’enchancing dell;
 In clusters wild, the sluggish wigwam stood;
 And, borne in snaky paths, the Indian fell
 Now aim’d the death unseen, now scream’d the
 tiger-yell.

Dwight depicts pre-colonial New England as a land lacking not just the trappings of civilization, such as “whiten’d temples,” but which lay uncultivated by those who lived on it: no “mellow harvest hung its bending load.” Absent recognizable cultivation, North American land had no rightful owners until the arrival of the agriculturally-minded English.

However it may justify the Indians’ eradication at the hands of white settlers, the poem reflects marked unease with the lingering presence of dead Indians. The narrator moves rapidly from this re-creation of the wasted Indian landscape to a moment of haunting: “Even now, perhaps, on human dust I tread, / Pondering, with solemn pause, the wrecks of time”; and a few lines later,

The plodding hind, laborious, drives his plough,
 Nor dreams, a nation sleeps, his foot below. . . .
 Releas’d from war, and far from deadly foe,

Lies down, in endless rest, a nation brave,
 And trains, in tempests born, there find a quiet grave.

In Bergland’s construction, Dwight writes like a man haunted by the dispossessed. He is able to describe the vanquished foe in generous terms—“a nation brave”—but the image of a sleeping nation just below the foot of the plowman is an unsettling one.



This sense of disquiet is continued later in Part IV. Here the narrator laments the great failure of the English to convert the Indians and bemoans the lost opportunity to bring more Christians to salvation. Of the dead, unsaved Indians, the narrator asks:

Where are they now? What thoughts the bosom pain,
 From mild Religion’s eye how streams the tear,
 To see so far outspread the waste of man,
 And ask “How fell the myriads, HEAVEN plac’d here!”
 Reflect, be just, and feel for Indian woes severe.

While these lines reflect a lingering sense of guilt that the warring colonists didn’t do more to convert the Indians to Christianity, there is no lament for their absence from the land. In *Greenfield Hill*, despite moments of eerie discomfort, the Indian is cleared away to make room for the white, Protestant farmer. He is relegated to the past, and the reader is allowed the indulgence of “the tear, / That steals, impassion’d, o’er a nation’s doom.”; a tear that is permissible precisely because of the finality of that doom. The bleak necessity of Indian removal may haunt the poem, but any remorse for the brutality of the destruction of the Pequots is overwhelmed by the triumphant march of American progress.

Dwight wrote *Greenfield Hill* while relatively young—the poem was published in 1788, when he was 36. Dwight was a man on the rise, surely, but not well-known outside of a relatively narrow circle. *Travels in*

New England and New York, however, is the work of a powerful and public man in the last and most significant phase of his career, an attempt to explain the new nation to itself, and thus foster a sense of national unity and purpose. As we have seen in *Greenfield Hill*, however, the narrator of the *Travels* confronts ghosts from the Indian past and flesh and blood human beings of its present that complicate and undermine Dwight's idealized American vision.



In western New York, Dwight encounters what he calls "oak plains" which are, according to his description, an elevated stretch of treeless plain. His description of these plains conveys a sense of bewilderment and confusion, caused primarily by the lack of discernible boundaries. Dwight writes that "[n]o passage out of them is presented to [the viewer's] eye. Yet though the tract around him is seemingly bounded everywhere, the boundary is everywhere obscure...they appear rather to border dim, indistinct openings into other tracts of country. Thus he always feels the limit to be uncertain...." The plains are a nightmare landscape, and in this "bewildering scenery" his imagination is promptly overtaken by Indians, for the viewer "...cannot fail to remember that on these plains Indians have lived." As in *Greenfield Hill*, the narrative quickly turns into an intense imagined encounter with an Indian: "the secret windings of the scout, the burst of the war whoop, the fury of an Indian onset, the triumphant display of scalps, and the horrors of the war dance before the tortured and expiring captive...these thoughts...spring up instinctively [in my own mind]". The imagined scene of horror is a mirror image of that which is obliterated from the landscape and the imagination, through the destruction of the Pequots, in *Greenfield Hill*. But in western New York, far from the confines of long-settled New England, the landscape is unbounded and so is the imagination. There is no cursory lamenting of the murdered Indians' lost souls, as though the open landscape is too dangerous a setting for remorse.

This moment of imaginative dismay ends abruptly, and the narrative shifts to a passionless explanation of how the plains came into existence and a complex repudia-

tion of Indian land use practice. In an effort to squelch his near-sublime horror, Dwight reverts to a rational deconstruction of Indian worth, hoping to control the terrifying and powerful savage by delegitimizing his claim to the land. Throughout the *Travels*, Dwight argues that the key to Indian assimilation is their adoption of an agricultural life, and he repeatedly laments their failure to

do so. When considering the impoverished circumstances of the Mohegans currently living in Montville, Connecticut, Dwight writes that they "...have been repeatedly solicited by the Oneidas to sell their own lands and plant themselves at Brothertown in the state of New York," but notes that few have gone or will go because "...they are so attached to their native spot, so addicted to a lazy, sauntering life, and so secure of gaining an easy livelihood by fishing in the neighboring waters as to feel little inclination to remove." The "easy livelihood" of subsistence fishing seduces the Indians from the healthful (spiritually and physically) practice of farming. Dwight establishes, here and elsewhere throughout the *Travels*, that the Indians' love of ease is a serious (if not insurmountable) obstacle in their assimilation to Protestant American culture.

Both *Greenfield Hill* and the *Travels* reveal the anxieties beneath the confidence of Dwight's expansionist American rhetoric. Doubts about the troubled, sometimes haunted present and uncertain future have always troubled American writers and thinkers; they are not new to our times. The causes of our anxiety may shift, but our anxiety remains. It is central to the ongoing process of self-definition that preoccupies the citizens of the American Republic.

—Ann Brunjes is Director of the Office of Teaching and Learning and Visiting Associate Professor of English.