

A [sample entry](#) from the

Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature

(London & New York: Continuum, 2005)

Edited by

[Bron Taylor](#)

© 2005
All Rights Reserved

B

Back to the Land Movements

American “back to the land” movements and practices span the historical period of the mid-nineteenth century to the present, with notable peak periods occurring at the turn of the century, from the late 1920s through the Depression, after World War II (particularly in the late 1960s and early 1970s) and again in the mid-1990s. The significance of these activities (often too diverse and individualistic properly to be termed “movements”) is best understood, first, in terms of a broader history of the cultural construction of nature that bears briefly noting.

Intellectual History

The idea that a pastoral or wilderness setting can serve as a morally purifying force is an ancient one. In different historical, cultural and religious contexts, the retreat to nature (or wilderness, or “the land”) appears in different forms, is acted out in particular ways (usually through a self-conscious reduction of human needs and a simplification of daily life) and is often understood to be a means of both personal and cultural reform. From biblical texts to Virgil’s *Eclogues* and medieval theological writings, Western religious and philosophical concepts of nature, while ambivalent, have included attention to the natural world as the appropriate context for inner contemplation and, at times, for the creation or reformation of community.

The long-standing theme of nature as the site of spiritual retreat, as a proper place for personal, moral reformation, and as a context for the modeling of new forms of community (over against the social status quo) all reappear in the American context where, from the time of the first colonial settlements, “uncivilized” nature was simultaneously conceptualized as a demonic wilderness to be conquered, an unsullied garden of Eden to be enjoyed and a physical and spiritual testing ground where God’s “afflictions,” as well as God’s grace, could be directly experienced. While the Puritans sought to control nature more than to commune with it, their understandings of their divinely-ordained “errand into the wilderness” helped shape later American responses to nature, including the desire to leave settled environments and live “close to nature” as a form of spiritual challenge and renewal.

Beginnings

Henry David Thoreau can be said to be the first authentic “back-to-the-lander” in two senses. First, although his

retreat to the woods was temporary, he was the first influential thinker and writer to advocate (and enact) a retreat to the woods as being *itself* a form of spiritual reformation. Prior to Thoreau’s experiment at Walden, American Christian thinkers had seen pastoral and wilderness settings as appropriate *contexts* for direct, personal experience of the divine presence (although the leaders of Christian institutions emphasized that private retreat into the woods should not replace the communal, public hearing of the Word in official church meeting-places). Thoreau was the first known writer, however, to make a post-Christian argument in favor of dwelling close to the land as an alternative to both the social and religious conventions of his day. In Thoreau’s reading (and experience) of nature, nature is no longer a setting or metaphor for Christian narratives of fall and redemption, but is *itself* interpreted as a means of personal and spiritual growth. Secondly, Thoreau’s retreat to Walden is historically a modern response to the growing threats of industrialization, urbanization and commercialism in the mid-nineteenth century. His own efforts were mirrored by other Transcendentalists and religious liberals of the time, whose communal experiments at Brook Farm (West Roxbury, Massachusetts) and Fruitlands (Harvard, Massachusetts) also praised the moral benefits of living in pastoral settings and engaging in manual, agricultural labor. Such cultural gestures of going “back” to the land or “out” into nature could not resonate meaningfully until American culture had “progressed” sufficiently to be seen as drifting away from its rural roots or, in those settings still primarily agricultural, falling prey to the growing mercantilism of the day. While retreat to nature for moral and spiritual reform has a long history, “back to the land” efforts are distinctly modern and are defined by the very modernity against which they pose themselves.

The Transcendentalist gestures of going “back to the land” – from Emerson’s largely “armchair” call for an original response to the universe to actual ventures such as Brook Farm and Thoreau’s two-year experiment at Walden – established cultural precedents that have remained highly influential into the twenty-first century. From Thoreau’s time to the present, back to the land practices have carried forward several prominent themes that emerge from *Walden*. Among these are: the phenomenon of conversion to nature, resistance against materialism and consumerism, a vision of nature as being primarily beneficent and advocacy of a life lived close to nature as being crucial for human psychological and spiritual

growth. More problematically, one also finds in Thoreau, a certain intellectual and social elitism that enables him to praise voluntary simplicity (because he has the means to embrace it) and to elucidate a range of meanings from nature that are shaped by the intellectual circles he frequented. Back to the land gestures of yesterday and today continue to have a social location that tends to be that of the more economically privileged classes or of the intellectual elite.

Religious Resonances

Among homesteaders from the nineteenth century to the present, recognizably Thoreauvian themes continue to circulate. The decision to go back to the land is often expressed as a post-Christian (or post-Jewish) conversion experience where a previously “meaningless” life in the city or suburbs (often including an unfulfilling religious upbringing) is dramatically left behind for a rural experience involving experiments with self-sufficiency, particularly in terms of food and shelter. Sometimes, as in the case of Wendell Berry (Christian) or Gary Snyder (Zen Buddhist), a religious identity remains important, but is understood or defined in consciously ecological terms.

In creating a new life, back-to-the-landers often understand nature as both the economic and spiritual focus of daily practice. Nature is understood to set the terms for the conduct of life and is given priority as a source of meaning and authority. While back-to-the-landers (or “homesteaders” as they often call themselves) rely on nature as a resource for daily needs – and thus occupy a different cultural space than wilderness preservationists – they tend to pursue means of interacting with nature that have a minimum impact. Many garden organically, some use only hand-tools and materials found on-site, while others take advantage of developments in solar and wind power in order to live “off the grid.” In many homesteaders’ writings (and many homesteaders, like Thoreau, are also writers), attention is paid to the symbolic dimensions of daily labor in nature. Work such as splitting wood or carrying water is valued as a kind of ritual practice, voluntarily pursued for the sake of the personal transformation and the “lessons” (about nature and the self) to be learned. These ways of living also resonate symbolically as a response against the outside culture that has been left behind and is seen as comparatively corrupting and empty of spiritual significance.

Caveats

Some distinctions should be made between back to the land practices where “getting close to nature” is the primary impetus and related rurally located movements. Some Christians also call themselves back-to-the-landers, for instance, and constitute a growing population of partially self-sufficient families that grow their own food and home-school their children. While a reverence for nature –

as God’s creation – is often part of daily life, however, the impulse behind Christian efforts at self-sufficiency is the desire for a retreat from the influences of a secular, non-Christian society. While homesteaders share some interesting points of agreement with self-sufficient Christian families (such as a desire for simplicity, an affection for country life and a critique of American materialism) homesteaders’ pursuit of a life lived close to nature recognizes nature *itself* as the primary source of meaning.

Similarly, in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, going “back” or “out” to the land has been a persistent aspect of a wide variety of communal experiments. From the Oneida community in New York and the first Mormon settlements of the reimagined Holy Land of Salt Lake City, Utah in the nineteenth century, to counter-cultural intentional communities such as The Farm and Twin Oaks in the 1960s and 70s, communal experiments have praised country living, adopted self-sufficient agricultural practices, expressed the importance of a commitment to a particular geographical place and have advocated simplicity in diet, dress and social life. Here again, however, these efforts often celebrate rural life as a *context* or *resource* for other kinds of social, religious, or political experiments, rather than pursuing living close to nature itself as a primary goal. Overlap in the goals and practices of various experiments in rural self-sufficiency make the boundaries of “back-to-the-land” practices and movements somewhat blurred, but “back to the land” efforts should not be seen as synonymous with every rural communal or family-based self-sufficiency experiment.

Historical and Sociological Dimensions

The number of contemporary North America back-to-the-landers is difficult to determine, though one estimate suggests close to a million actual practitioners (and as many as fifty million expressing interest in “simpler lifestyles”). More importantly, perhaps, homesteading experiments have had a long history of promotion by intellectuals and cultural reformers who have had a significant impact on American thought, even if they have not produced the hoped for grand transformation of culture.

John Burroughs (1837–1921), who is best known as a bird enthusiast, amateur naturalist and nature essayist, was among the first modern homesteaders who (unlike Thoreau) made a *permanent* shift from an urban, literary life in Washington D.C. to a rural farming life in West Park, New York. Having built his own house on the Hudson and established a grape farm, he later (1896) built a more rustic retreat known as “Slabsides,” in which he practiced the arts of plain living, cooking over an open fire, drawing water from a spring, taking daily outdoor rambles and writing of the virtues of his experiences. At a time of rising industrialism and urbanization, Burroughs’ essays, particularly his praise of the simple life in “What Life Means to Me” helped to draw thousands of visitors to his cabin,

seeking a taste of the back-to-the-land experience. Burroughs' views of nature were scientifically informed (he embraced the theories of Darwin), yet he feared that science would render nature absent of meaning and argued for a "Gospel of Nature" in which nature would be seen a vital, mysterious, beneficent force that could redeem humanity and set the terms for a virtuous life. At times, Burroughs argued that God and Nature were virtually equivalent, while in other, more Emersonian modes, he saw Nature as a book to be read, with divine "lessons" lying behind nature's physical surface. In either approach, however, he sought to divest God of any supernatural significance, while investing nature itself with a divine, moral and mystical sensibility.

A different kind of back to the land ethic was preached at the turn of the century by Bolton Hall (1854–1938), a prominent lawyer and a follower of the Single Tax program of Henry George, which sought to make land accessible to rich and poor alike. Son of the prominent, Fifth Avenue, Presbyterian minister, John Hall, Bolton Hall mixed progressive Christian thinking with other social and religious movements (including Eastern traditions). While Hall put his religious training to use by authoring liberalized versions of the Shorter Catechism, the Bible and Jesus' parables, he simultaneously advocated a liberal, rational, pluralist version of Christian social reform that centered on making land available to all for self-sufficient gardening. For the poor, access to the land would be the first step in economic self-improvement, while daily contact in nature would physically and spiritually purify those harmed by city living. For the well-off, the prospect of "a little land and a living" was less an economic necessity, but more a means of renewing the self and escaping the materialism, greed and pace of the city. In Hall's view, living "naturally" was a crucial antidote to the evils of urbanism. While his particular version of back to the land – articulated in books such as *Three Acres and Liberty* (1907) and *A Little Land and a Living* (1908) – was intended to be not far from the city, Hall's Vacant Lot Associations and related programs locate themselves on a continuum of back to the land projects that saw self-sufficiency as both an economic solution to class inequity and a psycho-spiritual solution to urban anomie.

A generation after Hall (and with family connections to Hall and his work), the marketing executive Ralph Borsodi (1888–1977) took Hall's vision a step further in 1920 when he left New York City to establish a seven-acre homestead in Suffern, New York. Like Hall, Borsodi was concerned with the problem of distribution, as well as the physical and psychological health hazards of the city. Drawn to the model cottage industry as a way for rich and poor alike to live healthfully and rurally, Borsodi used his own homesteads and home-based schools as laboratories for self-sufficiency. While praising the spiritual virtues of living

off the land, however, Borsodi also embraced technology more than some of his predecessors and heirs. His vision was to use labor-saving devices as tools in the service of homestead efficiency, while other back-to-the-landers shunned technology as interfering with their projects of "getting close to nature." Borsodi's experiments were reported in his *Flight From the City* (1933) and his ideas were popularized in Depression Era, federally sponsored homestead resettlement projects, though most of these eventually faltered on political grounds. Together with his protégé, Mildred Loomis, Borsodi founded The School for Living which had several iterations in various locations and now remains in operation at the Heathcote intentional community in Maryland. Mildred Loomis carried on the School for Living projects and became known in the seventies as the "grandmother" of countercultural back to the land projects.

In the same period as Borsodi's retreat to Suffern, the prominent screenwriter and novelist Louis Bromfield purchased a farm in Ohio in order to fulfill nostalgic longing for a simple, rural life of a kind he had earlier experienced in France. While more conservative politically than Hall and Borsodi, and working more clearly in the tradition of the gentleman farmer than the self-sufficient retreatant, Bromfield radicalized the agricultural norms of his day by insisting on organic practices and articulating an ethic of "nature knows best." Like Burroughs, Hall, Borsodi and others, Bromfield articulated a kind of theology of the soil, wherein he conceptualized agricultural work as a more authentic means (when compared to Christian doctrine and practice) of experiencing immortality. Bromfield often spoke of the "religion of the good farmer" who, by virtue of labor in the soil, exhibits the greatest faith in the "Grand Plan."

Perhaps the most widely known back-to-the-landers are Helen (1903–1995) and Scott (1888–1988) Nearing, prominent vegetarians and socialists who left New York City for Pikes Falls, Vermont in 1932 and later launched a new homesteading project in Harborside, Maine in 1952. The Nearings began their projects without much fanfare, although Scott had once been an economics professor and a lecturer of national prominence, while Helen was familiar in vegetarian, artistic and Theosophical circles. With the publication of their *Maple Sugar Book* (1950), *Living the Good Life* (1954) and, especially, the republication of *Living the Good Life* in 1970, the Nearings became widely known as advocates for "sane living in an insane world."

Like Burroughs in his time, the Nearings became representative symbols for the spiritual benefits of living close to nature and away from a materialist society. Helen's Theosophical background (which included a belief in reincarnation and a reverence for the sacred in nature) and Scott's early Social Gospel convictions (including, like Hall and Borsodi, a concern for social inequity and an

interest in Georgist principles) together shaped their back to the land experiments which centered on organic gardening, strict vegetarianism, pacifism, anti-materialism and a staunch work ethic.

Countercultural youth flocked to the Nearings in the sixties and seventies and adapted some of their principles while resisting others. While some back-to-the-land efforts in this period were short-lived or part of broader communal experiments, a core group of “baby-boomer” back-to-the-landers have continued to live rurally and practice relative self-sufficiency through growing their own food and producing local crafts.

From the 1990s to the present, a renewed interest in homesteading has sprung to life, coming in large part out of explicitly environmental concerns and in conversation with broader cultural movements such as efforts in voluntary simplicity. The Nearings' homestead, now a non-profit organization, The Good Life Center, draws thousands of visitors each year. Publishing ventures such as *The Mother Earth News*, *Countryside*, and, more recently, Chelsea Green Publishers continue to meet a demand for both philosophical and “how-to” aspects of back to the land experiments. Similarly, contemporary writers in the back to the land tradition (such as Wendell Berry, Gary Snyder, Anne LaBastille and Gene Logsdon) continue to attract an enthusiastic audience.

Throughout over a hundred and fifty years of back to the land efforts, hundreds of personal testimonies have been documented in first-person essays and narratives, with many more experiments virtually unreported and unknown. Even those who were prominent in their time have often been overlooked, the result being that “back to the land” has been associated primarily with counter-cultural interest in “communing with nature.” The larger story of back to the land movements, however, shows the persistence of this cultural practice in the face of the rise of industrialism and the market in the nineteenth century, and consumerism, ecological degradation and continued social inequity in more recent periods. While individual back to the land practices vary according to the rigor of self-sufficiency pursued, the extent of rural life, the embrace of technology, the practice (or not) of vegetarianism and so on, a reading of nature as an alternative source for spiritual growth and satisfaction is remarkably consistent. Nature is regularly seen as a beneficent force, a source of personal inspiration and as a moral guide for responsible, daily living in the modern world.

Rebecca Kneale Gould

Further Reading

Berry, Wendell. *Home Economics: Fourteen Essays by Wendell Berry*. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987.
Borsodi, Ralph. *The Flight From the City*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1933.

Bromfield, Louis. *Malabar Farm*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1948; New York: Aeonian Press, 1978.

Burroughs, John. *The Writings of John Burroughs*, 23 vols. Riverby edition. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, Riverside Press, 1904–1923.

Elgin, Duane. *Voluntary Simplicity: Towards a Life That is Inwardly Simple, Outwardly Rich*. New York: William Morrow, 1981.

Gould, Rebecca Kneale. *At Home in Nature: Modern Homesteading and Spiritual Practice in America*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004.

Jacob, Jeffrey. *New Pioneers*. University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1997.

Lears, T.J. Jackson. *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880–1920*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1981; University of Chicago Press, 1994.

Nearing, Helen and Scott Nearing. *The Good Life*. Reprint of *Living the Good Life and Continuing the Good Life* (with a forward by Helen Nearing). New York: Schocken, 1989.

Schmitt, Peter J. *Back to Nature: The Arcadian Myth in Urban America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969.

Shi, David. *The Simple Life: Plain Living and High Thinking in American Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985, 1986.

Veysey, Laurence. *The Communal Experience*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973; Phoenix Books, 1978.

Williams, Raymond. *The Country and the City*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973, 1975.

See also: Berry, Wendell; Bioregionalism; Bioregionalism and the North American Bioregional Congress; Brook Farm; Burroughs, John; Emerson, Ralph Waldo; Farm, The; Fruitlands; Hippies; Open Land Movement; Puritans; Radical Environmentalism; Rainbow Family; School of Living; Snyder, Gary – and the Invention of Bioregional Spirituality and Politics; Thoreau, Henry David; Tolstoy Farm; Transcendentalism.

SP Bahá'í Faith

The Bahá'í faith began as a reform movement in nineteenth-century Islam, but quickly became an independent religion. It has a background in esoteric Shi'ite Islam, especially the Shaykhi school and the messianic Babi movement that roiled mid-nineteenth-century Iran. The Bahá'í faith favors peaceful approaches to resolving social problems and adopts a progressive attitude to modernity. Its founder, Mirza Husayn 'Ali Nuri (1817–1892), known as Bahá'u'lláh (“the Glory of God”), taught the unity of the great religions, the oneness of God, the unity of humankind, greater equality between the sexes, avoidance