

A [sample entry](#) from the

# **Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature**

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caused a split in the Romani population, some of whom believe it is a major factor in the loss of traditional *Romanipen*. One successful Pentecostal church in Dallas, Texas, developed a program that has deliberately integrated references to dualism, balance, ancestral spirits and other aspects of Romanipen, which do not conflict with Christian doctrine, stressing parallels rather than differences.

There are Romanies who have embraced Mormonism, and the Bahá'í religion has acquired numbers of converts, especially in Spain. But with the exception of those completely assimilated to the non-Romani world, whatever religion may be professed, it will exist syncretistically with more or fewer elements retained from the original set of beliefs and practices which find their origins in India.

Ian Hancock

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See also: Hinduism; India; Proto-Indo-Europeans.

## Romanticism and Indigenous Peoples

Romanticism with regard to indigenous cultures has its roots in the edenic episode wherein nature and culture were rent apart in the generative moment of the Western narrative. As a taxonomic device, this separation has most often functioned in favor of "culture" and its putative bearers: "culture" defines the "properly human," and it is that which allows humans to claim a certain stewardship over nature. Configured historically by way of imperialism, this taxonomy also distinguishes between people of God (saved) and people given over to nature (fallen). Whether we choose to map this relationship according to the coordinates offered by Augustine, Columbus, or Andrew Jackson, for example, the results will largely be the same. Native peoples – cultural and categorical "others" – become the inverse and absence of "civilization." Lacking spirit, reason, and private property, among other crucial markers, natives are viewed as children of nature. Redeeming them (if indeed they are human and redeemable) entails converting them away from the world, lifting them up, as it were, from their earthly condition.

And yet the very taxonomy put into place by the edenic myth has an historical alter ego. As if unwilling to wait for the apocalypse – the mythological or technological rectification of history – many Westerners have sought to return to the garden by means of a shortcut. Ironically, this path is found precisely through the romantic recoding of the dominant taxonomy. Whether drawn from public discourse or scholarly treatises, we might distill a set of categorical oppositions concerning the relationship between romantic desires and the decidedly less romantic modern condition:

Nature ~ Culture  
 (source of redemption) ~ (liability, a state of decay)  
 Past ~ Present  
 Hunting/agriculture ~ Industry/global economy  
 Rural ~ Urban  
 Communal ~ Private

In romantic thought, what is striking about this set of oppositions is the way each term in the right-hand column is understood to be a corruption of the left-hand one. The remedy, then, is to chart a return to the former (if sometimes fictive) state by whatever means available. What is relevant for our purposes are the channels through which this symbolic "return" is navigated. As strong as nostalgic

sentiments might be, actually traversing any of these categories is, at turns, impossible, impractical, or frankly undesirable. What is needed is a stand-in: a scapegoat symbolically and metonymically linked to nature who can perform an eternal return to the garden. Enter the native.

Whether in tandem with real political agitation or in place of it, indigenous peoples have been looked to as an environmental and spiritual panacea by people around the globe in their retreat from the perceived failures and implications of modernity. Surely there are positive aspects to this phenomenon, as there is much to be learned from native traditions, particularly in terms of resilience and creativity. And one might add that it is high time that native peoples be celebrated rather than denigrated. It should be noted, however, that the degree to which Indians were “the first ecologists” is a hotly contested issue. Defining, defending, and denying the Earth ethic of Native Americans has become an academic blood sport. Quite beyond the historical and institutional concerns of this debate, I would call attention to several ideological aspects of romanticism that are problematic. First, romanticism is reactionary and escapist: romantic views of indigenous peoples spring from other peoples’ needs and desires, not from an appreciation of indigenous people in their own right. Second, romantic tendencies are predicated on a kind of social evolution model, even while its valuations are ostensibly reversed from the imperial pattern. Native peoples are looked to as an antidote to modernity precisely because they are understood – however uncritically – to inhabit the social past, specifically as anachronistic representatives of an imagined natural past (which explains why Native American exhibits are frequently located in natural history museums). The ramifications of such a view are anything but comforting. Third, romanticism reifies the very traditions it exalts, paradoxically suffocating that from which it seeks inspiration. Romantic images portray tradition as fixed, stable, uncontested and, linking us back to our earlier points, anti-modern. To imagine tradition in this way eliminates the prospect that the people romanticized will be heard when they speak in their own voice – even when it comes to speaking about those things which matter to them most, like the land and nature itself.

The narrative I have painted in broad strokes is, of course, distorted in significant ways. Observing this, we want to acknowledge that most people do not imagine or inhabit the world in ways so divided. Most of all, the dichotomy as stated obscures real political efforts of people and groups to heal and sustain nature in ways that neither depend upon the Western narrative nor the burdening of indigenous peoples as surrogate messiahs. That said, the romanticization of native peoples remains – indeed, it seems to escalate with every year and with each new environmental crisis. Complicating the picture, many

indigenous people have willfully engaged this discourse, sometimes as authors.

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#### Further Reading

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- See also: American Indians as “First Ecologists”; Noble Savage; Radical Environmentalism; Religious Environmentalist Paradigm.

## Romanticism in European History

Romanticism has long been recognized as a major trope in modern environmental thought and practice. Romanticism, however, was a complex, diverse, changing historical movement. Our present conceptions of Romanticism tend to be defined as much by critics and subsequent commentators as contemporary articulations by Romantic figures. Even the representations of Romanticism within academic studies are the products of different readings from different historical and theoretical positions, and seldom free of polemical overtones. As de Man has noted: “From its inception, the history of romanticism has been one of battles, polemics, and misunderstandings: personal misunderstandings between the poets themselves; between the poets, critics, and the public; between the successive generations” (de Man 1993: 4). Contested are not only the meanings of Romanticism, its very boundaries, origins and influences, and who might be considered a Romantic, but also its conception of nature, its relationship to religion and its relevance to modern environmentalism.

An emblematic text of European Romanticism has long been Wordsworth’s *The Prelude*. It is precisely this emblematic status of the poem that gives contestation over its appropriate reading such significance. The poem is an account of the poet’s formation as a poet, from his childhood experiences of nature to his mature vision of the sublime. Abrams reads Wordsworth’s poem as part of his