

A [sample entry](#) from the

# **Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature**

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engagement between people and nature expressed in the bardic tradition often outside of or on the margins of the mainstream church. As a generalization, this represents human society as resting on the bedrock of ecological community under the Providence of God. Nature transfigures humankind in a grounded transcendence, thus the motto of Stornoway in the Outer Hebrides is “God’s Providence is our inheritance,” and the great twentieth-century Gaelic poet, Sorley MacLean, writes in *An Cuilithionn* (The Cuillin): “Beyond the lochs of the blood of the children of men / beyond the frailty of plain and the labor of the mountain . . . / beyond guilt and defilement; watchful / heroic, the Cuillin is seen / rising on the other side of sorrow” (in Hunter 1995: 175).

In the late twentieth century, a few activists, including the present author, used the above analysis of history in an effort to reintegrate nature, spirituality and a bardic politics in the public life of a Scotland developing a “devolved” or semi-detached relationship with the rest of the “United Kingdom.” The Isle of Eigg Trust, established in 1991, successfully enabled the residents of a Hebridean island to revolt and rid itself of its landlord and establish a democratic community land trust. This in turn helped stimulate flagship land-reform legislation in the Scottish Parliament, which was reestablished in 1999.

Similarly, when the Isle of Harris was threatened by multinationals wanting to make it a center for European production of roadstone with perhaps two massive “super-quarries,” theological testimony against violating the integrity of the creation was made by a panel that included Scotland’s leading Calvinist, the Rev. Professor Donald Macleod, and the then-warrior chief of the Mi’Kmaq First Nation in Nova Scotia, a Sacred Pipe Carrier.

Attention was drawn in the public inquiry through the Mi’Kmaq testimony to the need for “defense of Mother Earth.” Scripture passages such as Genesis 2:15, Proverbs 8, Job 38 and Romans 8 were invoked to argue that it is not creation that is fallen (and therefore treated as fit to have its national scenic areas ravished), but humankind. Professor Macleod noted that the function of the creation is to reflect the majesty of God and that “to spoil the creation is to disable it from performing this function [giving rise to] the consideration that rape of the environment is rape of the community itself” (Macleod in McIntosh 2001: 234). Accordingly, the present writer concluded, an appropriate relationship with nature is one of *reverence*. This is not *pantheism* – God as nature – but it should be understood as, *panentheism* – God being present in the creation as, for example, in Job or Hebrews 1:3.

The Scottish Government that, in the previous year, had abolished feudalism, rejected the superquarry in 2000. The “harriers of the world” may hover yet in the guise of globalization, but the spirit of Calgacus, increasingly expressed through nonviolent direct action, remains strong in fight-

ing, as Tacitus described it, “desecration and the contamination of tyranny: here at the world’s end.”

Alastair McIntosh

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- See also: Celtic Christianity; Celtic Spirituality; Christianity (6c) – Reformation Traditions (Lutheranism and Calvinism); Christianity (6c2) – Calvin, John and the Reformed Tradition; Christianity (7c) – Liberation Theology; Christianity in Europe; Faerie Faith in Scotland; Ireland; The Protestant Ethic.

### Scouting

Founded during the Progressive Era, the early Scouting movement in the United States embraced the era’s widespread beliefs in Darwinism, in the restorative power of nature, and (for the boys) in the spiritual dimensions of physical activity (“muscular Christianity”). Lord Robert Baden-Powell founded the Boy Scouts in England in 1908, and in 1910 a group of men already active in youth work in the United States gathered in New York City to found the Boy Scouts of America (BSA). Juliette Gordon Low created the first troop of Girl Scouts in 1912, and by 1915 the Girl Scouts of America (GSA) was incorporated. Although technically not part of the “Scouting” movement, the Camp Fire Girls, founded by Luther and Charlotte Gulick in 1910 and incorporated in 1912, shared Scouting’s ideas and approaches to building nature-based recreational programs for children and adolescents.

Ernest Thompson Seton (1860–1946) played a central role in bringing into the BSA ideas about the relationship between nature and religion. Seton had been experiment-

ing since 1903 with his own youth program, “Woodcraft Indians,” based on American Indian lore, and he brought that experience to the BSA in 1910. Seton wrote a good many sections of the first *Handbook for Boys* (1911), including sections on “woodcraft,” and he held the title “Chief Scout” until his falling out with the BSA in 1915.

By the turn of the century, Seton had already established strong credentials as both a naturalist and an artist. Although Seton wrote scientifically sound and well-respected books on North American wildlife, he was best known as the author of a number of books of animal stories, such as *Wild Animals I Have Known* (1888). In his stories, Seton gave his animal characters intelligence, emotions, and even a sense of ethics. Although he was sometimes criticized for these stories, Seton defended them as based on scientific observation of animal behavior in the wild. Seton was a committed Darwinist, but his Social Darwinism resembled Peter Kropotkin’s view of cooperation and “mutual aid” in nature, rather than the Spencerian view that brutal competition was the natural state of things. Accordingly, Seton’s stories are full of animal cooperation and altruism. Although Seton had been developing these ideas over decades, he finally summed up his case for the moral lessons of nature in his 1907 book, *The Ten Commandments in the Animal World*, where he argues (using numerous examples from his observations of animals) that the Ten Commandments are “fundamental laws of all highly developed animals” (Seton 1925: 4).

When Seton turned to creating programs for young people, he brought into this work these same Social Darwinist ideas also found in the Social Gospel movement. Seton and other Darwinist reformers believed that they could intervene in the process of evolution and steer society toward more just and more spiritual (as opposed to material) ways. He read and agreed with G. Stanley Hall’s (1844–1924) Darwinist approach to the evolutionary psychology of the race and of the individual child and, like Hall, Seton believed that male early adolescence was a particularly magical period when the boy’s natural instincts could be turned to spiritual matters and to selfless service to others.

Seton held up the American Indian as a model for American character, spirituality, and physical fitness. He built his original youth program around Indian lore, and when he resigned as Chief Scout in 1915 (in a dispute with the leadership) he reestablished the Woodcraft Indians as a co-educational group in competition with Scouting. Seton thought that American Indian religions were the perfect model for human spirituality and ethics. Seton had moved from the East to settle in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in the early 1930s to create The College of Indian Wisdom, a training institute for leaders in the Woodcraft Indians and other youth organizations. During these years Seton continued publishing the Woodcraft League’s monthly *Totem Board*, where Seton tried out the ideas he finally con-

densated into one book – *The Gospel of the Redman* (1937) – where the Christ-like qualities of the great Shawnee Chief, Tecumseh, come to represent the merging of American Indian religions and those qualities Seton thought best in Christianity. Not surprisingly, the American Indian’s religion in Seton’s account relied heavily upon ideas about nature, so Seton was thoughtfully weaving together ideas about male adolescence, spirituality, American Indian religions, and the ethical lessons from the animal world.

Many of Seton’s ideas about nature and spirituality survived in the BSA handbooks and programs after his departure, but some of the other founders also had their own ideas about the ways religion and nature came together in Scouting. Three of the founders – Edgar M. Robinson, John L. Alexander, and James E. West – had extensive experience in the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), and they brought from those experiences a firm faith in the power of “muscular Christianity.” While that philosophy energized the late nineteenth-century commitment to athletics as a means to socialize young men in ethics and morality, Scouting went even further than the YMCA in viewing nature as the playground for the spiritual and ethical training of young men. The “Acadian myth” in the United States is the long-standing narrative that a “return to nature” will save Americans from the debilitating, polluting, and demoralizing effects of urbanization and (later) modernization, and we see in the handbooks and other literature of Scouting this enduring mythological idea of “going into the woods” for spiritual renewal (Schmitt 1990).

The founders and authors of the early BSA handbooks included religion as an important ingredient in the Scouting program. The Twelfth Point (and last) of the Scout Law is that “A Scout is Reverent,” and in the 1950s the BSA created a special category of Religious Awards so that the boy could learn more about his own religion and provide service to the congregation as an extension of his service to the community through Scouting. All mention of religion in the BSA materials, however, addresses more traditional understandings of religion. The BSA never formulated explicit ideas of a “nature religion” in these materials; those ideas appear far more often in the BSA publications about nature and in oral comments by Scout leaders (e.g., Scoutmaster’s “sermon” in Mechling 2001: 18).

Under the rubric “woodcraft,” the study of nature has always been a part of the Scouting program. In the Boy Scouts, boys must learn about nature for a range of badges, beginning at the lowest ranks and extending to Eagle Scout, the highest rank. Boys earn merit badges on topics running from the most general, such as “Nature” and “Environmental Science,” to specialized merit badges in such fields as bird study and reptile study. The pamphlets for these badges are usually written by experts in science, but even these publications convey the sense of awe

humans have in the presence of nature. If the modern “ecological consciousness” has a religious or spiritual dimension to it, then we see evidence of this in the BSA publications.

The religious or spiritual dimensions of the study of nature in Scouting are subtle but unmistakable. The notion of “stewardship,” an idea borrowed from religion by conservationists in the Progressive Era, pervades Scouting’s ideas about nature. These are the “conservationist” ideas of people like Gifford Pinchot, Teddy Roosevelt’s Secretary of the Interior, rather than the “preservationist” ideas of John Muir in the same period. William Temple Hornaday (1854–1937), who directed the New York Zoological Park from 1896 to 1926 and who was in the circle of Seton’s friends, is remembered in the BSA with the William T. Hornaday badge and medals for boys who undertake projects representing “distinguished service in natural resource conservation,” evidence of responsible stewardship over nature.

Although the social and cultural impetus for Scouting came from the pervasive sense of a “crisis” in white masculinity in turn-of-the-century Great Britain and the United States, some reformers thought that the ideas of the movement, including ideas about nature and religion, were also applicable to girls. Like Seton, the Gulicks created the Camp Fire program around American Indian lore and took care in designing campfire rituals meant to impart to girls the spiritual and service aspects of their lives as young women. Crafts and camping were part of the Camp Fire program from the beginning, sharing in the “Acadian myth” of the beneficial effects of having girls experience nature. Juliette Gordon Low’s ideas for the Girl Scouts (1912) did not rely upon American Indian lore for their program, but Low and her colleagues were just as committed to the view that teaching girls self-reliance for the twentieth century should include woodcraft skills. Seton created still another opportunity for girls with his Woodcraft Girls, an organization paralleling his Woodcraft Boys, with its own handbook, *The Woodcraft Manual for Girls* (1916). All three of these organizations – the Camp Fire Girls, the Girl Scouts of America, and the Woodcraft Girls – were feminist organizations in their cultural context, as they aimed to take young women beyond the domestic sphere and give them knowledge and skills, including campcraft and woodcraft. In these movements’ requirements, rituals, and excursions into the wilderness we see the same wedding of nature and spirituality so prominent in the boys’ movements.

Jay Mechling

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See also: Indian Guides; Muir, John; Nature Religion in the United States; Pinchot, Gifford.

#### SP Scything and Erotic Fulfillment

Ivan Illich has drawn attention to the “vernacular” as those practices and values that, like our vernacular (or native) tongue, are learned in family and community by oft-unconscious processes of social osmosis rather than through formal schooling. It is striking that vernacular activity in the satisfaction of fundamental human needs is typically rich in synergistic layers of meaning. Indeed, as development practitioners and “modernizers” have discovered to their cost, it is often the case in vernacular communities that “implicit meanings of local practices” will outweigh the superficially presented reason for doing things in a particular way. For example, stories abound in Africa of newly installed water pumps being broken by young men. Only then was it realized that having the young women walk to the distant well was an implicit but unspoken opportunity for courtship.

One of the most striking characteristics of much vernacular work is its relationship to rhythm – both as an outcome (for example, in work song), and as an organizing principle aiding the process. This emerges, for example, in walking, rowing, riding, cycling, milking, weaving, spinning, pounding corn, hauling on anchor chains, ropes and fishing lines, casting with a fishing rod, making music, repartee in discourse, varying forms of intercourse, rocking the baby, and in reaping with sickle or scythe.

The ability to “enter into the swing of things” in work, as in sport, is commonly the touchstone of right technique. Chant, song or dance, often in unison with co-workers, may be concomitant to such an extent that some cultures have built up considerable bodies of work-related folk songs. These are songs not necessarily about work, but rather, embodying the rhythm of work. Thus, for example,