

A LADY'S LIFE IN THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS: AN EXCURSION TO EMPOWERMENT AND ENVIRONMENTALISM

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes a reading of Isabella Bird's travelogue *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains* (1879) through the lens of Environmental Studies by focusing on the material and metaphorical uses of nature, scrutinizing the recurrent trope of the mountain, and paying attention to the interaction between the intrepid traveller and nature. While the adventurer deals with the difficulties of the transatlantic pilgrimage, Bird also goes beyond the traditional hymn to the beauty of the landscape in order to condemn the degradation of nature. Arguably, the most valuable insights that this text has to offer beyond empowering women derive precisely from the author's concern for nature. Bird not only composes an ode to the mountainous scenery in prose, but also an innovative manifesto, where a number of detrimental consequences of the infamous environmental crises are anticipated well in advance.

KEYWORDS: Isabella Bird, Mountain, Environmentalism, Empowerment, Innovative Manifesto.

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RESUMEN

Este artículo propone una lectura del diario de viaje de Isabella Bird *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains* (1879) desde la perspectiva de los Estudios Medioambientales, con atención al empleo literal y metafórico de la naturaleza, desentrañando el significado de la figura recurrente de la montaña y deteniéndose en la interacción entre la viajera y la naturaleza. Si bien la aventurera aborda las dificultades de un viaje trasatlántico para la época, el texto va más allá del tradicional himno a la belleza del paisaje para presentar una condena firme contra la degradación de la naturaleza. Su contribución más reseñable además del empoderamiento de la mujer sería la preocupación de la autora por la naturaleza. Bird no se conforma con componer una oda en prosa al paisaje montañoso, presenta un manifiesto innovador en el que atisba algunas de las consecuencias de la crisis medioambiental.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Isabella Bird, Montaña, Preocupación medioambiental, Empoderamiento, Manifiesto innovador.

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INTRODUCTION

Everything suggests a beyond.
Isabella Bird

A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains has formally been classified as 'travel literature' dating back to the end of the 19th century, in the context of the Westward expansion of the new Nation on a massive scale (Wrobel 2009). To read this seminal historical and literary document, literary criticism has traditionally been using the lens of 'colonial literature' in line with the imperialistic tenets of Bird's time (Morin 1999). As a woman of bourgeois origins and subject of the English monarchy, Bird was in need of readers for her volume, therefore, she always sought good manners and a proper dress code in each of her entries.¹ The fact remains that the location as well as the varied range of activities that she enjoyed place her, arguably against her will (Morin 2008, 81-82), at the forefront of what is called the New Woman's movement: writing, travelling unchaperoned, riding astride, and climbing, all of them highly contradictory ways for a woman of her class and position that envisage an impending new era loaded of radical changes, particularly with respect to women's status. Yet still, considering how nature is depicted and the relationship established with it, Bird's discourse gains relevance within the current context of the worldwide environmental and health crisis.

Beyond the fact that the leading role is played by a woman who embarks unaccompanied on an extensive journey to the New World, my research seeks to draw attention to the fact that exploitation and supremacy are not the proper way to interact with the other-than-human nature, resulting this time in a global health emergency derived from the outburst of the COVID-19 virus. In this context, Bird emerges as a visionary of environmental degradation. While her volume received at the time a general welcome by virtue of the magnificent deeds that the traveller related throughout her letters, the analysis that this study proposes brings Bird's text closer to us, by taking an environmental approach. It might reveal an ethical enquiry into the consequences of a landscape inflamed with history's violence and shaken by abuse of natural resources. Thus, rather than canonical travel letters, my research constitutes an invitation to place Bird's account right at the heart of the debate about our future as humans in relation to our Planet, an innovative manifesto for a fundamental redesign of our conservation policies and ethical behaviour.

¹ See Martín-Lucas: "Mientras que [la escritora] para ser aceptada e integrada en el mundo literario, aunque tan solo sea en un grado mínimo, debe pasar por una dama modesta, humilde y naïf, es decir, 'femenina', para cumplir su sueño de ser recordada debe ser visible y sobresaliente." (2022, 46) [In order to be accepted and integrated even to a minimum degree in the literary world, (the female writer) must come across as modest, humble and naïf, that is, 'feminine', by contrast, she must be visible and outstanding, to fulfill her lifetime dream of being remembered.]



Je me vois donc je suis.

Claude Cahun

While much of the recent scholarship dealing with British women travellers concentrates on making them known to the world through their great achievements and exploits, this study intends to pay tribute to Isabella Bird by emphasizing her commitment to nature as a herald of the pernicious consequences of development and modernity, in particular, the relationship between our economic growth and respect towards nature. We are facing an emergency of global nature, “the beginning of the end” (Puleo 2002, 36), since it has a negative impact on our health, destroys biodiversity and seriously jeopardizes our near future. And yet, as David Farrier (2019) suggests, reading literature (poetry) can help us understand and live this new age known as the Anthropocene mostly triggered by the devastating impact of human activity on nature.

Ruiz de Alegria (2020) offers a feminist reading of a work set in a notably male-dominated scenario in order to emphasize the idea of female empowerment as opposed to the traditionally acclaimed masculine empowerment in mountainous landscapes. Most importantly, since Bird’s suggestion involves quitting the simple role as muse and looking at the landscape with her own eyes (white, heterosexual and bourgeois), Ruiz de Alegria concludes that “the traveller’s discourse turns out to be of remarkable significance regarding the subversion of the patriarchal leading gaze on the mountain in the western culture” (2020, 88). Finally, Ruiz de Alegria argues that the text “seems to be pioneering and courageous for a Victorian Lady” (2020, 88) as it recognizes female sensuality.

Monica Rico, for her part, examines Bird’s position in comparison to other British subjects likewise allured by the exotism of the Far West, such as the Earl of Dunraven (2013, 83-181). For Rico, their unstable position in Britain would explain their shared attraction for the untamed lands (85), but while the British aristocrat would be running away from political and social upheaval questioning the legitimacy of his authority in Ireland, Bird would evade domesticity, illness, and ultimately the ideal of a Victorian woman. Paradoxically, in the light of Friedrich Gerstäcker’s, Richard Francis Burton’s, and Isabella Bird’s travel books, David Wrobel presents a shrinking world, the beginning of what will be known as ‘globalisation’, where no real escape is possible: “they were very much a part of the world of empire building and that their western frontier served as the primary stage for imperial endeavours, not an escape from them” (2008, 34). Additionally, Rico notes that contrary to most of Bird’s male compatriots, who celebrate The Rockies as a unique opportunity for new businesses derived from its nascent tourism industry, the adventurer celebrates instead its “grand, solitary, uplifted, sublime, remote, and, not least but last, beast-haunted nature” (121), giving way to Diana L. Di Stefano’s argumentation, where she explains how the Mountain West changed; from hostile barriers to sites of spiritual possibility to be preserved, through the idealization of risk-taking (2014, 4-5). Di Stefano introduces the romantic ideas about the sublime resonating with



transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson's texts, who advocates for the contemplation of nature and experiencing wilderness as a means of spiritual enlightenment and connection to the Divine (8). Emerson's successor, Henry David Thoreau (1817-1872), puts forward risk-taking as a potential path to transcendence, opening the door for mountain-seeking and their protection as the only wild places left after the devastating effects of industrialization (9). Di Stefano concludes with geologist, botanist, and mountaineer John Muir's pioneering conservation approach to the American landscape (13), who makes use of an almost theological language that infuses every element in nature with holiness. In that context, Rico asserts that "disavowing male violence against both wildlife and other human beings, Bird offers an alternative, the language of lyrical nature appreciation, emotional connection, and evangelical religion" (84). In the same line of thought, Susan Schrepfer mentions that through figurative language and altered aesthetic traditions, female travellers meet nature's power and their own spiritual needs (2005, 68-69).

When it comes to environmentalism, the traveller and writer Thérèse Longworth (1833-1881) displays a certain ethical approach on the subject of the depleted buffalo population in her two-volume work *Teresina in America*, 1875, reissued in 1974 (18-19). In the same vein as Longworth, Lady Rose Kingsley (1845-1925), cousin to the worldwide known traveller Mary Kingsley, positions herself against the random massacre of buffalo from the trains, in *South by West or Winter in the Rocky Mountains and Spring in Mexico*, 1874 (38-39). As Morin points out, while it is true that they are not so much criticising the killing of the creatures *per se*, but the American way of doing it in contrast to the more daring and selective British-like way, some form of compassion and sympathy permeates these female authors' texts (2008, 35-36). In addition, Schrepfer indicates that the new field of botany allowed women to enjoy outdoor spaces without suspicion while gathering new floral specimens, which provided the foundation for the aesthetics and spirituality of the feminine sublime (2005, 84). In that context, the 'naturalist' Constance Cumming (1837-1924) with whom Bird was particularly friendly (Hill-Murphy 2021, 239-240), complains about deforestation and lumbering and their adverse consequences for the local flora and fauna, in *Granite Crags of California* (1886, 341). Also, naturalist Marianne North's (1830-1890) *Recollections of a happy life: Being the Autobiography of Marianne North* (1894) gathers a number of critiques of the logging industry on the grounds that it mostly contributes to the destruction of local forests and exotic species such as redwoods and giant sequoias (211). In much the same way as Elizabeth A. Bohls refers to the internal battle that Dorothy Wordsworth wages between her aesthetic interest as a member of the privileged layers of English society and her opposition to the growing trend of scenic tourism, whose development contributed to the deterioration of the national landscape (1995, 170-208), my paper too seeks to stress Bird's particular attention to and care for nature, even if it might not straightforwardly stem so much from ecological concerns but aesthetic ones. Undeniably, her upper-class privileges and good education enable her to value not only aesthetics and spirituality, but to resist the surge in dehumanizing landscapes.



GOING WEST

As a mountain you can't grow, but as a human I can.
Edmund Hillary

Marie Dronsart, the author of *Des Grandes Voyageuses* (1894), describes British women's education as 'virile' (in Rogers & Thébaud 2008, 9), as they were taught walking and horse riding, predisposing them to be ready to travel and embark on long journeys without fear. Likewise, Rebecca Rogers and Françoise Thébaud add that British girls coming from bourgeois families were encouraged by their parents to spend some time abroad to become acquainted with other languages and cultures based on the belief that those activities would ease their performance in their subsequent role as mothers (2008, 11). In that respect, Olive Checkland reveals that Reverend Edward Bird, in performing his former duties as a lawyer in India, lost his wife and only male child (3). Back in England, with Isabella being the eldest of his second marriage, she might have enjoyed the opportunities particularly reserved for Edward's first-born eldest male child who was already deceased, giving way to Bird's particularly "virile" education (Checkland 1996, 3).

Afflicted by a mysterious illness², probably related to an unrequited love, Isabella Bird is urged to depart on a long journey as the perfect antidote to appease the source of her agony. In possession of a certain fortune after her parents' demise, the traveller feels free from parental restrictions to plunge into such an exciting adventure. While in untamed American lands, Bird relishes sending a day-to-day account of her adventures abroad. Originally written as letters to her sister Henrietta, it subsequently appeared as a serial in the English weekly *Leisure Hour* (1878), and it was not until 1879, six years after accomplishing her heroic feat, that it became a proper volume³ (Morin 2008, 2). Unlike the travel letter, where a dialogue between the sender and the recipient is on display (Romero 2007, 481), Bird's missives are usually void of dialogue, resulting in an extensive monologue about the heroine's daily routines:

I was actually so dull and tired that I deliberately slept away the afternoon in order to forget the heat and flies. Thirty men in working clothes, silent and sad looking, came in to supper. The beef was tough and greasy, the butter had turned to oil,

² Kay Chubbuck (2002, 4-7) speculates that Bird's mysterious ailments may have derived from carbuncle (a skin infection). In contrast to Chubbuck's view, Anna Stoddart (2007, 28) and Olive Checkland (1996, 3) appear more inclined to think that Bird's physical complaint might also be of a more psychosomatic nature as a result of a failed relationship. Monica Rico suggests Bird's invalidism "as a kind of self-expression." (2013, 91)

³ Jacki Hill-Murphy notes that before discussing the letters with her publisher, John Murray, Bird revised them, cutting out all the personal details until she felt they were suitable for Murray to look at them (2021, 233). See also Chubbuck: "Isabella's first biographer was hand-picked; she was given explicit instruction about what to write" (2002, 2-3).



and beef and butter were black with living, drowned, and half-drowned flies. The greasy table-cloth was black also with flies, and I did not wonder that the guests looked melancholy and quickly escaped. I failed to get a horse, but was strongly recommended to come here and board with a settler.⁴ (Bird 1982, 617)

According to Karen Morin, the traditional Victorian adventure tale presents the exploits of a male hero whose major deeds are related to the conquest of the land, search of gold or the colonial administration (2008, 67). As for women, by contrast, while a few of them travel to the West as writers or tourists, women are mostly expected to build their own family household irrespective of the selected location (Morin 2008, 68). However, Bird-like women are “well-qualified” (Middleton 1973, 67), resourceful and capable of almost anything, underscoring their dual status: marginalized as women, but privileged within the framework of colonialism—white, rich and devoting their existence to writing and the practice of scenic tourism. Under those circumstances, Bird’s account abounds in anecdotes and incidents where either the heroine’s physical integrity or dignity is at risk:

There are unaccountable noises, (wolves), rummagings under the floor, queer cries, and stealthy sounds of I know not what. One night a beast (fox or skunk) rushed in at the open end of the cabin, and fled through the window, almost brushing my face, and on another, the head and three or four inches of the body of a snake were protruded through a chink of the floor close to me. (Bird 1982, 674)

Her involvement in perilous missions seems to suggest that Bird deliberately depicts herself to make her achievement “more heroic” and to prove her “personal credit” (Morin 2008, 78). Further, Sara Mills argues that many female discourses present women travelling unaccompanied and “without coming to harm” so as to “reinforce the notion of imperialism” (1993, 22), which means that the mother country rules over even the most distant of its territories. This is even more true when talking about issues of visibility and etiquette since travelling, mountain climbing, riding astride and hunting disturb female adventurers being compelled to negotiate gender boundaries and exhibit contradictory representations of themselves (Stanley 1997, 147-167; Lane 2003, 1601; Morin 2003, 208; Schrepfer 2005, 73-74, 78-70; Jones 2015, 116).

Contrary to the male heroes, boastful of their accomplishments and conquests, Morin says that the Bird-like travellers “demonstrate not triumph or domination over place but a particular kind of triumph over self and emotive attachment to place” (2008, 52). While traditional Victorian women often resorted to “sickness, anorexia, neurasthenia or even wearing corsets” (Morin 2008, 78) in the battle for achieving a certain control over their bodies, the protagonist attains female empowerment through physical exertion to exhaustion. Still, if there is something

⁴ All the citations referring to Isabella Bird’s work have been extracted from *A Lady’s Life in the Rocky Mountains* (1982), introduced by Pat Barr.



genuinely strange in the story, it is the unlikely⁵ relationship between the explorer, a Victorian lady, and James Nugent⁶, a desperado trapper, who oddly guarantees the realisation of the traveller's dream: "the Rocky Mountains realise—nay, exceed—the dream of my childhood" (Bird 1982, 849). And yet their liaison embodies the most engaging of the love stories. In addition, it contributes to moving the story forward, as the couple's emotional involvement grows throughout the story.

THE MOUNTAIN AND ITS METAPHORICAL USES

This is no region for tourists and women.

Isabella Bird

Mountain Jim embodies the exquisite combination of intelligence and sensibility wasted due to the harsh living conditions and the alcohol abuse. The author presents the desperado trapper as "a broad, thickset man, about the middle height" (Bird 1982, 1131), and although he lost an eye after a violent encounter with a bear with nobody around to help him, Bird admits that he must have been a handsome man: "his face was remarkable" (1134). In addition, Jim is well-mannered. As though paving the way for the subsequent 'encounter', Bird cannot possibly present the male protagonist in a more favourable manner, even his conversation is pleasant, so much so that the traveller forgets that Jim "was as awful-looking a ruffian as one could see" (Bird 1982, 1211). Jim is endowed with the genuine ability to easily cope with the outdoor spaces Bird praises so much: he "is a complete child of the mountains" (1151). Everything suggests that Bird might not have found a more skilful guide: "I should never have gone halfway had no 'Jim' *nolens volens*, dragged me along with a patience and skill, and withal a determination that I should ascend the Peak, which never failed" (Bird 1982, 1319). This triumphant moment becomes in fact an anti-climax, since the traveller confesses that she would not have reached the summit without his help.⁷ More, Jim loves nature and kids madly, has a sense of humour,

⁵ See Pat Barr: "The surprisingly intense relationship that developed between Isabella and her "dear desperado," as she called Jim Nugent, was as improbable as any musical comedy plot, and more fascinating because, as far as one can judge from material still extant, it was the nearest Isabella ever came in her life to a romantic sexual passion" (1982, 152). See the title of the book by Chris Enss: *The Lady and the Mountain Man. Isabella Bird, Rocky Mountain Jim, and their Unlikely Friendship*. 2022. See Jacki Hill-Murphy: "There are many books and articles written about this affair between two extraordinary individuals in the Rocky Mountains. But this was 1873 and in a Victorian society fuelled by gossip Isabella would never have shaken off a tainted reputation" (2021, 257).

⁶ Known as Rocky Mountain Jim. According to Rico, there is no evidence to verify the biographical information offered by Bird about Nugent (2013, 113): "son of a British officer from a good old Irish family who ran away from home to become one of the famous scouts of the Plains" (Bird 1982, 2644).

⁷ See Morin: "They represented themselves as actively 'conquering mountain peaks as well as passively waiting for the men to do it, as fearing danger and fatigue but also ridiculing the



expresses acute judgments, writes poetry, his knowledge of literature is extensive, his manners are studied, and he possesses a melodious voice.

At a time when merely talking to strangers breaks social conventions, the text is rich in images of physical contact. Those are especially striking in Bird's descriptions of the ascent of Long's Peak, where the protagonist confesses that she sometimes "stood on his shoulders" (Bird 1982, 1372) while on other occasions she "was roped to Jim" (Bird 1982, 1313) to make the ascent easier for him. In one of the most compromising moments of her adventure, Jim even "dragged [her] up, like a bale of goods, by sheer force of muscle" (Bird 1982, 1310). The text is also sprinkled with comments concerning the freer manners Jim possesses, implying the traveller is risking her reputation: "his manner was certainly bolder and freer than that of gentlemen generally" (Bird 1982, 1252). A kind of danger that, far from dissuading her, exercises a magnetic attraction over her: "He took me back to the track; and the interview which began with a pistol shot, ended quite pleasantly. It was an eerie ride, one not to be forgotten, though there was no danger" (Bird 1982, 1985). The previous quotation, suggesting the pleasant ending of the interview with Mountain Jim, might constitute a literary strategy employed by Bird to pave the way for the final scene where she describes the heroine's arguable first sexual encounter as it is implied by the portrait of the couple around the fire, in a heavenly remote spot, under a ceiling of glittering stars while Jim is smoking:

I sat for two hours by the camp fire. It was weird and gloriously beautiful. The students were asleep not far off in their blankets with their feet towards the fire. "Ring" lay on one side of me with his fine head on my arm, and his master sat smoking, with the fire lighting up the handsome side of his face, and except for the tones of our voices, and an occasional crackle and splutter as a pine knot blazed up, there was no sound on the mountain side. (Bird 1982, 388)

In fact, the very same moment when Bird lets us know about the coronation of Long's Peak coincides with the traveller's questionable intimate rapport—"it is one of the noblest of mountains, but in one's imagination it grows to be much more than a mountain" (Bird 1982, 1190)—suggesting a disguised reference to the male genital organ evoked by the growth of the mountain. The remarkable utterance indicates that while Bird follows the female travel writing conventions, emphasising her domestic abilities and values, the character that Bird constructs of herself in the tale exceeds gender expectations and opens the door to innovative female narratives through landscape and far away settings. In any case, it is not so much about whether Isabella Bird actually enjoyed her first intercourse as it is about the fact that she dared to fabricate it and put it down on paper. Bird insists on the fact that "in that vast congeries of mountains" (3219) Long's Peak turns out to be "alone in imperial grandeur" (3220), where the mountain might be read as the embodiment

incompetency of local male guides, and as 'resisting' adventure, yet expressing female empowerment and abandonment in it" (1999, 489).



of the male genitals, opening the door for the world of female perception and sensual empowerment. Given the circumstances described, the leading role played by the male genitals is of paramount significance to understanding the text, not least because literature has been traditionally more prone to show female ones. In addition, Jim's masculinity, the male protagonist *par excellence*, has been reduced to a purely phallic symbol. One might wonder whether the fact that the complete list of charming peculiarities describing Jim as the 'Casanova' of the Rocky Mountains has been reduced to his genitals is an ironic use of metonymy.

From this perspective, Christine DeVine argues that Bird makes use of a "phallus-rich metaphorical landscape and an allegorical hero" (2007, 1) in order to transcend reality and give way to a heroic journey, where the author is allowed to go beyond societal as well as narrative boundaries. Ruiz de Alegria (2018) analyses Bird's text in terms of a bildungsroman, where the female protagonist's odyssey might illustrate an initiation journey into an arguably first relationship. Of German origin, the *raison d'être* of the bildungsroman is, according to Miguel Salmerón (2002, 59), the training and personal growth of the protagonist. In fact, the explorer's embarkment is the perfect framework for testing the heroine's resilience and adaptability, and it marks a turning point in the traveller's life similar in complexity to entering a new stage of life. Yet, in Ruiz de Alegria's view, the author's most valuable contribution "is not so much about whether Isabella Bird actually enjoyed her first intercourse with Jim, as it is about the fact that she dared to put it down on paper" (2018, ii). It is no surprise, then, DeVine's argument: "Bird's travel narrative has been shaped to resemble a quest romance" (2007, 1).

ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS

*We cannot shape the huge hills or carve out the
valleys according to our fancy.*

Dorothy Wordsworth

Concerning Lake Tahoe, it is described as "a dream of beauty at which one might look all one's life and sigh" (Bird 1982, 229). The heroine likewise admits "being bewitched by [its] beauty and serenity" (Bird 1982, 377). As for Lake Donner, it leaves her "smitten by its beauty" (Bird 1982, 419). Similarly, she describes the landscape from the top of Long's Peak: "in unrivalled combination all the views which had rejoiced our eyes during the ascent" (Bird 1982, 1357). It not only captivates her, but it also "satisfies [her] soul" (848). Surrounded by nature, she admits feeling unable to do justice to the beauty of the place, nor to "the glorious sublimity, the majestic solitude, and the unspeakable awfulness and fascination of the scenes" (Bird 1982, 1185). The fact is that she enjoys the ascent of Long's Peak, to the point that Estes Park means "grandeur, cheerfulness, health, enjoyment, novelty, freedom, etc." (Bird 1982, 1060) to her. Given the circumstances, she decides to draw sketches to immortalise the *vista*, and offer her sister Henrietta proof of its beauty. Even in spots not particularly attractive, probably due to their proximity to urban



areas, as is the case of Truckee, the mountaineer finds an excuse to take pleasure in observing the landscape. However, it is not the sight the only sense to be pleased, for she is also sensitive to genuine sounds of nature entangled with those caused by human beings: “the sharp ring of the lumberer’s axe mingles with the cries of wild beasts and the roar of mountain torrents” (Bird 1982, 340). This predilection for nature seems to be far from new in the protagonist’s life based on the following expression: “Mountains—the Sierras of many a fireside dream” (Bird 1982, 292).

As the narrative goes on, so grows the traveller’s affection for nature, so much so that she admits that the Rocky Mountains “are gradually gaining possession of [her]” (Bird 1982, 556). She even confesses to feeling like a victim of “the mountain fever” (Bird 1982, 1162). Surrounded by the “elastic air,” it is no coincidence that the “fatigue has dropped off from [her]” (Bird 1982, 836) and she appears reluctant about the idea of going back to urban areas “even in thought” (Bird 1982, 235). Even in the nice city of Denver, the protagonist is persuaded that “it was too much of ‘wearying world’ either for [her] health or taste” (Bird 1982, 2429). It is no wonder then that as soon as the adverse weather conditions confined her at home, the explorer longed for “the rushing winds, the piled-up peaks, the great pines, [and] the wild night noises” (Bird 1982, 3040). So Bird identifies nature with some kind of shelter against the inevitable progress of the ‘civilisation.’

From the negative connotation of the adjectives that the voyager employs to describe the impact of the gold rush (uninviting, blazing, repulsive and muddy), it is inferred that she feels aversion to the spaces displaying nature’s serious decline:

Very uninviting, however rich, was the blazing Sacramento Valley, and very repulsive the city of Sacramento [...] The dusty fertility was all left behind, the country became rocky and gravelly, and deeply scored by streams bearing muddy wash of the mountain gold mines down to the muddier Sacramento. (Bird 1982, 247)

The huge Pacific Train could not escape the above negativity either: “its heavy bell tolling thundered up to the door of the Truckee House” (Bird 1982, 464), not least because to the adventurer’s mind, ‘civilisation’ creates deafening noises as well as “long broken ridges and deep ravines” (251), threatening nature and its population. On the one hand, the gold rush attracts a significant number of prospectors; as a result, nature “straggles out promiscuously” (Bird 1982, 513) where “rubbish heaps, and offal of deer and antelope produce the foulest smells [she has] smelt for a long time” (Bird 1982, 512). Following this sudden and uncontrolled increase in the number of residents, the explorer condemns the pressure that true nature bears: “there is not a bush, or garden, or green thing” (Bird 1982, 513). Moreover, she points out that Colorado Springs has no appeal “from its utter treelessness” (Bird 1982, 2024). As for Boulder, the explorer admits that she runs away terrified after realising that following the discovery of its enormous mineral wealth “a picture of desolation where nature had made everything grand and fair” stands instead (Bird 1982, 2505). At the same time, the adventurer utterly rejects mining, as it “fill[s] the district with noise, hubbub, and smoke by night and day” (Bird 1982, 2497), and she insists that



she “ha[d] turned altogether aside from [it]” (Bird 1982, 2498). Being fully aware of the quick deterioration of the landscape, the traveller also notices that nature is eroded to the point that “the footprints of elk and bighorn may be sought for in vain on the dewy slopes of Estes Park” (Bird 1982, 1303). In that sense, the adventurer’s plea for the traditional agriculture that “restores and beautifies” (2499), in contrast to the mining, which “destroys and devastates” (Bird 1982, 2499) constitutes one of her strongest and most audacious statements in favour of nature. In this sense, Randall Rohe’s description of the damaging effects of the mining’s impact in the Far West is reflected in Bird’s chronicle: water and air pollution, diversion of water, alteration of terrain, erosion, and deforestation (1986, 299-338):

These mines, with their prolonged subterranean workings, their stamping and crushing mills, and the smelting works which have been established near them, fill the district with noise, hubbub, and smoke by night and day ... Agriculture restores and beautifies, mining destroys and devastates, turning the earth inside out, making it hideous, and blighting every green thing, as it usually blights man’s heart and soul. There was mining everywhere along that grand road, with all its destruction and devastation, its digging, burrowing, gulching, and sluicing...All the ledges covered with charred stumps, a picture of desolation, where nature had made everything grand and fair. (Bird 1982, 2177-2182)

The traveller also manifests her concerns about the population. As a matter of fact, land use and ‘development’ make escalate tensions between the population and nature. Afterwards, the heroine goes on to describe the misfortunes experienced by Digger Indians to whom she depicts as “a most impressive incongruity in the midst of the tokens of an omnipotent civilisation” (Bird 1982, 268) and “dying out before the white race” (262). Based on the testimony provided by a Western pioneer about moving on, “as one place after another had become too civilised for him” (Bird 1982, 305), not even those first settlers feel comfortable with the flourishing of ‘modernity’. By contrast, the most remote and unspoiled nature of the mountains, where the mountaineer indulges herself in listening to the lumberer’s axe, is for her a haven of peace, calm and harmony. In that context, the adventurer defines the air of Wyoming and Boulder as “the elixir of life” (Bird 1982, 400, 2440), and that its “air and life are intoxicating” (1409). The loneliness of lake Donner “pleased [her] well,” (Bird 1982, 421), and she confesses that she “soon fell asleep” (775) on a table left up the canyon since “the stillness is profound” (Bird 1982, 635). Meanwhile, in Colorado, the protagonist has “the pleasant feeling of gaining health every hour” (Bird 1982, 1903), a perception that she shares with the avalanche of consumptives, asthmatics, dyspeptics, and sufferers of nervous disorders going on pilgrimage to Colorado. In fact, “statistics and medical workers on the climate of the state represent [it] as the most remarkable sanatorium of the day” (Bird 1982, 3215). In conjunction with “the influence which persistent fine weather exercises on the spirits” (Bird 1982, 2182), the traveller also attributes mineral and medicinal qualities to the waters of Colorado. That is why thousands “come to drink the waters, try the camp cure, and make mountain excursions” (Bird 1982, 2056). It is no wonder that the Victorian traveller feels overjoyed outdoors, on horseback, dressed in her



easy Hawaiian outfit, and sleeping, weather permitting, “under the stars on a bed of pine boughs” (Bird 1982, 1410).

When it comes to the non-human animal nature, on the one hand, complaints about and rejection of violence against animals are a constant feature in Bird’s text. On the other hand, her many expressions of sympathy towards non-human animal nature are no less noticeable. In that regard, it is essential to consider the accuracy of judging the capability of feeling pain, instead of the ability to reason, the key element in guiding human behaviour towards all living beings, that is, sentient beings (Sanz 2015, 302; Anton 2017, 57, 62). Within this framework, the protagonist is fully aware of the catastrophic consequences of the killing of the buffalo by the white men: “maddened by the reckless and useless slaughter of the buffalo, which is their chief subsistence” (Bird 1982, 420). To deal with this injustice, Bird plainly reproduces the threats made by Indians:

The Indians have taken to the ‘war path’, and are burning ranches and killing cattle. There is a regular ‘scare’ among the settlers, and wagon loads of fugitives are arriving in Colorado Springs. The Indians say, “The white man has killed the buffalo and left them to rot on the plains. We will be revenged.” (Bird 1982, 1606)

Loss of biodiversity and the triggering of an unequal and unfair war between natives and white men are at the heart of the passage above. Similarly, the treatment animals are subjected to by humans gives the adventurer great sorrow. Bird defines the system as “one of terrorism” (Bird 1982, 1690), as a result, the calves live obsessed since they are marked until the day they are consigned to the slaughterhouse. However, the main aspect that emerges, probably due to Bird’s own experience, and, therefore, the deep knowledge that she shows on the subject, is the exquisite treatment that horses receive in Colorado. Contrary to British tradition, in America there is no need for a whip. In line with the prevailing degree of respect and worship towards horses, Bird christens her most beloved and loyal Indian pony ‘Birdie’. Bird describes her as “a little beauty, with legs of iron, fast, enduring, gentle, and wise” (Bird 1982, 1803). Before becoming acquainted with her, Bird has ridden other horses to whom she devotes equal respect and consideration: “a blithe, joyous animal” (Bird 1982, 1087) who follows his guardian “without being led” (1088). Bird confesses that hers has been love at first sight:

In addition to the charm of his movements he has the catlike sure-footedness of a Hawaiian horse [...]. I could have ridden him a hundred miles as easily as thirty. We have only been together two days, yet we are firm friends, and thoroughly understand each other. I should not require another companion on a long mountain tour. (Bird 1982, 1089)

By the way it proceeds, the previous excerpt describes the adventurer as though she starred in the Lone Ranger in the American Old West, with a horse as her only company. For lack of female models, Bird simulates male ones. On top of that, due to the fact that animals have not been mistreated, rather trained by the voice, Birds points out that horses “exercise their intelligence for your advantage and



do their work rather as friends than as machines” (Bird 1982, 1094). About Ring, Mountain Jim’s devoted dog, Bird states that he has “a wistful human expression” (Bird 1982, 1256) and that “he is almost human in his intelligence” (1258). Jim subsequently addresses him as though his dog were a human being. Ring is loving and seeks the contact and the strokes of his guardians: “lay on one side of me with his fine head on my arm” (Bird 1982, 1390). Moreover, Ring plays the role of a guardian angel by order of Jim: “Ring, go to that lady, and don’t leave her again to-night” (Bird 1982, 1259). In addition, the proximity and contact with wilderness is not a matter of concern for Bird. She gives an account of the presence of “a snake three feet long” (Bird 1982, 698) and finds that “bears stripped the cherry bushes within a few yards of us last night” (828). Proofs of sympathy show up every now and then “as the horse had become fidgety and ‘scary’ on the track, I turned off in the idea of taking a short cut” (Bird 1982, 348). On another occasion, when Bird watches a female bear with her offspring, she tries to quieten her horse, to avoid frightening them. Similarly, prairie dogs are bestowed with human features:

Acting as sentinels, and sunning themselves. As we passed, each gave a warning yelp, shook its tail, and, with a ludicrous flourish of its hind legs, dived into its hole. The appearance of hundreds of these creatures, each eighteen inches long, sitting like dogs begging, with their paws down and all turned sunwards, is most grotesque. (Bird 1982, 548)

The description above suggests that prairie dogs greet passers-by and take advantage of their situation to protect the land while sunbathing. There is no doubt that each line of Bird’s text exudes admiration and devotion towards all sort of species. She is familiar with them, and she refers to them with a mixture of poetic tenderness and scientific accuracy:

Crested blue-jays darted through the dark pines, squirrels in hundreds scampered through the forest, red dragon-flies flashed like ‘living light’ exquisite chipmunks ran across the track, but only a dusty blue lupin here and there reminded me of earth’s fairer children. (Bird 1982, 366)

Apart from the recurring references to rich and varied wild fauna, the preceding extract highlights the heroine’s deep knowledge of the precise species populating the Rockies. It comes as no surprise that Bird selects two animals as silent companions of the main protagonists. On the one hand, Ring’s role as the usual comrade for solitary beings such as Jim is remarkable. On the other hand, Birdie, the Indian pony, is Bird’s tireless friend. With their companionship, they complement or emphasise the heroes’ features. Bird also shows an ethical concern for the suffering animal: horses, cattle in general, even bears, and, indeed all the species are treated as living, sentient beings, and share the ability and human need of caring and being cared for (Antón 2017).

In this connection, Ruby Wax reminds us that unlike in the Victorian age, where the Planet abounded in wild and remote settings, now it is becoming increasingly more complicated to run away from what constrains us, since



exploitation and supremacy have ended in destroying biodiversity and seriously jeopardizing our near future (2022). To cite one simple example, a busy ski resort for billionaires stands at the very same place where Isabella Bird met her spiritual needs, and her childhood dream materialised.

CONCLUSIONS

In *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains*, as I have tried to demonstrate in the preceding pages, the protagonist epitomises the ideal of a Victorian woman, who despite being attributed with the most genuine virtues of a lady but stimulated by remoteness and inspired by a mountainous landscape, finds the favourable space to negotiate etiquette, visibility, gender roles, and ultimately, contest the powerful idiosyncrasy of the Victorian womanhood.

When it comes to the task of scrutinizing the recurrent trope of the mountain, my paper has illustrated that Isabella Bird makes a metaphorical use of it, since the adventurer takes visual pleasure in a mountainous landscape from a female, white, and heterosexual perspective. And yet, no matter whether the explorer truly entertained an emotional involvement with the desperado trapper because, as this analysis has tried to prove, at the end of the day, it is the author's talent and bravery what counts to fabricate a fascinating story. In light of this, the traveller's testimony seems to be pioneering and courageous for a Victorian lady, not only because her discourse challenges the patriarchal leading gaze on the mountain in the western culture, but because it endows the female heroine with a certain degree of sensual empowerment, calling into question the classical identification of the female body with nature, and the categorization of women in their reproductive role.

Similarly, considering the deterioration of the landscape observed and denounced within this captivating travelogue, my analysis has shown that the author emerges as a dependable herald of the devastating effects of economic growth and human greed. While it is true that Bird's particular attention to and care for nature might not straightforwardly emanate so much from ecological worries but aesthetic ones, it is nonetheless true that rather than a passive activity, by observation, Bird humanizes the landscape through the language of lyrical nature appreciation, emotional connection, and evangelical religion. Additionally, since Bird's sublime taste on landscape is intricately bound to the needs of its 'inhabitants', non-human animals are treated as sentient beings as a means of resisting the surge in dehumanizing landscapes.

Consequently, in no respect should this literary work be simply treated as travel literature when letter writing allowed Bird to go beyond societal as well as narrative boundaries in search of empowerment and environmentalism. If nothing else, we can always hope that literature will show the way forward to redesign our conservation policies and stimulate ethical behaviour in the Anthropocene era.

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