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"NATURAL BEAUTY" IS A 20th CENTURY PHRASE

MAXWELL C. WHEAT, JR.

Consolidated Edison Company's proposal to impose an impressively costly (\$162 million) pumped storage hydro-electric power plant on Storm King Mountain was 200 years late. The project, "thrusting its man-made might into the flanks of the mountain" on the north face where the eye focuses on the most dramatic view of the gateway to the Hudson Highlands, would probably have won a vociferous rumble of approval from the cultural autocrat of the 1700's, Dr. Johnson. He had been "astonished and repelled" by the "wide extent of hopeless sterility"

of the Scottish Highlands. In fact, Samuel Johnson (as described by James Boswell) would have made a vivid witness at hearings for the power plant, "blowing out his breath like a whale, whistling and clucking under the arguments of an opponent" (a conservationist, perhaps), if he rolled out what he said of the Scottish Highlands, "The appearance is that of matter incapable of form or usefulness. . ."

If the prevailing 18th century aversion toward nature could have been conveyed intact across two centuries at the Federal Power Commission's hearings on the power plant construction, no one would have worried about possible scenic values. For the 1700's, "The town, the Court, is Beauty's proper sphere" as they were for Fulvia in Young's "On Women:"

"Green fields, and shady groves, and crystal springs,
And larks, and nightingales, are odious things;
And smoke, and dust, and noise, and crowds, delight,
And to be pressed to death, transports her quite."

The 18th century, chided author Lillian Smith from a 20th century viewpoint, was "a period that shut the door on imagination."

Today, that door has been swung open, but it's not wide enough for all the urbanites and suburbanites to get through as they press upon the Nation's limited scenic resources in escaping the "smoke, and dust, and noise, and crowds." Through the attorneys for the Scenic Hudson Preservation Conference and other conservation organizations, they have pushed open the courtroom doors. December 29, 1965, the U.S. Court of Appeals nullified the FPC approval of Con Ed's project and directed that the Commission "include as a basic concern the preservation of natural beauty."

Could he define "natural beauty," Charles Callison, now executive vice-president of the National Audubon Society, was asked during the rehearings before the FPC. Thus, the rehearings through analytical testimony and sometimes stern cross-examination became a search for some delineation of what Mr. Callison said is "subjective to a considerable extent," and its application to the Hudson at Storm King. "How beautiful is Storm King" was a key question. The answers to all this could have implications for conservation.

Uniqueness was one of Mr. Callison's criteria. He declared that the supremacy of the scenic beauty of the Hudson at Storm King is directly related to a "dominant geological feature of the United States, the Appalachian Mountains." The Hudson Gorge, he explained, "is one of the very few places where the main chain of the Appalachians is broken by a river." He was backed up by the testimony of professional cartographer Richard Eades Harrison, who is also conservation chairman of the Linnaean Society of New York. He expounded on why he thought that "Storm King is uniquely dramatic and, in my opinion, the most scenic of the water gaps of the Eastern United States."

In addition to uniqueness, there also seemed to be involved an imaginative awareness of the processes of nature and an appreciation of the fact that this was not just one isolated piece of scenery but part of a mountain range extending up and down the east and dominating much of the environment. A drive from crowded New York City to view Storm King becomes a much more exciting experience when one is aware of the eons of geological time when the Hudson Highlands were formed and the Hudson waters cut through — an appreciation aided by knowledge deciphered by science and disseminated by education. Perhaps we cannot blame the 18th century lack of imagination when their explanation for mountains was, in the words of Thomas Burnett in his *Theory of the Earth*, “a punishment for sin.” He said the earth once “had the beauty of youth and blooming nature, fresh and fruitful, and not a wrinkle, scar, or fracture in all its body; no rocks nor mountains, no hollow caves, nor gaping channels, but even and uniform all over.”

No one can justify any improvement of the terrain on such theories today. But the 18th century ambition reared itself in the hearings with talk of plans for a bridge, a parking field, an information center, a park with play areas, softball fields, etc. A landscaper arguing for the project was asked;

“Have you ever in your experience found an area which you decided was so beautiful that you didn’t think that you could improve it?”

The answer:

“Personally, I think practically anything can be improved. In my past experience I have not had any area which wasn’t improved or something like that.”

If this were a play with the 20th century confronting the 18th the director would have it costumed differently — the cartographers, geologists, ecologists, biologists and some of the lawyers garbed in ties and cuffed suits, the others moving about in buckled shoes, tights, cloaks and wigs. But for any Dr. Johnsonian type character the dialogue would have to be enriched beyond the short answer given the following question:

“Did you consider, Sir, in developing the plans and the proposals for Storm King Mountain and the related area, that it may be so beautiful that you cannot improve upon it?”

The answer: “No.”

In the Storm King hearings “progress” had clearly become an 18th century word while “natural beauty” has become a 20th century need.

333 Bedell Street, Freeport, N.Y. 11520