

What a Book (or Two) Can Do

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Drawing inspiration (and a title) from Priscilla Coit Murphy's recent study of the publication and reception of Rachel Carson's Silent Spring, this paper offers a critical assessment of the argument and influence of George Perkins Marsh's Man and Nature, published in 1864. Long celebrated as a key work in the study of human-environment relations, as offering a radical new interpretation of society's capacity to alter nature, as the beginning of land wisdom in the United States and as the fountainhead of the conservation movement, Man and Nature holds a revered place in the pantheon of geographical and environmental writing. It was certainly influential. But few have asked where, when, how and why? To do so is to raise a long series of questions: Were its arguments unprecedented? Where did they come from? Where did they go? How did they work? Were they framed in particularly novel and/or compelling ways? What facilitated their dissemination? How did they gain purchase? When and where were they challenged (if at all)? When and where were they most influential? Who supported Marsh's ideas? Who advanced his reputation? Many of these questions speak directly to the relations between knowledge and power. They also echo concerns that are central to scholars (such as Murphy) interested in the history (and future) of the book, and thinking about them here requires close attention to the economic and social conjunctures in which both Marsh and Man and Nature operated. After exploring these questions we turn in conclusion to a brief comparison of the production and reception of Man and Nature with the writing of and reaction to that other great environmental "classic," Silent Spring, published almost exactly a century after Marsh's book, to ponder the effects of context and contingency in shaping an author's capacity to "speak truth to power," and to reflect on the question posed by the distinguished historian Robert Darnton (in Forbidden Best-Sellers of Revolutionary France): "Do Books Cause Revolutions?"