

Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur as Early American Natural History Writer

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ABSTRACT

Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur (1735–1813) is an eighteenth—century American writer who is famous for his *Letters from an American Farmer* and *Sketches of Eighteenth-Century America: More Letters from an American Farmer*. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, most critics regard Crèvecoeur as a patriotic and national writer because his writings frequently celebrate American freedom and prosperity and vehemently portray America as the true Paradise and the American as a veritable Adam.

Completely different from the readings of most critics, this essay will focus its emphasis on Crèvecoeur's effectiveness as a natural history writer. The aim of this paper is to establish Crèvecoeur as a natural history writer and to point out that through his natural historical discourse, Crèvecoeur celebrates his kinship with nonhuman nature and advocates environmental concern, thereby introducing a pattern of ecological thinking and proto-ecological sensibility in American culture. In this way, this essay hopes to refer the readers interested in an alternative view to the writings of Crèvecoeur.

KEY WORDS

Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, natural history writing, ecological thinking, environmental concern, early American natural history writer







I

Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur (1735–1813) is an eighteenth-century American writer. In 1782, Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer* was published and received enthusiastically in Britain, France and America (Skipp 12); it was an immediate success (Baym 657). In addition to *Letters from an American Farmer*, Crèvecoeur also composed another literary text — *Sketches of Eighteenth-Century America: More Letters from an American Farmer*.¹ Crèvecoeur’s works, as most twentieth-century and twenty-first-century critics frequently suggest, project an appealing image of America as an unspoiled agrarian landscape where class distinctions are insignificant and individual effort is richly rewarded. Through his works, Crèvecoeur constructs an archetypal image of the strong, self-reliant, and self-sufficient American farmer; such an image still resonates in popular conceptions of the American Dream.

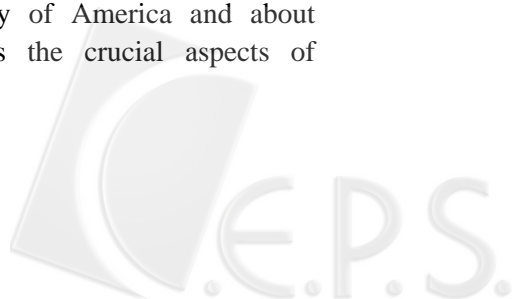
In the twentieth-century literary history of America, Crèvecoeur is generally regarded as a patriotic writer because his works vehemently celebrate American prosperity, shape an ideal image for America, and glorify the notion of the American Adam. In *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923), D. H. Lawrence asserts that Crèvecoeur is “the emotional” “prototype of the American” (29), considering that for most Europeans Crèvecoeur’s works establish a distinctive image for America. In an essay entitled “Michel-Guillaume St. Jean De Crèvecoeur: *Letters from an American Farmer*” (1970), Nye contends that Crèvecoeur’s works mainly explore “the differences between



American and European society” and help to create “the original, self-sufficient, independent Yankee as an American character” (39 and 47). In *A Handbook of American Literature* (1975), Day — another critic — maintains that Crèvecoeur’s works first give “explicit form to the idealistic American image in American literature” (37). In *Columbia Literary History of the United States* (1988), Crèvecoeur’s works are discussed by Elliott in a chapter entitled “Toward a National Literature” (187); in this way, Crèvecoeur is considered a national and patriotic writer in early America.

American literary history of the twenty-first century, most critics still consider that Crèvecoeur’s texts mainly intend to create national consciousness, national image, and national character for America. In *The Literatures of Colonial America: An Anthology* (2001), Castillo contends that Crèvecoeur’s works chiefly intend to articulate “the concept of America” and create national consciousness for America (497). In *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* (2003), Baym states that Crèvecoeur’s works “followed close enough on the American Revolution to satisfy an almost insatiable demand for things American and conformed,” for most readers, “a vision of a new land, rich and promising, where industry prevailed over class” and fashion (657). In *A History of American Literature* (2004), Gray argues that the general thrust of Crèvecoeur’s books is toward “celebration of both the promise and the perfection of America” (74).

On the whole, considering that American literature as the voice of American national consciousness began in 1782 with the publication of Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer*, most of the above-mentioned critics regard Crèvecoeur as a patriotic and national writer because his works primarily intend to answer a crucial question — “What is an American, this new man?” (Crèvecoeur 63). True, Crèvecoeur’s writings frequently portray America as the true Paradise and the American as a veritable Adam. Such an emphasis is understandable, indeed nearly inevitable. Nevertheless, to think of Crèvecoeur as a nineteenth-century patriotic writer who primarily cares about celebrating the freedom, prosperity of America and about defining American character is to miss the crucial aspects of



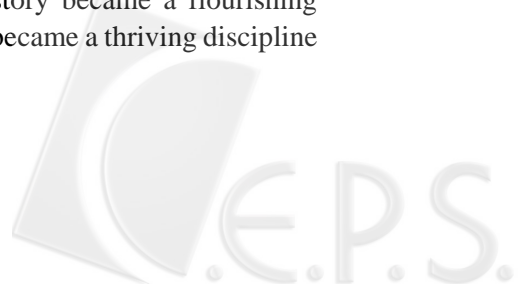
environmental concern and ecological consciousness in his writings.

In effect, Crèvecoeur is not merely a patriotic writer; he is also a natural history writer. Although Crèvecoeur's writings are best known for examining the question of American national identity in such an essay as "What Is an American?" (Letter III), his works are also a detailed study and an exploration of the American natural environment that frequently invokes natural history (Branch, *Reading the Roots* 166). On the whole, Crèvecoeur's works are a comprehensive look at America, constructed around a natural historical core that takes the characteristic forms of the manners-and-customs account and the natural history essay on a single kind of flora and fauna.² Natural history, in other words, is the primary intellectual orientation of *Letters from an American Farmers* and *Sketches of Eighteenth-Century America*. However, the formal and intellectual debt to natural history in Crèvecoeur's writings is rarely acknowledged and analyzed.

Completely different from the readings of most critics in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, this essay will focus its emphasis on Crèvecoeur's effectiveness as a natural history writer. The aim of this paper is to establish Crèvecoeur as a natural history writer and to point out that through his natural historical discourse, Crèvecoeur celebrates his kinship with nonhuman nature and advocates environmental concern, thereby introducing a pattern of ecological thinking and proto-ecological sensibility in American culture. In this way, this essay hopes to refer the readers interested in an alternative view to the writings of Crèvecoeur.

II

In this section, before establishing Crèvecoeur as a natural history writer and before exploring how Crèvecoeur's representations of the relationship between human and nonhuman nature contribute to the ecological awareness in early America,³ I would like to briefly discuss the context and a definition of natural history. In the mid- and late-eighteenth-century Europe, natural history became a flourishing discipline (Johnson and Patterson 3), and it became a thriving discipline



in America around the turn of the nineteenth century (Branch, “Early Romantic” 1059). At that time, natural history as a term was generally used to refer to all descriptive aspects of the study of nature. Natural historians took for their subject matter all of what they called the Creation. Any object within the natural world — such as rocks, mountains, plants, animals, and so on — was a proper subject of natural historical inquiry; only man-made objects lay outside its scope.

Generally speaking, natural history, in the eyes of most eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europeans and Americans, was a broad area of scientific and cultural inquiry circumscribing the present-day disciplines of meteorology, geology, archeology, ethnology, zoology, and botany; it encompassed “the aggregate of facts relating to the natural objects, etc. of a place, or the characteristics of a class of persons or things” (Regis 5). In their activities to explore the world of nature, natural historians (or naturalists or natural history writers) primarily employed two basic procedures: observing and describing. Through these two procedures, natural historians provided people with a way of looking at the natural environment, with a way of describing what they saw, and with an overarching scheme in which to fit what they had seen. Natural history, in short, provided people with method, rhetoric, and context in their detailed study — including observations, perceptions, and descriptions — of the natural world.

Emphasizing objective observations and detailed descriptions of nature, natural history owed much to science, and in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it was regarded as scientific demystification of the natural world (Lyon 20), yet natural history was also viewed as belles letters, for it offered people with methods and rhetoric in their descriptions and representations of the nonhuman beings in nature and it also presented an individual’s perception of the natural environment. In other words, natural history deliberately brought together science and literature (Johnson and Patterson 3);⁴ it was viewed as both science and belles letters (Branch, “Early Romantic” 1059).

In this paper, I would like to read Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer* and *Sketches of Eighteenth-Century America* based on the tenets of natural history. In the following section, I shall examine



how Crèvecoeur, as a farmer and explorer of North America, applies the natural historical method to observe and record basic information about the natural productions in the territory he lives: the weather, the climate, the rivers, soils, plants, animals, insects, and so forth.

III

Although Crèvecoeur's importance as a patriotic author has been widely acknowledged, his talent and significance as a natural history writer has been overlooked. In effect, many of Crèvecoeur's important achievements were in the field of natural history: he promoted Franco-American seed exchange and was responsible for introducing several new plants to the republic (Regis 110–11); he helped found botanical gardens in Connecticut and New Jersey; his invaluable contributions on American natural history informed the French *Encyclopédie* (1751–1772) article on the United States; and, in recognition of his contributions to natural science, he was made a member of the French Academy of Sciences and the American Philosophical Society (Branch, "Early Romantic" 1065). What is more, Crèvecoeur was also honored by election to the Royal Agricultural Society and the Society of Agriculture, Sciences, and Arts at Meaux (Regis 112).

As an ardent natural historian, Crèvecoeur was in contact with the natural history circles in both France and America. After the publication of *Letters from an American Farmer* in 1782, Crèvecoeur returned to France, and his friends took him to meet Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon (1707–1788),⁵ whose works he had widely read and highly admired (Regis 112). In America, Crèvecoeur also made contact with the members of the natural history circle, such as Thomas Jefferson.⁶ In 1785, Crèvecoeur wrote a letter to Jefferson, his one-time neighbor in New York, thanking Jefferson for giving him helpful advice about plants (Regis 112). In addition, Crèvecoeur knew the Bartrams — both John Bartram (1699–1777) and William Bartram (1739–1823) — as well (Regis 112). To express his great admiration for John Bartram, father of William Bartram and one of America's earliest



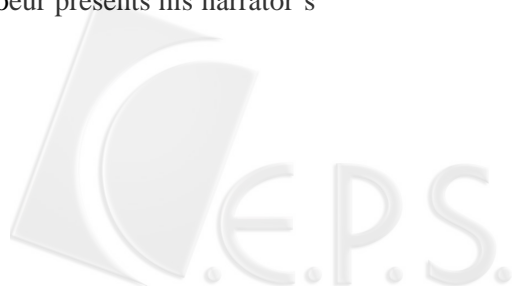
and most accomplished nature historians, Crèvecoeur spent the length of a whole chapter in *Letters from an American Farmer* — Letter XI — to discuss John Bartram and describe a visit to John and William Bartram’s botanical garden outside Philadelphia.⁷

In effect, within the textual world of *Letters from an American Farmer*, the privileging of natural history is most important in Crèvecoeur’s adulation of John Bartram — the widely recognized colonial botanist and natural historian — in Letter XI. Letter XI is devoted completely to the visit of the chapter’s narrator to John Bartram’s famous botanical garden outside Philadelphia. In this letter (Letter XI in *Letters from an American Farmer*), Crèvecoeur shapes Bartram into a successful American natural historian and suggests that Bartram’s secret to success is inscribed over the door of a greenhouse in his botanical garden:

Slave to no sect, who takes no private road,
But looks through nature, up to nature’s God! (185)

Believing that men should “look through nature,” Bartram, suggests Crèvecoeur in Letter XI, is enthusiastic about making a record of the “curious plants and trees” in the world of nature (188), devotes his time, energy, and life to the scientific investigation of botany in his own botanical garden, and consequently becomes a “celebrated Pennsylvanian botanist” and a distinguished natural historian in colonial America (181).

In addition to Letter XI, the second letter of *Letters from an American Farmer*, “On the Situation, Feelings, and Pleasures of an American Farmer,” is one typical example of Crèvecoeur’s natural history essay as well. In this letter, the narrator’s (James’s) curiosity and powers of observation lead to questions about the formation of frost, the social intelligence of honeybees, the mating rituals and migration patterns of birds, the life cycles of trees, the nests of insects, and the nests of wasps. In the following paragraph (selected from Letter II in *Letters from an American Farmer*), Crèvecoeur presents his narrator’s careful observation of the nests of wasps:



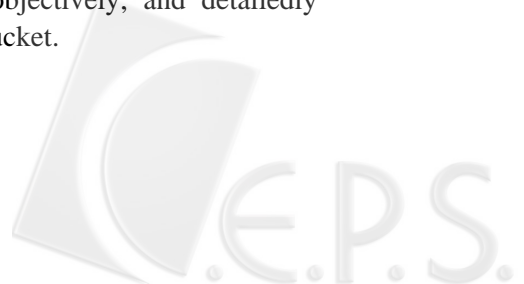
. . . most of them [wasps] build their nests in mud, which they fix against the shingles of our roofs as nigh the pitch as they can. These aggregates represent nothing, at first view, but coarse and irregular lumps; but if you break them, you will observe that the inside of them contains a great number of oblong cells, in which they deposit their eggs and in which they bury themselves in the fall of the year. Thus immured, they securely pass through the severity of that season, and on the return of the sun, are enabled to perforate their cells and to open themselves a passage from these recesses into the sunshine. (58)

In these lines, Crèvecoeur offers readers the objective facts relating to the nests of wasps “in mud” (58), and presents his narrator’s close observation and detailed description of the wasps’ cells, thereby establishing himself as an early natural history writer in America.

In *Letters from an American Farmer*, Letter IV — “Description of the Island of Nantucket, with the Manners, Customs, Policy, and Trade of the Inhabitants” — is also another typical example of Crèvecoeur’s natural history writing. In this letter, before giving manners-and-customs account of the people of Nantucket, Crèvecoeur’s narrator offers a detailed description of the Island’s location to readers:

The Island of Nantucket lies in . . . 60 miles N. E. from Cape Cod; 27 N. from Hyannis, or Barnstable, a town on the most contiguous part of the great peninsula; 21 miles W. by N. from Cape Poge, on the vineyard; 50 W. by N. from Woods Hole, on Elizabeth Island; 80 miles N. from Boston; 120 from Rhode Island; 800 S. from Bermuda. (104)

The incorrectness of this description notwithstanding, the method here is natural historical. In these lines, Crèvecoeur’s narrator employs the method of natural history to carefully, objectively, and detailedly represent the location of the Island of Nantucket.



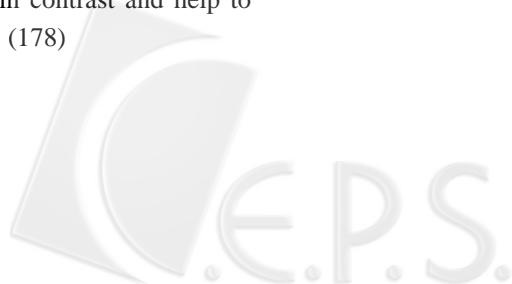
In Letter IV, Crèvecoeur's narrator employs a series of natural historical descriptions to represent the plant productions on the Island of Nantucket as well. The narrator objectively describes the island's plant productions:

It appears to be the uneven summit of a sandy submarine mountain, covered here and there with sorrel, grass, a few cedar bushes, and scrubby oaks; their swamps are much more valuable for the peat they contain than for the trifling pasture of their surface; those declining grounds which lead to the sea-shores abound with beach grass, a light fodder when cut and cured, but very good when fed green. (108)

With all the zeal — and the objectivity — of a natural historian, Crèvecoeur's narrator describes the plant productions of the Island of Nantucket (such as “sorrel, grass,” “cedar bushes,” “scrubby oaks”), the docks, the gardens, the community ropewalk, and the common meadow (Crèvecoeur 108). All of this description is couched in the impersonal historical present dictated by the rhetoric of natural history.

What is more, Crèvecoeur's natural historical descriptions and subjects occupy Letter X, “On Snakes: and on the Humming-Bird,”⁸ in *Letters from an American Farmer*, too. In Letter X, Crèvecoeur's description of the hummingbird includes details that are rendered with objective, orderly observation:

From this simple grove I have amused myself a hundred times in observing the great number of humming-birds with which our country abounds: the wild blossoms everywhere attract the attention of these birds, which like bees subsist by suction. From this retreat I distinctly watch them in all their various attitudes, but their flight is so rapid that you cannot distinguish the motion of their wings. On this little bird Nature has profusely lavished her most splendid colours; the most perfect azure, the most beautiful gold, the most dazzling red, are forever in contrast and help to embellish the plumes of his majestic head. (178)



The mode of presentation here is natural historical and the rhetoric recognizably objective. In these lines, the careful description of humming-birds' "splendid colours" is couched in the detailed, descriptive prose of natural historical discipline (Crèvecoeur 178).

In addition to *Letters from an American Farmer*, *Sketches of Eighteenth-Century America: More Letters from an American Farmer* is Crèvecoeur's natural historical writing as well. In this book, the very first paragraph of Chapter One — "A Snow Storm as It Affects the American Farmer" — evinces a command of natural historical subjects and descriptions:

No man of the least degree of sensibility can journey through any number of years in whatever climate without often being compelled to make useful observations on the different phenomena of Nature which surround him and without involuntarily being struck either with awe or admiration in beholding some of the elementary conflicts in the midst of which he lives. A great thunder-storm; an extensive flood, a desolating hurricane, a sudden and intense frost, an overwhelming snow-storm, a sultry day — each of these different scenes exhibits singular beauties even in spite of the damage they cause. (231)

In this passage, there exists some emotional presence; however, the predominant mode of presentation here is natural historical. Presenting his close and "useful observations on the different phenomena of Nature" in these lines, Crèvecoeur describes various climates of the land he lives in, records the "singular beauties" of these diverse climates, and in this way writes natural history for late-eighteenth-century America (Crèvecoeur 231).

IV

In his natural historical writings — *Letters from an American Farmer* and *Sketches of Eighteenth-Century America: More Letters from an American Farmer*, Crèvecoeur frequently celebrates his

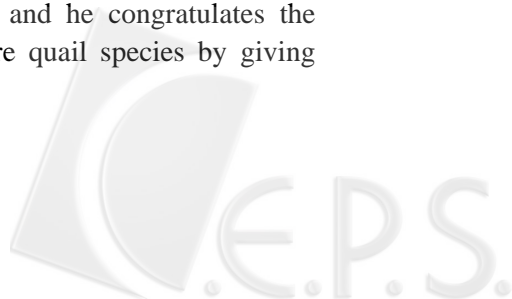


kinship with nonhuman nature and advocates environmental concern, thereby introducing a pattern of environmental awareness and proto-ecological thinking for late-eighteenth-century and early-nineteenth-century America. In *Letters from an American Farmer*, for instance, Crèvecoeur's narrator pays close attention to the squirrels, birds, wasps, bees, gnats, and many other tiny inhabitants of his farm; however, he does more than pay attention — he delights in them and views them as co-inhabitants. In a chapter entitled “On Snakes; And on the Humming Bird” (Letter X in *Letters from an American Farmer*), Crèvecoeur's narrator praises the ruby-throated hummingbird:

The richest palette of the most luxuriant painter, could never invent anything to be compared to the variegated tints, with which this insect bird is arrayed. . . . When fatigued, it has often perched within a few feet of me, and on such favorable opportunities I have surveyed it with the most minute attention. Its little eyes appear like diamonds, reflecting light on every side: most elegantly finished in all parts, it is a miniature work of our Great Parent, who seems to have formed it the smallest, and at the same time the most beautiful of the winged species. (178)

In these lines, the natural historical description of the hummingbird includes details that do not merely suggest the narrator's sense of kinship and membership in the natural community, but also are rendered with admiration, approval, and a feeling of great liking for the species in nonhuman nature.

When considering Crèvecoeur's approach to natural history, we should notice that his narrator's proximity to nature and sense of membership in the natural community demonstrate a kind of genuine environmental concern. In the second letter of *Letters from an American Farmer* (“On the Situation, Feeling, and Pleasures of an American Farmer”), the narrator's respect for nature manifests itself primarily in his love for animals, both domestic and wild. He shares his food with quail during freezing weather, and he congratulates the compassionate farmer who saves the entire quail species by giving

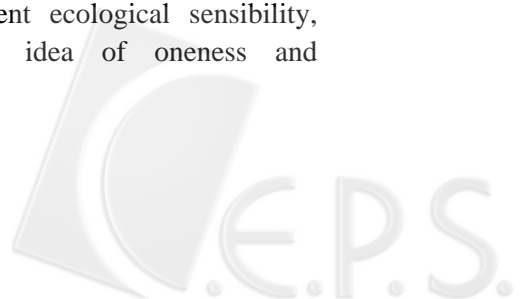


sanctuary to the remnants of the population during an unusually hard winter. He builds shelters for songbirds and honeybees, and he celebrates animal “intelligence” at every turn:

The whole economy of what we proudly call the brute creation, is admirable in every circumstance; and vain man, though adorned with the additional gift of reason, might learn from the perfection of instinct, how to regulate the follies, and how to temper the errors which the second gift often makes him commit. (56)

In the above-quoted passage, Crèvecoeur suggests two “ecological principles.” Firstly, though man is “adorned with the additional gift of reason” (Crèvecoeur 56), he ought to accept himself as a modest and humble member of nature’s community. In other words, man should cease to believe that he is the center of creation. Second, man should learn to admire and respect “the brute creation” and all non-human members in the natural world (Crèvecoeur 56). In effect, throughout *Letters from an American Farmer* and *Sketches of Eighteenth-Century America*, the narrator’s concern for nature manifests itself primarily in his love and respect for animals and insects, such as blackbirds, squirrels, turtles, wasps, and bees. In the second letter of *Letters from an American Farmer*, for another instance, Crèvecoeur’s narrator celebrates “the sagacity” of animals: “the sagacity of those animals which have long been the tenants of my farm astonish me; some of them seem to surpass even men in memory and sagacity” (49). In this letter, Crèvecoeur’s narrator even claims that the bees in his farm attract his “attention and respect” (49). Simply stated, Crèvecoeur’s narrator approaches the natural world with an attitude of respect and reverence;⁹ this sense of reverence demonstrates an incipient environmental concern — a concern that is essential to the work of most later nature writers.

In addition to celebrating men’s sense of membership and sense of reverence toward nonhuman nature, Crèvecoeur’s literary brand of natural history often displays an incipient ecological sensibility, especially in its emphasis upon the idea of oneness and



interconnectedness. In a chapter entitled “Thoughts of an American Farmer on Various Rural Subjects” in *Sketches of Eighteenth-Century America*, Crèvecoeur displays his environmental awareness and proto-ecological sensitivity:

When the floods rise on our low grounds, the mice quit their burrows and come to our stacks of grain . . . There, secured from danger, they find a habitation replenished with all they want. I must not, however, be murmuring and ungrateful. If Nature has formed mice, she has created also the fox and the owl. They both prey on these. Were it not for their kind assistance, [the mice] would drive us out of our farms.

Thus one species of evil is balanced by another; thus the fury of one element is repressed by the power of the other. In the midst of this great, this astonishing equipoise, Man struggles and lives. (297)

What these lines reveal is the totality of creation existed in undisturbed harmony. Claiming that “Man struggles and lives” at the end of this quoted passage (297), Crèvecoeur suggests that humankind is only one among many natural kinds existing within an interrelated and interconnected community of life on earth; in this way, Crèvecoeur presents his sensitivity to environmental processes and ecological interrelationships

What is more, Crèvecoeur in his natural history writings often laments men’s ruthless destruction of animals (such as blackbirds, squirrels, beavers, and so forth) and strongly denounces the brutality of man — the “huge monster” in the world of nature (Crèvecoeur 294). In a chapter entitled “Thoughts of an American Farmer on Various Rural Subjects” in *Sketches of Eighteenth-Century America*, Crèvecoeur poignantly portrays men’s relentless destruction of the beavers in America:

The beavers are the philosophers of the animals; the gentlest, the most humble, the most harmless. Yet brutal Man kills them. I was



once a witness to the destruction of one of their associated confederacies. I saw many of them shed tears, and I wept also; nor am I ashamed to confess it. (301)

On the one hand, these lines displays Crèvecoeur's poignant environmental awareness that through natural history writing, he is documenting aspects of the wild animals before their inexorable loss; on the other hand, these lines also fully reveal Crèvecoeur's sympathetic attitude toward non-human nature, especially the beavers — “the philosophers of the animals” (Crèvecoeur 301). In addition, what these lines portray is the brutality, egotism, and arrogance of men. Repudiating men's arrogance, Crèvecoeur finds humans' brutal treatment of beavers loathsome and abhorrent.

To repudiate the brutality and arrogance of men, Crèvecoeur's natural historical discourse proposes the prophetic and revolutionary idea that non-human nature has the right to exist. In the fourth chapter of *Sketches of Eighteenth-Century America*, stating that in order to prevent the blackbirds from eating men's grains and crops, American farmers sometimes poison corn to kill the blackbirds; Crèvecoeur criticizes the cruelty, arrogance, and selfishness of men and asserts that blackbirds have the right “to live” (293):

But after all the efforts of our selfishness, are they [blackbirds] not the children of the great Creator as well as we? They are entitled to live and to get their food wherever they can get it. We can better afford to lose a little corn than any other grain because it yields above seventy for one. But Man is a huge monster who devours everything and will suffer nothing to live in peace in his neighborhood. (293–94)

Claiming that blackbirds “are entitled to live and to get their food wherever they can get it” in this passage (293–94), Crèvecoeur completely rejects the arrogant view of his utilitarian contemporaries who saw non-human nature only as natural resources for men's use. Also, the first sentence of this passage — “are they [blackbirds] not the



children of the great Creator as well as we?” (Crèvecoeur 293) — is a rhetorical question; it suggests the equal worth of all creatures and it emphasizes that man should accept himself as an equal and humble member of Nature’s community, thereby introducing into American letters the notion of bio-centric equality.

In his natural history writings, Crèvecoeur describes land abuse and criticizes the deforestation that accompanies the establishment of an agrarian society, too. In “Thoughts of an American Farmer on Various Rural Subjects” (Chapter IV in *Sketches of Eighteenth-Century America*), Crèvecoeur poignantly describes watershed abuse:

I could show you in this country the ruins of eleven grist-mills, which twenty years ago had plenty of water but now stand on the dry ground with no other marks of running water about them than the ancient bed of the creek, on the shores of which they had been erected. This effect does not surprise me. Our ancient woods kept the earth moist and damp, and the sun could evaporate none of the waters contained within their shades. Who knows how far these effects may extend? (285)

Obviously, Crèvecoeur sees the necessity of “ancient woods” and primitive forests (285); these lines reveal Crèvecoeur’s keen attention to the issues of environmental sustainability. Asserting that “Our ancient woods kept the earth moist and damp, and the sun could evaporate none of the waters contained within their shades,” Crèvecoeur presciently and prophetically suggests the significance of forest protection (Crèvecoeur 285). This proposal for forest protection in Crèvecoeur’s natural historical discourse would eventually be realized by Gifford Pinchot (1865–1946) -- “the father of American Forestry and the Forest Service” (LaLonde 162),¹⁰ but not until one hundred years later, with the establishment of the US Forest Service in 1905.

What is more, the last sentence of the above-quoted passage — “Who knows how far these effects may extend” (Crèvecoeur 285) — is a rhetorical question;¹¹ it shows that Crèvecoeur’s narrator is well



aware of the changes abroad in the land. While most critics and readers know that Crèvecoeur frequently celebrates the prosperity and inexhaustibility of the American land, few critics know that Crèvecoeur is also a natural history writer who objectively portrays that American environment and mourns its destruction. The last sentence of the quoted paragraph is a dark-side echo to Crèvecoeur's upbeat and best-known rhetorical question, "Who can tell how far it [North America] extends?" in the much-anthologized essay, "What Is an American?" (88). Speaking for the need of protecting "the ancient woods" in America (Crèvecoeur 285), Crèvecoeur's natural historical discourse documents the American natural environment and expresses concern regarding its critical endangerment by human development.

V

Today, Crèvecoeur is frequently remembered as a patriotic writer and he continues to be remembered only as the author of such essay as "What Is an American?" Defining Crèvecoeur as a national and patriotic writer who primarily cares about celebrating the freedom, prosperity of America and about defining American character, literary history ignores the fact that Crèvecoeur is also a natural history writer who observes and describes American geography, climates, plants, animals, and insects in loving detail and who espouses an attitude of environmental concern and ecological awareness.

Crèvecoeur's natural historical discourse — his close observation, detailed study and careful description of nature — in *Letters from an American Farmer* and *Sketches of Eighteenth-Century America: More Letters from an American Farmer* helps initiate a tradition of environmental concern into American intellectual history. Through celebrating men's sense of membership and sense of reverence toward nonhuman nature, lamenting men's ruthless destruction of animals and denouncing the brutality of man, proposing the prophetic idea that non-human nature has the right to exist, and suggesting the significance of forest protection, Crèvecoeur's natural history writings do not merely lead toward an ecological understanding of the world of nature,



but also cultivate a new ethical sensitivity to nonhuman nature. In this way, Crèvecoeur introduces a pattern of proto-environmental ethics and ecological thinking for late-eighteenth-century and early-nineteenth-century American culture. Crèvecoeur is unquestionably an early American natural history writer.

NOTES

¹ Though the essays in *Sketches of Eighteenth-Century America, More Letters from an American Farmer* were published together in the twentieth century, these essays were all written between 1770 and 1778 (Lyon 33).

² In *Letters from an American Farmer*, Letters IV through IX, for instance, are manners-and-customs accounts that describe the inhabitants of Nantucket, Martha's Vineyard, and Charles Town. Letter X, a natural history essay, describes New World snakes and hummingbirds. In the third section of this paper, I shall discuss some passages in Letter IV and Letter X.

³ In the next section (the third section) of this essay, I shall establish Crèvecoeur as a natural history writer; in the fourth section, I will explore how Crèvecoeur's representations of the relationship between human and nonhuman nature in his natural history writings contribute to the ecological awareness in early America.

⁴ In an essay entitled "Writing about Nature in Early America: From Discovery to 1850," Johnson and Patterson define nature history writings as "texts in which authors, in representing the natural world in language, deliberately bring together science and literature, and description and meditation, in order to effect some artful end" (3).

⁵ As court naturalist to Louis XV, Comte de Buffon was the premier natural historian of the eighteenth century (Branch, "Early Romantic" 1066). The forty-four volumes of Buffon's *Histoire naturelle générale et particulière* (1787–1804) gave him nearly unassailable authority in the field of natural history.

⁶ Published two years after his friend Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*, Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787) was a significant contribution to American natural history writing in the Revolutionary period. *Notes on the State of Virginia* distinguished Jefferson as



a man well versed not merely in architecture, law, political philosophy, and statesmanship but also in the field of natural history.

⁷ In Letter XI of *Letters from an American Farmer*, Crèvecoeur calls John Bartram “the first botanist” in America (181).

In this paper, the following paragraph of this section will briefly discuss Letter XI.

⁸ In *Letters from an American Farmer*, Letter X, “On Snakes: and on the Humming-Bird,” is two natural history essays, one on hummingbirds imbedded within an essay on snakes.

⁹ In *Letters from an American Farmer*, Crèvecoeur approaches the natural world with reverence and respect, as a living testament of the Creator; indeed, the American farmer avers this natural divinity with the acknowledgement that “I know no other landlord than the lord of all land, to whom I owe the most sincere gratitude” (46).

¹⁰ Gifford Pinchot was the first American to choose forestry as a career (Nash 73). Also, he was “the first chief of the USDA Forest Service and an architect of the early conservation movement” (Miller and Sample xi).

¹¹ Today, conservation biologists have set themselves the task of answering this rhetorical question -- “Who knows how far these effects may extend?” (Crèvecoeur 285). One effect of cutting the last of the nation’s ancient woods and forests, these conservation biologists allege in trepidation, is to effect global warming and to hasten extinction rates.

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克瑞弗克爾：一位早期的美國自然史作家

摘要

在美國十八世紀末與十九世紀初這個世紀交替的時空下，克瑞弗克爾廣被認為是最負盛名的作家之一，他的代表作《來自一位美國農夫的書信》在十九世紀末問世後深受歡迎。在二十世紀以降的美國文學選集中，大多數的批評家選擇收錄《來自一位美國農夫的書信》裡的第三封信——〈何謂美國人〉，藉由此信將克瑞弗克爾定位為一個歌頌美國繁榮前景、探討美國性、以及定義美國民族性格的愛國作家。

本文完全不同上述解讀。此文試圖指出，克瑞弗克爾不只是一位定義美國人這個「新人類」的愛國作家，他其實更是一位自然史作家，而他的作品乃是典型的自然史文本。透過其自然史書寫，克瑞弗克爾不但為美國的大地風貌及物種做了詳實的觀察與紀錄，同時亦呈現了他對自然萬物的肯定與關切態度，進而為美國引進一套早期的生態思維與環境關懷意識。

關鍵字：克瑞弗克爾、自然史書寫、生態思維、環境關懷、美國早期自然史作家

