

Madison Grant and the Dark Side of the Conservation Movement

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ABSTRACT: James B. Wheeler, a career Park Ranger/Interpreter with the National Park Service and interpreter in North Coast Redwoods State Parks, wrote a letter before retiring in 2017 to his superiors and other Parks employees about Madison Grant's history, positive and negative. He asked for an adjustment to the stories told by the Prairie Creek memorial to Grant and the Founders Tree monument. His plea went unheard at the time, but it is central to the victory for historical truth and human decency that was achieved in more recent years. It is included here in its entirety as a necessary historical document (lightly edited for clarity and grammatical consistency).

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“This is a practical, merciful, and inevitable solution of the whole problem, and can be applied to an ever widening circle of social discards, beginning always with the criminal, the diseased, and the insane, and extending gradually to types which may be called weaklings rather than defectives, and perhaps ultimately to worthless race types.” Thus wrote Madison Grant, on using eugenic sterilization practices to save the “Nordic race” in America, in his anti-immigrant screed, *The Passing of the Great Race*, in 1916.¹

Madison Grant was one of the most prolific and influential conservationists and preservationists of the late 1800s and early 1900s. He was also the synthesizer of American “scientific” racism, cherry picking theories from the budding sciences of biology, anthropology, and genetics, and construed facts of history to fit his conclusion that northwestern Europeans (the “Nordic race”) are rightfully the master race.

Madison Grant was born in 1865 in New York City, an independently wealthy descendant of colonists who arrived in America in the 1630s. As a wealthy graduate

¹ Madison Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race; or The Racial Basis of European History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916): 46.

of Yale, with a law degree from Columbia University, he was part of the elite class of American society. As a “gentleman” conservationist, Grant became increasingly involved in conservation issues, starting the New York Zoological Society with Henry Fairfield Osborn, and eventually leading the Bronx Zoo and the New York Aquarium. As a big game hunter, he was invited by Teddy Roosevelt to be an early member of the Boone and Crockett Club. Through connections at the club and as a member of the privileged class, he was able to organize conservation groups and write legislation, which passed through Congress during the so-called Progressive Era of the Gilded Age. Laws such as the Alaska Game Bill, the No-Sale-of-Game Law, which put an end to market hunting, and the Migratory Bird Law were largely written by Grant. They insured that at least some North American wildlife would be protected and be available for Grant and his friends to hunt.²

Eventually Grant became a preservationist and was instrumental in creating both Glacier and Denali National Parks. His ideas helped to establish the “public domain” as we know it today, including national parks, national forests, state parks, and state and federal wildlife and game refuges. As the founder of the American Bison Society, he is largely responsible for saving the American bison from extinction. He later worked to save the last herds of American pronghorn, spending some of his own money to create the Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge in Nevada. Grant was also involved in international conservation efforts to establish refuges for the European bison (Wisent) and the elephant seals on Guadalupe Island in Mexico. He helped to establish Kruger National Park in South Africa and the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling. As a preservationist, Grant sided with John Muir in the fight to save Hetch Hetchy Valley in Yosemite, and differed with Gifford Pinchot because Grant wanted our national forests to be inviolate reserves for wildlife and water. He was also one of the first conservationists to understand the importance of predators in the natural balance of ecosystems, predating Aldo Leopold and the science of ecology. In 1918, Grant, his lifelong friend Henry Fairfield Osborne, and paleontology professor John C. Merriam, of UC Berkeley, founded the Save-the-Redwoods League (SRL).³

As a gentleman (amateur) “scientist” who dabbled in the new disciplines of zoology and anthropology, and born not long after Charles Darwin published *The Origin of Species*, Grant, like many of his contemporaries assumed that his own “race” of humans, northwestern Europeans (“*Homo europeas*”) as he called them, were the apex of human evolution, because they were the aristocrats of their society, just as he saw the tall coast redwoods at the apex of plant evolution. As Spiro states, “There can be little doubt that Grant identified the redwood trees with the Nordic race . . . In Grant’s mind, the redwoods . . . joined all the other embattled

² Jonathan Peter Spiro, *Patrician Racist: The Evolution of Madison Grant* (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2000). A revised version of the dissertation has since been published as *Defending the Master Race: Conservation, Eugenics, and the Legacy of Madison Grant* (Burlington: University of Vermont Press, 2008): 26–28. Notes are to the 2008 book except where otherwise noted.

³ Spiro, *Master Race*, 266–93.

native species of north America as being metonymous with himself, and, by extension, with the Nordic race.” His was a world of immutable types in which every genus had an ultimate type, and all other forms of that genus were considered degenerate. For instance, moose, elk and caribou were at the apex of deer evolution, and all other species of deer below them were degenerate forms.⁴

Madison Grant was the ultimate “splitter” among zoologists of his time. What most zoologists considered being regional variations among species, or races, were considered to be different species by Grant, including human beings. In Grant’s world, all races of human beings are species and are believed to be less evolved than northwestern Europeans, who he believed were the superior founders of all worthwhile civilizations in the past and at the apex of human evolution. Like many social Darwinists, he saw history as a struggle between the races. The cause of the fall of Greece and Rome, in Grant’s contorted history, was the “miscegenation” that occurred between the Nordic Roman and Greek conquerors and the peasant Mediterraneans, leading to a dilution of the superior Nordic blood. According to Grant, this inferior mix eventually led to the inability of Greeks and Romans to govern themselves (as he believed about most human races), leading to their downfall. By the early 1900s, the influx of southern and eastern European immigrants into the United States became increasingly alarming to Grant and his associates, who felt that their pure “Nordic” and “native American” bloodlines were threatened by the invasion of “Mediterraneans” and “Alpines,” the other species of humans from Europe, and particularly by eastern European Jews, whom he considered to be sub-human, as he did Africans. Note that Grant considered the “Nordic American” to be the true “native American” by right of conquest. In addition, America already had a huge problem of its own making in the form of Black Americans, Native American Indians, and immigrating Mexicans, whom he considered to be the worst of all because they were already “mongrels.”⁵

In 1916, Grant published through Scribner & Sons his manifesto of “scientific” racism, *The Passing of the Great Race*, in which he synthesized the racialist thinking of several of his predecessors and contemporaries from Europe and the United States, such as Francis Galton, Georges Vacher de Lapouge, Houston Stewart Chamberlain, Charles Davenport, and William Z. Ripley. In this book Grant raised the alarm that “Nordic” white Americans were imminently threatened with extinction because of immigration of the peasant class from central and southern Europe, and the brown and black hordes within their midst. It was an immediate success in a time when many rich white Americans were increasingly fearful of domestic minorities and the collapse of colonialism around the world.

From Grant’s perspective, all of the world’s people are rightfully “servient,” as he put it, to the master Nordic race. In his book he predicts that the spread of scientific literacy will lead us to discard “the shackles of former false viewpoints”

4 Spiro, *Patrician Racist*, 665; Spiro, *Master Race*, 272.

5 Spiro, *Master Race*, 242–44.

and to understand the “basic truth” that “inequality and not equality is the law of nature.” “The basis of the government of man is now and always has been, and always will be, force and not sentiment.” Once our ill-conceived democracy is disposed of and power returned to American aristocrats “to supply brains for the unthinking mass of the community,” then a program of eugenics can be instituted to attack the crisis of America’s racial “suicide” on three fronts. First, birth control should be legalized to reduce the number of children created by “the undesirable classes.” Second, anti-miscegenation laws should be passed and steps taken, such as the Jim Crow laws, to segregate the races. And third, sterilization should be instituted on a massive scale, so that inferior types will be “deprived of the capacity to procreate their defective strain.” As a first step, Grant proposed the immediate sterilization of what he calls “the least desirable . . . ten percent of the community.” “When this unemployed and unemployable human residuum has been eliminated, together with the great mass of crime, poverty, alcoholism, and feeble-mindedness associated therewith, it would be easy to consider the advisability of further restricting the perpetuation of the then remaining least valuable types.” Grant suggests America will have to turn a deaf ear to the proponents of social uplift, whose “mistaken regard for what are believed to be divine laws and a sentimental belief in the sanctity of human life” make them oppose “both the elimination of defective infants and the sterilization of such adults as are themselves of no value to the community.” Grant concluded his book with an oft-quoted paragraph on modern extreme right-wing and neo-Nazi websites, warning his fellow white Americans of the dangers posed by continued immigration, egalitarianism, and “sentimentalism” (empathy):

We Americans must realize that the altruistic ideals which have controlled our social development through the last century, and the maudlin sentimentalism that has made America “an asylum for the oppressed,” are sweeping the nation toward a racial abyss. If the Melting Pot is allowed to boil without control, and we continue to follow our national motto and deliberately blind ourselves to all “distinctions of race, creed, and color,” the type of native American of Colonial descent will become as extinct as the Athenian in the age of Pericles, and the Viking in the days of Rollo.⁶

In his book, Madison Grant combined a rewriting of European history with pseudo-scientific racism and the concept of applied eugenics as a method to perpetuate the master race. He essentially solidified proto-fascist social philosophy here in the United States before it was put into practice a little over a decade later with the rise of National Socialism in Germany. In fact, Grant received a letter from Adolf Hitler himself in 1933 referring to Grant’s book as his “Bible.”⁷ Perhaps it is no coincidence that Grant’s book was published less than a year after D. W. Griffith’s

⁶ Grant, *Passing*, 263; Spiro, *Master Race*, 234–65.

⁷ Spiro, *Master Race*, 357.

movie *Birth of a Nation* was released, which was based on Thomas Dixon Jr.'s 1905 novel *The Clansman*—a rewriting of the history of the Civil War that glorified the cause of the Confederacy.⁸ Grant's book and Griffith's movie were highly popular during the 1920s and 30s, a time when the domestic terrorist organization known as the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) enjoyed its highest membership and employed lynching to terrorize people of color and Jim Crow laws to maintain segregation nationally. These methods continued to be used until at least the early 1960s—one-hundred years after the Civil War ended.

As right-wing social activists and Gilded Age Progressives, Madison Grant, Henry Fairfield Osborne, and John C. Merriam were also founding members of the American Eugenics Society (AES). In fact, because the two organizations shared so many members, John C. Merriam scheduled Save-the-Redwoods League and AES meetings to occur on the same weekend, on either the East or West Coasts for many years. The work of this group included getting thirty-two states to pass compulsory sterilization legislation for individuals deemed unworthy of procreation, starting in 1907. From 1909 until the 1960s, at least 60,000 people, mostly of color, were sterilized under these laws. Since 1973, the AES has been called the Society for the Study of Social Biology, and along with publications and organizations such as the *Occidental Quarterly*, *Mankind Quarterly*, the Pioneer Fund, and others, is an organization that is still funding research and publishing articles aimed at proving biological differences in capability between the races. Other right-wing organizations Grant participated in were the American Defense Society, American Coalition, American Prison Society, Aristogenic Association, Citizen's Committee on Immigration Legislation, Eugenics Committee of the USA, Eugenics Research Association, Galton Society for the Study of the Origin and Evolution of Man, Immigration Restriction League, International Commission on Eugenics, Military Order of the Loyal Legion, and the Society of Colonial Wars.⁹

Grant's second book, *The Conquest of a Continent; or, The Expansion of Races in America*, 1933, was largely ignored by the public and academics. In his later years he suffered from a crippling form of arthritis, and he died in 1937.¹⁰

In the spring of 2000, Jonathan P. Spiro completed the first academic study about Madison Grant, "Patrician Racist: The Evolution of Madison Grant," a UC Berkeley dissertation for a PhD in History. Perhaps this and the book that followed, *Defending the Master Race: Conservation, Eugenics, and the Legacy of Madison Grant*, are the only things written about Grant because his family apparently destroyed all of his personal papers after he died. In Chapter 18 of the dissertation, "Saving the Redwoods," Spiro states:

⁸ Thomas Dixon, *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1905); *The Birth of a Nation*, dir. D. W. Griffith (Epoch Producing Corp., 1915).

⁹ Spiro, *Master Race*, passim.

¹⁰ Madison Grant, *Conquest of a Continent* (New York: Arno, 1977; orig. New York: Scribner's, 1933).

In August of 1991, the California Department of Parks and Recreation received a letter from a man who had just visited Humboldt Redwoods State Park. . . . But during his visit to the forest he had been “shocked” to come across a bronze plaque honoring Madison Grant. Citing passages from *The Passing of the Great Race*, his letter pointed out that Grant’s “racist writings are so abhorrent to basic American principles that they discredit anything honorable the man may have done in his lifetime . . . Honoring Madison Grant with a plaque on public property is as historically bizarre as erecting a monument to Adolf Hitler for his part in founding the Volkswagon Company. Please have it removed.”¹¹

The District Superintendent responded by writing: “Many parks would not exist today, or would contain only a fraction of the magnificent ancient forest that they do, had it not been for [Grant]. We are not apologists for Grants opinions, which were very controversial even when they were written. However, I do not agree with your statement. . . . His contributions to saving the great Redwood forests of California deserve recognition. The plaque will remain to honor the founder of the Save-the-Redwoods League.”¹²

A few months later the irate tourist was sent another, more thoughtful letter from Donald Murphy, then director of the Department of Parks and Recreation, that Spiro felt deserved to be reproduced in full:

Thank you for your letter concerning Madison Grant and the bronze plaque at Humboldt Redwoods State Park.

Is it “historically bizarre” to commemorate Grant’s undeniable efforts on behalf of conservation in light of his undeniable racism? That might be an easier question to answer if Grant had been alive and postulating his theories in recent decades.

Although he died in 1937 at age 72, Grant was a creature of the nineteenth century and as with many of his life contemporaries he held beliefs that most of us, hopefully, find both absurd and abhorrent today.

Grant drew attention to his misguided deductions on race by setting them down on paper, but the sad truth is he probably did not think too differently than many others who’ve been “honored” for some historical role unrelated to the issue of race. I’m not sure that society can or should conduct a wholesale revision of history because the people of the past did not have a late-twentieth century vision of fairness and equality.

As Director of the California Department of Parks and Recreation, I don’t ordinarily wear my ethnicity on my sleeve, so to speak, but in responding to

¹¹ Spiro, *Patrician Racist*, Chapter 18.

¹² *Ibid.*

your concerns I feel compelled to note that as an African American I think I have a personal perspective on the pain and suffering, the hurt and disappointment of racism. As a longtime state employee and in recent months as Department of Parks and Recreation Director, I have tried to be alert for and responsive to instances of discrimination and/or inequality whether it concerns skin color, gender or other factors that should be unrelated to the fulfillment of basic human rights.

I say that only to let you know that I do not take lightly your request for removal of the plaque and that I can quite understand and appreciate the reasoning behind your request. I would hope you will understand too my decision to not have the plaque removed. Harmony among peoples comes from the true principles and attitudes of the present, not from purging the past.¹³

I would agree with Mr. Murphy. As the noted philosopher George Santayana wrote, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”¹⁴ I would argue that removing references to Grant or his name from SRL plaques in CA State Parks would keep many of us from finding out who Madison Grant was, what his beliefs were, and how his beliefs in written form provided a springboard for right-wing terrorist activities in this country, and the murder of six million Jews and countless others in Germany during the 1930s and 1940s. Madison Grant’s books continue to inspire racism and domestic terrorism in this modern age when the USA appears to be drifting back toward plutocratic ideals at the expense of democracy.

During the Nuremberg Doctors’ Trial following World War II, excerpts from *The Passing of the Great Race* by Madison Grant were entered into evidence for the defense by the lawyer for Dr. Karl Brandt and others, which they claimed justified the elimination of persons not worthy of living.¹⁵ Could this be the reason his personal papers were destroyed by his own family?

As a Redwood National and State Parks (RNSP) Interpreter, and a Black American of mixed ancestry, I and my family have personally experienced the consequences of Grant’s and his colleagues’ deductions and assumptions. My uncle Fred was a decorated WWII veteran who made the mistake of trying to start a club for Black veterans in Charleston, South Carolina. He was forced to leave the state in order to protect his mother and sister from threats received from the KKK. My uncle moved to Los Angeles and did not return to South Carolina until he was in a coffin. As an Interpreter working in several parks that Madison Grant helped to create, I sometimes find myself wanting to tell visitors to the parks about the other,

¹³ Spiro, *Master Race*, 293; “Founders’ Grove,” folder, July 27, 1992, Save the Redwoods League archive, Special Collections, University of California, Davis.

¹⁴ George Santayana, *The Life of Reason: Reason in Common Sense* (New York: Scribner’s, 1905): 284.

¹⁵ Spiro, *Master Race*, 381–83.

darker side of some of the people who spearheaded the creation of California Redwood State Parks. After all, according to them, I would be incapable of even appreciating the beauty of the forest, let alone having the ability to understand the intricacies of the forest's ecology, because of my race. They were not creating parks for everyone.

As a cultural anthropology graduate from UC Santa Cruz, I thought it rather ironic that a memorial plaque on a rock in Elk Prairie in Prairie Creek Redwoods State Park (PCRSP), lauds Grant as an anthropologist, when I didn't even know who he was until I started working in the parks. At best, he may have helped set cultural anthropology on its current course, with his obsessions with skull shape and racial purity, and his hatred of Jewish professors like Franz Boas. Similar to the plaque at Founders Grove at Humboldt Redwoods State Park, the Madison Grant Forest and Elk Refuge plaque at PCRSP may have been an attempt to salvage Grant's reputation as a conservationist by his brother, De Forest Grant, and John D. Rockefeller Jr., who purchased the 1600-acre forest for the SRL and dedicated the plaque in 1948. Grant did identify Elk Prairie and the surrounding forest as one of the SRL's first four projects.

I'm thankful to Grant for his conservation work, particularly for his efforts in creating the public lands that we have today, and for founding the SRL. Yet I also hold him, and his contemporaries, responsible for the pain, suffering, and death that his musings seem to have justified for many Americans from 1916 until the 1960s.

It is often said that we cannot hold people of the past responsible for the beliefs of their time and place. I disagree. I believe all of us, no matter our race or time in history, intrinsically know the difference between right and wrong. Mass delusion is no excuse for being wrong. Even the founding fathers must have understood the irony in the wording of the Declaration of Independence in a land of slavers. So they had to define Native people as savages and Black Americans as 3/5 human. It was much easier, politically expedient, economically feasible, and perpetuated the delusion for them that way. They were wrong then, just as those who perpetuate the same ideas are wrong today, and we're still paying for it socially.

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Jim Wheeler was a career interpreter for the National Park Service, now retired. He worked extensively with both state and national parks in the redwoods country of the extreme northwest of California.