

FIRESCAPES AND THE BIRTH OF A GENRE
AN ENVIRONMENTAL AND LITERARY HISTORY OF 1910

by

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GLOSSARY

Hard Science Fiction: The term “hard science fiction” was first used in print in 1957 by P. Schuyler Miller to connote a sub-category of science fiction genre that is specifically concerned with scientific accuracy. Also referred to as “Hard SF.”

Soft Science Fiction: Defined in contrast to hard SF, “Soft Science Fiction,” or “Soft SF,” typically refers to science fiction narratives that prioritize human emotion or story plot over scientific accuracy. On occasion, the term can also suggest a narrative that is concerned more with soft sciences than hard sciences. It should also be noted that these binary terms have been largely dismissed or dismantled in certain academic spheres.

Space Opera: Originally coined as an insult, the term space opera, in the pejorative sense, usually refers a set of melodramatic characters participating in trite narratives set in outer space. However, fans of the genre redeemed the term over the years and more positively define the term as sweeping dramas set in space which usually include a prodigious set of characters, settings, and plot developments. See term, space odyssey.

Space Odyssey: Considering the negative connotations associated with the term space opera, many opted to use the term space odyssey. The positive use of space opera can be used interchangeable with that of space odyssey.

ABSTRACT

This thesis discusses the unique interplay of the historic fires occurring in Montana and Idaho in the summer of 1910, the prominent ideologies of the American West and the Conservation Movement at the time, and the life and work of contemporary Idaho author, Edward Elmer Smith. The purpose and driving question behind this study is to examine the various means by which a communal environmental consciousness is culturally produced. In addressing this question, the fires of 1910 serve as a useful case study. By exploring the mutual influences of the 1910 fires (an environmental event), the ideologies of the time (the prevailing culture), and the content of Smith's popular science fiction trilogy, *The Skylark*, (a tangible vessel by which one culture is carried into and made part of a future culture), we can begin to see how communal environmental ideas and ethics are birthed and carried into new generations. This thesis argues that Smith, residing in Idaho during the fires, allows dominate ideas of fire, wilderness, frontiers, masculinity, and more, to shape the characters and plot of his fiction. In this manner, the trilogy should be understood as an example of literature shaped by an environmental event—in this case fire, and subsequently as a powerful tool used to shape an aspect of an on-going communal environmental consciousness as his works grew in popularity.

INTRODUCTION

“BUILDING THE WORLD OF TOMORROW”

Hosting the First World Science Fiction Convention

In the spring of 1939, the New York World’s Fair hosted thirty-three countries and boasted over 44 million visitors. The theme, “Building the World of Tomorrow,” oriented exhibits and visitors towards the future. At the same time, the fair inspired a group of prominent authors, editors, and scientists to hold, in conjunction with the fair, the first ever World Science Fiction Convention (now popularly referred to as World Con, and still held annually). The guest of honor was Frank Rudolph Paul, a pulp science-fiction illustrator. Other distinguished guests included authors Ray Bradbury (*Fahrenheit 451*), Lyon Sprague de Camp who coined the terms “extraterrestrial” and “E.T.,” John W. Campbell whose work inspired the 1982 and 2011 films both titled “The Thing,” Jack Williamson, one of the first to introduce the idea of genetic engineering, prolific science fiction author and biochemist Isaac Asimov, as well as other respected rocket fuel developers and nuclear physicists.

These men were accomplished and dedicated to “the world of tomorrow.” They were artists, authors, and scientists—many of them all at once. Their livelihoods were predominantly gained through their scientific work and yet they chose to hold a *literary* convention as their contribution to “Building the World of Tomorrow.” Science and culture existed together for these men in both imaginative and tangible spaces—laboratories, universities, and natural ecosystems as well as magazine serials, books, and illustrations. Although a small, unusual group, these imaginative scientists did indeed begin something that would last into the world of tomorrow.

The following year, Chicago held the second ever World Science Fiction Convention. Chemical engineer and science fiction author, Edward Elmer Smith was the guest of honor. Smith, likewise, appears to see this community as an anomaly. Entitling his speech “What Does This Convention Mean?,” Smith took this opportunity to reflect on the nature and purpose of science fiction as a genre, the type of mind attracted to the literature, and the odd community they formed together. Fundamentally, Smith believed that science fiction is about the human soul. Unsurprisingly, many of these scientifically inclined authors were tempted to disagree. Science fiction was about imagining technologies and possible futures.

Smith differed.

I realize fully that I am treading controversial ground. Every fan knows that fantasy is not science fiction, and knows exactly the connotations and implications---in his own mind---of each term. Yet wherein lies the difference---wherein are they alike? ... Both, fundamentally, deal ... particularly with the development of human character; both, primarily, are studies of the human soul. Stripped of such ... embellishments as ray-pistols and rocket ships, werewolves and zombies, the basic themes and motivations are the same. Both are highly imaginative, both have their real meaning more or less subtly hidden, more or less deeply buried beneath the superficially thrilling or gruesome narrative. Both require a keen mind, [and] a broad cultural background[.]¹

To most, this “controversy” likely seems superfluous; but in many ways this distinction split the genre into what fans refer to as “hard SF” and “soft SF.”² Hard science fiction revolves around plausible technologies; the narrative must not exceed the realistic capabilities of the imagined technologies. Soft science fiction prioritizes narrative; the limits of technology might

¹ Edward E. Smith, "What Does This Convention Mean?" *Speech presented at the World Con, Chicago* (1940). Available online at fanac.org/conpubs/Worldcon/Chicon%20I/Chicon%20I%20E.%20E.%20Smith%20speech.pdf

² Within the purview of literary criticism, these terms are often rejected as binary and simplistic. They are use here only in that they are helpful in understanding the ideas and definitions the genre was working through at the time.

be stretched or restricted in order to propel the story and characters forward. Likewise, a detailed understanding of how the science or technology works need not be explained (partially or in full).³ By popular standards today, soft SF dominates the genre (meaning more people interact with the genre via soft SF than hard SF). At the time Smith was writing, however, these distinctions are still being made; the genre and subgenres still being defined. In the midst of this formulating time, Smith's "melodramatic" approach sparks a subgenre within the movement later dubbed Space Opera by author Wilson Tucker.⁴ The term was not a compliment.

Like many science fiction authors at the time, Smith published his work in a serial magazine, *Amazing Stories*. For Wilson, many of these serial publications were similarly formulaic to soap operas and trite westerns (also called horse operas). Space Operas were nothing more than a "hacky, grinding, stinking, outworn, spaceship yarn."⁵ They were also frequently called "super-science epics."⁶ In other words, the science was not realistic. While the term Space Opera was meant to be pejorative, the name stuck and as the genre responded to critique and evolved, Space Operas became one of the most popular forms of science fiction (including titles such as *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, *Dune*, *Ender's Game*, *Hitchhiker's Guide to the*

³ For example, *Star Wars* provides a scientific explanation as to how certain people have access to the force (a percentage of midi-chlorian in the cell) but this theory has no base in real science. *Star Wars*, therefore, is considered soft science fiction. On the other hand, an author such as Kim Stanley Robinson would classify as hard science fiction since his works often center on realistic technologies and scientific theories.

⁴ Wilson Tucker, "Depts of the Interior," *Le Zombie*, No. 36 (January 1941), 9. Available online at <http://www.midamericon.org/tucker/lez36i.htm>

⁵ Tucker, "Depts of the Interior," 9.

⁶ David Pringle, "What is this thing called space opera?" in Gary Westphal, ed., *Space and Beyond: The frontier theme in science fiction* (1st ed.) (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000), 36.

Galaxy, and *Hyperion*, to name a few).⁷ But in retrospect, it is Edward Elmer Smith that is considered the father of Space Opera, the subgenre concerned with science *and* the human soul; with ecosystem *and* adventure; with the future *and* the past.

Smith's childhood was split between eastern Washington and the panhandle of Idaho. Smith's father, Fred Jay Smith, is listed as a farm laborer in the 1910 census and young Smith seemed content to follow in his father's steps as a manual worker.⁸ He was forced to consider alternative options in 1909, however, when he injured his wrist while fleeing from a fire. Unable to work in a manual capacity for the time being, Smith enrolled in the University of Idaho, Moscow. Retreating to the southern regions of the panhandle in 1909, Smith began his studies in Chemical Engineering thanks to a small, unruly fire. The following year in 1910, one of the largest unruly fire systems in US history tore through the panhandle of Idaho, western Montana, parts of Washington and British Columbia. By twenty years of age, Smith was no stranger to the explosive nature of fire.

Throughout that dry, rainless summer, news coverage of fires flooded local and national papers, climaxing over the events of August 20th and 21st. These fateful days would later be given names like "The Big Blowup," "The Big Burn," and "The Great Fire." Personal stories, official forest service reports, and debates over controlled burns proliferated. The saga became an

⁷ The continued use of this term in the literary world is often debated considering the original intent of the term was meant to be pejorative. Some have suggested the term "Space Odysseys" as a more positive alternative while others have simply continued to use "Space Operas" without intending the negative connotations. This study will use the terms interchangeably and does not mean to imply the negative stereotypes associated with the term "Space Operas."

⁸ U.S. Federal Census, 1910; Census Place: *Markham, Bonner, Idaho*; Roll: *T624 223*; Page: *44*; Enumeration District: *0084*; FHL microfilm: *1374236*. Accessed online at Ancestry.com, February 1, 2022.

environmental drama in localized lore and a highly politicized one on the national level. Back in Washington, D.C. political enemies wove conflicting narratives concerning the fires and the lessons we ought to learn from them. Senators Weldon B. Heyburn of Idaho and William A. Clark of Montana “blamed Pinchot and Roosevelt for locking up land and inhibiting settlement they believed would have confined the wildfire. [On the other hand] Pinchot blamed the enemies of conservation who failed to sufficiently fund the Forest Service and who clamored for more public land giveaways.”⁹ Politically, the fires solidified the Forest Service (initiated only five years before) as a federal agency and decidedly moved the nation’s fire policy towards total suppression (introducing programs like the 10’am rule, adopted nationally in the 1930s).¹⁰

For everyday locals like Smith, however, these wildfires were a stage on which personal dramas unfolded. Fire was a deviant character that stole away friends and family, property, homes, and livelihoods. It is unknown as to whether Smith spent his summers working in Moscow or if he returned to his family’s home in Kootenai County. If Smith remained in Moscow, he would have sought out all the information he could, fearing over his family’s proximity to danger. If he indeed returned to his family, Smith would have been frighteningly close to the fires. The skies were dark with apocalyptic smoke and thick bits of ash drifted down to the ground. The Smith family may even have witnessed glowing embers and bits of flaming branches soar through the sky. Being deeply religious, they likely prayed that God would spare the land they worked as a family. Smith and his brothers may have had friends on volunteer fire

⁹ For an insightful scholarly review of Egan’s work see, Michael C. Blumm, “Present at the Creation: The 1910 Big Burn and the Formative Days of the U.S. Forest Service,” *Ecology Law Quarterly* 37:4 (2010), 1219.

¹⁰ Blumm, Review of Egan, 1217-1224.

crews and imagined their compatriots facing down walls of flames. This was not a political event concerned with budgets and agencies but the occasion for personal fears, triumphs, and tragedies.

That summer, fire scarred not only on the land, but individuals and communities alike. One third of Wallace, Idaho burned to the ground. Other smaller towns were consumed completely.¹¹ For Smith, landscapes once lovely and intimate were suddenly severe and alien. Forests and mountains that had nurtured his body and imagination now stood as charred and barren firescapes, a term we will return to later in this study.

As the first snows fell that year, finally putting to rest that terrible fire season, Smith resumed his university studies. Harrowed by multiple encounters with fire and studying chemical engineering (allowing Smith to contemplate fire on a chemical level), themes of fire began to emblazon themselves on the creative mind of Edward Elmer Smith. In 1914, Smith graduated with two degrees in chemical engineering. His undergraduate thesis, *Some Clays of Idaho*, did not focus on fire, but did have him traveling throughout the panhandle to collect samples during his last three semesters.¹² Only three to four years after the fires, Smith undoubtedly would have noticed new saplings springing forth from the ground. Perhaps they felt representative of his own life as he prepared to enter a new season.

1915 did indeed bring many changes. That October, Smith married a young Scottish-born woman named Jeanne Craig MacDougall—the sister of his college roommate. Soon after, the young couple would move to Washington, D.C. where Smith began work as a chemist for the

¹¹ Such as Grand Forks and Falcon, Idaho, and Taft, De Borgia, Haugan, Henderson, and Tuscor, Montana. See, Egan, *The Big Burn: Teddy Roosevelt and the Fire that Saved America* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2009), 190-194.

¹² Edward E. Smith, “Some Clays of Idaho,” Undergraduate Thesis, University of Idaho, 1914. Retrieved 16 October 2022. <https://digital.lib.uidaho.edu/digital/collection/etd/id/538>

National Bureau of Standards. Here, Smith also continued his education in food chemistry at George Washington University under Dr. Charles E. Munroe, an expert in chemical explosives.¹³ Having just moved over 2,500 miles away from their mountainous home in Idaho, the couple must have been relieved to learn that a former university friend and classmate, Carl Garby and his wife Lee, happened to live nearby. Late one evening, while visiting the Garbys's, the dinner conversation turned to outer space.

It was an evening to remember, full of laughter, conjecture, plausible and implausible science, fantastic tales, and new worlds. By the end of the night, the four young Idahoans had cast a vision for a grand adventure through galactic space. They would be the main characters—the Seatons and the Cranes, modeled after the Smiths and the Garbys respectively (Seaton Place was also the name of the Garbys's apartment complex). They all encouraged Smith, evidently the creative architect of the story, to write their adventure. Smith declined initially, claiming that such a story necessitated romance, which he believed himself incapable of writing. To his surprise, Lee, a literary mind in her own right, offered to write the romantic scenes and dialogue for him. His excuse voided, *The Skylark of Space*, was well underway by 1916.¹⁴

The *Skylark Trilogy* is more than just tangentially linked to the fires of 1910 through their author. That terrifying summer of fire deeply impressed upon the creative thinking of E. E. Smith. His popular science fiction publications can therefore be read and understood as an affective response to a major environmental event. Said another way, in the same manner that

¹³ Edward E. Smith “The People Who Made Other Worlds,” *Other Worlds*, Issue No. 27 (March 1953), pg. i (continued pg. 159). Accessed online at Archive.org. Retrieved 16 October 2022. https://archive.org/details/Other_Worlds_27v05n03_1953-03/page/n1/mode/2up

¹⁴ Smith continued working in the food industry until 1941 when he began working at the Kingsbury Ordnance Plant, in Indiana, developing explosives for the war effort.

many eco-literary critics now read *Frankenstein* as a response to the eruption of Tambora, Dickens's work as uniquely bearing the mark of London's smog, or Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* as reflecting on the Mississippi flood of 1927, Smith's science fiction novels grew out of the burns of 1910.¹⁵ Further considering Smith's publications as genre defining, this work hopes to explore the ways in which the first Space Operas were born of and shaped by, firescapes.

Firescapes

I use the term firescapes here, as a more encompassing abstraction of fire regimes. Fire regimes are concerned with the ecological function and occurrence of fire within deep time. Fires that raged through a landscape a millennium or more ago profoundly impact the ecosystem and alter the type, frequency, and intensity of fires on that landscape going forward. Consequently, the 1910 fires cannot be seen in an ecological vacuum. They are occurring within a fire regime that is quite literally beyond our means of quantifiable comprehension. The concern of this paper is to go beyond the ecological print of fires. Firescapes, as I use the term here, denote an expanded understanding of fire regimes that considers not just the ecological but the cultural, political, and social thrusts behind the occurrence of any one fire. As Pyne notes in his recent work, *The Pyrocene: How We Created an Age of Fire and What Happens Next*, as soon as humans begin to manipulate fire (roughly 2 million years ago) our species becomes an active

¹⁵ Precedents for this type of argument weaving environmental, literary, and historical components can be seen in works such as *Tambora* by Gillen D'Arcy Wood and *The Sky of Our Manufacture* by Jesse Oak Taylor. See, Gillen D'Arcy Wood, *Tambora, The Eruption that Changed the World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); and Jesse Oak Taylor, *The Sky of Our Manufacture: The London Fog in British Fiction from Dickens to Woolf* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016).

participant in the ongoing creation of fire regimes.¹⁶ If we are to fully consider our role as fire-bearers, however, we must also consider the evolutionary, communal, political, cultural, artistic, national, and ecological elements that compel our species to fire. These are the interweaving threads that create firescapes.

This thesis explores some of the elements that informed the particularities of the 1910 firescape as Smith would have experienced them. Cultural, historical, ecological, and political factors all impacted both how the fire actually ignited and spread as well as how communities responded to and understood the event. Specifically I give attention to the intermingling myths and narratives of conservation, masculinity, frontiers, and progressivism as they interacted with and impacted the fires. A step beyond this, however, I also give heed as to how these ideas, as elements of firescape, become embodied and culturally perpetuated. In the same way that fire regimes reach into the past, present, and future, we must likewise see firescapes as spanning across time. Fire regimes are perpetuated via ecological shifts and adaptations. Firescapes are perpetuated via ideological expression and subsequent individual and cultural embodiment. This is where the work of Edward Elmer Smith enters in. If we are concerned with fire regimes alone, the environmental sciences would be sufficient to consider their role. If we are concerned with the cultural narratives of the time occurring around the fires of 1910, the discipline of history would be sufficient. But to consider the full breadth of firescapes we must turn to the environmental humanities, specifically the intersection of ecology, history, and literature as a means of exploring the cultural imprint of fire.

¹⁶ Stephen Pyne, *The Pyrocene: How We Created an Age of Fire, and What Happens Next* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2021), 4.

Though Smith made a career as a science fiction author, his young mind absorbed and was shaped by the firescape of 1910. Exploring his literature with this in mind exposes how the social, political, and economic components that factored into the occurrence of the 1910 fires further pervaded cultural currents to the extent that conservation, masculinity, frontiers, and progressivism—the same narratives that figured prominently around the fires—are front and center in Smith’s fiction. This also demands that we read Smith’s *Skylark Trilogy* as fire literature. This claim disrupts the field of fire literature as it currently stands. For example, Pyne seems to limit fire literature to ancient myths directly involving fire and a small selection of works similar in vein to Norman McClean’s *Young Men and Fire*.¹⁷ The argumentation in this thesis, however, would greatly expand what and how we might categorize fire literature by considering the cultural realities around fire.

In focusing on the rising popularity of conservation in the early 20th century, this thesis will also discuss how conservation came to be used as a social and political narrative to encourage and perpetuate specific ideas of masculinity, imperial expansion, the extraction of natural resources, certain economic values, and progressive narratives of advancement. Only by understanding the historic context of the 1910 fires and the narratives that existed in conjunction with them can one clearly see the presence of fire in Smith’s writing.

This shows how firescapes become individually embodied (Smith and his work) and are then culturally perpetuated (Smith’s prominence as an author and the father of Space Opera). To demonstrate this process, I rely on personal accounts of the 1910 fires, the dominant cultural,

¹⁷ See, Stephen J Pyne, *The Northern Rockies: A Fire Survey* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2016), 11-20; and, Norman McClean, *Young Men and Fire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972).

political, and national ideologies of the time, and their interwoven presence in Smith's work. In addition to the history of conservation and its embedded narratives, this thesis will also place Smith's work within its literary history, both as a work of science fiction and as an example of fire mythology. Although this work considers the specificity of the 1910 fires and their influence on the literary work of Edward Elmer Smith, more fundamentally it acknowledges the environment and environmental events as powerful cultural agents. In the same way that fire forever alters an ecosystem going forward, cultures are molded and shaped by the environmental events that they enjoy and endure.

This thesis is not intended to be a literary critique. Rather, my hope here is to explore and demonstrate some of the hidden influences of environmental events on cultures at large. Many historians have pointed to the ways in which the 1910 fires helped shape our nation's forest service and fire policy. But we are often blind to the more subtle ways our communities and the stories we tell bend to the active environment moving in and around us. Smith's creative mind is a product of his time and environment—his firescape, and his creations carry those markers. In this case, fire, expanding designs for technology and transportation, ideas of masculinity and manliness, the hope of new frontiers, and the increasing demand for resource extraction—all wound up in prevailing ideas of conservation—found their way into *The Skylark* and into the genre itself. The birth of Space Operas as a subgenre, therefore, is rooted in the firescapes of the American West and in the mind of one who longed for the trees, remembered the flames, and lived in the ashes.

CHAPTER ONE

THE LANGUAGE OF FIRE:

MYTHOLOGY, SCIENCE, AND SCIENCE FICTION

Accounts of 1910

The Big Blow Up of 1910 was a holocaust of flames and thick black smoke. This terrifying event burned across Montana, Idaho, Washington, and British Columbia. In the aftermath of the fires, encounter stories flooded newspapers, personal journals, diaries, and official reports. These accounts and the language they used give us a window into how men and women in the early 20th century—including Smith—understood their environment and conceptualized fire. The intense language of these narratives is to be expected, but what is particularly surprising in these accounts is the consistency with which they employ ideas of character and setting. The flames themselves tend not to be portrayed simply as the event within the story but as a powerful and active character. Perhaps even more surprising, the setting of these stories predictably works to establish a link between fire and sky. In addition to understanding how people perceived and processed the fires, analyzing this language will help to position Smith in his literary context as well.

Often beginning with the words “on that fateful day,” survivors describe haunting scenes and escalating dangers: “Then came the fateful 20th of August. For two days the wind blew a gale from the southwest. ... Little fires picked up into big ones. Fire lines which had been held for days melted away under the fierce blast. The sky turned a ghastly yellow, and at four o’clock it

was black dark ahead of the advancing flames.”¹⁸ This dual occurrence of a discolored sky (yellow, orange, or reddish in tint) butting up against darkness—divided by invisible means, is an important part of scene setting in these stories. The action in this excerpt is mostly attributed to fire, but it demands that the reader turn her gaze skyward. In other words, the action takes place *in the sky*.

The action begins with the wind (already drawing the reader to the sky). This gale then causes little fires to pick “*up*” into big ones. On a basic reading, this is simply referring to small fires on the ground becoming bigger fires on the ground; but the impression of these words is an image of the wind *lifting* the flames. Then we read that, “fire lines...held for days melted away *under* the fierce blast.” Fire lines are, of course, dug into the ground. This further situates the flaming blasts as coming from above. Apart from “melting” the defensive lines, the flames turn the sky a “ghastly yellow,” heralding the flames into the blackness ahead. Notice the advancing flames are still situated in the sky.

Due to the intensity of the fires, the occurrence of flaming projectiles was not uncommon (though still spectacular to their observers). One man in Wallace Idaho marveled that despite being six miles from the nearest fire, “numerous pieces of burning bark as large as a man’s hand fell in the streets” setting fire to three separate awnings.¹⁹ Another crew of fire fighters were “startled by a burning brand ... a couple of feet long that hurtled down out of the sky a hundred

¹⁸ In the 1960s, Forest Service ranger Elers Koch compiled primary sources from the Forest Service archives with introductory materials. The Forest Service republished his research as, Elers Koch, “History of the 1910 Forest Fires – Idaho & Western Montana,” in, United States Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Northern Region, *When the Mountains Roared: Stories of the 1910 Fires*, (Missoula, MT: U.S. Forest Service, June 2010), quoted pg. 9. Hereafter cited as Koch, *When the Mountains Roared*.

¹⁹ Koch, *When the Mountains Roared*, 11.

yards from the camp.” The leader of the crew recalled sending two men to “locate this phenomenon.”²⁰ Others faced yet even more fearful scenes: “As evening drew on the fires were burning up so terrifically that huge columns of smoke which contained large quantities of combustible materials would frequently burst into flames that would shoot into the sky for thousands of feet.”²¹

My favorite of these “falling flame” stories told of a firefighter calling to his friend, Ed, in earnest belief that he had just seen a star fall from the sky and start a fire on the neighboring hillside.²² Although his friend “knew it was out of reason to think a star could have set this fire,” this quaint story continues to demonstrate that these people perceived and told their stories in ways that drew fire and sky together. In another account, the observer described flame and sky as being physically connected. His descriptive language makes it worth rendering in full:

The wind came up with a fury. It seemed to blow in whirls carrying sparks in every direction. ... As if by magic, new fires would spring up here, there, and everywhere. In every direction a mountain of flame faced us. One side of the gulch would be aflame and in an instant the fire would be borne across to the other side, and by leaps and bound from tree to tree, the terrible destruction continued. ... The mountains so high and steep with the narrow gulches between, resembled curtains of fire suspended from the clouds.²³

These stories of flaming projectiles, falling starts, and “curtains of fire suspended from the clouds” are all elements of setting that work to draw the connection between sky and fire. In the case of projectiles, the fire is militant and in motion. And it is in the sky that these missiles and fiery columns exist. The falling star account is precisely mythological in that it presents fire not merely coming from the sky, but from a celestial realm. The fiery curtain example physically

²⁰ Koch, *When the Mountains Roared*, 29.

²¹ Koch, *When the Mountains Roared*, 17.

²² Koch, *When the Mountains Roared*, 38-39.

²³ Koch, *When the Mountains Roared*, 64-65.

connects fire and sky, but it also references a mystical element that is common in many of the account stories: “as if by *magic*, new fires would spring up.”

Beyond the dramatic visuals of a veil of flames descending from the clouds to the earth, the sky—or really the atmosphere—is a powerful participant in many of these accounts. In some instances, the atmosphere “reflecting” the flames onto the clouds acted as a warning, making “danger feel uncomfortably near.”²⁴ Sometimes this “reflection” became a calm-before-the-storm moment. “In the distance, the reflection of the ruddy glow in the sky and the great crimson sun, seeming to stand out like a gigantic, blood-red orange; a perfect sphere at which one could gaze with ease through the smoke, had been a most beautiful and awe-inspiring sight.”²⁵ In these stories, fire is certainly cast as dangerous, but not necessarily malicious, as evidenced by its ominous warnings. In other instances, the sky was simply the emissary of death to come. The air would become “hot and oppressive,” burning branches began falling from the sky and “all agreed that our worst fears were about to be realized.”²⁶ This sequence of events repeats in other stories as well: “The resinous smoke had become darker, the air even more oppressive and quiet. As if by magic, sparks were fanned to flames which licked the trees into one great conflagration.”²⁷ In these instances, fire is clearly presented as an enemy.

These examples all demonstrate the ways in which observers of the 1910 fires felt them to be protective (warnings of danger in the color of sky), hostile (oppressive “emissaries of death”), divine (coming from the sky or celestial realms), and even technological (the lighting of

²⁴ Koch, *When the Mountains Roared*, 63.

²⁵ Koch, *When the Mountains Roared*, 62.

²⁶ Koch, *When the Mountains Roared*, 63.

²⁷ Koch, *When the Mountains Roared*, 53.

backfires for example). But what is most evident in these accounts is the way in which, to survivors, fire and sky are hemmed together in narrative form. The question remains, however, as to what encourages this connection? One answer to this question is mythology. Although these stories are set in time in August of 1910, in western Montana and the panhandle of Idaho, the storytellers are pulling from the deep recesses of their cultures and mythologies to tell a unified story of fire coming from the sky. These stories existed as an individual and cultural collection of fire narratives that actively shaped how communities conceptualized, interacted, responded, and spoke about fire.

Fire and Mythology

The deep connection between fire and mythology is not simply thematic. Said another way, the narrative plot of a heroic, often mischievous character stealing fire away from the gods and gifting it to humans is not the extent to which fire and mythology are linked. Rather the persistent presence of fire in mythology is testimonial to its informing power within the collective human experience. From Prometheus to Mātariśvan, to Napa, almost every culture has a set of characters and a rich collection of narratives surrounding fire.²⁸ Moreover, throughout these diverse cultures, fire tends to function narratively in three predictable expressions: as protective, divine, and/or technological. Understanding these general historic literary functions enables us to perceive the presence of fire when it is not obviously visible on the surface.

²⁸ While fire mythologies are diverse in meaning and structure across cultures, there are consistent trends, which justifies referencing them more generally. I will mostly rely on mythologies of western cultures when making specific connections to Smith simply because they would have been the mythologies with which he was personally most familiar.

A. Protective

Anthropologically, the domestication of fire provided protection. Night fires illuminated the darkness and kept wild animals at bay. Likewise, in various myths the gods wield the power of fire in defense of their people and against their enemies (many gods and goddesses of fire are also the patrons of war). The Egyptian goddess Wadjet is a female figure with the head of a venomous snake—her particular venom being fire. As the protector of Egyptian lands, Wadjet would spit consuming fire on their enemies.²⁹ In the exodus narrative of the ancient Hebrews, YHWH's presence materializes in the form of a pillar of fire by night to stand between the Israelites and their former enslavers.³⁰ There is also a host of gods and goddess specifically tasked with protecting the hearth fire. The protective capacity of fire also brought people together, forming communities.

B. Divine

The most obvious link between fire and the divine is that of sacrificial systems. Again, most cultures partook in animal and grain sacrifices—some in human sacrifice. The Canaanites practiced child sacrifice with some regularity to the god Molech (also referred to as Baal).³¹ The Aztecs practiced a particularly gruesome, albeit rare human sacrifice. There also appear to be

²⁹ The protective goddess, Wadjet, is also strongly associated with the sun gods and goddesses. Although breathing a venomous fire very clearly categorizes Wadjet within fire related mythologies, so too does her connection to the sun. In this manner, within ancient mythologies, in addition to direct mentions of fire, stories revolving around the sun and or lightening are equally relevant. See “Wadjet,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Accessed online, November 1, 2023, [Britannica.com/topic/Wadjet](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Wadjet).

³⁰ Exodus 13:21-22 (New International Version).

³¹ 1 King 18: 20-40 (NIV).

instances of sacrifices to appease fire gods, sometimes associated with volcanic eruptions.³²

Apart from burnt offerings, fire was also used in divination. Sparks and embers from the Yule log for instance (also associated with protection) were used to make predictions for the following year.³³ Still another use, gods would be called upon to send fire as a testament to their supremacy—the prophet Elijah being a prime example. Although multifaceted, connections to the divine also hemmed fire to aspects of morality, purity, and even legality.

C. Technological

Fire embodies technological innovations for many cultures within their mythologies. Associated with the advancement of humankind primarily through the giving of light and the ability to cook raw foods, this is not mere mythology, but a simple fact of human development.³⁴ With the domestication of fire, the human experience was greatly altered and enhanced. One of the most common myths across cultures in the taking of fire from the gods, Prometheus likely being the most well-known example. In the narrative, Prometheus is a titan and a trickster that, having already fooled Zeus once, mocks him again by stealing his fire and gifting it to the humans. Prometheus's punishment—carnivorous vivisection by bird, is also well known. Through renditions of this story in western cultures, Prometheus is both a heroic and cautionary

³² Such sacrifices fall short of the dramatized versions often seen in films in which a virgin, usually female, is literally cast into the heart of a volcano. Rather, archeological records indicate that these sacrifices would remain near the summit of a particular volcano until death resulting from exposure would occur. See, Dagmara M. Socha, Johan Reinhard, and Ruddy Chávez Perea. "Inca Human Sacrifices on Misti Volcano (Peru)." *Latin American Antiquity* 32:1 (2021), 138-153.

³³ Stephen J. Pyne, *Fire in America: A Cultural History of Wildland and Rural Fire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 14, 139.

³⁴ Pyne, *Fire in America*, 56-57.

tale. He symbolizes striving and advancement, but also the reality that our actions can precipitate great consequences.³⁵

In the Blackfeet, Chippewa, and Cree traditions, the fire-theft narrative is likewise cautionary. Old Man (also called Napa or Napi) endeavors to steal the sun's "fire leggings" so that by their light he might become a more mighty hunter (a technological advancement in order to better see the prey). Old Man, however, is not wise enough to use the leggings properly and in the end sets fire to the forests and grasslands which then burn uncontrollably. In a particular telling of this story by War Eagle to a group of Cree children, he concludes the night reflecting, "The Sun's clothes were too big for OLD-man, and his work too great. We should never ask to do the things which Manitou did not intend us to do."³⁶ These two mythologies are representative of a much wider category of myth-telling that not only views fire as technology but the beginning of all technological advances within a society, and yet they are cautionary tales.

These are not simply fantastical stories of lore. They are a record of how different human communities have interacted with fire. As these stories are passed down, each new generation inherits the imagination of their elders; inherits their language, perception, and experience of fire. If they tell of protective goddesses throwing fire at their enemies, it is because they have found fire to be a powerful weapon in times of war. If they tell of burnt offerings, it is because they have felt their guilt melt away in making amends with a neighbor. If they tell of fantastic

³⁵ Alfred W. Crosby, *Throwing Fire: Projectile Technology through History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 41-43.

³⁶ Frank Bird Linderman, *Indian Why Stories: Sparks from War Eagle's Lodge-Fire* (New York C. Scibner's Sons, 1915). Republished Ebook edition, The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation. Online at <https://gutenberg.org/cache/epub/606/pg606-images.html>

innovations, it is because fire has eased some of the challenges of their hard lives. If they tell a cautionary tale, it is because fire has indeed proven itself dangerous.³⁷

It was this inherited imagination that allowed so many people from a diversity of cultures to link fire and sky in their imagination. In the same way we should aim to understand Smith's fiction as a continuation of this legacy. When Smith began writing of spaceships, rockets, and fiery explosions flying through the stars, we should recall the language of 1910. Like his fellow fire-survivors, Smith is linking fire and sky and, pulling from the deep traditions of fire mythologies, cast fire in his own *Skylark* series as divine, technological, and protective.

In fire mythologies, the element of the divine begins with fire belonging to the gods and needing to be won, stolen, or gifted to humans. In these stories fire is divine in its very nature. In the *Skylark*, the role of fire is played by the element "X." Like fire, X is an energy source that opens the door for immense technological advancements. And although it does not need to be stolen from petty gods, element X nevertheless needs to be "liberated."³⁸ Moreover, X is very much celestial. Deposited by a meteor, X is not naturally occurring in Earth's system. In this manner, X is divine in the fact that it is unearthly. It must come from the heavens. In the *Skylark*, this mimics the idea of progress being unleashed by something inherently external to humans that we see so often in mythology.

³⁷ Stephen Pyne, likewise, sees such mythologies as deeply significant saying, "these shards of folklore amount to something more than an archaeology of relic beliefs and quaint customs. They represent an effort to understand and ultimately to control a powerful natural force: thus they complement the vastly more subtle and complicated intellectual assimilation of fire." Pyne, *Fire in America*, 14.

³⁸ Edward E. Smith and Lee Hawkins Garby, *The Skylark of Space*, classics republication edition, (Auckland, NZ: The Floating Press, 2011), 12. Hereafter cited as Smith, *Skylark of Space*.

In the Prometheus myth, along with many others, fire is what unlocks technological advancements within society. This theme is especially evident within the *Skylark* series. When Seaton liberates the sub-atomic energy of element X, he fundamentally alters what is technologically possible. With this new discovery, the world now has access to nearly unlimited energy and can undertake projects never before dreamed of—such as traveling through space and voyaging to unknown planets. Furthermore, throughout their travels they are exposed to a variety of new worlds and societies, gleaned from each of their distinct techno-cultures. And of course, among these advancements are extraordinary weapons. This introduces the protective element. As in mythology, fire gods and goddesses are often the patrons of war. And just as these goddesses protect their subjects with blasts of fiery venom, the weapon capabilities of element X protect the Seatons and Cranes as well as the fate of humanity. This brief overview helps trace how fire mythologies shape our language and understanding of fire and reveal fire as a mythological element in Smith’s fiction. Yet this is only one aspect of Smith literary context.

Smith was a prolific science fiction author and is considered the father of the sub-genre, Space Opera. Interestingly many have moved to understand science fiction as the literary continuation of mythology.³⁹ Simultaneously, those within the genre tend to emphasize scientific

³⁹ A major reason for this comparison is the unveiled recycling of myths in science fiction. Mary Shelly’s *Frankenstein* for example is also called *The Modern Prometheus*. Others argue that ancient mythologies were themselves the earliest forms of science fiction. This argument is dependent on definitions of “science,” however. Another comparison often made is on the nature of scale. Both myth and science fiction frequently embrace epic structure. This can include (though not necessarily) elongated time frames, expansive travel, interconnected narratives and characters among different stories, as well as individual, national, and human wide implications. But the greatest point of comparison is perhaps how these two genres approach questions of meaning, identity, existence, and the human experience. See, Arthur B. Evans, “The Beginnings: Early Forms of Science Fiction,” in Roger Luckhurst, ed., *Science Fiction: A Literary History* (London: The British Library, 2017), 13.

inquiry as the dominate stimulus of science fiction writing. This is an intriguing dynamic in so far that mythology and science are so often seen as antithetical. Yet both are linked to science fiction and rely heavily on fire. Understanding these points of connection between mythology, the history of science fiction, and the history of fire and science (which helps to contextualize Smith's work as a chemist), allows us to better analyze the presence of fire in Smith's fiction.⁴⁰

Science and Fire

Like fire and mythology, fire and science are inextricably linked. The bond between fire and science, however, has gone through key moments of discovery that recreated the

Both myth and science fiction use fantastical elements and place their characters in remarkable circumstances in order to ask and answer questions of human meaning. Fantasy writing has a very similar approach; yet one element that sets fantasy apart from mythology and specific types of science fiction is the use of religion and science respectively to establish a certain sense of authority or, at least relevancy. Gods, goddesses, titans, and demi-gods are the heroes and villains of mythology. Yet this cast of spiritual beings also suggests that the narrative relays a moral authority that is universally relevant. Post-enlightenment, religion no longer lent this sense of authority or universality. In its stead, science emerged as the authoritative voice. In this manner, both myth and science fiction usurp sources of cultural power and authority in their narratives to establish credibility and justify their ideals for identity creation. Yet, as this relationship developed between science and science fiction, complexities and questions on the nature of this relationship emerged.

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relationship. In ancient Greek philosophy, as one of the four main elements, fire was seen as having “motive power,” animating the living beasts. The idea of fire as a core element persisted into the mid to late Middle Ages. At this time, alchemists began to wonder at the nature of fire and discern its chemical aspects. This led to the theory of phlogiston. Coming from the Greek word meaning “burning up,” it was believed that different substances contained different levels of phlogiston. Materials with more phlogistons would burn more than materials with less. Furthermore, as the substance burned, it would then lose its phlogiston becoming *dephlogisticated*. In this theory, the substance lost in the process of combustion is then absorbed into the air.

For the most part, this theory went unchallenged until the end of the 18th century when Lavoisier, able to pull from Priestley’s experiments with air, put forward a theory of combustion based in oxidation.⁴¹ In this understanding, air is not a pure single element but made up of different components. Fire, or combustion, then, is a chemical reaction in which oxygen is taken from the air. This significant development in the science then paved the way for Sadi Carnot in 1824 to publish his *Reflections on the Motive Power of Fire*. In this thesis, Carnot united the physical and chemical aspects of combustion within the theory of thermodynamics.

A poetic return, Carnot like his ancient predecessors, focused on the motive capabilities of fire. In human history, fire has so often been in motion. And while a reflection on this may be less scientific than anthropologic, it is concerned with science insofar as developments in pyro technologies have altered the ways in which we connect fire and motion in our minds. A

⁴¹ Steven Johnson, *The Invention of Air: A Story of Science, Faith, Revolution, and the Birth of America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008).

worthwhile study of this is presented in Alfred Crosby's *Throwing Fire: Projectile Technology through History*.⁴² Crosby begins his study with a reflection on human evolution—specifically bipedalism and the propensity to throw. Once humans have domesticated fire, he follows the history of humans literally “throwing fire.” His history is presented in four eras of “acceleration,” the first being the Pliocene age to the Middle Ages in which humans throw primarily through muscular power aided sometimes by gravity and or simple machines. The second acceleration follows the Chinese origins of gunpowder and its adoption into western culture ending with WWI. The third era covers the rapid advancements of technologies from more sophisticated cannons to ballistic missiles. The fourth acceleration is speculative, ultimately concerned with space travel. I include this summary of Crosby because it so succinctly portrays how fire has been used and developed throughout history towards ideas of both transportation and warfare (recall the common link between fire and war deities in mythologies).

It is relevant to note the history of chemistry as overlapping with the history of fire and its anthropogenic uses because Smith studied and worked as a chemist. This means that Smith did not simply see trains and automobiles as developments in transportation, or cannons and missiles as developments in warfare. Rather he understood both as developments in pyrotechnology. In the imagination of a chemist, so too would have been a flying spaceship hurtling through the galaxy. Where others saw novelty in newfangled machines, Smith the chemist saw the outworking of predictable science; and where others saw fantastic stories, Smith the author saw honest inquiries.

⁴² Crosby, *Throwing Fire*.

Science and Science Fiction

The connection between science and Science Fiction might seem obvious; after all, the genre includes the word “science” in its name. Yet both the definition and history of the genre are highly contested.⁴³ What qualifies a work as science fiction? Can it only employ established science? Probable science? Seemingly *improbable* science? Does the science have to influence the narrative? What about a fictional story following a group of scientists? Is that science fiction?

The history of SF is dependent on how one answers these questions. Some will argue ancient mythologies launched the genre, others, Sir Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516) or Francis Godwin’s *The Man in the Moone* (1634). Those that tend to think the science should be more prominent in the narrative might look to Mary Shelly’s *Frankenstein* as the first SF novel (1818). Sometimes surprising books are included in the genre such as Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). Despite such diversity of opinion, most tend to agree that Jules Verne is at least the father of *modern* SF (though a major dissenter of this opinion was Verne himself who credited Edgar Allen Poe with this honor). As mentioned in the introduction, these questions and distinctions eventually split the genre into Hard SF (more realistic use of science) and Soft SF (a more imaginative use). But as the genre relates to science we might think of SF as being a. influential, b. reflective *and/ or* c. predictive.

A. Influential

One of the best examples of SF influencing science, and vice versa, is that of hollow-Earth theories. In 1692, the astronomer Edmund Halley introduced his hollow-Earth theory. This

⁴³ Luckhurst, ed., *Science Fiction: A Literary History*, 14-16.

seemingly began a craze of fictions obsessed with fantastical underground journeys. Twenty-six years prior, however, Margaret Cavendish wrote her own underground voyaging tale, *The Blazing World* (1666). Consequently, while Cavendish *imagined* this possibility, Halley seemingly gave it *scientific plausibility*. This encouraged more hollow-Earth fiction which then fueled the theory's popularity *within* the scientific community, giving life to the real research, studies, experiments, and expeditions that followed.⁴⁴ Needless to say, scientists and authors do not always influence each other in the “right” direction.

B. Reflective

The lines between SF being reflective and/or predictive are easily blurred (many examples are often both). For the sake of simplicity here, however, I will constrain reflective to refer to those examples of SF that center on established scientific ideas and technologies *or* those theories and prototypes that are actively making progress within the scientific community. For example, novels by Margaret Atwood and Kim Stanley Robinson often include only technology that already exists. They do, however, employ those technologies in imaginative ways. In her *MaddAddam* series, Atwood turns up the dial on social and agricultural technologies for a quasi-dystopian world of hackers and headless lab-grown chickens. In Robinson's, *The Ministry for the Future*, he imagines large numbers of rural towns displaced to cities to recreate wilderness channels for migrating animals, arctic drilling to slow the rate of ice melt, and even the devastating *lack* of technology for large populations facing heat waves. These types of stories may indeed prove predictive, but they are reflective in their relationship with science insofar as they are bound by the science.

⁴⁴ Luckhurst, ed., *Science Fiction: A Literary History*, 19.

C. Predictive

In using the word predictive here, I do not necessarily mean anticipatory. In other words, Francis Godwin's aforementioned *The Man on the Moone* (1634) was not "predictive" of Neil Armstrong's moon walk in 1969 (since the only real similarities are the words *man* and *moon*). Science fiction *has* "predicted" events and technologies—cell phones, video calls, robots, flying cars, and the internet, to name a few—but there is also an important *prescriptive* element to this type of SF. By this I mean, that when a work of science fiction centers on a technology (regardless of its development or lack thereof within the scientific community), that work now has an inspirational power.

This is more than a nudge of possibility. For example, robots in SF are often personal assistants, domestic help, or companion navigators—all anthropomorphized with quirky personalities. The science of robotics does not necessitate this type of utility, however. Rather these stories enter our cultural imagination and as the tools and machines develop, our shared stories shape how we employ the new technology. Siri will take notations for you *and* tell a joke. You can change the gender and accent of your GPS voice. This is the long-term implication of influence; our fiction shapes how we choose to function in society—including how we integrate and relate to science.

As evidenced by the Hallow-Earth theories, we must accept that science is conducted in and swayed by a world that entertains the fantastic. Yet this dynamic did not necessarily work to reinforce science as a reliable authority. Consequently, as the distinction between hard SF and soft SF came to a head in the 1920s and 30s, soft SF was often viewed with scorn, I argue, because it did not sufficiently reinforce science as a cultural authority. On the other hand, hard

SF supported the authority of science by insisting on including only plausible science within the narrative, thus maintaining its own influential power.

These relationships between fire, mythology, science, and science fiction literature are intimately webbed together, each impacting how we conceptualize and understand the others. Specifically, they each impact the language of fire. To detect the presence of fire in Smith's literature we cannot simply look for mentions of literal fire. Rather we must look for mythological and scientific *ways* of understanding fire within Smith's narrative. Yet this also requires understanding Smith's historic and cultural moment.

Born in 1890, Smith's birth coincided with the census proclamation that the "frontier was closing." Moving to rural Idaho before his first birthday, however, Smith likely did not grow up in a world that felt void of frontiers. But he did grow up in a national moment obsessed with "new frontiers." While Teddy's conservation was about protecting and maximizing internal resources, his imperial pursuits were primarily concerned with seizing and securing new frontiers and thereby new external resources. Consequently, the lust for new frontiers and adventures was thick in American culture in the early half of the 20th century. This aspect of the American imagination plays into Smith's writing and how the early ideas of "Space—The Final Frontier" began to form.

Smith's fantastical science fiction must also be analyzed in the midst of the prolific technological advancements he would have experienced throughout his childhood, early adulthood, and writing career. The light bulb, invented only a decade prior to Smith's birth, catalyzed a string of electrification. Ten-year-old Smith would have heard descriptions of the first airship, "The Zepplin." A few years later the Wright Brothers manned the first gas powered

airplane. While Smith's young imagination took flight, radio receivers, neon lights, and lie detectors helped to color his daydreams. But then followed military tanks, gas masks, and stainless steel as he entered adulthood. In 1921, the Czech playwright, Karel Capek introduced society to the word robot for the first time (imaginative prototypes soon to follow). And through the late 1920s and early 30s, scientists began to develop the first liquid fueled rockets.⁴⁵ All these inventions and many more gave shape to Smith's world—real and imagined, and his writings reflect these technological advancements and their societal implications.

Many of these technological advancements were in the field of transportation. The importance of this is two-fold. First, developments in transportation technology fueled the cultural obsession with new frontiers. Just as the rail system enabled the proliferation of settler communities in the American West, so too would new technologies help expand the American empire. Second, innovations in transportation are fundamentally evolutions in fire technology. As a chemical engineer, Smith understood this. The steamed powered locomotive as well as the combustion engines of the new model Ts (introduced 1908) were both fueled by the motive power of fire. As a science fiction author, Smith took these associations to imaginative ends.

These three areas of advancements—frontiers, technologies, and transportation—link not only to each other but also to the particular firescape of 1910. Cultural perception and fears surrounding “the closing of the frontier” encouraged conservation ideals among the public. One of the major threats to conservation at the time, however, was wildfires. Ironically, most of the 1910 fires were ignited by railway sparks, the very transportation technology that opened the west to increased settlement. Inversely, the dwindling resources (harvested to support the

⁴⁵ Karel Capek, *R. U. R. (Rossum's Universal Robots)* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2004).

growing technological advancements) fueled the perceived need for better transportation (better fire technology) to reach new frontiers that offered more resources that could aid in the march of progress. This cycle, in constant pursuit of advancement, assisted in creating the environmental and cultural conditions necessary for the 1910 fires. In other words, these cultural narratives of advancement are equally as encapsulated in the idea of firescape as would be the charred leftover trees. Consequently, we must also understand the ways in which these cultural narratives in the early years of the 20th century helped to frame the narratives of Smith's space operas.

CHAPTER TWO

THE CULTURE OF CONSERVATION:
MANLINESS AND MASCULINITY IN THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY

At the turn of century, the frontier and wild landscapes became important spaces in the minds of presidents and policy makers, alike. Theodore Roosevelt, Gifford Pinchot, and like thinkers embraced ideas of “viral masculinity” to address new anxieties of an expanding American empire. This raw masculinity could only be developed and strengthened through physical exertion in “wild” spaces.⁴⁶ Roosevelt called this “playing savage.”⁴⁷ Manliness, on the other hand, was seen as a manner of virtue and of a civilized nature; controlling “the savage” so to speak. Predictably, this definition of manliness was also highly racialized and stratified.⁴⁸ This chapter discusses the pervasive culture of masculinity within conservation and the subsequent fire-fighting culture and how these narratives present themselves in Smith’s work.

This pop psychology endorsed by cultural giants like Roosevelt played a noticeable role in the American conservation movement throughout the twentieth century. But it also came to be

⁴⁶ This attaching of masculinity to “wild” landscapes to demonstrate status, masculinity, and dominance is a common tool of empire and the aristocracy. The goal defining these landscapes in terms of gender and class (and consequently race) is to expand their influence of power and control over these spaces. See, Michael S. Reidy, “Mountaineering, Masculinity, and the Male Body in Mid-Victorian Britain,” *Osiris* 30:1 (2015), 158-181.

⁴⁷ “By the late nineteenth century, elite men began to take lengthy trips to the western frontier, scale high peaks, trek, and take on conservation issues.” This “became increasingly common for men to demonstrate their masculinity, wealth, and upper-class status by undertaking conquest-oriented outdoor activities such as hunting big game in the West” Dorceta E. Taylor, *The Rise of the American Conservation Movement* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 48, 67.

⁴⁸ Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in The United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 92.

a more ubiquitous lens through which Americans viewed the world and their role within it. As Stephen Pyne notes in his work *The Pyrocene*, a nation's status as either developed or undeveloped is directly linked to weather that nation employs primarily closed (developed) or open (undeveloped) flames.⁴⁹ Closed fire or flame simply refers to the contained burning of alternative fuels such as coal or natural gas. Open flame refers to the open burning of wood, grasses, dung, etc. To have large amounts of open flames, controlled or uncontrolled, therefore had negative associations of an uncivilized or undeveloped nation-state. This cultural narrative had interesting implications for wildfires in the US, and especially in the American West. Debates around fire suppression verses prescribed burning raged across the United States throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. On the one hand, the west ought to be wild and fires added to its sense of savagery. On the other hand, out of control wildfires threatened the landscape's resources, as well as brought into question the character of American land stewardship.

The fires of 1910 proved a powerful convergence for these narratives. Examining these ideas of fire, male identity, and civilization side by side encourages us to see wildfires in the American West as both a challenge to and a stage on which to perform popular ideas of manliness and masculinity. Fighting fire required physical and mental strength, as well as to be in wild spaces. In this way one's masculinity could be proven. At the same time, it also worked to extinguish fire as a symbol of uncivilized culture from the landscape, specifically regarding Indigenous burning practices. This Anglo-masculine "civilizing mission" acted as a tool of empire and encouraged fire policy to favor total suppression on the national level.

⁴⁹ Pyne, *The Pyrocene*, 13.

Also wrapped up in conservation and masculinity were specific approaches to the extraction of natural resources. Resource scarcity became a central fear circulating around wildfires in general and especially those of 1910. “Aproximatly eight billion broad feet of timber burned in the fires.”⁵⁰ Fear over resource (and therefore profit) loss fueled the political debates back in Washington. Economicly, much of the west was supported by resourse extraction. As a major source of economic employment and livlihood, this shaped the culture deeply. Roosevelt cast extraction as an unavoidable link between conservation and masculinity suggesting that a restrained approach to resource extraction signified a man of quality. This domestic restraint, however, was of course sustained by an expanding American Empire elsewhere.⁵¹ These political questions framed the debates around the 1910 fires and the management approaches the Forest Service eventually adopted.

When we come to Smith’s fiction, we do not find flaming forests and brave rangers per say. But we do find these same ideas of manliness, masculinity, extraction, and advancement. These narratives play out in the *Skylark* primarily in the three main male characters, Richard

⁵⁰ United States Department of Agricultural, Forest Service, “The Great Fire of 1910,” online resource, retrieved 26 October 2022.

https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb5444731.pdf

⁵¹ Simultaneously, putting conservation land under the power of the nation state preserved resources that could and would later be used to expand the power and influence of the American Empire. Historically, exploration, resource extraction, and management have been used to expand colonial power on foreign lands. For example, it was the goal of the English explorer, Mackinder, to “break into the great central plateau in the heart of Africa. It belonged to the larger geopolitical strategy of seizing control of the upper reaches of the Nile, the water reserve for the entire northeast of the continent. From the beginning, Mackinder viewed his voyage in these ... imperial terms.” Although conservation is employed domestically, the intent is to place contested (stolen) resources in the hands of the state. See, Michael Reidy, “At the Height of Empire,” *Newsletter of the History of Science Society* (2008), p. 19.

Seaton, his friend Martin Crane, and the antagonist Marc DuQuesne. Their physical and personal attributes directly embody these ideas and distinguish them as the protagonists and antagonist. Smith experienced these ideas in conjunction with fire—as an element of firescape, and their presence in his science fiction should be understood as the imprint of the 1910 fires.

These ideas of manliness and masculinity shaped how we thought about fire in the American West, but they did not begin with fire. Represented by the writings of Stanly Hall and public personas of cultural giants like Teddy Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot, very particular definitions of manliness, masculinity, and civilization gained traction in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Pulling from the scholarship of Gail Bederman, masculinity at this time was considered descriptive or belonging to all men and understood as being driven by passion, sexuality, and the primitive strength of the male savage. Manliness, on the other hand, was characteristic of the “civilized man” (typically signifying elite white males) and had connotations of godly restraint. According to Hall’s theory, however, being “over civilized” had negative effeminizing effects. This being an unbearable disease, Hall recommended that men access their primordial savage side, especially as young boys, to solidify their natural strength. Theodore Roosevelt, who built his political persona around ideas of “the rugged man” and “the strenuous life,” fully endorsed this philosophy. Part of Hall’s and Roosevelt’s recommended man-boosting-regiment was to regularly spend time in the wild outdoors embracing a Darwinistic survival of the fittest. Although you were to regularly access this primordial masculinity, to succumb to it would be to lose your status as a civilized man.⁵²

⁵² Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, esp. ch. 3, 77-120.

Romanticized ideas of the west born of adventurous frontier stories coupled with this idea of the over civilized man needing to reconnect with his “savage masculinity” to remain strong gave the American West a very particular role to play in this unraveling narrative. In part, Roosevelt’s desire to set apart “wild” landscapes was to ensure that places existed where the American man could go and recapture his strength and prove his internal masculinity. Conservation land and national parks would permit manly gentlemen to escape the civilized world of their cities, work, and families to untamed landscapes where they would hunt, kill, and be revitalized by nature. But in conserving these spaces, plants, and animals, the natural processes associated with the land—chief among them, fire—were likewise conserved. Fire proved problematic at the time as it posed a constant threat to both the conservation movement as well as to extractable resources (each valued by opposing political parties).

It was clear to Roosevelt and his confidant Gifford Pinchot that there needed to be a federal agency tasked with managing these wild spaces.⁵³ This management would consist of policing resource extraction, mapping the land, and, increasingly, protecting forests from fires among other responsibilities. During Roosevelt’s presidency, the Forest Service was created to meet this task under the leadership of Pinchot. Considering prevailing ideas of manliness and masculinity, however, in convergence with how Roosevelt understood conservation and wild

⁵³ In addition to establishing conservation spaces as masculine, creating a government organization to preside over these spaces works to establish Empire as a legal authority over and within these spaces. As “experts,” foresters became the scientific authority concerning management. Yet embedded within the state, this placed scientific tools, labor, and research, under governmental control. For more on how empire governs scientific inquiry and application see, Michael S. Reidy, *Tides of History, Ocean Science and Her Majesty’s Navy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 157-197.

spaces, Forest Rangers were often romanticized with an eye towards this idolized man perfectly balancing civilization and his inner savage. For proponents of the Forest Service, rangers had this reputation from the beginning. But in the wake of the 1910 fires and Pinchot's successful campaign to cast rangers as the heroes, this reputation took root in a powerful way. For those in the west, rangers remain a prominent cultural figure, arguably solidified by their role in the 1910 fires. In this manner, Forest Rangers and their embedded ideas of manliness, masculinity, and understandings of fire as uncivilized become a central component in the 1910 firescape.

Conservation and Male Identity

Roosevelt linked nature and masculinity very early in his life. Stories of a weak boy prone to sickness declaring that he would “train [himself] painfully and laboriously” are common in Roosevelt lore and usually mentioned in connection to his outdoor explorations and naturalist propensities.⁵⁴ Roosevelt's desire to be seen as a powerful male figure only grew stronger in his early years of public service as he was often dismissed by older men as “too feminine.” In a calculated turn, Roosevelt began to build his public and political persona around ideas of brute strength, ruggedness, and the strenuous life—as a man that never backed away from suffering. Roosevelt used his time in the west and glamorous frontier stories to perpetuate this persona. Undoubtedly, Roosevelt's love for conservation grew first and foremost out of a deep enjoyment of the natural world; but from it he was also able to weave a no-nonsense reputation and launch a successful political campaign.

⁵⁴ Theodore Roosevelt, *An Autobiography*, First Edition. (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1913), 59-60. Accessed online <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=wu.89058673005&view=1up&seq=7>

Roosevelt's language around manliness and civilization is politically motivated from the beginning. In his 1899 address to a prestigious gentlemen's club, Roosevelt focused on "The Strenuous Life." The desired outcome of this lifestyle was plainly stated, a powerful nation of powerful white men with an unwavering imperialistic drive.

We cannot avoid the responsibilities that confront us in Hawaii, Cuba, Porto Rico, and the Philippines. All we can decide is whether we shall meet them in a way that will redound to the national credit, or whether we shall make of our dealings with these new problems a dark and shameful page in our history. [...] The timid man, the lazy man, the man who distrusts his country, the over-civilized man, who has lost the great fighting, masterful virtues, the ignorant man, and the man of dull mind, whose soul is incapable of feeling the mighty lift that thrills 'stern men with empires in their brains'-all these, of course, shrink from seeing the nation undertake its new duties; shrink from seeing us build a navy and an army adequate to our needs; shrink from seeing us do our share of the world's work, by bringing order out of chaos in the great, fair tropic islands from which the valor of our soldiers and sailors has driven the Spanish flag.⁵⁵

Here, Roosevelt created an effective narrative in which "we" (meaning wealthy, educated, white American men) have a moral obligation to bring "order out of chaos" in places like Hawaii, Cuba, Porto Rico, and the Philippines. His language is simultaneously racialized and imperialistic. These islands serve as new frontiers and to shy away from his national agenda in these places is to bring your masculinity into question. But this is not simply an individual concern. A strong nation is made of strong men so to shirk this responsibility is to hasten in a "dark and shameful page in our history." Roosevelt continued to use this type of language throughout his political career but what is interesting to note is how he adapts this masculine language to different political contexts, specifically conservation. With so much money to be

⁵⁵ Roosevelt, Theodore. *The Strenuous Life: Essays and Addresses*, (New York: The Century co., 1902), 6-7. Accessed online <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015002574773&view=1up&seq=2&q1=spanish%20flag>

made from unencumbered resource extraction, conservation efforts needed a formidable strategy to stand against the capital giants of the day.

As Bederman notes, while masculinity belonged to all men, manliness and civilization denoted wealth and elite status; but in the case of conservation, extractive wealth was the enemy. What Roosevelt needed now was the everyday, average man on his side. With this in mind, Roosevelt promoted conservation as an arena in which the everyday man could *earn* his manliness. In a speech titled “Conservation as a National Duty” given to a group of governors in 1908, Roosevelt proclaimed “One distinguishing characteristic of *really* civilized men is foresight” (emphasis added).⁵⁶ This statement is representative of an important shift. Previously, wealth, education, status, and consequently race, signified a civilized man. But here Roosevelt made clear that a man’s conviction to conserve natural resources was not only *among* wealth, education, status, and race as a marker for manliness, but signified a truer, deeper civilization—and it was available to all men.

As a political strategy for conservation, this was an ingenious move. Roosevelt cast conservation land as belonging to the public yet ever in danger from private greed. In this manner, if lumber companies were allowed to pillage forests, they were stealing both capital and *status* from the average man. Unfettered extraction was simply uncivilized and immoral. Extraction was no longer simply an economic question; it was of moral and national importance. The Conservation Movement also upheld that a restrained approach to natural resources was

⁵⁶ Theodore Roosevelt, "Conservation as a National Duty," in Proceedings of a Conference of Governors in the White House, May 13-15, 1908 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1909), 3-12, paragraph 3.

indeed the best way to ensure the continued advancement of the American state politically, economically, technologically, and morally. An issue of this magnitude warranted some form of official enforcement. The Forest Service, established in 1905, became Pinchot and Roosevelt's proposed solution. But in another calculated move, the Forest Service wouldn't accept just any man; they needed men who embodied the conservation moment—ideal in both manliness and masculinity and yet nevertheless representative of the everyday man (or at least to be perceived as such).

Developing Rangers as the Ideal Man

Stories of early day rangers in the west tend to bring out a very specific set of characteristics. Rangers were consistently described using words such as self-assured, independent, pioneers, exceedingly hardy, etc. They were a model, “part explorer, part conservationist, part lawman.”⁵⁷ Their stories relay tremendous adventures, struggles, discomforts, and conquests. In other words, Forest Rangers lived (and advertised) Roosevelt's “strenuous life.” A sampling of Robert C. Gildart's collection of first-hand accounts, *Montana's Early-Day Rangers*, demonstrates how rangers embodied the language of manliness and masculinity and how such stories were perpetuated and used to shape public perception of the agency and conservation movement more broadly.

Gildart describes Forest Service applicants as facing a “three-part no-nonsense examination to qualify.”⁵⁸ And although many of the early rangers were in fact graduates of The

⁵⁷ Robert C. Gildart, *Montana's Early-Day Rangers* (Helena: Montana Magazine, Inc., 1985), 1.

⁵⁸ Gildart, *Early-Day Rangers*, 3.

Yale Forestry School, men from “all walks of life” were eager to apply.⁵⁹ A written test disqualified illiterate men while two additional field tests “insured that the Forest Service hired experienced hands.” Even in this hiring process we see the advent of a particular reputation taking shape. First, “all walks of life” are invited to apply. This demonstrated the inclusive changes that Roosevelt made regarding the conservation movement. Roosevelt needed everyday men in the Forest Service if he wanted to pass conservation as being *for* the public. Second, the description of “no-nonsense” examinations, two of which were physically taxing, insured strong, masculine applicants. And third, the intention of the tests to uncover those applicants who were literate and most experienced speaks to their manliness and civility.

Pinchot believed rangers needed to be “thoroughly sound and able-bodied, capable of enduring hardship and of performing severe labor under trying conditions” and to deal “tactfully with all classes of people.”⁶⁰ Another ranger noted (with a note of sarcasm) that “all one had to do was demonstrate an ability to read, write, and shoot a gun; pack a mule; ride a horse; read a map; build a cabin; kindle a fire; count game; subdue a poacher; buck wind, rain and snow; endure cold; exhibit prowess in snowshoeing, hiking, and cross-country skiing; and demonstrate

⁵⁹ Gifford Pinchot and Henry S. Graves founded The Yale Forest School in 1900, five years before Pinchot and Roosevelt formed the National Forest service. Funded by the Pinchot family, this essentially ensured that there were handpicked, “qualified” men ready to step into the newly created Forest Service. Being the only official school for forestry, this immediately established graduates as leading excerpts and authorities within the field. However, the curriculum was designed towards the desired political ends of Roosevelt and Pinchot. Subsequently, these two institutions reinforced the validity of the other. For more on the production of scientific knowledge within institutions to perpetuate power see: Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010), 1-9, 240-275. See also, Londa Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire: Colonial Bioprospecting in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004), 1-22, 226-241.

⁶⁰ Gildart, *Early-Day Rangers*, 18.

strength of character and strength of body.”⁶¹ Again, these diverse expectations were meant to attract and produce a *type* of man that could represent the Forest Service and conservation efforts in a manly and masculine manner.

Beyond recruitment, stories of early day rangers tend to emphasize their self-sufficiency and independence. As Gildart notes, “the early rangers were an elitist group capable of functioning effectively without the blessings of higher command.”⁶² This independence was perceived as increasing the agency’s efficiency and self-determination. Often operating without clear direction, however, meant rangers needed to be “resourceful and self-reliant [to] overcome obstacles no matter how overpowering.”⁶³ Examples of this resourcefulness and self-sufficiency range from building shelters, surviving extreme weather, avalanches, fires, to interactions with armed and dangerous men (and a few women), and in general thinking on their feet in legal, political, and life-threatening situations. One ranger summarized this internal culture by recollecting, “housing was provided, but often, only after he himself constructed it.”⁶⁴ Less romantically and more realistically, this independence was often due to the agency’s infancy and the novelty of their work.

This independence did allow the agency to make impressive strides forward in their early days, but it also made for a small group of loosely connected independent law officers. Officially, forest rangers were responsible for policing crimes like unlawful timber extraction, poaching, and arson as well as sorting out the occasional land claim dispute. In practice, however, this often

⁶¹ Gildart, *Early-Day Rangers*, 18.

⁶² Gildart, *Early-Day Rangers*, 11.

⁶³ Gildart, *Early-Day Rangers*, 14.

⁶⁴ Gildart, *Early-Day Rangers*, 4.

meant policing towards a specific vision of the American people, especially regarding class and race. It is important to remember that, while men like Roosevelt worked to reframe conservation as a movement for the everyday man, this was first and foremost a political strategy, not necessarily a heart reality. Underneath its equalizing reputation, conservation is still concerned with a racial utopia and imperialistic control. Conservation preserves wild playgrounds for the wealthy, regulates who has access to the land (heavily influenced by race), and how land can be used (influencing the flow of capital). While the forest rangers were a major step forward for the positive elements of conservation, their stories likewise expose negative contributions.

Ranger Charles Marble, or Buckskin Charley, moved to the Montana Territory in 1881 to work in the Yellowstone area. Reflecting on some of their “legal” duties, Charley recalled a time when “a couple of hombres with bad reputations decided to file a squatter’s claim on land having agricultural possibilities.”⁶⁵ He gives no context or explanation regarding these Latino men and their “bad reputations,” but continues that Frank, another ranger, took him along to “help move them off.” When Frank and Charley arrived the two men were in the midst of building a small cabin. Charley remembers the men, “in no uncertain terms,” telling them “to get the h—l off their land before they put us off.” Instead of leaving, Frank sat down a top the men’s coats on the ground and argued the following two hours. Eventually one of the Latino men deferred to Frank saying, “these persistent [sons of bitches] won’t leave us alone; lets go.”⁶⁶ They then retrieved their 45 colts from under their coats and left. Presumably Frank sat on their belongings thinking they might be armed.

⁶⁵ Gildart, *Early-Day Rangers*, 14.

⁶⁶ Gildart, *Early-Day Rangers*, 14.

Very clearly the rangers used race as a contributing factor to justify removing these men from the land. They are stated to have “bad reputations” but do not appear to have any legal warrant out for their arrest. Neither are they violating squatter law. Because of ranger independence, however, they were not obligated to follow any *real* legal procedure. The rangers simply needed to follow up the encounter with an incident report. In this manner, while the political language around conservation worked to lessen the racial components of manliness, authorities within the conservation movement still worked to remove non-whites from the landscape.

In another example, Ranger Frank Liebig recalled when he was given his assignment in 1902. He would be the ranger over the land that would become Glacier National Park. At the time his supervisor took him aside and said, “the whole country is yours, from Belton to Canada and across the Rockies to the prairie or Waterton Lake and the foot of St. Mary Lake.”⁶⁷ During his time there Liebig recorded many amazing adventures but recalled being worried only once. His language is important to note and so will be quoted in full.

I guess the only time I was a little worried was once when word was brought to me...that a bunch of Cree Indians had come across the Canadian border...with about 10 to 12 lodges and 40 dogs and were killing all the moose and smoking the meat. I sent word to Ranger Herrig, stationed at Fortine, to meet me at Round Prairie near Bowman Creek. ... F. Herrig was one of Roosevelt’s Roughriders, and a quite imposing figure. He generally rode a dark bay horse, decked up with a silver-studded bridle and martingale. He wore mostly high-top boots, a big 44 strapped on his belt and a 45-70 in a scabbard, and he wore the ranger’s badge always in plain sight. A big Russian wolfhound was his steady companion.

[When we arrived at their camp,] I walked up to the tepees, where three or four Cree Indians were cutting up some meat. Ranger Herrig rode ... behind me, his rifle all ready for action. I had my rifle in my hands too. When we got close the camp we were met by about twenty or more dogs. Men came from everywhere, and all the squaws and kids ran into the tepees.

⁶⁷ Gildart, *Early-Day Rangers*, 36.

I hollered for the chief to come out. Finally a diseased-looking Indian stepped out and made himself known as the responsible party. I told him that he came across the line and not to kill any more moose. He said they had had a fire across the line which drove all the moose into the United States and they were hard up for winter food. I told him again that they ran all the game out of the country with their dogs.

Some of the Indians didn't want to go. I told them they had to break camp next morning or we would kill all the dogs. The Indians could not exist without the dogs. These dogs were trained to surround a moose and hold him until the Indian comes up and kills him. We went to their camp next day [we] ... saw no signs of breaking their camp. This time Indians were hiding behind tents and trees, no squaws in sight, but plenty of dogs. The old Indian chief was there to meet me and said they couldn't move for a week yet until all their meat was cured.

First thing three or four shots crashed out, and a couple of dead dogs rolled on the ground. Ranger Herrig couldn't stand it any longer, and wanted to mop up all the dogs. I got ready for action also, thinking that the Indians sure would get even with us. So I hollered to Herrig and Geduhn to hold their fire for a minute to see what the Indians had to say. Everything was confusion in the camps, and I thought lead would be flying in our direction any second. Then the chief hollered and told me they would move immediately. The lodges went down, and in three hours they were on the trail up the North Fork and across the Canadian border. We hung around for several days, but the Crees stayed away.⁶⁸

On the surface, this is a story about conservation and the legacy of Indian removal, but the details of the narrative reveal even more. To start, Liebig begins the narrative with the words of his supervisor, "the whole country is yours." This is especially ironic and tragic considering the land to which he is referring is traditionally part of the migratory lands of the Cree, the tribe being harassed. The Cree are cast as the antagonist of this story because they 1) cross boundaries and 2) are "killing all the moose." While this is clearly an exaggeration, its intention is to cast the Cree as irresponsible stewards (lacking manliness) and thus underserving of the land. When the Cree explained that a fire has pushed the moose downward, their competence is further insulted by Liebig insinuating that it is their own dogs that have chased the moose away. Again, this

⁶⁸ Gildart, *Early-Day Rangers*, 36-37.

works to minimize their manliness and civilization suggesting they lack “dominion” over their animals.

The next noteworthy element of this narrative is the surprising amount of description given about Ranger Herrig. Liebig feels compelled to tell us that Herrig formerly belonged to Roosevelt’s Roughriders and was “a quite imposing figure.” Drawing associations to Roosevelt as well as a general militant and imperial persona works inversely to the Cree descriptions. While the Cree cannot control their dogs, Herrig rides a majestic and decorative bay with an obedient Russian wolfhound at his heels (ironically, also a hunting dog). Herrig is an imposing figure in military garb (regarding weaponry) with his “ranger’s badge always in plain sight.” The Cree chief, on the other hand, is initially hidden away and when he does emerge, is described as a “diseased looking Indian” (the descriptors hidden and sick working to undo even his masculinity). In every way these descriptions guide the reader or hearer to believe Herrig and the Rangers to be masculine, manly, and civilized and the Cree to be emasculate, unvirtuous, and uncivilized.

The last interesting element of this narrative is the way in which Liebig and Herrig are established as *complimentary* characters, one more so embodying manliness, the other masculinity. Herrig is clearly the masculine archetype. His physical description, military history, and flashing temper (the sudden and unannounced shooting of the dogs) all evidence this. Liebig, on the other hand, starting the story in a state of trepidation, represents the more manly traits when he stops Herrig from shooting the rest of dogs and speaks with the Indians to see if they are willing to leave without further conflict at this juncture. Liebig and Herrig are not meant to be

understood as conflicting characters, but as embodying the two virtues of the Forest Service: manliness and masculinity.

From the very conception of the Forest Service their role was to protect and propel the conservation movement as imagined by men like Teddy Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot. But as a small, burgeoning agency with few men and fewer resources set over impossibly vast regions, their ability to practice conservation through physically intervening with unauthorized extraction, logging, poaching, etc. was severely limited. Rather their most impactful work for the conservation movement was becoming a cultural embodiment of conservation virtues—at this time, manliness and masculinity. Unbeknownst to the rangers at the time, however, the agency was about to face a literal crucible and their continuation would depend on their ability to uphold and strengthen this reputation.

Why Men Fight Fire

Throughout the 19th and early 20th century people debated the merits of prescribed burning. Native tribes had been cultivating landscapes beneficial to their hunting and migratory patterns through controlled fires for a millennium. Some westerners saw the practicality of controlled burns for land clearing or simply keeping forests from becoming too dense. A few even understood the immense ecological benefits of fire. Others saw it as a mark of savagery on the land. They perceived Natives as torching what otherwise might have been profitable timber. Conservationists and agriculturalists could be swayed to either side of the debate, but timber companies were certain that fire of any kind was a scourge on the land. The question came to a head, however, with the fires of 1910. The most compelling narrative would win the day, but the first threads of these narratives began before anyone conceptualized the magnitude of 1910.

Steven Pyne tells us in his work, *The Pyrocene*, that in Europe with “the advent of the Enlightenment’s modern science and the technologies it made possible...hominins began to lose their fire connection. [...] Social elites decided that fire had to be deconstructed, put into appliances, or as coal became a dominant fuel, sublimated into steam. Open burning reeked of superstition and magic; it was deemed dangerous and unnecessary. [...] Fire went from friend to foe.”⁶⁹ Fire became a symbol of the uncivilized. This prejudice continued its heritage in America and especially in the west where it was conveniently usurped into the language of conservation.

The overlapping vocabulary of civilized and uncivilized in discussions on fire and conservation is not hard to spot. Open flames were inherently uncivilized and those that employed it were seen as foolish and superstitious. Roosevelt argued that those opposing conservation exposed themselves as foolhardy and uncivilized. Linking these two in his mind, when Roosevelt argued for conservation, he didn’t imagine conserving the natural processes that came with the land such as fire. Rather, he and Pinchot dreamed of forests totally free of fire. Prior to 1910, Pinchot even wrote in his book *The Fight for Conservation*, “Today we understand forest fires are wholly within the control of men.”⁷⁰ But just as Roosevelt’s hopes for the conservation movement needed more than elite white support, this fireless dream would require manpower.

Roosevelt and Pinchot had already made conservation and wild spaces a place where the everyday man could earn his masculinity, but firefighting became an even more poignant tool. Fighting wildfires in the American west became a national stage on which men could

⁶⁹ Pyne, *The Pyrocene*, 28-29.

⁷⁰ Gifford Pinchot, *The Fight for Conservation* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1967), 45.

symbolically perform ideas of manliness and masculinity. Usually led by a Forest Ranger, already the cultural embodiment of these ideas, men on the fire line were told they were defending something core to the American identity from a savage enemy. Conservation was a moral and nationalistic issue because the civilized man, according to Roosevelt, prioritized foresight; and it is only in wild spaces that the civilized man can claim his masculinity. In this manner, firefighters were not simply protecting a forest but rescuing the very means of producing a strong, civilized nation.

In his book *The Big Burn*, Timothy Egan shows how firefighting became a crucible for manliness, so to speak. Egan focuses on the multitude of lower-class men and especially the experiences of immigrants and the 25th Infantry (the all-black regiment of Buffalo Soldiers) as they fought the fires of 1910.⁷¹ It is important to note here a potential flaw in Egan's research and logic. While Roosevelt certainly presented himself and the conservation movement as for the everyday man—even the downtrodden man—Egan seems to present this as an entirely genuine aspect of Roosevelt's character. Perhaps Roosevelt's understandings of race did soften throughout his life, but it seems far more likely that his inclusive language was designed to win votes and recruit bodies. After all, neither Roosevelt, Pinchot, or anyone in their social circles felt called to join the thousands of working-class men as they marched into a fiery holocaust with little to no preparation, resources, or compensation. Yet Egan is right to note the power of that social narrative on the men themselves.⁷²

⁷¹ Egan, *The Big Burn*, 137.

⁷² For an example of Roosevelt's complicated track record on race, especially with regards to the Twenty-Fifth Infantry, see, Anthony W. Wood, *Black Montana: Settler Colonialism and the Erosion of the Racial Frontier, 1877-1930* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2021), 96-97.

Regardless of Roosevelt's sincerity, many men labored because they believed this narrative. Egan tells the story of two Italian immigrants saying "For now, Domenico and Giacomo had a vital role in the new country. [... They] and hundreds of other Italians were now working for the pride and joy of Gifford Pinchot and Teddy Roosevelt. Their small part of the Great Crusade [...] was to save the centerpiece of the dream of the two easterners. Pinchot and T.R. would do the speechifying, the political lifting, while these strong backs would hold the front line."⁷³ It is human nature to assign meaning to our work and many like Domenico and Giacomo were willing to step into this readymade narrative.

Similarly, for the Buffalo Soldiers, "The call to the fire lines was a chance for the 25th to prove itself again, to its own men, to the rest of the nation, and to Teddy Roosevelt."⁷⁴ In a cultural context that disparaged black men as "a menace to American civilization"⁷⁵ (and in the wake of a violent incident involving one of the Buffalo Soldiers), black men wondered if fighting fire was a powerful enough stage to transform how their white counterparts perceived them. For some, it did. After the 25th Infantry successfully saved the town of Avery and evacuated many others from danger, local newspapers and individual citizens remarked on the bravery and respectability of the Buffalo Soldiers. Although these compliments and praises were frequently and unfortunately phrased as "despite being black, the men behaved as if white," this still demonstrates that their participation worked to change how the public understood their manliness. One local remarked of the soldiers, "They stuck to their posts like *men*" (emphasis

⁷³ Egan, *The Big Burn*, 137.

⁷⁴ Egan, *The Big Burn*, 126.

⁷⁵ Egan notes here that "books such as *The Negro: A Menace to American Civilization* were popular throughout the nation." Egan, *The Big Burn*, 127.

added). Another paper wrote they “have done heroic service and saved many lives and much property.”⁷⁶ Here in these remarks, we see local everyday people taking up the language of conservation, of manliness and masculinity, and bestowing new identities on those that participated.

Perhaps galvanized in 1910, firefighting continued to be defined by ideas of manliness and masculinity. Norman McClean, who experienced the fires as a boy, later wrote in his book *Young Men and Fire* that “a summer spent fighting fire would turn a boy into a man and straighten out a drunk.”⁷⁷ In the wake of the fires Pinchot also made sure to cast these men as heroes. Arguing that these fires could have been avoided or at least minimized had the Forest Service been better funded, Pinchot was able to garner an immense amount of support for the agency by casting those against conservation as desecrating the memories of those that had died.⁷⁸ In reality, no amount of funding could have averted 1910, but the public stood behind Pinchot’s narrative. “Barely ten months after the fire, Congress doubled the money in the Forest Service budget for roads and trails, giving the rangers what they had begged for in previous years. The convincing story Pinchot had told of ragged young foresters fighting a sea of flame carried the day once more for a majority in the new Congress.”⁷⁹ Pinchot did indeed win his funding, but it did not come freely. The narrative Pinchot and Roosevelt had spun suggested that with proper funding the Forest Service could basically remove fire from the landscape. To act on this promise, the forest service began to implement policies of total fire suppression.

⁷⁶ Egan, *The Big Burn*, 209-210.

⁷⁷ McClean, *Young Men and Fire*, 27.

⁷⁸ Egan, *The Big Burn*, 241.

⁷⁹ Egan, *The Big Burn*, 248.

Many point to the evolution of fire policy post 1910 as the lasting legacy of The Great Fire rather than understanding the changes in fire policy as the lasting legacy of manliness and masculinity narratives and how they influenced how humankind interacted with their environs. The former fails to consider 1) how the language and culture of manliness and masculinity influenced these policies and 2) how the narratives of conservation and firefighting deeply cemented the language of manliness and masculinity within the culture. This is problematic from an eco-critical perspective because it distracts us from seeing the complex ways in which we respond to and think about the more-than-human world in our cultural productions. In this case, because the fire was understood in terms of manliness and masculinity, it is intellectually defensible to pause and dissect such language in works like the *Skylark Trilogy* in hopes of better understanding how Smith conceptualized the fires themselves. Yet this approach is only justifiable when the historical context is placed front and center.

Men like Roosevelt and Pinchot so successfully usurped the language of manliness and masculinity—already prolific in the public imagination—and reimagined it for their political benefit. To gain support for conservation, they took the extremely exclusive image of the ideal man, and said to the everyday man, you don't have to be born into this, you can *become* this. In his "Strenuous Life" speech, Roosevelt is speaking to stereotypically manly men—wealthy, educated, and upper class. To them he offers imperial conquest as a way to reaffirm their masculinity. Inversely, conservation is presented to the masculine man as a way to earn his manliness. This was a powerful narrative and compelling promise cemented by the fires of 1910. Following the Big Burn, conservation emerged as the victorious narrative, consequently allowing socio-political ideas of manhood to influence national fire policy for the greater part of the next

century. This further demands that we recognize these ideas of manliness and masculinity not merely as a cultural practice but also as an active environmental ethic. By returning to Smith and his science fiction work, we can begin to uncover and reimagine the ways in which environmental events seeped into culture—often in unexpected ways.

From Forests to Galaxies—Reimagining Rangers

Beyond management policies, the fires of 1910 found their way into culture in some very direct ways, such as Zane Grey's novel *The Young Forester* in which the hero is a Pinchot Boy (what the early day rangers are often referred to as).⁸⁰ The presence of fire in Smith's space operas is not as apparent. Growing up surrounded by the newly created national forests in the panhandle of Idaho, Smith was steeped in a conservation culture. Smith was eleven years old when Roosevelt was first elected to the presidency meaning his teen years and early adulthood coincided with Roosevelt's campaign to connect ideas of conservation with specific definitions of manliness and masculinity. As Smith grew into a young man, therefore, what constituted the ideal man was increasingly being defined, embodied, and advertised by Forest Rangers and the conservation movement. Emerging as the triumphant narrative of the day, the fires of 1910 only worked to solidify the influence of the conservation movement and its embedded culture of manliness and masculinity.

Smith's stories and characters embody these ideas. Although Smith's protagonist is not a literal forest ranger, the main character Richard Seaton and his compatriot Martin Crane are clearly intended to embody the virtues of early day rangers and indeed, later in the series, Seaton

⁸⁰ Zane Grey, *The Young Forester* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1910).

essentially becomes a “space ranger.”⁸¹ Furthermore, Smith uses the main antagonist, Marc DuQuesne, as a foil example to these particular ideas of manliness and masculinity. And finally, Smith elevates a conservation ethic as central to the narrative and ultimately as the most profound moral difference between our hero and villain. From Smith’s character descriptions to backstories to the narrative plot, the ideas of manliness and masculinity made popular by the conservation movement and cemented by the fires of 1910 are front and center.

One of the first descriptions given of Seaton is from the perspective of his fiancé, Dorothy. She remarks that Seaton has “the wide brow of the thinker” as well as “the firm square jaw of the born fighter.” Even in this first description, we see the language of manliness and masculinity. Concerning masculinity, Seaton is “*born*” a fighter. This reinforces the thinking of Hall and Roosevelt that all men are born with this viral masculine strength, some, though, more than others. But it also notes that he had “the wide brow of the thinker.” In this case, Seaton is not born with this physical trait, rather the “wide brow” is a result of his contemplative nature. Dorothy’s description continues on denoting that it was Seaton’s “vivid personality, fierce impetuosity, and indomitable perseverance” that had “set him apart from all other men.”⁸² Very clearly Smith is using this language, so pervasive in the conservation movement, to build his protagonist in the imagination of his readers.

⁸¹ Although the term “Space Ranger” was actually first employed by Smith’s contemporary, Isaac Asimov (who may also have been pulling from Forest Rangers for inspiration), Smith’s characters very much embody the work of the early day rangers.

⁸² All references to Idaho, the fires, and his father appear in the rare Pyramid edition of *The Skylark of Space*. Edward E. Smith, *Skylark of Space* (New York: Experimenter Publishing Company, 1928), 10.

Even Seaton's backstory leans into these ideas. Like Smith himself, Seaton's character grew up in the mountains of northern Idaho—a region, Smith notes, “not much out of the Pioneer stage and offering few inducements to the intellectual effort.” It is here that Seaton, raised by his widowed father, is shaped by the wilderness around him. He describes his childhood home, a cabin in a meadow “beyond which rose a magnificent snow-covered peak that caught the earliest rays of the sun. This mountain, dominating the entire countryside, was to the boy a challenge, a question, and a secret.” The challenge was one of physical conquest consisting of hunting and fishing as well as “scaling its steep sides” in order to “[toughen] his sturdy young body.” Here we see the fulfillment of Roosevelt's desire for young boys to “play savage” in the great outdoors. The question was one of mythos. Young Seaton “puzzled over the question of [the mountain's] origin as he lay upon the needles under some monster pine.” In this manner the wilderness is almost a spiritual necessity, lending the character a sense of depth. Also in asking about the land's origin, we move away from a purely extractive view of the land. And finally, the mountain is a secret.

He put staggering questions to his father and when in books he thought he found some partial answers, his joy was complete. He discovered some of the mountain's secrets then, some of the laws that governed the world of matter, some of the beginnings of man's mind had made towards understanding the hidden mechanism of nature's great simplicity. Each taste of knowledge whetted his appetite for more. Books! Books! More and more he devoured them, finding in them meat for the hunger that filled him, answers to the questions that haunted him.⁸³

Not only does this work to present Seaton as a man whose intellect is never satisfied but whose very intellect was sparked by interactions with the wild. This element satisfies the language of

⁸³ Smith, *Skylark of Space*, (New York: Experimenter Publishing Company, 1928), 10.

manliness by bringing in ideas of academia, culture or civilization, advancement, and a sense of understanding or mastery of the natural world—particularly through science.

It is not surprising that Smith references the fire of 1910 in his work of fiction, though he changes certain details. Seaton's character experiences the fire at a younger age than would have Smith (early high school compared to early college). Additionally, in the *Skylark*, Seaton's father, Fred, perishes leaving the boy orphaned. And in a moment of what I believe is honest reflection, Smith writes that "Seaton turned his back upon the woods forever." This statement, coming immediately after a wonderfully nostalgic description of his wooded home, indeed shows how truly horrifying the fires of 1910 were for so many people. Despite being presented in a work of fiction, this represents the very real emotions of Smith and many others. Both as an individual and part of a community, Smith felt the weight of these fires and was compelled to integrate the experience into his fiction.

In the *Skylark*, the fire in Seaton's childhood is very much presented as a crucible for the strength of his character. The fire also functions as Seaton's official entry into manhood as his father is now dead. The orphaned protagonist works his way through the rest of high school and excels, earning a scholarship to college (denoting manliness). Seaton's character thrives at university. "Study was a pleasure to his keen mind. And he had ample time for athletics, for which his back woods life had fitted him outstandingly" (linking masculinity and conservation). The narrative also says that "*in spite* of the fact that he had to work his way, he was popular with his college mates" (emphasis added).⁸⁴ These three descriptions work together to create Seaton as the ideal male figure based on cultural preferences endorsed in the conservation movement.

⁸⁴ Smith, *Skylark of Space*, (New York: Experimenter Publishing Company, 1928), 11.

He is intelligent and academically minded. He is physically fit, which Smith directly links to life in the wilderness. But it also says that he was respected and popular with his peers *despite* his need to work through college. This activates the language used by Roosevelt and his party that any man can *become* the ideal man. Recall that previously wealth and status were equally necessary descriptors for the ideal man. Seaton comes from poverty and yet can still qualify as the ultimate male figure as one that has essentially adopted the tenets of Roosevelt's "strenuous life."

Smith dedicates this whole chapter to establishing Seaton's manliness and masculinity as well as his transition from boyhood to adulthood. After Seaton's character graduates from college as a physical chemist with highest honors, he continues on in University as a research fellow earning his PhD by "brilliant research upon rare metals."⁸⁵ Immediately after, he is given his own room in a respected rare metals laboratory in Washington D.C. Almost as if Smith is concerned that he has been focusing too long now on Seaton's intellectual achievements, he returns to describing Seaton's physical prowess. "He was a striking figure, well over 6 feet in height. Broad shouldered, narrow waisted, a man of tremendous physical strength. He did not let himself grow soft in his laboratory job but kept in hard fine condition. He spent most of his spare time playing tennis, swimming and motorcycling."⁸⁶ We are even given his muscled weight, 211 pounds. Smith emphasizes that Seaton "did not let himself grow soft" in all his academic work.⁸⁷ This language plays into the fears of emasculation that Hall associated with being over-civilized.

⁸⁵ Smith, *Skylark of Space*, (New York: Experimenter Publishing Company, 1928), 11.

⁸⁶ Smith, *Skylark of Space*, (New York: Experimenter Publishing Company, 1928), 11.

⁸⁷ Smith, *Skylark of Space*, (New York: Experimenter Publishing Company, 1928), 11.

It is as an accomplished tennis player that Seaton enters Washington's elite social circles and meets the supporting protagonist of the trilogy, M. Reynolds Crane. As the trilogy unfolds, Seaton becomes "the fastest gun in space" and Martin Crane is his ever faithful depute. But both characters and their friendship function to display the desired elements of maleness. Where Seaton comes from poverty, "Crane had never known the lack of anything money could buy. He had inherited his fortune and had little or nothing to do with its management, preferring to delegate that job to financial specialists. However, he was in no sense an idle rich man with no purpose in life. As well as being an explorer and archeologist and a sportsman, he was also an engineer, a good one, and a rocket instrument man second to none in the world."⁸⁸ This so perfectly reflects Roosevelt's speech on "The Strenuous Life" given to a group of wealthy college graduate men. Roosevelt compels the young men that, though they have the wealth to live a comfortable and idle life, they must rather employ their time pursuing a life of purpose. Crane represents the ideal man born into wealth while Seaton represents the everyday man that proves himself worthy.

It is the equality of their friendship, however, that demonstrates the cultural power of the conservation movement and its campaign to champion the everyday man. First meeting as opponents on the tennis court, they recognize the other's skill and decide to become a fearsome doubles team. Importantly, it is through their daily practice that they "came to know the other as a man of his own kind and a real friendship grew up between them." Moreover, "their friendship was such that neither Crane's immense wealth and high social standing, nor Seaton's comparative poverty and lack of standing offered any obstacle whatever. Their comradeship was

⁸⁸ Smith, *Skylark of Space*, (New York: Experimenter Publishing Company, 1928), 12.

the same weather they were in Seaton's modest room or Crane's palatial yacht."⁸⁹ These are not inconsequential narrative details. The expressions of manliness and masculinity described in Bederman's scholarship is not congruent with this fictitious friendship written by Smith. Crane certainly qualifies but Seaton's poverty disqualifies him and a friendship between these two would be highly improbably and equality, impossible. What, therefore, has occurred between the era with which Bederman's scholarship is concerned and Smith's writing of the *Skylark Trilogy* in 1928? The answer is the conservation movement.

Men like Roosevelt and Pinchot so successfully usurped the language of manliness and masculinity—already prolific in the public imagination—and reimagined it for their political benefit. To gain support for conservation, they took the extremely exclusive image of the ideal man, and said to the everyday man, 'you don't have to be born into this, you can *become* this.' Support for conservation was your ticket and the early day rangers served as your guide. It is arguably the fires of 1910, however, that cemented forest rangers (and consequently this new vision of the ideal man) as a central cultural figure in the American West. Without a doubt, these ideas impressed upon the mind and imagination of Edward Elmer Smith. Only in the wake of the conservation movement and the fires of 1910 would a young man from Idaho write and successfully circulate a series in which the protagonist is an impoverished orphan, hardened by the wilderness, sharpened by academia, tested by fire, master over the elements, *and* seen as the ideal man—not in spite of his trials but because of them.

When introducing the antagonist, Dr. Marc DuQuesne, we are meant to see Seaton and DuQuesne as foil characters. Smith even uses some of the same words to describe the men.

⁸⁹ Smith, *Skylark of Space*, (New York: Experimenter Publishing Company, 1928), 12.

“[DuQuesne] was a striking figure. Well over six feet tall, unusually broad-shouldered even for his height, he was plainly a man of enormous physical strength.”⁹⁰ Like Seaton, DuQuesne’s brow as a celebrated scientist, is prominent. “His thick, slightly wavy hair was black. His eyes, only a trifle lighter in shade, were surmounted by heavy black eyebrows which grew together about his aquiline nose.”⁹¹ Where Seaton has a welcoming, handsome face, DuQuesne has a “forbidding but handsome face.”⁹² Even one of their co-workers when looking for DuQuesne says, “I thought it was Seaton in here at first. A fellow has to see your faces to tell you two apart.”⁹³ Smith is going out of his way to show the similarities between these two men—and not only in their masculinity, but in their manliness as well.

DuQuesne is never described as anything less than a genius. He is cultured, academic, calculating, successful, and preeminent in all he does. He appears to be both masculine and manly in every respect, yet he and Seaton are cast in opposition. What *does* distinguish these two men is clearly tied to the conservation movement. At the beginning of the series, both men work for the government at the Rare Metals Laboratory, but we discover soon that DuQuesne has secret dealings with the World Steel Corporation. World Steel is cast as blatantly corrupt, committing any crime from back ally deals, buying political support, to murder in order to monopolize their power within the steel industry. They represent the extractive capitalists at their worst.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ Smith, *Skylark of Space* (Floating Press Edition), 9.

⁹¹ Smith, *Skylark of Space*, 9.

⁹² Smith, *Skylark of Space*, 9.

⁹³ Smith, *Skylark of Space*, 9.

⁹⁴ It’s almost surprising that Smith chose the villains to be steel rather than copper barons; though perhaps it had something to do with Pennsylvania being the center of the steel industry at the time and Idaho’s senator Weldon B. Heyburn hailed from PA.

DuQuesne's dealings with World Steel are only a partial explanation of their differences. The other major distinction between these two men is how they approach the discovery of the new element "X." Other aspects of element "X" and how it relates to themes of fire will be made clear shortly, but for now all that is necessary to understand from the narrative is that element "X" is an off-planet element that when exposed to copper allows for total conversion of energy. Seaton discovers and holds the only solution of this element X, but DuQuesne is desperate to gain control of it. "Chemists have known for years that all matter contains enormous stores of intra-atomic energy, but have always considered it 'bound'—that is, incapable of liberation. Seaton has liberated it. [...] Now that discovery means such power as the world never dreamed of...the Corporation could furnish power to the entire world at very little expense."⁹⁵ DuQuesne's mind immediately goes to the economic possibilities of this discovery, but he is not interested in entering a competitive market. "[W]e must have exclusive control. How could we make any money out of it if Crane operates a rival company and is satisfied with ten percent profit? No, we must get all of that solution. [...] Seaton...must be killed, for if he is left alive he can find more of the stuff and break our monopoly."⁹⁶ Here, the reader is meant to understand DuQuesne's desire for a monopolist control over a natural resource as central to his villainy.

Inversely, Crane and Seaton's approach to this discovery is meant to demonstrate the strength of their character. Seaton, who rarely thinks of personal gain, immediately considered the voyaging capabilities of this new element—specifically, space travel. As the business minded one in the friendship, Crane does consider the economic potential, but in a very different capacity

⁹⁵ Smith, *Skylark of Space*, 12.

⁹⁶ Smith, *Skylark of Space*, 15.

than does DuQuesne. “I [Crane] have already drawn up sketches for a power-plant installation of five hundred thousand electrical horsepower, which will enable us to sell power for less than one-tenth of a cent per kilowatt-hour and still return twenty percent annual dividends.”⁹⁷ We see that Crane is not unconcerned with profit, but he has no interest in a monopoly. Both Seaton and Crane think in terms of human advancement and betterment; DuQuesne thinks in terms of personal profit and power. And later in the narrative, when they encounter deposits of X, Seaton and Crane are satisfied to harvest a very small amount knowing it is more than enough to meet the energy needs of the world many times over.⁹⁸

Seaton and Crane’s restraint in their extraction as well as their resistance to a monopolist business model cast them as worthy men compared to the greed of DuQuesne. All three men display traits denoting manliness and masculinity; but what truly sets them apart as men in the narrative is a conservation ethic. This demonstrates the extent to which Smith absorbed the cultural ideology pushed by men like Roosevelt and Pinchot to first, garner support for the conservation movement and later, in the wake of the fires, to garrison the precarious forest service. Further, the fact that Smith used this language to describe his protagonists suggests that, on some level, Smith supported the conservation movement and its wider political agendas—specifically Roosevelt’s imperial pursuits. We see suggestions of this in Seaton’s character when, instead of being concerned with the economic ramifications of his discovery, he is absorbed in the prospect of exploring new worlds and new frontiers.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Smith, *Skylark of Space*, 54.

⁹⁸ Smith, *Skylark of Space*, 195.

⁹⁹ Notably, the power-plant comes after the flyer. Their “principal” desire is not for the money or power but to “be off exploring new worlds,” Smith, *Skylark of Space*, 54.

As in Roosevelt's speech urging the young college graduates not to dismiss their "responsibly" as men in the south pacific, manliness and masculinity serve as a link between conservation and imperialism. Frontiers are the wild spaces that "produce" ideal men. Within the nation, this elevates the importance of conservation. But as fears over "the closing of the frontier" circulated in the US after 1880, the imperial capture of new frontiers became exceedingly attractive. Not only does imperial expansion perpetuate frontiers, but conservation within the homeland is easier to sustain when natural resources can be extracted and imported from elsewhere. We see this in the *Skylark* series as our four main protagonists travel throughout different systems. In many ways, space exploration is what lends Smith's trilogy its shape.¹⁰⁰ His characters jump from system to system, planet to planet, and culture to culture, all the while making new friends and enemies. From their new intergalactic alliances, they are able to extract vast amounts (yet always noting how little they took in comparison with the available stores) of copper and platinum.¹⁰¹ And although they are gaining these resources through peaceful alliances the violence of imperialism is by no means absent. In order to protect themselves and their new allies, Seaton and Crane are more than willing to resort to violence, even genocide.

The second book in the trilogy, *Skylark Three*, begins with their alien friends, the Osnomian being threatened by a neighboring enemy planet. Because of advanced weaponry (a common theme in science fiction), total destruction is presented as both possible and probable. The Osnomian solution is to commit genocide before their enemies have a chance to attack. At this point in the narrative, Seaton's and Crane's wives, Dot and Margaret, raise their voices in

¹⁰⁰ A common characteristic of Space Opera more generally.

¹⁰¹ Smith, *Skylark of Space*, 195. Later on in the trilogy their main extraction becomes scientific knowledge opposed to raw materials.

protest. “He can’t,[...] He mustn’t! It would be too ghastly! It’s outrageous—it’s unthinkable—it’s[...]simply too horrible! [...] Think of the destruction of a whole planet—of an entire world—with all its inhabitants!”¹⁰² Immediately the two women are silenced and chastised. Seaton condescendingly responds “Now listen, you two girls—you’re going off half-cocked and you’re both full of little red ants. What do you think [the Osnomians are] up against? [...] this is a real he-war; a brand totally unknown on our Earth. It isn’t a question of whether or not to destroy a population—the only question is which population is to be destroyed. One of them’s got to go. [...] there isn’t a thought, even remotely resembling our conception of mercy [...] on either side. If Dunark’s plans go through the enemy nation will be wiped out. That is horrible, of course. But on the other hand, if we block him off from the salt and ‘X,’ the entire Kondalia nation will be destroyed just as thoroughly and efficiently [...] Which nation do you want saved?”¹⁰³ Gender, conservation, and imperial thinking are all at play in this interaction.

Most obviously, the discussion is divided between men and women—the men in favor of genocide, the woman appalled by the very idea. But while the women are cast as being irrational and, ironically, lacking prudence, the men are to be seen as not backing down from an “uncomfortable decision.” Their willingness to commit violence in order to suppress a threat is elevated as a testament to their masculinity. This violence is their “responsibility” as men. They are also able to conveniently justify their actions in two ways. First, violence is seen as inevitable. One population will destroy the other. The only controllable element is who will act first and emerge victorious. Second, they define the morality of the other. These alien nations

¹⁰² Edward E Smith and Hans Waldemar Wessolowski, *Skylark Three* (Auckland, NZ: The Floating Press, 2011), 25-26.

¹⁰³ Smith, *Skylark Three*, 26.

(including their allies surprisingly) do not possess anything “resembling our conception of mercy.” This othering enables them to claim the moral high ground without actually compelling them to behave accordingly.

Roosevelt’s political campaign used ideas of masculinity and manliness to link and support both conservation and imperial violence. In his “Strenuous Life” speech, Roosevelt is speaking to stereotypically *manly* men—wealthy, educated, and upper class. To them he offers conquest as a way to reaffirm their *masculinity*. Inversely, conservation is presented to the *masculine* man as a way to earn his *manliness*. This was a powerful narrative and a compelling promise, so much so, that in even the wake of 1910 and the great fires, conservation emerged as the victorious narrative. In doing so, this became cemented as the language of conservation, the language of the 1910 firescape, and the language of Smith’s science fiction.

CONCLUSION

IMAGINING THE WORLD OF TOMORROW

In the early 20th century, the “rugged man” ideal is very much a popular cultural narrative. Yet, because it is essentially hemmed to ideas of conservation, the “rugged man” ideal likewise functions as an environmental ethic. This, however, should not be understood as unique. All environmental ethics stem from cultural narratives and vice versa. Yet so often, when trying to discern environmental themes, ethics, influences etc. within our cultural productions we can easily identify the “obvious” environmental connections, but so often fail to understand how a common societal or political idea might also be functioning as an environmental idea.

In the case of Smith’s genre defining science fiction, manliness and masculinity exist within the narrative culturally, politically, and environmentally. Yet it is the fires of 1910 that tie these realities together in the lived experience of Edward Elmer Smith. Culturally, wildfires allowed men to perform their masculinity and earn their manliness. Politically, the fires of 1910 solidified the Forest Service and therefore the model of new ideal man. And environmentally, these fires encouraged policies to favor suppression and perpetuated naïve notions that landscapes and ecosystems could be controlled. Because the fires of 1910 are central to Smith’s experience and the cultural, political, and environmental responses to those fires are thematically present in Smith’s *Skylark Trilogy*, I argue Smith’s works should be read and understood as fire literature. This, however, is counter to the way many would define fire literature.

Stephen Pyne has argued that with the development of industrial combustion, the role of fire in the production of ideas has essentially disappeared in western civilization.¹⁰⁴ Once a constant companion to humans, fire permeated every facet of culture from basic survival, cooking, family systems, to mythology, religion, and philosophy. As the presence of open flames faded from daily life, however, Pyne sees its intellectual residue lessening. While I resonate with this position, I believe Pyne's own work challenges this perception.

Consistently, Pyne refers to all forms of industrial combustion as the burning of lithic landscapes, possible only through advancements in pyro-technologies. In other words, though the flames may have flickered out, fire is still all around us. So, if indeed, our lamps and light switches, stovetops and electric kettles, mopeds, subways, and jet engines, are all burning—are all pyro-technology, on what basis must we assume that our intellectual ruminations have abandoned fire? I argue here that, although our production of ideas may indeed have been industrialized, the connection to fire was never lost. The unique historic, literary, and environmental moment in which E. E. Smith lived and wrote provides a useful case study to consider the intellectual role of fire in a work of highly “industrial” science fiction.

To understand this relationship, however, it is necessary to understand the connections between fire, conservation, progressivism, mythology, chemistry, and science fiction. Fire has often been linked to mythology for the obvious reason that many of the most memorialized myths center on humans receiving, taking, or discovering fire. As one of the four primeval elements, fire is also deeply embedded in science, both ancient and modern expressions—

¹⁰⁴ Stephen J. Pyne, “Fire in the Mind: Changing Understandings of fire in Western Civilization.” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B*, Vol. 371 Iss:1696 (2016). <http://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2015.0166>

specifically chemistry. Advancements in pyro-technology have encouraged and seemingly supported ideas of unending progress. From the beginning, conservation has had to ask questions about fire on the landscape. Science and science fiction have a symbiotic relationship of inspiration. And in the literary world, many connections have been made between the cultural function of mythology and science fiction. Yet few have endeavored to connect fire and science fiction.

On the surface, this seems to affirm Pyne's argument; there is no trace of fire in our futuristic imaginings. But if mythology is so often pyric in theme, science, pyric in nature, and science fiction, a form of imaginative science as well as mythology in function—logically, we ought to find science fiction mid-combustion. By unpacking the language of fire in these relationships as well as in Smith's lived experience of the 1910 fires, I argue that Smith's genre-defining *Space Operas* illuminate the presence of fire in the production of modern science fiction and should thereby be understood as a continuation of fire literature.

In the *Skylark Trilogy*, Smith integrates the ancient mythologies of fire, technology, and advancement with the modern myths of the frontier and the march of progress. In doing so, whether consciously or subconsciously, Smith presents a narrative in which the morals and values of conservation, frontier ideologies, and progressivism are cast as the solution to the cautionary myths of old. I argue this distinct merging of ancient and modern mythology developed in the creative mind of Smith because of his experience with fire in the 1910 burn which then uniquely shaped the narratives and characters of his *Skylark Trilogy*.

Within many of the ancient fire-mythologies, while human striving is applauded, it is also cast as a potential danger. A common theme in many of these narratives is the idea that humans

must restrain their desire lest they reach for that which they were never intended to have (what they should and should not have usually being religiously dictated). The technological possibilities of fire are often seen in this light, thus encouraging the narratives to be, in some way, cautionary. Fire in these narratives, such as in the Prometheus myth, is inherently divine. It comes from the gods, whether stolen or gifted, and then becomes the basis of some cultural benefit, though the procurer is often punished (hence the cautionary element).

The premise of Smith's trilogy is Seaton's discovery of the new element X. Like the fire of ancient mythology, element X is "divine," coming from outer space. And like fire, the chemical conversion of X produces an immense amount of energy. Consequently, element X holding great technological potential fills the same narrative function as does fire in ancient mythologies. Furthermore, in both myth and history, advancements in pyro-technology are most often utilized in warfare and motive power. So too in Smith's trilogy, element X is applied first and foremost to transportation (exploration) and warfare.¹⁰⁵ Neither is the cautionary moral absent.

In the trilogy, both the protagonist, Seaton, and the antagonist, DuQuesne, gain access to element X and its subsequent power. DuQuesne's immediate instinct is to monopolize X and leverage its market value for societal power. This seed of greed escalates by the end of the trilogy with DuQuesne's eventual desire to dictatorially rule not only earth, but the whole galactic system which would end in demise. As an alternative to DuQuesne's use of element X, Seaton

¹⁰⁵ Pyne argues in his book *Voyager* that one of the few consistent cultural motivations for advancements in pyro-technology is the human desire for exploration. Crosby in *Throwing Fire* likewise argues that there is something intrinsic to fire that inspires human movement, often in the fore of exploration. See: Stephen J. Pyne, *Voyager: Exploration, Space, and the Third Great Age of Discovery* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2010); and Crosby, *Throwing Fire*.

and Crane move to democratize the technological power of X, harvesting only what is necessary, for the betterment of humanity. In this manner conservation is cast as the solution to the cautionary element of ancient mythologies and Seaton is cast as the new and improved Prometheus. It is the key to progress without the embedded fear of demise.

This is not a forgetting of fire, but a reimagining of it. Element X, used wisely, sparingly, and democratically, is presented as opening new frontiers, expanding technological capacities, and launching new eras of scientific exploration. In other words, in the same way that ancient fire mythologies allowed cultures to imaginatively adapt to new ideas and pyro-technologies, Smith's fiction is an imaginative exercise that explores the ideas and technologies of his own time—neither of which have strayed far from fire. This also begins to answer the question presented at the start of this work: Why, in 1939, did a group of creative, accomplished scientists host a literary conference as their contribution to “Building the World of Tomorrow?”

From ancient mythologies to futuristic Space Operas, humankind has always tended to imaginatively work through the implications of our thoughts, plans, and actions. We are calculating creatures of forethought, and our most sophisticated tool yet is undoubtedly our imagination. I believe Smith and his fellow author-scientists knew this to be true. While on-lookers may have seen their science fiction writing as antithetical to their work as “real” scientists, or a creative outlet for a highly methodological occupation, they did not. These men believed that the first step to *building* the world of tomorrow was *imagining* the world of tomorrow. Yet in their ruminations, they did not forsake their current moment. As we see in Smith's *Skylark* series, he pulls from the past and present to weave creative futures; futures

forged by empire, expansion, conservation, gender, “frontiers,” politics, wild spaces, and of course, by fire.

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