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Success in the Limberlost: Concepts of nature and the successful life in the Limberlost novels of Gene Stratton-Porter

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SUCCESS IN THE LIMBERLOST:
CONCEPTS OF NATURE AND THE SUCCESSFUL LIFE IN THE
LIMBERLOST NOVELS OF GENE STRATTON-PORTER

A Thesis

Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of History
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by
Katherine E. Rasche
1982
APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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Approved, May 1982

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER I. THE LIFE AND WRITINGS OF GENE STRATTON-PORTER</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER II. SUCCESS IN THE LIMBERLOST</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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The writer wishes to express her appreciation to Thad Tate, under whose guidance this research was conducted, for his patient guidance and criticism throughout the investigation. The author is also indebted to Cam Walker and Drew McCoy for their careful reading and criticism of the manuscript.
This thesis examines Gene Stratton-Porter's concepts of nature and how they related to her version of the successful life in early twentieth century America. Born on Hopewell Farm, Wabash County, Indiana, in 1863, Gene Stratton-Porter was one of the most popular and successful novelists of her time. The thesis investigates the question of whether her ideas were mere nostalgia for a simpler life or if she addressed the more pressing problems of the society in which she lived.

Gene Stratton-Porter wrote both nature novels and natural history books. This thesis deals with her earliest novels, written when she lived near the Limberlost Swamp in Geneva, Indiana. They are: The Song of the Cardinal, Freckles, At the Foot of the Rainbow, A Girl of the Limberlost, The Harvester, and Laddie. The critical literature on Gene Stratton-Porter is also considered and discussed.

After discussing Gene Stratton-Porter's life, the thesis examines the components of her version of the successful life. Gene Stratton-Porter defined success in economic and spiritual terms, and her characters found both by living close to nature. She emphasized the independence, freedom, and self-reliance engendered by finding economic and spiritual fulfillment through working on and caring for the land. Yet, in using the land's resources for their needs, her characters also preserved the inherent beauty of the natural world. By emphasizing the concept of self-sufficiency rather than the accumulation of wealth as the basis for success, she hoped to show people that they could use the resources to fulfill their needs without destroying or upsetting the natural order. Thus she hoped to reconcile the differences between strict conservationists, who were interested primarily in the economic value of the land, and strict preservationists, who looked to the land as a source of spiritual and moral inspiration.

The thesis concludes that Gene Stratton-Porter's writings awakened Americans to the need to view nature as both an economic and a spiritual resource, as well as the need to weigh very carefully the possible benefits to humanity against the destruction of nature in making decisions concerning the environment.
SUCCESS IN THE LIMBERLOST:
CONCEPTS OF NATURE AND THE SUCCESSFUL LIFE IN THE
LIMBERLOST NOVELS OF GENE STRATTON-PORTER
INTRODUCTION

For over three hundred years Americans' physical and emotional responses to the land have shaped their environment. Whether these responses were positive or negative Americans' decisions about their way of life and the future of their society altered the environment, imprinting upon it their views of the natural world and man's place in it. Throughout American history a "sea of feelings, psychic imagery, literary and poetic insight, economic heritage, perceptual habit, and other factors" influenced people's views of nature and the landscape.¹ Nature became more than just greenery; it became a repository for the symbolic feelings Americans had about the direction of their lives and society. This thesis will examine how one popular writer in the early twentieth century, Gene Stratton-Porter, attempted to integrate these feelings and responses into a model for living a successful life.²

In American social myth the image of the self-made man

²Throughout this thesis I have conformed to Gene Stratton-Porter's publishers and used the hyphenated form of her name.
led to the persistent model of success as the self-reliant individual who finds economic and spiritual fulfillment through his own energies and abilities. Often the individual's success depended upon his use of the resources in the environment. In colonial times, as the ideas of the Enlightenment infiltrated the colonies and the population moved westward, the myth of the self-reliant hunter, living alone in the wilderness and gaining spiritual fulfillment from it, became one model of success. According to Richard Slotkin, author of *Regeneration Through Violence, The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*, John Filson's *Daniel Boone* embodied the first literary interpretation of this myth. Through the act of killing his prey Boone gained an understanding of himself and the world, and could thus return to civilization and regenerate it. In this model of the successful life man found inspiration in the natural world but also exploited it, destroying the wilderness and transforming it into a rural landscape. Filson built his model around the concepts of economic and spiritual gain as well as this act of transformation. In regional variations of the myth the Boone character's values emphasized individual initiative and self-reliance, and equated success with the remaking of his individual fortune.

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and his individual spirit. Although the wilderness served as the source of inspiration, the hunter's responses to his environment aided in the destruction of that source.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Americans' perceptions of nature were linked to their hostile views of the city. In the case of Thomas Jefferson his complex attitudes toward the city were shaped by his love of the self-reliant farmer's life; his love of architecture, painting, music, philosophy, conversation, and other pastimes he associated with civilized urban life; and his concern for national interests. According to Morton and Lucia White, authors of *The Intellectual vs. the City, From Thomas Jefferson to Frank Lloyd Wright*, Jefferson's agrarianism usually triumphed over his aesthetic tastes, yet the dangers of the War of 1812 made him realize that America needed its own manufacturing centers to preserve the freedom he associated with his agrarian ideals. In the ordering of his values he was "first a patriot, second a lover of the soil, and third a lover of chamber music." Thus Jefferson accepted the city as a source of independence and comfort,

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6 Ibid., 13.
but he remained haunted by the European image of corrupt
city politics, activities of city mobs, and the taint of
commercialism and the accumulation of money. 7 By linking
agrarian economics with a system of nature-centered values
in which the landscape ministered to men's minds rather
than to their bodies, Jefferson tried to integrate both
physical and emotional responses to the land in a model
for living a successful life. Yet the need for cities to
protect the American nation made it impossible for everyone
to live according to this ideal. This discrepancy did not,
however, extinguish his belief that nature would sustain
the progress of the American people, advancing civilization
and enriching individuals favored with its development. 8

In the decades after 1820 individualism found its
embodiment in contemporary heroes and its celebration in
the works of writers and poets. The individualistic model
of success emerged to dominate most of the nineteenth
century. 9 Yet the political rhetoric of the time continued
to waver between images of the simple self-sufficient farmer
and the ambitious, enterprising urban liberal capitalist. 10

7 White and White, The Intellectual, 19, 217.
8 Peter J. Schmitt, Back to Nature, The Arcadian Myth in
9 Greene, America's Heroes, 10.
10 Ibid., 13
Like Jefferson, Ralph Waldo Emerson had urban tastes such as art, opera, and his club, yet he did not identify the city with civilization. Thus he could praise the values of civilized life even as he attacked the American city. Emerson believed that man's closeness to God and nature away from the city had a positive effect upon his character, "for he learned the importance of tranquility, innocence, and patience, and gained endurance from 'plenty of plain food, unwatered milk, and cheaper and better sleep than was possible in the city.'" He viewed the woods as the scene of faith, as contrasted with the city as the scene of deception that destroyed poetry and philosophy.

Henry David Thoreau's maxim that man's home should be among the living things of nature illustrated his antipathy not only toward the city, but toward the village and farm as well. He valued the isolated individual, living in nature, free from all social attachments. Unlike Jefferson, Thoreau was philosophically opposed to civilization as well as the city. Although he often returned

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11 White and White, The Intellectual, 26-27.
12 Ibid., 28.
13 Ibid., 29-30.
14 Albert Solnit, "What's the Use of Small Towns," in Zube and Zube, eds., Changing Rural Landscapes, 80.
15 White and White, The Intellectual, 30.
16 Ibid., 33.
to the town, during his sojourn at Walden Pond he tried as best he could to live his version of the successful life, deriving his physical and spiritual sustenance from the natural world around him.

As the nineteenth century progressed, however, the American nation underwent profound social changes that turned the emphasis of success away from moral and spiritual growth to the accumulation of monetary wealth. The base of the American economy changed from a mercantile commercial system to an industrial manufacturing one. Industrialization and immigration swelled American cities to previously unknown dimensions.\textsuperscript{17} Between 1860 and 1870 the growth in the urban population exceeded that in the rural population for the first time. From 1860 to 1900 the urban population of the United States quadrupled while the rural population merely doubled. Men such as Henry Adams and Henry James deplored the American city for its bad air, dust, noise, dirt, miserable crowding, poverty and beggary, monotony of buildings, and general complexity.\textsuperscript{18} Yet those who had to survive in an increasingly urban environment looked for a new definition of the successful life. They found a new model in the gospel of success and the writings of Horatio Alger.

\textsuperscript{17}White and White, \textit{The Intellectual}, 75.
\textsuperscript{18}\textit{Ibid.}, 218.
In the age of Rockefeller, Carnegie, Vanderbilt, Gould, Fisk, Harriman, Guggenheim, and other multiple millionaires, great wealth could come suddenly and in immense profusion. The gospel of success arose in post-Civil War America to awaken Americans to the promise of such opportunities for financial gain in urban centers. This gospel manifested itself in the lecture circuit, the pulpit of the Protestant church, schoolbooks, novels, magazines, biographies of the successful, and juvenile literature as the question of how to control wealth became one of the pressing ethical, political, and social problems of the time. Horatio Alger aimed his books at juvenile audiences, and through his writings he introduced his young readers to this gospel of success and showed them one way to deal with its preachings. *Ragged Dick*, published in 1867, illustrated that success, distinction, honor, and wealth were the rewards of persistent ambition and hard work. Many of Alger's heroes came from poor rural backgrounds and found success through a combination of pluck and luck in an urban setting. Although Alger emphasized traditional faith in self-reliance and individual effort, he also noted that one needed luck as well in order to succeed. *Ragged Dick* also revealed the

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20 Ibid.
21 Ibid., 63.
great emphasis on money in a capitalist society: every one of Dick's relationships had its basis in a financial transaction. Yet Dick showed that the pursuit of wealth could be challenging, exciting, and satisfying, and that any poor boy who tipped his hat, saved his money, took baths, and watched for his opportunity could be very successful and marry a wealthy girl.  

In his model for success Alger restated what Emerson, in more exalted terms, told a previous age: in an era of urbanization and industrialization, undergoing a rapid population explosion, the individual was in danger of submerging himself in a swiftly developing mass society. Unlike Emerson, however, Alger wrote about individualism more in terms of economic fulfillment rather than spiritual fulfillment, using the city as the focal point in his version of the successful life. Furthermore, his model for American life based upon the city and industrial expansion implied the maximum use of natural resources and thus the total devastation of the environment, not merely a transformation of it.

By the end of the nineteenth century the immigrant and the millionaire were the two new types in American history,

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22 Nye, The Unembarrassed Muse, 63, 65.
23 Ibid., 63.
and both symbolized the city. Yet by the time of Alger's death in 1899 the popularity of his books was waning. In an age when it increasingly took money to make money, rags-to-riches millionaires were becoming scarce; it also took technological skill, scientific talent, and business acumen to succeed in the financial world. At the same time Americans were becoming discontented with the nature of their society. With Frederick Jackson Turner's analysis of the ending of the frontier in 1893, Americans exhibited an increased anxiety over changes in their environment. According to Roderick Nash, author of Wilderness and the American Mind, opinions of the American wilderness had always depended to a large extent on opinions of American civilization, and by the end of the nineteenth century enough doubts had arisen about the benefits of civilization to make possible widespread popular enthusiasm for the uncivilized. Reacting against industrialization, urbanization, and a growing population, Americans began to renew their interest in the natural world around them.

In his article "Conservation As Anxiety" Roderick Nash identified several facets of this new wilderness cult that

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24 White and White, The Intellectual, 96.
25 Nye, The Unembarrassed Muse, 71.
had its roots in a discontentment with civilization. These facets included a growing tendency to associate the wilderness with America's frontier and pioneer past that was thought responsible for many desirable national characteristics; the appeal of the savage as the embodiment of virility, toughness, and fighting spirit; investment of the wilderness with aesthetic and ethical values, with emphasis on the opportunity it afforded for genteel contemplation and worship; and the defense of the primitive as a means of protesting the commercialism and sordidness observed in the nation. These changes in attitude contributed to the first major surge of the American conservation movement in the Progressive period of the early twentieth century, and within a few years, the concept of conservation came to have wide public usage.

To many conservation would take over the functions of the frontier, "keeping the nation young, vigorous, prosperous, democratic, replete with opportunity for the individual, and, because of its relation to nature, wholesome and moral." In returning to the values of an earlier time they looked for a definition of success that took into account moral and spiritual fulfillment as well as economic gain.

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28 Ibid., 87.
29 Ibid., 87-88.
Gene Stratton-Porter, a writer in the early twentieth century, expressed her concern for the individual in a rapidly changing society and attempted to place him back in the landscape where he gained both economic and spiritual fulfillment, thereby reassuring Americans that they could return to the simple life of a previous age. Writing within the genre of romantic nature novels, Gene Stratton-Porter formulated her own version of the successful life. Because popular fiction embodies the attitudes and concerns of the society for which it is produced, it has been an unusually accurate reflector of the aspirations of that society.\(^30\) Thus the immense appeal of her novels suggests that many Americans were, at least symbolically, looking for an alternative to the urban industrial society in which they lived. Although the impracticalities of Gene Stratton-Porter's model left little room for its implementation in real life, its emphasis on the self-reliant individual and his use of the land for both spiritual and economic fulfillment awakened Americans to the need for conservation while reassuring them that it was not too late to return to the values and lifestyle of an earlier time.

Because Gene Stratton-Porter wrote within the popular tradition few scholars have studied her work. In The Popular Book James Hart found the popular appeal of her novels in the

\(^{30}\) Nye, The Unembarrassed Muse, 4.
simple country life she portrayed. According to Hart, the novels "vicariously satisfied many Americans' yearning for the rural ways they had left in searching out a living in the big cities, and also pleased urban-bred people who shared the common American belief that the country somehow created purer, happier lives." Yet Hart, in concentrating on her popularity, ignored her very real contribution to nature study and conservation ideas.

Peter Schmitt discussed Gene Stratton-Porter in his book, Back to Nature, The Arcadian Myth in Urban America. Schmitt argued that at the turn of the twentieth century Americans began a "back to nature" movement on a popular scale that was different from a "back to the land" movement in that it valued nature more for its spiritual impact than its economic importance. The writers of nature novels and wilderness fiction, such as Gene Stratton-Porter and Harold Bell Wright formed an important part of this movement. In discussing Gene Stratton-Porter as part of a general movement, however, Schmitt did not address her unique ideas about man's total relationship with the land. For example, according to Schmitt, writers of this fiction brought nature to city dwellers purified of black flies and mosquitoes,

frigid cold and steaming heat, while the heroes alienated themselves from ignorant farmers by their books and love of the forest.\textsuperscript{33} Yet Gene Stratton-Porter demonstrated to her readers that a utilitarian knowledge of the natural world was necessary for people to survive the unpleasantness and dangers inherent in that world. The heroes of her novels may have appeared to be "sophisticated intellectuals who valued nature's ancient grandeur and a simple life denied to most Americans," but Gene Stratton-Porter attempted to show her readers the possibilities for living such a life.\textsuperscript{34}

In \textit{The Unembarrassed Muse: The Popular Arts in America} Russell Nye described Gene Stratton-Porter's novels as joining the cheerfulness of the "glad" books with a love story, and adding a third element, the nature-loving sentimentality of the currently popular outdoor school.\textsuperscript{35} Although he called her first book, \textit{The Song of the Cardinal}, "incredibly mawkish" Nye recognized that her formula was a good one: "sentimentality, faith and optimism, innocence and trust, nostalgia for country life, curative and educational powers of Nature (with a capital N)."\textsuperscript{36} Frank Luther Mott, author of \textit{Golden Multitudes, The Story of Best Sellers in the United

\begin{footnotes}
\item[33]Schmitt, \textit{Back to Nature}, 140.
\item[34]Ibid., 131.
\item[35]Nye, \textit{The Unembarrassed Muse}, 37.
\item[36]Ibid., 38.
\end{footnotes}
States, identified her formula as love of nature with a practical twist, such as collecting moths to pay for school, coupled with the gospel of cheeriness. In Mott's view the novels not only dealt with children's affairs, but were written so completely on a childish level that "they seem rather banal to any active adult intelligence." In The New American Literature, 1890-1930, Fred Lewis Pattee criticized Gene Stratton-Porter for blending her extensive and exact knowledge of nature with flat sentimentality. Pattee deplored Americans' taste for sentiment as "the sugar that must be sprinkled even upon science and realism." Another critic, Carl Van Doren, described Gene Stratton-Porter as the "first among dozens who practiced their tearful, perishable mode of art, throbbing with all the current impulses, laughing and weeping with the uncritical multitude, possessing the gift of attracting and exciting that multitude with books in which was displayed, as in a consoling manner, the rosy, empty features of banality." He saw no merit in an author who "piled sentimentalism upon descriptions of nature in soft, sweet heaps." Because such critics saw no

40 Ibid.
merit in the obvious sentimentality of Gene Stratton-Porter's writing, none analyzed her work for its deeper symbolic value.

Grant Overton, a literary reporter and contemporary of Gene Stratton-Porter's, discussed her work in three of his books, *The Women Who Make Our Novels*, *American Nights Entertainment*, and *Authors of the Day*. Overton saw in her remarkable popularity important and significant tendencies of the time, and cautioned against undervaluing the influence she exerted "for good, for clean living, for manly men, for womanly women, for love of nature, for sane and reasonable human hopes and aspirations, for honest affection, for wholesome laughter, for a healthy emotionalism as the basis and justification of humble and invaluable lives." While recognizing that literature, aesthetically viewed, may not have been enriched by her writings, he nonetheless valued her writing for its power to bring happiness to people as well as make their lives better. He discussed her popularity in terms of her own absolute sincerity in her ideals and writing, especially her view of the role of art. According to Overton, Gene Stratton-Porter defined art as any human effort that encouraged nature to grow—the handling of flowers with the deftness and skill of her mother or writing a story that tended to stimulate and fortify the

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42 Ibid., 89.
natural impulses of average men and women to live and learn, to seek and engage in interesting work, and to mate and bear children. Because her novels promoted these personal and social ends in her vision of the successful life, Gene Stratton-Porter considered herself an artist making a valuable contribution to society. Overton was among the few critics who recognized that contribution.

In his recent book, *Gene Stratton Porter*, Bertrand Richards made no attempt to establish her as a major figure in American literature, but strove to place her among the minor ones. He conceded that while she may not have been a great novelist, she also was not a "cheap, money-grubbing sentimentalist" or an "insincere hack." Her appeal, according to Richards, lay not in her novels' cleanliness, decency, or even in their beauty, but in her ability "to arouse and sustain the interest of her readers in the most transparent of plots, the most obvious resolvement of situations, and the most advantageous workings of circumstance." Yet Richards recognized that without the rich nature lore pervading her novels, Gene Stratton-Porter would only be one of many popular writers at the turn of the century. Her deep love of the natural world around her and her

45 Ibid., 134.
ability to transmit that love through her writing gave her work its permanence. Although Richards did not discuss her nature message in his book, he realized that her accurate portrayal of a region and her discernment of the wonders of nature earned her consideration as a minor figure in the history of American literature.

While many of these critics made valid points, none discussed Gene Stratton-Porter in terms of her views of the natural world and their relationship to her vision of the successful life. Schmitt weakened his argument by grouping her novels with those written by authors with different viewpoints; Overton and Richards concentrated on other aspects of her writing. By her own admission, everything she wrote was taken from her own life and experience. Therefore her life and upbringing hold the key to her ideas and writing.

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46 Richards, Gene Stratton Porter, 75.
47 Ibid., 141.
Jeanette Porter Meehan's biography of her mother, The Lady of the Limberlost, The Life and Letters of Gene Stratton-Porter, provides the most comprehensive source for her life. Gene Stratton-Porter wrote a brief autobiographical sketch at the request of her publishers for use as an introduction to her novels, and this profile furnishes further information about her life. Bertrand Richards's book also provides insight into the motivation for her work. Taken together these sources reveal the story of a woman who based her model for the successful life upon her physical and emotional perceptions of the natural world, emphasizing the spiritual aspects of success rather than the economic aspects.

Geneva Grace Stratton was born on August 17, 1863, on Hopewell Farm, Wabash County, Indiana. This land on which she was born and matured cannot be considered apart from her life and work. By 1863 men had cleared much of the Wabash Valley area and established farmsteads, but the land was still only one step removed from the wilderness. Wildlife abounded everywhere—buffalo on the prairie to the west, fish in the rivers and streams, and all types of birds and game animals in the surrounding forest. The youngest of
twelve children, she was allowed to roam free as a young girl, and so began her lifelong interest in the natural world. Both parents had a great influence on her, especially her father, a self-made man who had moved to the wilderness of Indiana and carved a prosperous farm from the landscape. He also was a licensed Methodist minister who claimed with pride that he could recite the Bible from memory. He believed in the love of God, the love of his fellow man, and the love of nature, and he worshipped beauty in souls, hearts, faces, landscapes, trees, flowers, and animals. These beliefs he passed on to his daughter who described her life as love, "just love, love of God, love of Nature, love of my fellow man." 

In the physical beauty of the natural world around her lay the foundation for her love of the land. "No other farm was ever quite so lovely as the one on which I was born after this father and mother had spent twenty-five years beautifying it," wrote the author in later life. In a natural setting of rolling hills and flowing streams the Strattons had

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3 Meehan, The Lady of the Limberlost, xii.
created an ideal landscape from the transformed wilderness—
vine-covered fences formed colorful boundaries for their
land, their orchard in bloom resembled a carpet of flowers,
and sheets of blue flag, marigold, and buttercups covered
the swale which they could have drained but chose to leave
in its natural state.  

This appreciation for the physical beauty of nature led
Gene Stratton-Porter to investigate the functions and workings
of the natural world. Her father, Mark Stratton, had to
observe nature and understand it in a utilitarian sense in
order to survive and be economically self-sufficient. This
knowledge allowed him to appreciate both the beauty and
dangers inherent in the environment and thus enabled him to
use the land for his economic and spiritual needs. Noting
his daughter's extraordinary interest in all outdoor life,
he helped and encouraged her in her learning. He taught her
that birds were a gift of God, "their beautiful music-
making and presence a delight, their particular use being
to protect the crops and fruit from insect pests." He
 taught her to deal lovingly with all wild things, showing
her how to doctor wounded birds or animals and how to make
pets of squirrels and rabbits. She learned not to be afraid
of anything, for she could recognize the really dangerous

5 Porter, "A Little Story," 12.
6 Meehan, The Lady of the Limberlost, 12.
things and knew what to do in case she ever met them. She knew that the absence of fear was the greatest protection from danger in the natural world, "for when you are afraid, animals know it; they are immediately antagonistic, and that is where the trouble begins." Understanding and knowledge of the natural world provided the key to this absence of fear, reinforcing her love for all elements of the environment. In her version of the successful life this love and acceptance of the natural world in all its guises enabled men to transform the landscape physically, thus giving them the means to survive economically, without destroying it.

In her model of the successful life Gene Stratton-Porter emphasized economic self-sufficiency only as a means for allowing people to live close to the land and find their spiritual fulfillment from it. From the land she learned the love of God for all living things and found inspiration for her soul, precepts that no amount of formal education or religious training could teach. Because she was allowed to run free as a child, Gene Stratton-Porter developed a dislike for formal institutions, including church and school. When she sat in church dressed in her uncomfortable Sunday clothing, "watching the sky, the clouds, listening to the birds and bees, catching the delightful odor of clover fields and new-mown hay as it drifted through the open

windows, and wondering in her own mind if God was not outside rather than inside." She had very little formal schooling in her early years, and did not begin school on a regular basis until she was eleven and the family had moved to Wabash. She was forced to drop out of high school in order to nurse her sick sister, and she was thankful for the private nature of the rest of her education. She once observed, "I have always been too thankful for words that circumstances saved my brain from being run through a groove in company with dozens of others of widely differing tastes and mentalities . . . What measure of success I have had comes through preserving my individual point of view, method of expression, and the spartan regulations of my childhood home." As the antithesis of formal institutions, the natural world provided the setting and inspiration for learning and spiritual fulfillment.

In 1886 Gene Stratton married Charles Darwin Porter, a druggist, and in 1887 their only child, Jeanette, was born. The family moved to Geneva, Indiana, in 1888. When oil was discovered on their land they used the profits to build a new house, Limberlost Cabin, according to Gene Stratton-Porter's own design. The fourteen room house, built near

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8 Meehan, The Lady of the Limberlost, 22.
10 Meehan, The Lady of the Limberlost, 35.
the Limberlost Swamp, had Wisconsin cedar logs on the bottom story and redwood shingles from the Pacific coast on the upper story. Once Jeanette was old enough for school, a growing interest in photography combined with an already established interest in the natural world took Gene Stratton-Porter into the swamp to study its life. By this time the Limberlost Swamp was not the dangerous, pristine swampland it had been when they had first moved to the area. The continual discovery of oil and valuable timber combined to make Mrs. Porter's field work possible by opening up roads into the swamp and bringing men to it—men who were tolerant of and helpful to her work.

Gene Stratton-Porter began to spend her spare time photographing and sketching birds and animals in their natural habitat. Around 1900 she sent these photographs and natural history hints to Recreation; after the first few installments, she was asked to take charge of its camera department. She later had a dispute with the editor, and Outing offered her a position on its natural history department. Her success as a nature writer encouraged her to try fiction with a nature theme, and Metropolitan published her first story, "Laddie, the Princess, and the Pie," in 1901. She based this story upon her childhood

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13 Richards, Gene Stratton Porter, 29.
experiences, later incorporated into the full length novel, Laddie, and began the pattern of her later work in which she based each story or novel upon some incident in her life. By the time she published her second story in December 1901 she had a wide following as a professional writer, photographer, and illustrator, even though she had yet to publish her first book.\(^{15}\)

According to Richards, these early nature articles were almost entirely devoid of the sentimentality and anthropomorphism that marked her later nature work. She presented her material straightforwardly, the descriptions of bird life illustrated with highly original photographs of birds and bird families.\(^{16}\) Her pioneer work in the portrayal of birds greatly influenced her contemporaries and photographers who were to follow her. To a greater or lesser extent, the method she developed and explained through her writing had to be followed if totally natural pictures were to be taken.\(^{17}\) No other naturalist had accomplished what she had with photographing birds. Others may have been doing more valuable scientific work, but she had the greatest talent for presenting her work and observations in a combination of words and pictures which would appeal to many people.\(^{18}\)

\(^{15}\)Richards, *Gene Stratton Porter*, 33.
\(^{16}\)Ibid., 48.
\(^{17}\)Ibid., 66.
\(^{18}\)Ibid., 94.
Throughout her career it was impossible to separate the naturalist from the novelist in Gene Stratton-Porter's writing. Nature was her first love, and it permeated her novels as background, motivation for action, and shaping of character. It was her novels, not her nature work, that had the greatest popular appeal and supported her other interests. Through these novels millions of Americans learned how they could become economically self-sufficient and find spiritual fulfillment through her model of the successful life.

Gene Stratton-Porter published her first book, The Song of the Cardinal, in 1903. She received inspiration for the story on one of her late afternoon walks when she came upon the broken mangled body of a dead cardinal, left lying in the road where a hunter had shot it merely to test his marksmanship. The incident became the story of the life of a pair of cardinals and of a farmer who loved nature. The male cardinal leaves the Limberlost Swamp to find a mate, and he finds both a mate and the perfect nesting ground on the banks of a river on the farmer's land. The farmer and his wife befriend him and protect the cardinal family from a hunter passing through the land looking for targets to test his skill. Their interest in the cardinals draws the

19Richards, Gene Stratton Porter, 46; Overton, American Nights Entertainment, 288.
old couple back together as they reaffirm their love for nature and each other. Because they are central characters in the book, Gene Stratton-Porter treated the cardinals anthropomorphically, but in later novels she did not portray animals in this way.

The critical response to The Song of the Cardinal set the pattern for the reception of her later works. Many were overwhelmingly positive, such as the reviewer in Arena, who cited Mrs. Porter's valuable contribution to a greater understanding of the natural world and praised her poetic style of writing:

We cannot conceive of a boy or girl, or one of older years, who has read its pages, ever again being able to wantonly slaughter the feathered singers of forest and field. It will awaken the tender and essentially noble emotions which inspire a reverence for life and a sympathetic and loving interest in Nature, in a way that cannot fail to enrich the character of its readers. . . . this volume, if widely circulated, will be no inconsiderable factor in awakening the finer side of life which the money-madness of the past thirty years has tended to anesthetize. . . . If the Audubon Society should circulate thousands of copies of this work, it would do far more to revolutionize public sentiment than the expenditure of the same amount in dry arguments or heated protests. 20

Yet other reviewers questioned both the accuracy of the natural history in the book and the reality of the

In response to this latter criticism she defended the character, Abram, the farmer:

Shades that are and are to be! of Washington Irving, Whittier, Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Joaquin Miller, Enos Mills, John Muir, John Burroughs, and all the mighty host of men past and present who have lived their life on the land! Shades of my father, whom I wrote into and all over the character of Abram, a man who daily worked in the soil, and read the big books from Confucius down and whose speech teemed with the high perfection of phrasing of Isaiah, whom he read daily and could quote literally throughout!  

These two differing perceptions followed Gene Stratton-Porter throughout her career and caused her much unhappiness. She insisted that she wrote with maturity "a more deeply searching and a more highly polished brand of English" than her critics would admit, and she added that for her natural history work alone "in Norway or Sweden I would have earned a Nobel prize." Yet even though most of her nature writing contained accurate observations and authentic photographs, when she succumbed to poetic interpretations in these studies her writing was at its worst. When she resisted this temptation, however, her powers of observation were so keen and her descriptions so accurate that she could vie

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22 Meehan, The Lady of the Limberlost, 131.
23 Hart, The Popular Book, 211.
with scientists for veracity while at the same time remaining readable. Thus readers might be led from her writing directly into the natural world, learning to love and appreciate nature firsthand.

While wandering on the outskirts of the Limberlost in the spring of 1904, Mrs. Porter saw a huge feather drift down and fall at her feet. She used this incident and her subsequent nature work on the birds of the Limberlost as the inspiration for her second novel, Freckles, published in October, 1904. The story concerned a young boy who believes himself an orphan, but is eventually found by his wealthy relatives. Freckles, although frightened of the Limberlost Swamp, applies for a job to guard it from lumber thieves, and here he grows close to nature, drawing inspiration from the ways of the insects, birds, and animals, and enjoying the beauty of the flowers and trees. He also proves himself a man in his encounters with the thieves and wins the love of the beautiful heroine, the "Swamp Angel."

Gene Stratton-Porter drew the characters of Freckles from the people around her. She modeled the title character after an oil man who helped her with her nature work; an idealized picture of her daughter became the "Swamp Angel." Throughout all of her writing Gene Stratton-Porter

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24 Richards, Gene Stratton Porter, 97.
25 Meehan, The Lady of the Limberlost, 140.
believed that she depicted real people, having them say the things that they really said and do the things they really did. This human touch, according to her daughter, accounted for the tremendous appeal of her novels.

Freckles brought Mrs. Porter the large reading public that she kept for many years and gave her the necessary reputation to establish an advantageous agreement with her publishers. Mrs. Porter's greatest interest had always been her nature work, and after the successful reception of Freckles her publishers allowed her to alternate one natural history book with one nature novel. She knew that these nature studies would not be commercially successful on their own, and she tried to interest people in them through her novels. Thus she called her novels "nature studies coated with fiction" and hoped her readers would absorb enough of the nature work while reading the fiction to send them afield, and at the same time keep in their minds her picture of the successful life.

At the Foot of the Rainbow, published in 1907, followed Freckles. Set in central Indiana, it told the story of two trappers and the woman they both loved. Because of a false message the woman married the dissipated Irishman rather than

26 Meehan, The Lady of the Limberlost, 135.
the heroic Scotsman whom she truly loves, and the course of the novel concerns the way in which the two lovers are united. Their love and appreciation of the natural world symbolize their romantic love. In contrast, the Irishman always sought adventure and excitement in town, the symbol of his ultimate downfall due to alcohol. *At the Foot of the Rainbow* again drew mixed responses from the critics, yet many agreed that the naturalistic theme was a redeeming characteristic. As a reviewer in *Outlook* stated, "If it is worth reading (and let us give the author the benefit of the doubt), it is so because of the background of outdoor life, nature, and the changing pageant of the seasons."  

In August 1909 Mrs. Porter published another of her most successful novels, *A Girl of the Limberlost*. The story concerned Freckles's friend, Elnora, who hunts the Limberlost for moths to sell in order to finance her education. Her mother hampers her efforts because she is unable to come to terms with her husband's death, and subsequently she ignores the spiritual and intellectual well-being of her daughter. Through the course of the novel Elnora receives her education and gives the city people a new respect for the country way of life. Her mother also realizes her mistakes and becomes an open, loving parent. In the end Elnora falls in love with and marries a man who shares her love and respect for the

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28 Review of *At the Foot of the Rainbow*, *Outlook*, June 6, 1908, 89:313.
world of nature. Mrs. Porter received the inspiration for this novel while doing field work at night and realizing that a young girl could make a good living by working with moths. In an article she wrote for *World's Work*, "Why I Wrote A Girl of the Limberlost," Gene Stratton-Porter discussed her satisfaction in bringing hope and inspiration to people and also added another word to her critics:

> And I want to say for such people as I put into books, that, in the plain, old-fashioned country homes where I have lived, I have known such wealth of loving consideration, such fidelity between husband and wife, such obedience in children, such constancy to purpose, such whole-souled love for friends and neighbors, such absence of jealousy, pettiness, and rivalry as my city critics do not know is in existence. I know that they do not know these things exist, else they would not question my chronicles of them.

> ... In the meantime I shall have had the joy of my work, for to me it is a joy unspeakable to make a swimming hole splash, squirrels bark, and nuts rattle down inside reform school walls, or set a bird singing, leaves rustling, and a cricket chirping beside hospital cots.²⁹

In 1911 Mrs. Porter published *The Harvester*, a book she wrote in response to letters written her by young men asking questions about the woods and if there were anything they could do to earn a living that would keep them outside all of the time. Because she considered intimacy with the

outdoors and all of nature as the best way of knowing God and His teachings, she wanted to interest all young men in her conception of the successful life, and so emphasized that no man was forced to endure the grind of city life if he willed otherwise. According to Mrs. Porter, anyone who wished could, with such simple means as herbs dug from fence corners, start a farm that in a short time would yield worthwhile work and independence. So she wrote The Harvester about a young man whose mother trained him to stay in the woods and earn a good living through the resources he found there. She based her story upon growing ginseng and other herbs that could be sold to druggists and chemical supply firms. The Harvester also carved wood, drawing inspiration from moths and other creatures suggested to him through daily life in the woods. His search for a young girl who could love the woods as he did provided the romantic interest in the novel. The reviews and Mrs. Porter's response were similar to those after the publication of her previous works.

In 1913 Mrs. Porter wrote her last novel at Limberlost Cabin, Laddie, which was a faithful description of her childhood home, friends, and neighbors. She cast herself as the "little Sister" who narrates the story, and the romance between her older brother, Laddie, and the mysterious English girl with whom he falls in love, provided the main interest

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in the novel. The critics gave their usual response, most of them stating that if a reader enjoyed her earlier novels he would enjoy this one as well, while others reiterated the value of her portrayal of the natural world. One minister criticized Laddie as "molasses fiction," but Gene Stratton-Porter accepted the comment as praise. As she wrote:

What a wonderful compliment! All the world loves sweets. Afield, the bears as well as flies would drown in it. Molasses is more necessary to the happiness of human and beast than vinegar, and overindulgence not nearly so harmful to the system. I am a molasses person myself. So is my family. So are most of my friends—all of them who are happy, as a matter of fact. So I shall keep straight on writing of the love and joy of life I have found in the world, and when I have used the last drop of my molasses, I shall stop writing. Forever the acid of life will have to be doled out by those who have enough in their systems to be accustomed to it. God gave me a taste for sweets and the sales of the books I write prove that a few other people are similar to me in this. 

Throughout her career Gene Stratton-Porter felt the influence of writers such as Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman who viewed the natural world as an instrument of self-fulfillment. Her novel, The Harvester, bore the inscription, "This portion of the life of a man of today is offered in the hope that in cleanliness, poetic temperament, and mental

32 Meehan, The Lady of the Limberlost, 159.
force, a likeness will be seen to Henry David Thoreau."\(^{33}\)

Mrs. Porter expressed even greater admiration for the life and writing of Walt Whitman, and she discussed her reaction to him in an address to her village literary club:

> I would not advise everyone to attempt *Leaves of Grass*, the beautiful uncut hair of graves, the carpet of God spread for his kings and savages, children of wealth and sin, black, white, red, and brown. If you believe in God; if you love the green grass, flowers, and trees; if you know what the leaves whisper and the waters murmur and the birds sing; if you love God's creation above man's manufacturing—read the book. If in your heart there is the throb of universal love and pity; if your hand has lain on the bare body of a man and it has not frightened you, read the book. You will be better for it.\(^{34}\)

Changes in American society also influenced Gene Stratton-Porter's writing. During her formative years, America was experiencing rapid growth of cities and industry. After 1870 the expansion of railroads, steel, and oil signaled the industrialization of America, changing it from a primarily agricultural nation.\(^{35}\) This shedding of tradition separated the American from the soil more completely than the citizen of any other country.\(^{36}\) On the nineteenth century farm the

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\(^{34}\)Meehan, *The Lady of the Limberlost*, 110.

\(^{35}\)Richards, *Gene Stratton Porter*, 118.

self-sufficient settler regarded his land as an expanding organism through which he related to all nature, loving and yet conquering it. The Strattons regarded the outdoors as both church and recreation, and they had a strong idea of beneficient creation and their place in the natural order. Yet the flexibility of the farming pattern, growing dependence on manufactured goods, and a cash market acted as a wedge between the farmer and the environment, foreshadowing total dependence on technology in the next century. Through her novels Gene Stratton-Porter hoped to reassure Americans that they could still live successfully on the land, making sufficient money for their needs and finding spiritual fulfillment from nature. Her novels ignored the great gulf between farmers' hopes, often built on blind faith, and the realities of settlement, which resulted in hardships, sacrifices, and often complete failure. Rather than truly recommending the agrarian way of life, Mrs. Porter used it symbolically as a way of becoming closer to the lessons and inspiration of the natural world.

Gene Stratton-Porter also spoke out against the destructive forces of industrial expansion. As a proponent of a way of life in which man gained both livelihood and spiritual

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38 Ibid., 233.
inspiration from the natural world, she advocated a creed of beauty and use combined to bring about the betterment of mankind without destroying the educational and inspirational qualities of the environment. Although she never mentioned reading Walt Whitman's poem, "The Song of the Broad Axe," the point of view in her novels was similar to the woodchopper who "gains mythic stature through the reduction of the wilderness to planks and blocks, in service of civilization and the soul." Yet senseless slaughter and destruction disturbed her, and in 1922 she was one of the founders of the Isaac Walton League. This powerful organization grew to over seventy-five thousand members and became known as the "defender of soil, vegetation, water, and wildlife." She herself was involved in the League's early attempts to save starving elk at Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Yet nowhere in her writing does she mention any direct influence on her ideas from a preservationist such as John Muir, or a conservationist such as Gifford Pinchot.

The destruction of the landscape touched both her childhood home and the Limberlost Cabin where she began her writing career. When as a successful writer she returned to her childhood home, determined to buy it at any cost, she was

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40 Slotkin, Regeneration Through Violence, 564.
appalled by the destruction of the farm. The house as well as the surrounding trees had been burned; the hills had been shorn and plowed down; the creeks and springs had been filled and obliterated. Most of the forest had been cut down and only a few gnarled trees remained of the orchard. The one remaining creek crossed the meadow at the foot of the orchard, but it flowed in a sickly current over a dredged bed between bare, straight banks. As she recalled, "The whole place seemed worse than a dilapidated graveyard to me. All my love and ten times the money I had at my command never could put back the face of nature as I knew it on that land."\(^{42}\)

Although both she and her husband benefitted from the drilling of oil wells on their Limberlost farm and also from the sale of timber, the widespread devastation of natural resources in the name of progress saddened and angered her. By 1913 much of her beloved Limberlost Swamp had been drained to facilitate the search for oil, and lumbermen had stripped the area of its valuable walnut and curly maple. Because of this destruction she and her family moved from Limberlost Cabin in 1913 to a new home, Wildflower Woods, on the shores of Sylvan Lake near Rome City, Indiana. Here she found a great many lakes, miles of unbroken marsh, and a greater wealth of plant and animal life than existed in the Limberlost region. In one season she located almost every flower named

\(^{42}\) Porter, "A Little Story," 12.
in the botanies as native to the region, and several that she could find in no book in her library. In 1920 Gene Stratton-Porter moved from Wildflower Woods to California for her health, and on December 6, 1924, she was killed when her automobile was hit by a streetcar. In 1947 the Limberlost Conservation Society of Indiana presented Limberlost Cabin to the State of Indiana, and the State has maintained it since then as "Limberlost State Memorial."

By the time she moved away from the Limberlost region Gene Stratton-Porter had already established herself as a best-selling novelist, having published the works that are the topic of this thesis, *The Song of the Cardinal*, *Freckles*, *At the Foot of the Rainbow*, *A Girl of the Limberlost*, *The Harvester*, and *Laddie*. Yet her successful career continued until her death, and she wrote a total of twenty-six books and over one hundred magazine articles. Her books were translated into many foreign languages, including Dutch, German, French, Spanish, Norwegian, Swedish, Danish, Czechoslovakian, Afrikaans, Arabic, Japanese, and Korean. They were also translated into Braille. In addition, her novels served as the basis for twenty motion pictures, most of which she produced herself because of her dissatisfaction with the results of other movie adaptations. As one contemporary

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43 Porter, "A Little Story," 47.
44 Hofstadter, "Gene Stratton-Porter," 404.
critic stated, she was more than merely another novelist; she was an American phenomenon, "a public institution like Yellowstone Park." Only five novels issued between 1900 and 1930 in the United States achieved sales of one and a half million copies, and Gene Stratton-Porter had written four of them: _Freckles, A Girl of the Limberlost, The Harvester, _and _Laddie_. Her five most popular novels sold over eight million copies and gave her royalties of over two million dollars. At one point she had an estimated readership of fifty million people.

Through her Limberlost novels Gene Stratton-Porter attempted to awaken people to the opportunities for economic self-sufficiency and spiritual fulfillment inherent in the natural world. She drew on her own experiences to provide her readers with a model of success that called for the self-sufficient individual using the environment, economically and spiritually, without destroying it. Gene Stratton-Porter wanted her novels to be a source of inspiration and encouragement for those who had to deal with a rapidly changing society and a reassurance that change would not destroy the values and traditions of an earlier age. In her own words:

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45 Hart, _The Popular Book_, 211.
46 Schmitt, _Back to Nature_, 125.
To my way of thinking and working the greatest service a piece of fiction can do any reader is to leave him with a higher ideal of life than he had when he began. If in one small degree it shows him where he can be a gentler, saner, cleaner, kindlier man, it is a wonder-working book. If it opens his eyes to one beauty in nature he never saw for himself, and leads him one step toward the God of the Universe, it is a beneficial book, for one step into the miracles of nature leads to that long walk, the glories of which so strengthen even a boy who thinks he is dying, that he faces his struggle like a gladiator. 48

CHAPTER II
SUCCESS IN THE LIMBERLOST

Gene Stratton-Porter based her concept of the successful life on a love of nature that encompassed an appreciation of both the physical beauty and the dangers of the natural world, the use of the land for economic self-sufficiency and spiritual fulfillment, and an ethic that allowed for both uses without destroying the environment. In varying degrees all of her Limberlost novels contained these components and provided the model for living a successful life.

Through her characters and the narrative Gene Stratton-Porter expressed her delight in the sheer physical beauty of the natural world. Whether describing moths, birds, flowers, or trees, she perfected the art of creating scenes of natural wonder. By participating in these scenes her heroes and heroines demonstrated their appreciation of the physical beauty of nature. Yet because they lived in the natural world and had to survive, her characters possessed a utilitarian understanding of nature. They needed an awareness of the dangers of their environment and a knowledge of the laws of nature to become self-sufficient.

The beauty of the natural world evoked comparisons with art and poetry among Mrs. Porter's characters. In The Song
of the Cardinal, a river fringed with willows and giant sycamore seemed like a shining river of poetry and song to the cardinal.\(^1\) Philip, a character in A Girl of the Limberlost, wished that sick people could see the pictures of the natural world—bees and butterflies searching for food, a rose-breasted grosbeak perching at the top of a maple tree serenading all in the area, and a big Turnus butterfly sailing through the arbor—to help them grow strong.\(^2\) Another character in the novel, the Bird Woman, expressed the mystery, wonder, and pure beauty of nature through her paintings of moths, putting them into books for all people to see and know: "We Limberlost people must not be selfish with the wonders God has given us...We must share with those poor cooped up city people."\(^3\) When Elnora, the heroine of the novel, began to play the violin she learned by imitating the sounds of nature. Although she played traditional works proficiently, "when she played her own, that was joy inexpressible, for then the wind blew, the water rippled, the Limberlost sang her songs of sunshine, shadow, black storm, and white night."\(^4\)

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\(^3\)Ibid., 34.

\(^4\)Ibid., 129-130.
In *Freckles* the title character needed a place to store his books and specimens, and so he constructed a room in the forest from the natural materials of the Limberlost. Freckles named his room the "cathedral," even though "he had never been taught that 'groves were God's first temples.'"\(^5\) When the Swamp Angel saw the room for the first time she proclaimed it "fairyland."\(^6\) Freckles's boss recognized the true artistry of his charge in the skillful blending of color and form: "What a picture he had wrought in living colours. He had the heart of a painter. He had the soul of a poet."\(^7\) In another novel, *The Harvester*, the heroine, Ruth, responded ecstatically to the title character's artistry in his rendering of the land: "Why he's a poet! He's an artist with earth for his canvas, and growing things for colours."\(^8\) The original beauty and artistry of God combined with the souls of these people to produce compositions symbolizing their love for the land.

Yet in an age when the majority of the population resided in the city, many people could live out their lives without coming into contact with the world of nature. Through her novels Gene Stratton-Porter hoped to introduce these people to the land, and so emphasized the effect of the land's beauty

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\(^6\) Ibid., 65.

\(^7\) Ibid., 47.

\(^8\) Porter, *The Harvester*, 268.
on those from the city. In A Girl of the Limberlost Philip, a city resident, was continually surprised and delighted by the scenes of unusual beauty in the Limberlost. While gathering plant specimens he had difficulty concentrating on his task rather than the world around him:

> Back in the deep woods a hermit thrush was singing his chant to the rising sun. Orioles were sowing the pure, sweet air with notes of gold, poured out while on the wing. The robins were only chirping now, for their morning songs had awakened all the other birds an hour ago. Scolding red-wings tilted on half the bushes... wild flowers made the path border and all the wood floor a riot of colour. Elnora, born among such scenes, worked eagerly, but to the city man, recently from a hospital, they seemed too good to miss.⁹

In The Harvester Gene Stratton-Porter again emphasized the effect that the beauty of nature had upon a person accustomed to the sights, sounds, and smells of the city. The Harvester, David, married Ruth even though she did not yet return his love in order to protect her from her cruel uncle. Although dismayed, at first, by the isolation of her new home, she recognized the pictorial qualities of the land—the glowing color, blue sky, and green leaves—as parts of a complete work of art.¹⁰ Her first view of the Harvester's land especially affected her:

⁹ Porter, A Girl of the Limberlost, 205.
¹⁰ Porter, The Harvester, 470.
Everywhere flamed foxfire and cardinal flower, thousands of wild tiger lilies... Rank jewel flower poured gold from the dainty cornucopias and lavendar beard tongue offered honey to a million bumbling bees... On the right, the hill, crowned with gigantic forest trees, sloped to the lake... among the scattering trees all the way to the water's edge were immense beds of vivid colour. Among the growth of the lake shore, duck, coot, and grebe voices commingled in the last chattering hastened splash of securing supper before bedtime... With wide eyes she stared around her. "Why didn't you tell me it would be like this?" she demanded in awed tones.11

Yet the natural world could also be a frightening, dangerous place, and Mrs. Porter's characters developed an awareness of these dangers and a knowledge of the laws of nature in order to become self-sufficient. In *The Song of the Cardinal*, the cardinal flew so far his first day in flight that his mother feared he would lose his strength and fall, thus becoming the victim of a hungry predator.12 When he splashed and romped while taking his bath his mother was afraid that he would attract a watersnake or turtle.13 Yet she taught him that he could remain in the water as long as he wished if he could see the bottom for a long distance, thus insuring his ability to avoid anything attempting to harm him.14

Freckles, alone in the world and fleeing mistreatment,

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13 Ibid., 11.
14 Ibid., 18.
applied for the job of guard over the valuable timber in the Limberlost in order to prove himself. In the first month every hour was torture for him. He feared for his life every minute, and so armed himself with a revolver and a cudgel. He became so ill from fear and nervousness that he could scarcely control his shaking hand to do his work.\textsuperscript{15} After a few weeks, when he realized that he was still alive, Freckles grew proud of himself as nature "worked her own miracle in the heart of the man whose daily task kept him alone among her sights, sounds, and silences."\textsuperscript{16} He gradually developed the fearlessness that came from a greater knowledge and understanding of the land and its creatures. He was aware, however, that this knowledge did not make him immune to danger and physical harm, it only enabled him to avoid danger. Freckles knew of the dangers of the Limberlost from firsthand experience, when he ventured into the swale to catch the lumber thieves: "Compelling beautiful was the Limberlost, but cruel withal; for back in there bleached the uncoffined bones of her victims, and she had missed cradling him, oh! so narrowly."\textsuperscript{17}

Elnora's father had been one of the Limberlost's victims, and sometimes her mother would visit the pool where he had sunk before her, calling his name and begging the swamp

\textsuperscript{15} Porter, Freckles, 11-12.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 13.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 127.
to give back its dead. ¹⁸ Yet Elnora had no fear of the swamp. She felt a special affinity for moths and caterpillars and studied them to learn their ways. When Philip commented that most girls would go into spasms if they had to touch such creatures, Elnora replied that nobody had taught the girls that caterpillars were "perfectly clean, helpless, and harmless as so much inanimate velvet." ¹⁹ Her knowledge helped her to appreciate more fully their beauty and handle them without fear.

The Harvester also studied the ways of the natural world and relied upon warnings of wild creatures to keep him from danger. ²⁰ Yet Ruth, after her initial awe at its beauty, had a dreadful fear of the natural world. She hated the awful silences and the equally awful noises, such as the barking of a squirrel, that came when she least expected them. ²¹ She feared that snakes would drop from trees and bushes or spring from the ground. In some places she was sinking; whenever a bush caught her skirt she felt it was something dreadful reaching up for her; and she felt the possibility of "horror lurking behind every tree." ²² Yet she realized that as soon

¹⁹ Ibid., 200.
²¹ Ibid., 179.
²² Ibid., 164.
as she grew accustomed to the stillness and learned what things would not harm her she would feel better. 23

The Harvester warned Ruth to be careful in touching plants and flowers until he could teach her about them, for although "there are gorgeous and wonderfully attractive things here, some of them are rank poison." 24 He taught her what each sound of the night was and how and why it was made. She learned that the sharp, startling cry of birds was not meant to frighten her, but rather to warn straying intruders away from nests. Gradually she heard running through his explanations, "... the story of steady evolution, the natural processes of reproduction, the joy of life and its battles, and the conquest of the strong in nature. At his hands every sound was stripped of terror... There was not a thing to fear or a voice left with an unsympathetic note in it... Everything was right in its way, all necessary to human welfare, and so there was nothing to fear, but marvels to learn and pictures to appreciate." 25

In Laddie, Little Sister's father taught her the things she had to be careful of while wandering through the fields. She watched out for a little shiny slender snake "with a head as bright as mother's copper kettle," and a big "thick one with patterns on its back like those in Laddie's geometry

24 Ibid., 269.
25 Ibid., 307-310.
books, and a whole rattlebox on its tail."\textsuperscript{26} She could not eat any berry without first asking her father, and she always measured the depth of water before wading alone.\textsuperscript{27} At one point she came across a snake in her path, but because she did not see any coppery head, geometry patterns, or rattlebox she knew it was not poisonous and would not bite unless it was hurt.\textsuperscript{28}

Although her portrayal of nature may seem sentimental, Gene Stratton-Porter believed that this appreciation of the physical beauty of the natural world and the dangers in it formed the foundation for a realistic love of nature. She felt that the only way to love nature, as her characters did, was to live close to the land,

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\ldots \text{until you have learned its pathless travel, growth, and inhabitants. As you know the fields, you must begin at the gate and find your way slowly, else you will not hear the great secret and see the compelling vision. How many people know anything about moths? There are trees you never before have seen, flowers and vines the botanists fail to mention, and such music as your ears cannot hear elsewhere.}\textsuperscript{29}
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Living close to nature and learning of it through books,

\textsuperscript{27}\textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{28}\textit{Ibid.}, 28.
\textsuperscript{29}"Mrs. Porter and Nature," \textit{Bookman}, August 1912, 35: 587-588.
observations, or the lessons of others, her major characters
loved the natural world and considered it an integral part of
their lives. Because of their appreciation of the physical
beauty of nature and their utilitarian knowledge of its ways,
they could find their economic independence and spiritual
fulfillment in the land.

Yet moving back to the land or growing up on it did not
automatically instill a love for nature. While Mary Malone
and Dannie, the hero and heroine of *At the Foot of the
Rainbow*, loved and appreciated nature, Jimmy Malone felt
alienated from and hostile to the natural world. A trapper
discontented with his life who cheated his best friend of
true love and whose ultimate downfall lay in his propensity
for drink, Jimmy could not see the beauty or purpose in the
world around him. Instead he centered his life around
satisfying his thirst for liquor, and rather than looking
upon the Wabash River as one of nature's beauties, he la-
mented that it was not running with whiskey:

> But the Old Wabash ain't runnin' "wine and
milk and honey" not by the jug-full. It seems to
be compounded of aquil parts of mud, crude ile,
and rain water . . . If 'twas only runnin'
Melwood (whiskey)... you'd see a mermaid named
Jimmy Malone sittin' on the Kingfisher stump . . .
scoopin' whiskey down its gullet with its tail
fin.\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{30}Gene Stratton-Porter, *At the Foot of the Rainbow*,
Yet only through a love of nature could a person live Mrs. Porter's conception of the successful life, finding economic and spiritual sustenance in the land. In the end Jimmy died a frustrated, unhappy, drunken man. Gene Stratton-Porter used him as an example of a man who had happiness at his fingertips, if only he had opened his heart to the world around him.

Because of their love and knowledge of the land, the characters of Mrs. Porter's novels could use its resources to become economically self-sufficient. Gene Stratton-Porter wanted to reassure her readers that they were not compelled to remain in the city, but could survive economically on the land and return to the simpler lifestyle of an earlier age. Abram, the farmer in The Song of the Cardinal, used the land's resources for his food and shelter. In At the Foot of the Rainbow Dannie and Jimmy made their living by trapping muskrats in the winter and farming in the spring and summer— they "grow grub in the summer to feed folks and trap skins to cover 'em in winter." But to Jimmy the muskrats represented whiskey, not a means of self-sufficiency. Dannie, on the other hand, paid close attention to the signs of the changing seasons in order to support himself in the world of nature. He knew how to lay the best traps, when to plant each crop, and when to fish as the spawning season ended and the fish

31 Porter, At the Foot of the Rainbow, 29.
32 Ibid., 6.
returned to their own places.\textsuperscript{33}

In \textit{A Girl of the Limberlost} Elnora's mother, Mrs. Comstock, asked her daughter to stay away from the Limberlost, but Elnora refused because the swamp was going to buy her schoolbooks and clothes, pay her tuition, and start her college fund.\textsuperscript{34} Mrs. Comstock would not give her money so Elnora asked to borrow it to start her education, vowing to pay the money back by digging ferns, gathering nuts, and collecting moths to sell.\textsuperscript{35} Freckles, who appeared briefly in this novel, told her to persevere in her efforts and her hour would come. He proved correct, as she earned enough money to pay for her education.

Yet the Limberlost not only furnished money for education, but also the means for educating others about the wonders of nature. In the early twentieth century many people were concerned that school children, growing up in the city, would have no contact with nature, and therefore would have only a narrow conception of life. In response to these fears Liberty Hyde Bailey, a Cornell educator, founded the Nature-Study movement "to put the pupil in a sympathetic attitude toward nature for the purpose of increasing his joy of living, to enable every person to live a richer life, whatever his business or profession may be ... It is not a science ..."

\textsuperscript{33}Porter, \textit{At the Foot of the Rainbow}, 87.
\textsuperscript{34}Porter, \textit{A Girl of the Limberlost}, 59.
\textsuperscript{35}\textit{Ibid.}, 13.
not knowledge . . . not facts. It is spirit."\(^{36}\) He believed that to be happy one must be in sympathy with the common things and must be in harmony with his environment.\(^{37}\) He felt that the Nature-Study spirit stood for "naturalness and the natural method, freedom, spontaneity, and individual initiative; doing and accomplishing; the active and creative method; developing the powers of the pupil, not hearing him recite."\(^{38}\) According to Bailey, the best subject for nature-study was the brook, for,

In miniature it illustrates the forces which have shaped much of the earth's surface; it reflects the sky; is kissed by the sun; is rippled by the wind. Minnows play in its pools, soft weeds grow in the shallows; grass and dandelions lie on its sunny banks; moss and fern are sheltered in its nooks. One cannot see its beginning or its end. It awakens the desire to explore; it is fraught with mysteries; it typifies the flood of life. It "goes on forever." It is the central theme in the scene of life.\(^{39}\)

In A Girl of the Limberlost Elnora learned of the Nature-Study movement while at school and decided upon a career as a Nature-Study teacher. As she contemplated her future as a teacher, she formed the idea of choosing specimens to illustrate the unique life of each season--fringed gentians, asters,
ironwort, abandoned birds' nests, and leaves for fall, and so on for each season.\(^{40}\) Thus in addition to providing the money for her education, the resources of the Limberlost also allowed Elnora to earn her living as a teacher and at the same time awaken children to the joys of the natural world.

The Harvester also earned his living by aiding humanity through the natural resources of the land. He began his venture by reading books and drug pamphlets, learning every medicinal plant, shrub, and tree in his area, and then roaming over fields and woods to collect them. Next he thought of transplanting the material to land he owned and cultivated. Only he knew the extent and value of his operation, for "when neighbors twitted him with being too lazy to plow and sow, of 'mooning' over books, and derisively sneered when they spoke of him as the Harvester of the Woods or the Medicine Man, he smiled and went his way."\(^{41}\) He thought that God had never made a more perfect place for an herb farm—"from woods to water and all that goes between, it is perfect."\(^{42}\) The Harvester, David, also felt that nature had provided him with the perfect occupation:

\[\text{I don't see what bigger thing a man can do}\]


\(^{42}\) Ibid., 272.
than to combine pure, clean, unadulterated roots and barks into medicine that will cool fevers, stop chills, and purify bad blood. The doctors may be all right, but what are they going to do if we men behind the prescription cases don't supply them with unadulterated drugs... I can't think of a thing on earth I'd rather do, and there's money no end in it. I could get too rich for comfort in short order... 43

In Laddie Mr. Stanton farmed the land in order to support his large family. He taught his daughter, Little Sister, that if one left no place for birds, the worms and insects would devour the crop and one would not raise half as much food as if the birds were given food and shelter: "He said he would rather have a few good apples picked by robins and jays, than untouched trees, loaded with wormy falling ones he could neither use nor sell." 44 She thought God had created the perfect farm, putting in birds to keep away worms, trees to break the wind, and creeks to save the moisture. 45 Many years earlier her parents had recognized the potential of the land, their knowledge of nature allowing them to use the land for the greatest good. They were living the successful life.

Throughout her novels Gene Stratton-Porter emphasized the freshness and purity of the products grown by these people on the land, contrasted with the products consumed by city dwellers. Her characters and their families knew what they

43 Porter, The Harvester, 41.
44 Porter, Laddie., 267.
were eating, but city dwellers were too far removed from the world of nature to realize what fresh, pure food tasted like. A conversation between Mary and Dannie in *At the Foot of the Rainbow* illustrated Gene Stratton-Porter's attitude:

What do you suppose that adulterated stuff we read about in the paper tastes like? I've often wondered . . . Look at some of the hogs and cattle that we see shipped from here to the city markets. The folks that sell them would starve before they'd eat a bit o' them, yet somebody eats them, and what do you suppose maple syrup made from hickory bark and brown sugar tastes like?

And cold storage eggs, and cotton-seed butter, and even horse radish half turnip.46

Mrs. Porter's characters not only gained their livelihoods from the land, they received their spiritual inspiration as well. This inspiration took many forms including a better sense of well-being, a greater love of God, a more perfect understanding of love between men and women, and a keener desire to live in close proximity to nature rather than in the cities. This desire and predilection to look for spiritual fulfillment through nature gave her characters a greater foundation for finding success in life.

The cardinal, main character of *The Song of the Cardinal*, gained a greater sense of strength and power and a keener love for the sweep of the field and forest below him with

46 Porter, *At the Foot of the Rainbow*, 94.
every mile that he flew; he felt a greater zest for living as he "rocked on the wind, raced through the sunshine, and sailed over the picturesque land." 47 Freckles found his first hours of real happiness in the Limberlost as he performed his job faithfully, gained physical strength, paid his own way, and saved money. 48 After hungering for love, freedom, and appreciation for so long, he had found it and learned that the loneliness of the forest was not so hard to bear as the "loneliness of being constantly surrounded by crowds of people that do not care in the least whether one is living or dead." 49

Through her life in the forest Elnora felt a greater sense of brotherhood for all human and animate creatures. Although the Limberlost lay close to destruction, she knew that the talking trees remained--the beeches and oaks who "meet the winds that travel around the globe, and from them learn big things." 50 The concept of talking trees fascinated Philip, and he asked Elnora what they told her. The beeches taught Elnora "to be patient, to be unselfish, to do unto others as I would have them do unto me"; the oaks told her "to be true, live a clean life, send your soul up here and the winds of the world will teach it what honor achieves." 51 The trees gave her a model for living based upon some of the basic tenets

48 Porter, Freckles, 15.
49 Ibid., 20.
51 Ibid., 219.
of Christianity.

The Harvester found inspiration in the everyday activities of the creatures around him. Tired and restless, David would lie on the ground, listening to the insects humming lazily in the night air and a whip-poor-will explaining to his mate how much he loved her, and find comfort in the enfolding voices. He knew that the woods did not teach him how to shine in society, but offered lessons in the fineness of nature and her ways; he felt that he had learned her lessons so well that they helped him more than anything to discern the qualities of human nature.

In Laddie, a visitor from England felt the land take hold of him despite its newness and rawness. He found himself watching roots grow, hoping they would develop and beautify his house with flowers. On a much broader scale Mrs. Stanton, Little Sister's mother, equated the building of her farm with the building of the nation. She felt that in planning and transforming the land to make it the most beautiful spot on earth, she was contributing to the improvement of her township, county, and state, and thus doing her share "toward upbuilding this nation." Whether on a small or large scale,

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52 Porter, The Harvester, 102-103.
53 Ibid., 85.
54 Porter, Laddie, 313.
55 Ibid., 285.
the land provided a greater sense of well-being for the characters in these novels.

The natural world also provided these characters with many opportunities to worship God and His creation. Abram, the farmer, received the "power o' God" from listening to the cardinal getting all he could out of life, and thus Abram counted his blessings. He thought there was no better way to worship God than to protect and appreciate the gifts He gave men for their joy and use:

Worshipin' that bird's a kind o' religion with me. Getting the beauty from the sky an' trees, an' the grass, an' the water 'at God made, is nothin' but doin' Him homage. Whole earth's a sanctuary. You can worship from sky above to grass under foot.

For Freckles, the room he constructed in the woods served as evidence of his great desire for beauty, art, companionship, and worship. Yet Freckles had to look beyond the world of nature as he knew it to find the essence of God:

Freckles gazed upward, trying to fathom these things which had come to him. There was no help from the sky. It seemed far awy, cold, and blue. The earth, where flowers bloomed, angels walked, and love grew, was better. But to One, above the sky, he must make acknowledgment for those miracles.

56 Porter, The Song of the Cardinal, 187-188.
57 Ibid., 129.
58 Porter, Freckles, 61.
He knew that although God manifested Himself in nature, He was much greater than the sum of His creation.

In *At the Foot of the Rainbow*, Dannie considered Rainbow Bottom, his land, the finest meetinghouse. Here he could find the best talking in the "tongues of the trees" and the soundest preaching in the "sermons in the stones"; the river provided the best reading and the choir of birds the best music. Nothing that man created could compare with these beautiful works of God that he worshipped:

When did man ever compete with the work of God? All the men that have peopled the earth since time began could have their brains rolled into one, and he would stand helpless before the anatomy of one of the rats in those bags. The thing God does is good enough for me.

When summer came to the Limberlost Mrs. Comstock gave Philip and Elnora a lesson in nature, science, and God. As she observed a moth in flight she pointed out that even if air and water had accumulated by chance, it took "the wisdom of the Almighty God to devise the wing of a moth" and other miracles in the natural world. Mrs. Comstock had never felt closer to God than she did at that moment:

I feel as if the Almighty were so real, and so

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60 Ibid., 72.
near, that I could reach out and touch Him, as I could this wonderful work of His, if I dared. I feel like saying to Him, "To the extent of my brain power I realize Your presence and all it is in me to comprehend Your Power. Help me to learn, even this late, the lessons of your wonderful creations. Help me to unshackle and expand my soul to the fullest realization of Your wonders. Almighty God, make me bigger, make me broader!"62

The Harvester remained in the woods for his religion as well as his work. Listening to the singing of hens, the screaming of geese, the quacking of ducks, and the rasping of guineas, he thanked God for the sound and messages of His creation.63 He felt that worship meant enjoying God's creation to the depth of his soul and that praising God meant being thankful for everything.64 When Ruth exclaimed that he taught her wonders and gave life new meaning, he replied:

If that be true, it is because I am of the woods. The Almighty does not evolve all his wonders in animal, bird, and flower form; He keeps some to work out in the heart, if humanity will go to His school, and allow Him to have dominion.65

Just as Freckles had learned earlier, the Harvester realized that God revealed Himself in His creation, but retained many mysteries that the human heart had to strive to solve.

63 Porter, The Harvester, 66.
64 Ibid., 312.
65 Ibid., 216.
Jimmy Malone served as a direct contrast to the thoughts of these characters. Hearing the talk at the bar he frequented gave him a different view of life and made him envious of those who had greater material wealth. He had a superstitious mind, and rather than seeing the works of God in nature, he peopled the landscape with goblins and devils. Because he had tricked Dannie into believing that Mary loved Jimmy, the opposite of the truth, his conscience troubled him and influenced his attitude toward the land and nature:

A man could work in this field today, with all the flowers around him . . . and not feel afraid of being alone . . . Afraid of being away from the sound of a human voice, because within you are the voices of the black divils of conscience come twist-ing up from the ground in a little wing whisper, and moanin' among the trees, and whistlin' in the wind rollin' in the thunder, and above all in the dark they screech, and shout, and roar, "We've after you, Jimmy Malone! You're going to burn in Hell, Jimmy Malone!"

Life in the woods was torture for a man whose conscience made him see devils rather than the works of God and who did not open his soul to the healing strength of the world around him.

The lessons of the natural world also gave Mrs. Porter's characters a greater understanding of the meaning of human love and therefore a greater chance for happiness. The

66 Porter, At the Foot of the Rainbow, 69.
67 Ibid., 6.
68 Ibid., 151-152.
cardinal brought a renewed spirit to Abram as life took on new meaning. His new attitude and vigor affected his wife, Maria, and together they recaptured the flame of their youthful love and found a greater joy in each other.  

From the very beginning Freckles's feelings for the Swamp Angel were tied to his feelings for the Limberlost. When it came time to buy her a ring Freckles chose a ruby, the color of the Limberlost's most vibrant blossoms and the Swamp Angel's lips. Before giving the ring to her Freckles explained his feelings:

Me heart's all the Swamp Angel's, and me love is all hers, and I have her and the swamp so confused in me mind I never can be separating them. When I look at her, I see blue sky, the sun rifting through the leaves and pink and red flowers; and when I look at the Limberlost I see a pink face with blue eyes, gold hair, and red lips, and before, God, sir, they're all mixed till they're one to me!

Because the land was the source of their spiritual inspiration, Gene Stratton-Porter's characters wished to remain there and not venture into the city. The Harvester knew that he could never conform to the ways of society, for he saw what these ways did to other men and did not presume that he was stronger. Only by living in the woods could he guarantee that

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69 Porter, The Song of the Cardinal, 103.
70 Porter, Freckles, 185.
71 Ibid., 188.
he would rest at night "clean and unashamed."\textsuperscript{72} Even though Ruth had been afraid when she first came to the woods with the Harvester, she had seen the effect of the city on her mother's life and so would rather spend her life in the open.\textsuperscript{73} Soon she warmly embraced country life rather than merely accepting it as a less terrifying alternative to the city:

\begin{quote}
Instead of the senseless roar of commerce, manufacture, and life of a city, she was beginning to appreciate sounds that varied and carried the Song of Life in increasing measure and absorbing meaning, while she was more than thankful for the fresh, pure air, and the blessed, God-given light.\textsuperscript{74}
\end{quote}

The natural world healed her soul as well as her body and so she wanted to remain on the land, actively learning the lessons of life from God's creation.

Little Sister's father objected most strongly to the lack of independence in the city. In his mind the land and its products formed the basis of everything, and on the land the failure of a bank did not break him, contagion could not easily reach him, and fire started by another man's carelessness could not destroy his home or business.\textsuperscript{75} Yet of all his sons only Laddie decided to remain on the land as a farmer,  

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\textsuperscript{72}\textit{Porter, The Harvester}, 274.
\textsuperscript{73}\textit{Ibid.}, 163.
\textsuperscript{74}\textit{Ibid.}, 310.
\textsuperscript{75}\textit{Porter, Laddie}, 274.
\end{flushright}
and would not leave it even to win the hand of the girl he loved. Whenever he went to the city he saw something that made him angry, and he once remarked that he did not meet "nearly so many two-legged beasts in the country" as he did in the city. When his girlfriend objected to farming as dirty, offensive work, Laddie defended his chosen way of life:

There are parts of it that are dirty. Thank God, it only soils the body and that can be washed. To delve and dive into, and to study and to brood over the bigger half of the law business of any city is to steep your brain in, and smirch your soul with, such dirt as I would die before I'd make an occupation of touching.

Fortunately the girl realized the error of her thinking, and she and Laddie found complete happiness on the land.

A life lived close to the natural world offered these people spiritual as well as economic self-sufficiency. Without this feeling of spiritual fulfillment from the land, a man would not be content. He would always be searching for something better and, as in the case of Jimmy Malone, find only self-destruction. Thus this feeling of closeness to the land constituted an essential part of the successful life. Mrs. Stanton summed up the feelings of those who lived this ideal life:

76 Porter, Laddie, 325.
77 Ibid., 309.
Comfort, independence and freedom, such as we know here, is not found in any city I ever have visited. We think we have the best of life, and we are content on the land. We have not accumulated much money; we have spent thousands . . . But we make no complaint. We are satisfied. We could have branched off into fifty different things after we had a fair start here. We didn't, because we preferred life as we worked it out for ourselves. Paul says when he leaves the city, and his horses' hoofs strike the road between our fields, he always lifts his head higher, squares his shoulders, and feels a man among men. To own land, and to love it, is a wonderful thing.\(^7\)

This feeling of contentment and satisfaction based upon a love of nature, economic sustenance from the land, and spiritual inspiration in God's creation formed the foundation for Gene Stratton-Porter's concept of the successful life.

Yet the political tensions of the early twentieth century also influenced her work, and Gene Stratton-Porter tried to combine a conservationist outlook and an aesthetic appreciation of nature at a time when the two were in some direct conflict. In the early twentieth century a conflict developed between conservationists who favored resource development for economic purposes and preservationists who argued that wild areas and wildlife should be preserved from commercial use. Gifford Pinchot, chief of the Bureau of Forestry and a proponent of the concept of efficiency, subordinated the preservation of natural scenery and historic sites to increasing industrial productivity.

\(^7\)Porter, Laddie, 292-293.
and scientific, sustained-yield timber management.\textsuperscript{79} In order to gain popular support, however, he and his colleagues portrayed conservation in more sentimental terms. Thus, their major political support came from groups who looked upon the conservation issue in moral rather than economic terms, and opposed the application of technology to use the resources of the land.\textsuperscript{80} These groups, who dominated the movement from 1908 to 1910, came mainly from the urban upper and middle classes and looked to conservation to restore traditional American values and solve the urban and social problems of the time.\textsuperscript{81} They felt that in closer contact with nature both the individual and the nation could renew their spiritual life.\textsuperscript{82} These people, preservationist in outlook, opposed the rational, comprehensive planning for resource use and favored the use of the land for moral and spiritual inspiration. Yet because of the political rhetoric of the time the line between these differing positions often blurred in the popular mind. Two conflicts, however, illustrated this difference of opinion between conservationists and preservationists. In 1911 Gifford Pinchot lost his bid to overturn restrictions against timber cutting in New York's Adirondack State Park.\textsuperscript{83} In 1914, however, the conservationists


\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 145-146.

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 142-143.

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 145.

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 191.
won a ten-year battle over the use of the Hetch-Hetchy Valley in Yosemite National Park as a reservoir for San Francisco. This judicial decision reflected Pinchot's view that national parks should be opened for grazing, water use, lumbering, and other resource development. In both conflicts the conservationists argued in terms of economic necessity while the preservationists emphasized the moral and spiritual appeal of the natural world.

Throughout her life Gene Stratton-Porter was aware of both the economic and spiritual uses of the land, and so was interested in reconciling these two different attitudes. The beginnings of her conservation ideas could be found in her memories of her childhood home and the clearing of the surrounding forest. Here she saw great tracts of precious timber burned, a priceless resource that was then just a hinderance to the settlers. Many of her magazine articles, including "A New Experience in Millinery," showed her deep concern for the natural world. In this article she deplored the senseless slaughter of birds for plumage to decorate women's hats and urged an end to the practice; she suggested other and more suitable decoration, such as ostrich plumes or peacock feathers, which could be taken without damaging the birds.

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84 Hays, Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency, 192, 195.
85 Richards, Gene Stratton Porter, 19.
86 Gene Stratton-Porter, "A New Experience in Millinery," Recreation, February 1900, 12, #2:115.
In her nature book *Music of the Wild* Gene Stratton-Porter demonstrated her concern for the preservation of the beauty of nature as well as her interest in the economic value of the natural world. She attacked the indiscriminate clearing of the forest to make farmland and the failure to leave enough trees to nurture wildlife. Mrs. Porter realized, as few did in her time, how the widespread destruction of the forest and marshland could seriously affect the actual climate of a region, and she wrote of the permanent, irreversible changes in rainfall resulting from such widespread destruction:

If men in their greed cut forests that preserve and distill moisture, clear fields, take the shelter of trees from creeks and rivers until they evaporate, and drain the water from swamps so that they can be cleared and cultivated, they prevent vapor from rising; and if it does not rise it cannot fall.

In another of her books, *Homing With the Birds*, Mrs. Porter made a plea for the preservation of bird life out of economic necessity. She presented a catalog of all the species of birds, outlining the particular benefits of each and enumerating the weeds and insects they destroyed. She especially emphasized birds of prey, including hawks, vultures, eagles, and owls, and discussed their importance in the natural order. In addition, Mrs. Porter called for stronger conservation of natural

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87 Richards, Gene Stratton-Porter, 111.  
If men do not take active conservation measures soon, I shall be forced to enter politics to plead for the conservation of the forests, wildflowers, the birds, and over and above everything else, the precious water on which our comfort, fertility, and life itself depend.

In 1913 the destruction of the Limberlost Swamp forced Mrs. Porter and her family to move to Wildflower Woods, a new home they had built on the shores of Sylvan Lake. Yet by 1916 this site was also threatened with destruction. Drainage ditches had been planned and cut, lowering the levels of the natural lakes in the region. Although Sylvan Lake was man-made and therefore safe from the drainage project, Gene Stratton-Porter opposed the plans. When she failed to stop the project she made a great effort to move to the protection of her own land all of the native flora she possibly could. As her conservation efforts became known, people began to send her plant material from all over the world. These people admired her efforts and wanted to contribute in any way they could. One of her admirers, Theodore Roosevelt, invited Mrs. Porter and her daughter, Jeanette, to spend the afternoon at Sagamore, his Long Island estate.

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90 Richards, Gene Stratton Porter, 34.
91 Ibid., 119.
Yet Mrs. Porter did not subscribe to the idea that any landscape touched by man was marred and displeasing to the eye. She realized that most landscapes, no matter how natural they may have appeared, had been profoundly altered by man over long periods of time. Thus she recognized that a variety of forces, including economic necessity, technological evolution, change in social outlook, and attitudes toward nature, had created the human landscape. Growing up on her parents' farm, she watched her father design the environment to suit his economic and spiritual needs. As a traditional farmer Mr. Stratton "studied natural systems and focused attention on discovering and applying natural laws to the behavior of these systems and on explaining the relationships and interactions of separate parts." In changing the topography and vegetation of his land, he attempted to encourage the productivity of his environment while still recognizing that the natural order, although slightly altered by man, was the basis of successful agriculture.  

In Gene Stratton-Porter's novels the characters designed their environments so they could use the land to fulfill both their economic and spiritual needs, and the needs of mankind as well. They harvested the physical resources of the land for their economic needs while leaving the beauty of the

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93 Ibid.
natural world intact so people could respond to this beauty and gain spiritual fulfillment from it. In response to the conflict between conservationists and preservationists, Mrs. Porter wanted to demonstrate how the successful life integrated both physical/economic and emotional/spiritual responses to the land for the greater good of mankind.

All of Gene Stratton-Porter's characters demonstrated an awareness of the necessity for establishing guidelines to protect the natural world from destruction and ruin. While they loved the beauty of the land, they also believed in using the products of the land for the greater good of humanity. Unlike those who exploited the resources of the land with little regard for the natural order, however, her characters always weighed very carefully the possible benefits to mankind against the destruction of a single creature. Those who found success in life gained sustenance from the land, taking from it only the products needed to survive and help mankind. They could not wantonly destroy the source of their physical and spiritual lives.

The Harvester did not kill the moths he used as models for his wood carvings; he felt that he had not given life and therefore he had no right to take it away. So although he could have received a high price for the specimens from collectors, he gave the moths their freedom when he had finished his work.

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with them. Money was not a sufficient reason for him to kill such exquisite creatures. Elnora, on the other hand, did kill some of the moths in order to finance her education. Yet, again, money was not a sufficient reason in itself, as she sold them in order "to teach the masses of people how to distinguish pests they should destroy from harmless ones of great beauty." She took enough for collections, to show city dwellers, and to illustrate the books of the Bird Woman. In this instance the benefit to mankind and to the moths in the long run justified the killing.

Gene Stratton-Porter considered the killing of birds one of the greatest crimes against the natural order. Abram posted "No Hunting" signs all over his property for the benefit of city men who called themselves "sportsmen" but who would hit a hummingbird just for target practice. In earlier times Abram had hunted squirrels, quail, and rabbits for food, but these animals had become so scarce that "a wild turkey gobblin' would scare me most out of my senses." Other birds were so scarce that his crops suffered, and although he protected birds for their beauty and song, he also said of himself that "he ain't so slow but I see I'm paid in what they do for me."

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95 Porter, The Harvester, 44.  
96 Ibid., 173.  
98 Ibid., 202.  
100 Ibid.
When, in spite of the signs, a hunter tried to shoot the cardinal, Abram stopped him and lectured him on the immorality of his actions. According to Abram all of nature belonged to God and therefore man had no right to kill except to insure his own survival. God gave man dominion over the creatures of the earth, but that only meant a man could kill a wolf carrying off his lambs, a copperhead poising to strike, or a hawk attacking his chickens. Shooting a cardinal just for target practice was not exercising dominion over anything; "it's just makin' a plumb beast o' yerself." Abram's words so shamed the hunter that he left without his rifle.

Dannie also posted signs to keep hunters off his property, and he would not allow Jimmy to hunt, either. He wanted his land as a gathering place for birds and other wild creatures, to be like a national park. If he took measures to protect the birds, Dannie knew that they would feel secure. Yet the Harvester felt that birds trusted human beings too well and so were often deceived; greater measures were needed for their protection. People like the Bird Woman had to educate the public about the plight of birds and so stop their destruction:

They have more to fear than human beings. No one is going to kill you merely to see if he can shoot straight enough to hit you. Your life is not in dan-

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102 Porter, *At the Foot of the Rainbow*, 150.
ger because you have magnificent hair that some 
woman would like for an ornament. You will not be 
stricken out in a flash because there are a few 
bits of meat on your frame that someone wants to 
eat. No one will set a seductive trap for you, 
and, if you are tempted to enter it, shut you off 
from freedom and a natural diet, in a cage so 
small you can't turn around without touching bars. 
You are in a secure and free position compared 
with birds. 104

As the real-life counterpart of the Bird Woman, Gene Stratton-
Porter did educate the public, "half-killing herself in all 
kinds of places and weather to teach people to love and pro-
tect the birds." 105

Mrs. Porter also objected to the loss of contact between 
the natural resources and the use of the finished product in 
the city. She felt that people should have a greater sense of 
continuity between the two and therefore a greater appreciation 
for both the beauty and uses of the natural world. Of the 
thousands who bought furniture made from Limberlost trees, 
polished and cared for over the years, few connected it with 
"mighty forests and trackless swamps, and the man, big of soul 
and body, who cut his way through them, and with the eye of 
experience doomed the proud trees that were now entering the 
homes of civilization for service." 106 The Harvester, however, 
possessed strong feelings of love for his trees and land. He 
knew the value of furniture made from trees grown on land be-

104 Porter, The Harvester, 190.
105 Porter, Freckles, 51.
106 Ibid., 5.
longing to his ancestors for three generations, cut, cured, and fashioned into designs of his own. He hated to kill his trees and apologized to each one before he cut it, but he felt that he had a right to take what he needed for himself:

But it certainly must be legitimate for a man to take enough of his trees to build a home . . . The birds use of the material they find here; surely I have a right to do the same . . . I was born and reared here, I've always loved you; of course, I can't use anything else for my home.

He only took the trees he needed, thus preserving the natural beauty of his land.

Yet in A Girl of the Limberlost Mrs. Comstock had to choose between ruining her land or having no money to pay for Elnora's education. She could not bear the thought of cutting down her late husband's trees, tearing up the land, and covering everything with oil, so she chose to preserve the land. Elnora had to earn her own money by selling moth specimens, but she saved the natural beauty of the Limberlost. In a few years' time Elnora recognized the correctness of her mother's decision, as all around her people sold their land and destroyed the environment:

The trees fell where corn would grow . . .

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107 Porter, The Harvester, 43.
108 Ibid., 38.
Wherever the trees fell, the moisture dried, the creeks ceased to flow, the river ran low, and at times the bed was dry. With unbroken sweep the winds of the west came, gathering force with every mile and howled and raved, blowing the surface from the soil in clouds of fine dust and rapidly changing everything. From coming in with two or three dozen rare moths in a day, in three years' time Elnora had grown to be delighted with finding two or three...

In an earlier novel the Swamp Angel had predicted the ruin of the Limberlost, deploring the loss of the beautiful trees and birds as men took out the timber, dug ditches, and planted corn and potatoes. She hated seeing such destruction and thought that Freckles must feel as if he were losing his best friend. Yet nothing could take the lessons of the Limberlost and nature away from him, for he declared, "I've the Limberlost in me heart so that all of it will be real to me while I live, no matter what they do to it." Although he, too, deplored the destruction of the environment, he knew that the Limberlost and its lessons would live in his soul forever.

Gene Stratton-Porter condoned the destruction of renewable resources for the benefit of humanity. The Harvester hated to kill his plants and herbs, but he knew that they were indispensable to sick people; he would never destroy them if money were the only consideration. The longer he stayed

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111 Porter, Freckles, 80.
112 Ibid., 81.
113 Porter, The Harvester, 98.
in the woods alone, the more he thought of the rights of birds, flowers, trees and insects to life. Yet he also had to remember the great numbers of sick people and their right to life.  

When Ruth first met the Harvester she thought she detected a discrepancy between his love of nature and his destruction of plants, but he quickly disabused her of that idea. He assured her that he loved his trees, bushes, and plants not only for their beauty, but also for keeping him at the "fountain of life" and teaching him lessons not found in books. Yet he explained that human welfare came first:

> My heart is filled with feeling for the things you see around you here, but it would be a joy to me to uproot the most beautiful plant I have if by doing so I could save you pain . . . There is nothing I would not give to allay the pain of humanity. It is not inconsistent to offer any growing thing you can soon replace, to cure suffering . . . You said you could worship at the shrine of the pokeberry bed, you feel holier before the arrowhead lilies, your face takes on an appearance of reverence when you see pink mallow blossoms. Which of them would you have hesitated a second in uprooting if you could have offered it to subdue fever or pain in the body of the little mother you loved?  

The Harvester planted his land with respect for both beauty and use, however, and the killing of plants did not result in the total devastation of the land; the land could still provide

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115 Ibid., 336.
116 Ibid.
him with both economic and spiritual sustenance. When Gene Stratton-Porter spoke out against the ruin of the Limberlost she realized that lumber, oil, and food were necessary for the survival of humanity; she wanted people to harvest the natural resources without destroying the essential natural order of the environment. Using the land productively need not interfere with its beauty. She hoped that people would consider both beauty and use, as Little Sister's parents did:

Many's the hour, all told, that I have stopped my horse on one of these hilltops and studied how to make the place beautiful as well as productive. That was a task you set me, my girl. You always considered beauty as well as use about the house and garden, and wherever you worked.

In designing these landscapes, then, Gene Stratton-Porter's characters kept the essential order of the natural world while using its resources, thus preserving the beauty and inspirational qualities of the environment. Her model for the successful life depended upon this ethic for the economic and spiritual use of the natural world. She wanted people to shape the physical environment in such a way as to preserve the basis for their emotional response to nature. By defining the successful life as self-sufficiency, both economically and spiritually, she hoped to counteract the emphasis on commercialism and materialism she saw pervading her time. She took the

117Porter, Laddie, 278.
dominant image of the self-reliant individual and placed him in the environment, thereby linking already popular images with a new ethic for conservation as the beauty and use of the resources found in the landscape. She hoped to curb the tendency to tear down everything impeding the industrial growth of the nation and to use it for immediate economic gain; she wanted people to consider the spiritual needs of the nation as well. Thus her vision was not merely looking back to an earlier age, but combined the older values and traditions with a new concept of conservation that took into account the problems and needs of her society.
CONCLUSION

In an age of rapid industrialization and urbanization, Gene Stratton-Porter made nature an important component in the progress of the nation. Her concept of the successful life depended upon a love of nature in all its guises, with the individual living in close contact with it and gaining economic self-sufficiency from its resources while preserving the inherent spiritual qualities of the natural world. Thus she linked the careful planning and wise use of resources with an appeal to preserve the beauty of the environment. Mrs. Porter tried, through her novels, to show people how they could live pure, moral, independent lives away from the corrupt practices and influences of the city while fostering this ethic of an economic and spiritual use of the land to forestall the complete devastation of the environment. Thus she did not view the land as merely an economic resource, but also as a spiritual resource necessary to the continued success of the American nation. By combining this interest in spiritual fulfillment with an interest in the natural world, Gene Stratton-Porter attracted many urban dwellers who were reacting against the materialism and commercialism of the time.

Although Gene Stratton-Porter's sales figures attest to the symbolic appeal of her model for a successful life, few
people were willing to do without the conveniences of modern society. In *Wilderness and the American Mind*, Roderick Nash attributed this ambivalence to the "inevitable perplexity that arises from simultaneous subscription to two opposing sets of values." Even Theodore Roosevelt exhibited these ambivalent attitudes toward the role of nature and the role of industrial, technological advancement in the future of American society. Although he believed in the individualistic agrarian ideals of an earlier age, his emphasis on applied science, comprehensive resource planning, and endorsement of the new technology advanced the nation away from the source of the very ideals he cherished. Furthermore, Mrs. Porter's own life demonstrated that one could subscribe to and work for an ethic that called for economic and spiritual self-sufficiency without giving up the benefits of the modern industrial age. In *Golden Friends I Had*, Margaret Widdemer, the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, described her meeting with Gene Stratton-Porter in Los Angeles. The meeting took place in Mrs. Porter's hotel suite of "ample proportions and much hotel elegance" with a parlor "at least twenty feet long and full of flowers." Afterwards they drove around the city in Mrs. Porter's chauffeur-driven limousine.

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4 Ibid., 249.
When Ms. Widdemer admired her dress, Mrs. Porter responded:

I make a terrific lot of money . . . Why shouldn't I spend it the way I want to? I support thirty-seven of my relations wholly or partly. Yes, I counted them once; thirty-seven.5

Yet Gene Stratton-Porter continued her nature work and believed that the natural world held the key to ultimate happiness and fulfillment.

Although people may not have moved back to the land in response to Gene Stratton-Porter's concept of the successful life, her writings awakened Americans to the need to look upon nature as both an economic and a spiritual resource, as well as the need to weigh very carefully the possible benefits to humanity against the destruction of nature in making decisions concerning the environment. She made great efforts to inspire the public to work for conservation and preservation of natural resources, while understanding that the preservation of all nature in a pristine state would make no allowance for the development and progress of the nation.6 Thus her novels encompassed more than the endorsement of the values of an earlier agricultural society; she attempted to reassure people and show them how to cope with the pressing conflicts and problems of the time. In an age when people turned to the

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5 Widdemer, Golden Friends I Had, 249.
6 Richards, Gene Stratton Porter, 36.
natural world as an antidote to the excess commercialism and materialism of society, many found hope, inspiration, and instruction in the novels of Gene Stratton-Porter.
APPENDIX

MAIN CHARACTERS IN THE LIMBERLOST NOVELS

The Song of the Cardinal

The Cardinal
His Mate
Abram, the farmer
Maria, his wife

Freckles

Freckles
The Swamp Angel, his beloved
McLean, Freckles's boss
The Bird Woman

A Girl of the Limberlost

Elnora
Mrs. Comstock, her mother
Philip, Elnora's beloved
The Bird Woman

The Harvester

David, the Harvester
Ruth Jameson, his beloved
Henry Jameson, Ruth's uncle

At the Foot of the Rainbow

Dannie
Jimmy Malone
Mary, Jimmy's wife

Laddie

Little Sister
Mr. Stanton, her father
Mrs. Stanton, her mother
Laddie, her brother
The Princess, Laddie's beloved


SECONDARY SOURCES


Review of *At the Foot of the Rainbow*, *Outlook*, June 6, 1908, 89:313.


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