

# PRESCIENT PATRICIAN

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## **Patrician Racist**

### **The Evolution of Madison Grant**

Jonathan Peter Spiro

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*Reviewed by Nelson Rosit*

Jonathan Spiro has written the first comprehensive biography of Madison Grant. Many readers of this journal are familiar with Grant through his influential works on racial history: *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916) and *The Conquest of a Continent* (1933). Spiro's study makes clear, however, that Grant was much more than a scholar of racial history and anthropology. He was a leader of America's early conservation movement, and a political activist who was instrumental in the passage of the immigration restrictions of the 1920s.

Spiro teaches history at Castleton State College in Vermont. *Patrician Racist* is his doctoral dissertation, submitted as part of a PhD program in history at the University of California, Berkeley. It is available in a variety of formats from UMI Dissertation Service of Ann Arbor, Michigan. While readily accessible, such manuscripts have several drawbacks. They lack the production quality that a major book publisher would provide. In this case there is some bleed through in text, the photographs are of poor quality, and of course, there is no index. Another disadvantage is that this two-volume, 950 page dissertation never had the benefit of professional editing, which would have trimmed off some fat without losing any of the meat.<sup>1</sup>

The questions of form are less problematic than reservations about the author's frame of reference. Spiro is a liberal and a Jew writing about a man he perceives to be an elitist and an anti-Semite. His ideology and ethnicity have prejudiced his account. Spiro is not out to do a hatchet job on Grant. As a scholar he is too sophisticated for that, and to Spiro's credit he is upfront about his biases. His perspective, however, leaves him with a blind spot and he claims he cannot understand Grant's motives. Because he is at variance with his subject, Spiro resorts annoyingly often to a sarcastic and facetious brand of humor that can wear on the reader.

Given these flaws, why bother considering *Patrician Racist*? Although not the ideal biographer for Madison Grant, there is no denying that Spiro is a first-class researcher. A true archival athlete, Spiro consulted no fewer than

112 archive collections, and his bibliography fills thirty-two closely spaced pages. He needed to cast a wide net because Grant is not an easy biographical subject. He wrote no memoirs and his family destroyed his personal papers after his death. Much of his correspondence to colleagues has also been destroyed or gone missing. In addition, though Grant was an activist, he was not a self-promoter, and usually worked out of the limelight. So Spiro "scoured the newspapers of Grant's time and the memoirs of his peers to glean any and all mentions of Grant, and combed through the correspondence of hundreds of his colleagues attempting to decipher the occasional reference to him."<sup>2</sup> There are, of course, Grant's published works, the records of his many organizations, and his achievements in environmental and racial preservation. It is largely through his work that we can get to know and appreciate Madison Grant.

Grant was a true American aristocrat, descended from distinguished colonists on both his mother's and father's side. He was born in New York City on November 19, 1865. His father, Gabriel Grant, was a prominent physician and a Civil War hero who was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. As a boy Grant was privately educated, spending four years in Dresden.<sup>3</sup> He entered Yale in 1884 with sophomore standing. Admission to Yale at the time required passing exams in mathematics, German or French, Greek, and Latin. Spiro notes, "It is a sobering thought that probably not a single American teenager is alive today who could have qualified for admission to Yale in 1884."<sup>4</sup> After matriculating at Yale Grant went to Columbia Law School and was admitted to the bar in 1890.

Despite its title, much of *Patrician Racist* concerns Grant's career as a conservationist. It is no hyperbole to state that Madison Grant ranks with John Muir, Gifford Pinchot, and Aldo Leopold as a pioneer of America's conservation movement. Some readers may feel that Spiro's treatment of the subject as overly detailed, but it is important to reclaim Grant the environmentalist. Grant's conservationist career also establishes him as an innovative and original thinker. His understanding of environmental issues was far ahead of his time. He exhibited the same characteristics when he turned his attention to racial and social issues.

The reason Grant has gone down the memory hole of environmental history is obvious. As Spiro observes, "like the vanishing commissar, [Grant's] political views made it necessary to remove his portrait from the history of conservation."<sup>5</sup> The political ideology that has erased Grant's accomplishments from the American memory is indeed the same ideology that produced the Soviet commissar. Spiro notes this, but is not overly concerned.

The beginning of Grant's public career can be dated to 1893, when he joined the Boone and Crockett Club [BCC]. This organization had been founded as a sportsmen's club by Theodore Roosevelt five years before. With Grant's influence the organization broadened its scope. "Grant and his ally George Bird Grinnell set about transforming the club from a mere social lodge for wealthy hunters into the seminal conservation organization in America."<sup>6</sup>

It is obvious from his writing that Spiro has had little experience afield (right word here?). Some of his comments about hunting, hunters, and their relationship to conservation are slightly amusing. He suggests that there is something “contradictory” about men who kill wild game being in the forefront of wildlife preservation. He also claims that wealthy sportsmen “had a vested interest in maintaining conditions of game scarcity” so as to add to the elite and sporting nature of hunting.<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere Spiro states that it was common for sportsmen to pass up close shots in favor of trying to bring down game at long range, again, presumably, to add to the sporting challenge. Of course anyone who has been involved with either field sports or conservation knows that sportsmen have been, and continue to be, a driving force behind conservation and preservation of the natural environment. This has also been the standard interpretation of environmental historians, at least since the publication of John Reiger’s *American Sportsmen and the Origins of Conservation* thirty years ago.<sup>8</sup>

Grant’s first conservation battle was over preservation of Yellowstone National Park. The park had been established in 1872 as the world’s first large public park. While it was nominally under the jurisdiction of the Department of Interior, that department had neither the legal authority nor the funds to manage the park. At first Yellowstone’s remoteness offered at least some protection for its flora and fauna. During the 1880s, however, poaching, timber cutting, and vandalism had become serious problems. In 1893 the U.S. Senate even passed a “Segregation Bill” opening 622 square miles of the northeast quadrant of the park to development. Grant and his fellow BCC members realized that, if passed into law, this act “would serve as the opening wedge for the eventual disintegration of the entire National Park.”<sup>9</sup> Grant mobilized the BCC to defeat the bill in the House. The following year they went on the offensive and helped pass the Park Protection Act of 1894. The act went a long way toward defining the modern concept of a national park as a public preserve. The fight over Yellowstone established the BCC as “the first private organization to deal effectively with conservation issues of national scope.”<sup>10</sup>

In addition to helping define the idea of national parks, Grant originated the modern zoological park. In the late 1890s he founded the New York Zoological Society which in turn established the Zoological Garden of the City of New York – the world famous Bronx Zoo. At three hundred acres, the Bronx Zoo was five times larger than the largest existing zoo. Instead of displaying animals in cramped cages, Grant’s zoo created natural settings, large enough for the animals to interact with their environment, yet small enough for them to be easily viewed by the public. The zoo’s purpose was not merely to entertain, but to educate the people about wildlife.

Although Aldo Leopold is rightfully credited with developing the principles of modern wildlife management, much of his work was anticipated decades earlier by Grant and his colleagues. Grant and fellow BCC member William T. Hornaday originated both the idea of wildlife restoration and that of national

wildlife preserves. Grant and Hornaday worked to establish the first national reserve for land mammals in 1905. Two years later they stocked it with buffalo from Grant's Bronx Zoo. Thus the American bison was reintroduced to the Wichita Mountains of southwest Oklahoma thirty years after the original herds had been hunted to extinction. Grant and Hornaday also founded the American Bison Society (ABS). Eventually the ABS helped to create four other bison refuges: one each in Montana, Nebraska, and North and South Dakota. It is no exaggeration to say that without the efforts of Grant, Hornaday, and the American Bison Society, buffalo would not have survived in the wild.<sup>11</sup> This story was largely repeated in Grant's efforts to save the pronghorn, the so-called American antelope.

Grant was not just interested in game animals. He was one of the first conservationists to see the important role predators played in wildlife management. Well into the twentieth century, animals such as wolves, bobcats, and coyotes were still considered vermin and pests, "varmints" at best, and many states offered cash bounties for their destruction. Yet in 1911 Grant was trying to reverse government policy that sought the extermination of predators. In the 1930s when Aldo Leopold, fellow BCC member and Yale grad, became a forceful advocate for preserving entire ecosystems attitudes toward predators began to change.

Grant was concerned with urban landscapes as well protecting natural environments. In 1905, with motoring still in its infancy, he pioneered the concept of the modern parkway by planning and then lobbying for the construction of the Bronx River Parkway. In the 1920s he was instrumental, along with his unlikely ally Franklin Delano Roosevelt, in planning the Taconic State Parkway. This 105-mile roadway, one of the most pleasant drives in America, was finally completed in 1963, long after the deaths of its originators. Always one to think outside the box, Grant wrote President Roosevelt in 1933 to suggest the construction of limited-access transcontinental highways, an idea that seems to anticipate the interstate highway system begun two decades later.

It could be argued that Grant's greatest achievement as a conservationist was saving some of the last old-growth redwood forests. As late as the First World War almost all redwood stands were held by lumber companies and slated for harvest. Grant became aware of this situation during a 1917 camping trip to northern California. The following year Grant and his friends Henry Fairfield Osborn and John C. Merriam formed the Save-the-Redwoods League. One of the long-term goals of the League was the creation of a Redwood National Park; at the time the proposed Redwood National Park was to be the first national park created out of privately owned lands. The park finally became a reality in 1968, over thirty years after Grant's death.<sup>12</sup> In the interim the organization began buying particularly magnificent groves of trees and deeding the property to the state of California for parks. To this day, according to Spiro, two plaques, one in Del Norte Coast Redwood State Park and one in Humboldt Redwood State, commemorate Grant's efforts to save these majestic trees.

The extensive accomplishments noted above are only a few high points in Grant's career as a naturalist, conservationist, and urban planner. It is not too surprising, given Grant's character and the tenor of the times, that he would extend his views on nature to include *Homo sapiens*. Grant was hardly unique in this regard. Many of the leading naturalists and conservationists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were also racialists.<sup>13</sup>

Spiro dates Grant's interest in race and eugenics to a lecture given by William Z. Ripley to the Half-Moon Club of New York in February 1908.<sup>14</sup> Ripley was a professor of economics at MIT whose interest in anthropology resulted in his authorship of *The Race of Europe* (1899). While there is no surviving transcript of Ripley's presentation that evening, it is probable that he expressed concern over the growing waves of immigrants arriving in the United States. These newcomers were disrupting American society by changing its racial character from predominately "Teutonic" to a polyglot population "unparalleled for ethnic diversity anywhere on the face of the earth."<sup>15</sup>

Rather than the genesis, it is more likely that Ripley's paper was the catalyst that caused Grant to seriously investigate issues he had been thinking about for years: racial differences and their influence on human societies past and present. Grant's study of race and racial improvement was a logical extension of his interest in zoology, for he viewed man as a biological entity very much part of the natural world. Spiro's explanation: "Grant simply took the concepts he was developing in wildlife management and applied them to the human population."<sup>16</sup> One of Grant's principles was that *the good of the community came before the interests of any particular individual*.

Grant's research in anthropology and history led to the publication of *The Passing of the Great Race* in 1916. Spiro considers this book the first attempt to unite scientific racism with the science of eugenics. *The Passing of the Great Race* was written ninety years ago, yet the book has stood the test of time.<sup>17</sup> Since 1916 we have witnessed the rise and fall of communism, racial conflict, the advent of sociobiology, evolutionary psychology and behavior genetics, and huge advances in the fields of microbiology and human genetics. These developments tend to support Grant's view that man is a part of the natural world, and as Spiro summarizes, "the key to history is not class struggle, but race struggle."<sup>18</sup>

As was manifest in his efforts to protect the environment, Grant had the ability to go beyond conventional thinking and consider new possibilities. In writing *The Great Race* he coined the term "Nordic" to designate his race.<sup>19</sup> Grant did not avoid stepping on toes. He was stingy in his praise of Germans and German-Americans, and had a rather low opinion of the Southerners, in part because he felt Nordics could not thrive south of the 38th parallel. He suggested a partition of the South that would abandon the Gulf Coast and lower Mississippi Valley to Negroes.<sup>20</sup> Grant believed that Nordics needed a bracing climate, a rural environment, a regime of fresh air, and "heavy, healthy work,"

to flourish.<sup>21</sup> Increasing immigration, urbanization, and industrialization were a triple threat to Nordic existence.

Perhaps Grant agreed with Emerson that “a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.” He was a life-long New Yorker who loved the wilderness and advocated the rural life. He was an aristocratic bachelor who urged the best people to have large families. He feared that modernity was destroying his great race, but had great faith in scientific advancements.

Despite Spiro’s claim “that almost nothing in *The Passing of the Great Race* was original,” the work was a strikingly new synthesis of a wide range of earlier historians and social thinkers, plus Grant’s singular interpretations. Published by Charles Scribner’s Sons, the book received generally enthusiastic reviews, including an endorsement by Theodore Roosevelt. The most vociferous of Grant’s critics was the influential anthropologist Franz Boas, who penned a review for *The New Republic* calling the book both “dangerous” and “fanciful.”<sup>22</sup> Grant and Boas were, of course, adversaries in the great nature vs. nurture debate. Recent scientific advances appear to underscore Grant’s hereditarianism far more than Boas’s strict environmentalism.

Grant was a scholar, but his greatest achievements came as an activist. *The Passing of the Great Race* was criticized in some academic reviews for its lack of footnotes and sweeping generalizations. The format and style were intentional. Grant’s goal was to attract the widest possible readership so as to influence American public opinion. The most important policy change Grant and his colleagues (Spiro calls them Grantians) wanted was tighter restrictions on immigration. The First World War had restricted immigration from 1914 to 1919. Now millions from war-ravaged Europe were poised to immigrate to the United States.<sup>23</sup> While the restrictions of the 1920s aimed at Southern and Eastern Europeans Spiro believes their main intent was to halt the influx of Jews into America. Jews were so closely identified with Bolshevism at the time that opposition to their immigration was based as much on ideological as racial grounds.

Not surprisingly, when immigration legislation was introduced to Congress in 1920 Jews were the most vocal opponents. Boas led the opposition in academia, while Representatives Isaac Siegel, Samuel Dickstein, Adolph Sabath, and freshman Emanuel Celler were the chief adversaries in Congress.<sup>24</sup> Striking a contemporary note, Gedalia Bublick, editor of the *Jewish Daily News*, complained to the House Immigration Committee that the legislation was a product of “race hatred.”<sup>25</sup> Spiro comments that some Jewish leaders resorted to the “if you can’t lick ‘em, join ‘em” strategy during the racially conscious 1920s. Jews would oppose immigration from Asia in the hope that “the old-stock Americans would permit them to join the Nordics in a coalition known as ‘the white race.’”<sup>26</sup>

Restrictive legislation was passed in 1921 and 1922, culminating in the Immigration Act of 1924, which limited the annual total of immigrants to

165,000, mostly from Northern and Western Europe. The act did not apply to the Western Hemisphere. Grant and his colleagues rejoiced, but did not rest on their laurels. There was still the issue of Latin American immigration, the millions of nonwhites already in the country, and the need for a eugenics program.<sup>27</sup> Spiro dates America's high-water mark for scientific racism to 1924. It is quite remarkable how quickly this movement collapsed during the next decade and a half. The author devoted an entire chapter "The Empire Crumbles," to analyzing the decline of racial consciousness. As with the immigration fight, Spiro highlights the role of Jews, in this case academics, who successfully discredited the belief in hereditary racial differences. Boas, of course, was among this number. So was Jacques Loeb, another Jew from Germany, as well as Edward Sapir, Melville Herskovits, Alexander Weinstein — the list goes on and on.

Spiro gives relatively little attention to Grant's second major book, *The Conquest of a Continent*, implying it was too little, too late to turn the ideological tide. He notes that many publications, such as the *New York Times* and *The Nation*, which had favorably reviewed *The Great Race* harshly criticized *The Conquest*. He mentions the infamous Anti-Defamation League letter sent to American and British magazine editors telling them not to review the book in order to limit sales. Poor sales would "sound the warning to other publishing houses against engaging in this type of venture."<sup>28</sup>

The penultimate chapter of *Patrician Racist* deals with Grant's relationship with National Socialist Germany. At the time "scientific racism" was losing the political/ ideological battle at home, it was triumphant in Germany. Grant and his colleagues, such as Lothrop Stoddard and Henry Fairfield Osborn, were accused of "aiding agents of the German government by advice, correspondence and personal contact."<sup>29</sup> So what? The United States had normal international relations with Germany at the time. This chapter is a classic example of reductive thinking as Spiro tries to establish a direct link between Grant's *Weltanschauung* and the worst atrocities imputed to wartime Germany. It is also yet another example of how the specter of Nazism is used to shame racially conscious whites into acquiescence. "See where this all leads to?" Several times Spiro implies that Grant can be partially forgiven for his views because he was essentially a nineteenth-century gentleman, and he did not live to see the Holocaust. Since 1945, in Spiro's view, there has been no excuse for anyone to hold similar notions.

Grant died on May 30, 1937, and was buried at Sleepy Hollow Cemetery in Tarrytown, New York, resting place of Washington Irving and other notables. He was active up to the last week of his life in pursuit of such projects as the creation of Olympic and Everglades National Parks, the enlargement of Yosemite National Park, and the completion of an article on the American bison. Grant was also assisting Hermann Göring with the International Hunting Exposition, which was held in Berlin in November 1937. Spiro concludes, "Grant did not

live long enough to go hunting with Göring. Still, it is fitting that Grant's final project had combined hunting and the Nazis, for those were the two poles of his intellectual development. He began as a big-game hunter in the 1890s, and evolved over the course of his life into conservatism, preservationism, wildlife management, eugenics, and finally National Socialism."<sup>30</sup>

Spiro's final chapter is a grab-bag summary of his dissertation – interesting, but not particularly well reasoned. For example, after denigrating scientific racism for nine hundred pages, the author confesses that today “we have witnessed the surprising phenomenon that some of [Grant's] pseudoscience has actually been validated by research in genetics.” He admits that Grant's ideas have refused to die and today “the spirit of Grant haunts the world wide web.”<sup>31</sup>

Hardcore Grantians will want to read Spiro's biography. This dissertation is an impressive research effort, and they will learn a lot about their champion. Others may want to wait to see if the text is released by a book publisher. It is sadly indicative of our times that no European-American historian felt the need or had the courage to write the biography of America's premier racist. If *Patrician Racist* becomes the definitive biography of Madison Grant, then it will be part of the valedictory for white America. My hope is that in twenty or thirty years a more sympathetic scholar will write the definitive biography of Grant. By that time European-Americans should be able to fully appreciate the greatness of Grant. He was truly prescient, seeing clearly the dangers confronting both his race and the physical environment that sustains that race. More important, he accepted personal responsibility for saving both. The fact that his efforts met with mixed results was not the fault of his intelligence or energy, but was due to the shortsightedness of his fellow Americans and the strength of the forces arrayed against him.

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## ENDNOTES

1. In response to an email from this reviewer, Spiro stated that there has been “a great deal of interest from publishers” in his dissertation, and that it may yet appear in book form.
2. Spiro, *Patrician Racist*, xi.
3. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Germany had perhaps the best education system in the world. Other Americans who studied in Germany during this period include Theodore Roosevelt, Herbert Baxter Adams, Lothrop Stoddard, and the unlikely Germanophile W. E. B. Du Bois.
4. Spiro, *Patrician Racist*, 11.
5. *Ibid.*, 39.

6. Ibid., 24.

7. Ibid., 25.

8. This book first appeared in 1976 and has gone through a number of revised editions, most recently: John F. Reiger, *American Sportsmen and the Origins of Conservation*. Third revised and expanded edition. Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2001.

9. Spiro, *Patrician Racist*, 36.

10. Reiger, *American Sportsmen*, 153.

11. A recent example of the way in which Grant has been airbrushed out of American conservation history is: Michael Punke, *Last Stand: George Bird Grinnell, the Battle to Save the Buffalo, and the Birth of the New West* (New York: Collins, 2007). Grant, who collaborated with Grinnell on conservation projects for over forty years, is reduced to a single footnote in Punke's otherwise solid work.

12. It is interesting to note that the neoconservative Ronald Reagan fought against a large redwood park as governor of California, and as president gave amnesty to millions of illegal immigrants from Latin America. The conservative Grant fought successfully to save the redwoods and unsuccessfully to restrict Latin American immigration. If Reagan was not interested in conserving the environment or the race, what was he concerned about conserving?

13. A case in point was Grant's close friend Henry Fairfield Osborn. Osborn was a member of the BCC and Save-the-Redwoods League, professor of biology at Columbia University, and head of the department of vertebrate paleontology at New York's Museum of Natural History. He wrote the preface to Grant's *Passing of the Great Race* and the introduction to *The Conquest of a Continent*. Osborn was also a good friend of John Muir, founder of the Sierra Club, another giant of American conservation. Muir and his wife spent summers at Osborn's Hudson River estate, where he did much of his later writing. Muir is not considered a racist, but a close reading of his work shows he held blacks and Indians in low regard.

14. The club, another of Grant's many organizations, was named for the ship Henry Hudson used in the early seventeenth century to explore the river that bears his name.

15. Ripley, quoted in *Patrician Racist*, 257.

16. Ibid., 321.

17. The book did contain a number of errors. For example, Grant located the origins of Homo sapiens in Asia.

18. Spiro, *Patrician Racist*, 290.

19. The common term for northern Europeans at the time was Teutonic, but Grant thought that designation should be limited to continental Germans. He thought Aryan was best left as a linguistic term.

20. Madison Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race; or, The Racial Basis of European History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916), 68.

21. Ibid., 186. Grant goes on to write that "the big, clumsy, and somewhat heavy Nordic blond...needs exercise, meat, and air." The rate of obesity among contemporary Nordics seems to confirm Grant's belief that they need a lot of exercise to stay healthy.

22. Franz Boas, quoted in *Patrician Racist*, 363.

23. According to some sources, postwar Eastern European Jews were preparing for a mass exodus. In 1920 the Hebrew Shelter and Aid Society stated that three million Polish Jews wished to "escape to America." Quoted in *Patrician Racist*, 497.

24. All the men mentioned here were foreign born except for Celler. There is strong evidence that Dickstein was in the pay of the NKVD, the Soviet spy agency, while in Congress, though not at the time of the immigration debate.

25. Spiro, *Patrician Racist*, 526.

26. *Ibid.*, 528.

27. It should be noted that during the period 1919-1924, while Grant was vigorously fighting for immigration restrictions, he was also saving the redwoods, heading the Bronx Zoo, and involved in many other projects. He did all this despite being afflicted with crippling infectious arthritis at a time before antibiotic treatment.

28. ADL letter (December 1933), quoted in *Patrician Racist*, 852.

29. Anthropologist William Gregory, quoted in *Patrician Racist*, 898.

30. *Ibid.*, 929.

31. *Ibid.*, 941-42.