Madison Grant and the Preservation of Buffaloes, Redwoods, and America's European Heritage

Review by F. Roger Devlin

Madison Grant (1865-1937), conservationist and architect of the Immigration Restriction Act of 1924, is finally the subject of a biography.

The author, Prof. Jonathon Spiro, recounts that

> **During the course of my research, if I told people I was writing a biography of a leading conservationist, they would delightedly exclaim "how wonderful!" On the other hand, if I told people that my subject was a leading eugenicist, they would invariably respond: "How dreadful!"**

Defending the Master Race: Conservation, Eugenics, and the Legacy of Madison Grant

By Jonathon Spiro.
Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2008.
508 pages, $39.95

Yet Madison Grant had similar motivations for both of these endeavors. Having worked to save buffaloes, antelopes, eagles and bears, it seemed only natural to him to turn to the preservation of his own kind, viz., Americans threatened by the flood of foreign immigration of the early twentieth century.

Born into an old and wealthy New York family, Grant was taught by private tutors and then packed of to Europe at age sixteen for a four-year classical education *cum* grand tour. He graduated from Yale, studied law at Columbia University, and was admitted to the bar in 1890. But he had no financial need to practice law, and spent most of early manhood socializing and hunting.

In 1893, he was admitted to the Boone and Crockett Club, an exclusive society of big game hunters recently founded by Theodore Roosevelt. The club quickly turned much of its attention to the increasing *scarcity* of game. This was due, among other things, to widespread commercial hunting and such unsportsmanlike practices as "crusting" (killing game rendered helpless by deep snow) and "jacking" (shining lanterns into the darkness to hypnotize animals).

The Boone and Crockett Club waged a successful campaign to outlaw such practices in New York State, and later elsewhere. Although mostly forgotten by historians, Roosevelt's and Grant's Boone and Crockett Club—rather than John Muir's Sierra Club—was the first private organization to deal effectively with conservation issues of national scope.

Next, Grant and his friends founded the Bronx Zoo. Over four times the size of the largest European zoo, it was also the first anywhere to attempt to display its animals in something approaching their natural environment.

Over time, Grant's concerns widened from the mere preservation of game for hunters to natural preservation for its own sake. He wrote:

> **It is our duty as Americans to hand down to our posterity some portion of the heritage of wildlife and of wild nature that was ours. In other words, to leave to them a country worth living in, with trees on the hillsides; with beasts in the forests; with fish in the**

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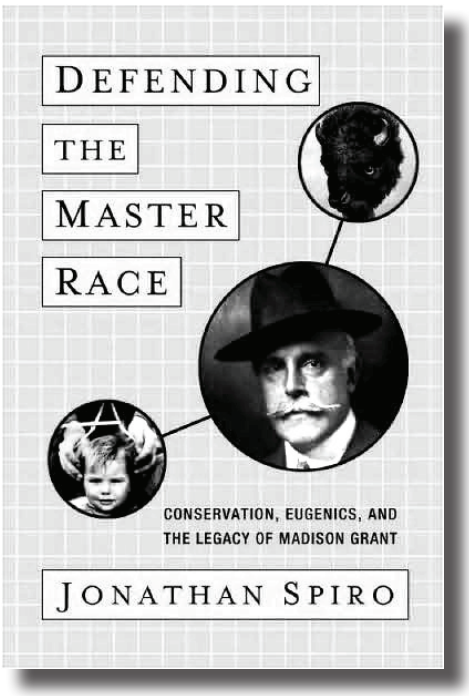
streams; and with birds in the air.

With his friend and ally Teddy Roosevelt in the White House, Grant went from triumph to triumph: creating reserves for the American Bison, establishing Glacier National Park, and saving California's Giant Redwoods from extinction. Only Prof. Spiro's concern for the average reader's attention span prevents him from describing Grant's involvement in saving the Pronghorn Antelope, the Bald Eagle, the Alaskan Bear and the Fur Seal. As one director of the National Park Service declared, "no greater conservationist than Madison Grant ever lived."



Indeed, by the second decade of the twentieth century, it became apparent that preservation efforts could succeed *too* well. Well-meaning conservationists had rangers waging an all-out war against the predators of certain protected classes of animals. These quickly increased to the point of exhausting the food supply—not only for themselves but for other species as well.

This unexpected challenge was at first met with a sort of welfare payments to the animals, such as the $20,000 worth of feed purchased to rescue the Yellowstone Elk population. But, as with all welfare systems, it merely encouraged reckless procreation by the animals and the problem grew worse. In some cases, such as the white-tailed deer of Pennsylvania and the mule deer of Arizona, the end result was a massive die-off of thousands of emaciated beasts.

Eventually, blind conservationism was supplanted by the notion of *wildlife management*. The periodic culling of herds came to be an accepted practice. Natural predators came to be understood not as pests to be wiped out, but as part of the larger system of nature, destroying weak individuals for the good of the species as a whole.

Grant published extensively on these issues. Three themes, says Spiro, continually reappear in his writings:

typology (the concept that for each genus there was a classic "type" which was invariably the largest and "handsomest" version of the animal); deterioration (the claim that even the "types" were degenerating as a result of trophy hunters killing the largest bulls); and invasive species (Old World animals [which] could mingle with native animals and form "a mongrel race," or even completely drive out the native species).

When he turned his attention to his own species, he would come to the conclusion that the American human "type" was degenerating under the onslaught of "invasive species" from Southern Europe and the ghettos of Poland.

In 1894, New York had over 1.8 million residents, of whom 1.4 million had either been born abroad or had at least one foreign born parent. They settled in crowded slums. "On Manhattan's East Side," writes Spiro, "the streets were often filled with dead horses, mounds of offal, and spilled barrels of fish."

The new arrivals had scant interest in American traditions such as republicanism. Upon arrival, an immigrant's first order of business was usually to sell his vote to the corrupt Democratic Tammany Hall political machine. "Americans were shocked," wrote Grant, "to find what a subordinate place was occupied by the old American stock in the opinions of some aliens."

In 1908, Grant came under the influence of physical anthropologist William Z. Ripley, author of *The Races of Europe*. He learned that the rise of mass immigration correlated with a drastic decline in the fertility of the older American population. As a result, immigration amounted not to a re-enforcement of the American population but to a *replacement* of native by foreign stock. Ripley also

taught that Europe was inhabited not by one but by three races, albeit much mixed. The old American stock had belonged to the "Nordic" branch of Europeans, which was being replaced by "Alpine" and "Mediterranean" types.

Finally, Ripley also taught him the botanical phenomenon of *reversion*, whereby the crossing of two dissimilar domesticated plants produced an offspring with the traits of some ancient wild variety. This led Ripley to believe that the offspring of old stock Americans and the new immigrants might "revert" to the condition of Neanderthals or some other primitive hominid. Grant would take this fanciful bit of speculation seriously enough to press for drastic antimiscegenation laws.

Rep. Albert Johnson (1869-1957), author of the 1924 Immigration Act and colleague of Madison Grant, argued during congressional debate on the 1924 Immigration Act, "it has become necessary that the United States cease to function as an asylum."

In 1909, Grant became Vice President of the Immigration Restriction League, already in existence since 1895. There efforts were at first directed toward establishing a literacy test as a requirement for immigration. The primary if unstated aim of this campaign was to discourage immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe, where literacy rates were lower. Grover Cleveland had vetoed such a bill as early as 1896. Grant lobbied Pres. William Howard Taft personally, but to no effect. Taft's attorney general told him: "My dear Grant, if the manual laborer is shut out, we will soon have nobody to dig our ditches!"

Taft's successor Woodrow Wilson also opposed such a bill, but congressional support grew until his veto was finally overridden in 1917. But by that time literacy rates were so high all over Europe that the new law had little effect.

The tide was turned mainly by Grant's publication in 1916 of *The Passing of the Great Race*, developing and popularizing Ripley's racial ideas. Grant's present biographer, a self-styled progressive, describes this work as a "diabolical masterpiece." In it, Grant attempted to shame Americans of his day for trying to "purchase a few generations of ease and luxury" by importing cheap labor. The avoidance of manual labor by the native born, he warned, was a prelude to their extinction; the immigrant workers were out breeding him and would eventually crowd him out.

But the principle lesson Grant wished to transmit was that America was a "Nordic" country in danger of being swamped by a flood of inferior short-skulled Alpines and swarthy Mediterraneans. The validity of this classification scheme is questionable, with the alleged "Alpine" race being especially elusive. Ripley once asked a German anthropologist who had personally measured tens of thousands of subjects, for a picture of a "pure Alpine type." The anthropologist admitted that he had never encountered one. All his brachycephalic [i.e., Alpine] men were either blond or tall, or narrow nosed, or something else which they should not be according to the theory.

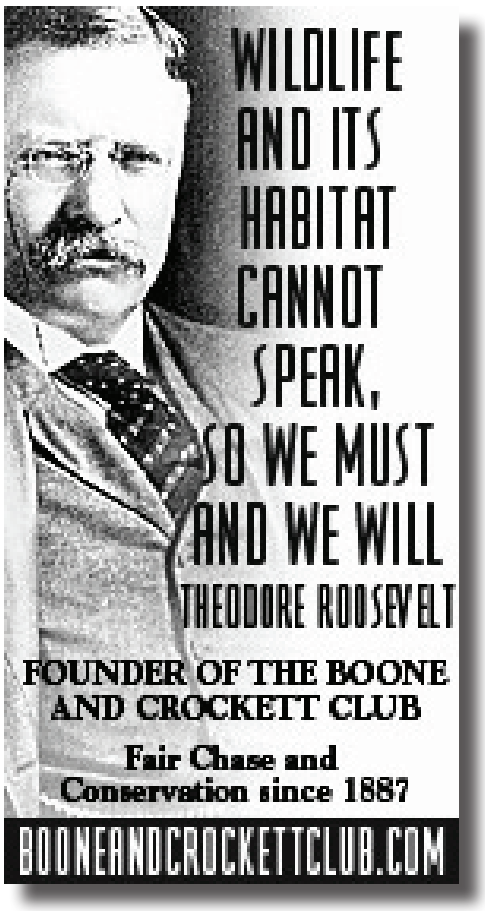
It did not matter. Grant set out his case with such verve that he soon found a host of imitators. Before long, his ideas filled the nation's newspapers. Suddenly everybody was talking about the need to preserve the Nordic race.

In March 1919, the Republicans assumed control of the House of Representatives, and Albert Johnson of Washington State became the new chairman of the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization. Madison Grant cultivated Johnson's acquaintance carefully, taking him around to all the best private clubs in New York and introducing him to his eugenicist friends. Eventually,

the two worked out a strategy to push a "one-year emergency restriction" through Congress. The pretexts for this supposedly temporary measure were a cholera epidemic in postwar Europe, an economic downturn in postwar America, and widespread Bolshevik sympathies among immigrants. But once on the books, they had little difficulty getting the restriction extended for another two years.

Johnson also appealed to conservationist concerns in his congressional speeches. Following Grant's lead, he warned that mass immigration would drown American valleys to build reservoirs, would strip American rivers of their fish and convert them into sewers to carry off factory waste, and would turn the American landscape into a gridiron of railroads.

In this age of ethnic hypersensitivity, it is interesting to read some of the language employed in the immigration debate of the 1920s. The new immigrants constituted a "turgid stream of offscourings; the scum, the offal, the excrescence of the earth; human scrubs and runts and culls; indescribably filthy, twisted, ignorant and verminous," etc.



This last charge was literally true in some cases; delousing centers had to be set up in European ports to fumigate emigrants for America. But after all, even Emma Lazarus had described the new arrivals as "wretched refuse."

During the three years of "temporary" immigration restriction, Grant and his many coworkers continued to propagate his ideas. Among other endeavors, they organized an international eugenics conference in New York. Once it concluded, all the displays, maps and charts were sent off to Washington, D.C. and displayed for several months in congressional meeting rooms. No one could doubt that public as well as political support for permanent immigration restriction was on the rise.

In 1924, congressional hearings were held on a permanent law far more restrictive than the "emergency" measure of 1921. There was opposition, of course, especially from Jewish organizations. Yet even Jews limited themselves to disputing the notion of "Nordic" superiority; at least publicly, they accepted the necessity of limiting immigration to whites. No one testifying before Congress advocated letting European Americans be *replaced* by Orientals, Mestizos or Africans. Spiro is shocked by the darkness of an age when the preservation of the White Man was imagined to rival the preservation of the caribou in importance.

On 26 May, President Coolidge signed the Immigration Restriction act of 1924 into law. America remained an unapologetically European country for another forty years. Madison Grant went off to save the Giant Redwoods of California.

Spiro's book devotes much space to Grant's associates as well as to Grant himself, sometimes reading more like history than a mere biography. Attention is paid to Grant's opponents as well, such as Franz Boas and his "cultural anthropology" movement. Spiro mentions Boas' study purporting to show that skull shape is heavily influenced by environment—without, alas, noting that it was discredited in 2002. Nor are his criticisms of the crude intelligence tests of Grant's day accompanied with any reference to the more sophisticated recent work of Richard Lynn or Phil Rushton. But, then, he is an historian. With due caution, *Defending the Master Race* will be of the greatest interest both to students of human differences and to contemporary immigration restrictionists. ■