tropical wood products are relatively low, Vincent says, but the reason is that most tropical timber exports, such as plywood and sawed wood, must compete with wood products from the temperate regions. That keeps prices down.

The policies of tropical nations themselves have exacerbated the boom-and-bust pattern, Vincent asserts. The forests in most tropical countries are government-owned; harvesting concessions are typically short-lived, doled out as a form of political patronage. The concessionaires have little incentive to conserve forests. There are two ways to change this, Vincent argues. Governments can increase their fees to finance public-forest management, or they can grant concessionaires contracts that are longer, renewable, and transferable. That would give them a stake in the forests' future and ample reason to regard forests as what they really are: valuable natural assets.

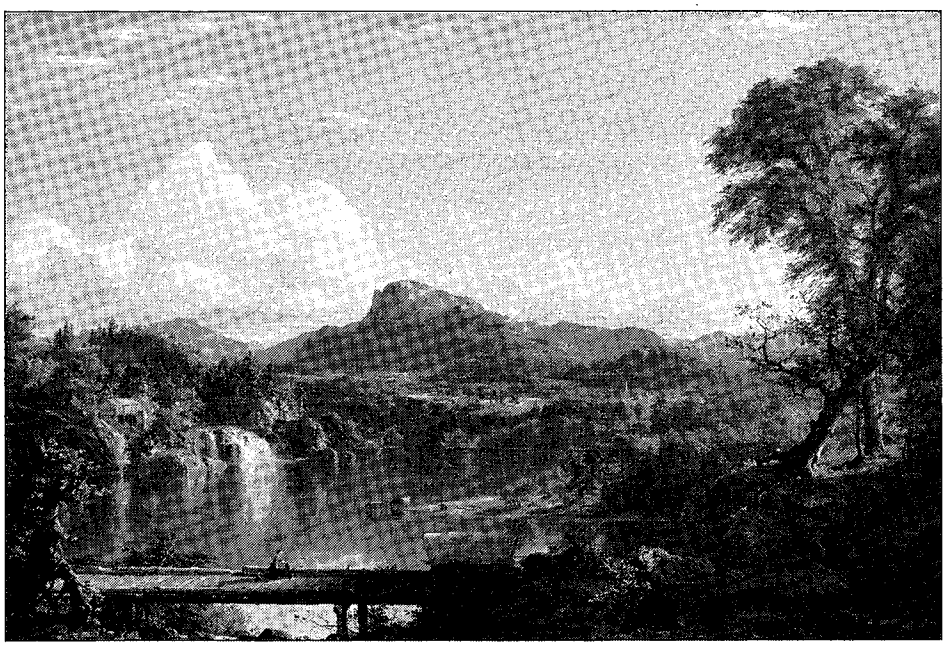
ARTS & LETTERS

Paradise Regained

"Retreat to Arcadia: American Landscape and The American Art-Union" by Carol Troyen, in *The American Art Journal* (Vol. XXIII, No. 1, 1991), 40 W. 57th St., 5th fl., New York, N.Y. 10019.

In 1851, the New York-based American Art-Union held one of its most influential exhibitions. Three of the show's paintings were so powerful and accomplished that they became much-imitated models of a pastoral form of landscape painting, according to Troyen, an associate curator at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts. In a nation beset by growing sectional and economic tensions, these archetypes, she says, shored up the "foundering ideal" of America as an arcadian paradise.

The inspiring works were done by three young painters just starting to make their mark in the New York art world. John F. Kensett's (1816–72) *Mount Washington from the Valley of Conway* was especially innovative. It depicts snow capped Mount Washington in New Hampshire as a majestic and gracious setting for farming and civilization, and bathes the whole vista in a golden light. Guidebooks of the 1820s and '30s had described the sparsely populated area as dangerous and forbidding, and



Man is in harmony with nature in Frederic Church's New England Scenery.

earlier paintings, such as Thomas Cole's *Storm near Mount Washington* (circa 1825–1830), had shown it that way.

The Art-Union show's two other breathtaking paintings—*American Harvesting* by Jasper F. Cropsey (1823–1900) and *New England Scenery* by Frederic E. Church (1826–1900)—were composite images, but were very much like Kensett's in scale, composition, and theme. The three scenes, Troyen says, had a "Jeffersonian harmony and idyllic quality," and offered "the sense of America as the new Eden." It was a reassuring vision then, for outside the Art-Union's walls, Troyen writes, "the nation was in turmoil, scarcely recovered from the crises precipitating . . . the Compromise of 1850."

The artistic uplift was no accident. The Art-Union, managed by a committee composed of 21 prominent New Yorkers, envisioned itself (in the words of an annual report) as "one of those great institutions which influence the character and manners of the whole nation." Engravings of Kensett's and Cropsey's works were sent to the Art-Union's 13,578 members, and each member also could hope to win an original painting in the lottery the organization held each year.

But the lottery proved the Art-Union's undoing. The New York Supreme Court declared it illegal and ordered the Art-Union to sell all its holdings and cease operations. Church, Kensett, Cropsey, and many other artists painted inspiring landscapes through the 1850s, Troyen notes, until the Civil War "made such detailed representations of Eden in America impossible to believe."

Biography's Perils

"To Edit a Life" by Peter Davison, in *The Atlantic* (Oct. 1992), 745 Boylston St., Boston, Mass. 02116.

As biography has grown increasingly popular and lucrative in recent decades, more and more writers have tried to put the lives of the great, or at least the well-known, between hard covers. Often the results come under the heading of what Joyce Carol Oates has called "pathography"—works that emphasize the subject's shortcomings and sins. Robert Caro's multivolume treatment of Lyndon Johnson, according to some critics, falls into that category. So, needless to say, do a host of less seriously intended works, such as Kitty Kelley's venomous blockbusters on Nancy Reagan et al.

People in the public eye now have little protection under libel law, thanks to *New York Times* v. *Sullivan* (1964) and other Supreme Court rulings—and the proliferation of sensational biographies owes something to this change. Yet while the door has thus been opened wide for unadmiring Boswells, Davison, an editor at Houghton Mifflin, says that *serious* biographers still face a host of imposing obstacles.

A serious biography, Davison notes, demands "the author's time, attention, scholarship, and fidelity to the truth or what can be discovered of the truth." If the subject is not long dead, the biographer must obtain evidence from "the still living, who tend to have a particular interest in seeing that the life of the beloved (or detested) is written 'accurately.'" The author who takes a different view of the subject may find himself out in the cold.

Further hurdles appear when the subject is a literary artist. If he or she is not long dead, the biographer must obtain permission to quote from the published works. Since 1963, when poet Sylvia Plath committed suicide at age 30, at least nine would-be biographers, according to Davison, have had either to submit their books for scrutiny by the Plath estate "or to refrain from quoting the very poetry that made Plath famous." Four of the proposed biographies never made it into print.

Literary biographers now face yet another hurdle, thanks to a federal court's ruling in *Random House* v. *Salinger* (1987). The court prevented Ian Hamilton, after he had finished his book about the reclusive novelist J. D. Salinger, from even paraphrasing, let alone quoting, Salinger's *unpublished* letters without the author's permission—which he did not grant.

Writing the book sometimes seems the least of a biographer's trials. Anne Stevenson's *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* (1989) is, in Davison's judgment, "the most penetrating and eloquent life" of the poet yet to appear. It fell to him to modify Stevenson's text so that both estate and author were relatively satisfied. But Stevenson's book came out after Plath "had been elevated posthumously into an illusory martyrdom of the feminist movement." Despite Stevenson's fidelity to the known facts and because of the Plath estate's obvious influence on her book, *Bitter Fame* "was attacked, misinterpreted, and harangued . . . by ideologues or self-interested critics" in England and "relatively ignored" by the U.S. public.