

Driven out of Eden

Our desire to holiday in an earthly paradise has created a hell for those we shut out

It is surely one of the most brazen evasions of reality ever painted. John Constable's *The Cornfield* – completed in 1826 and now hanging in the National Gallery's new exhibition, *Paradise* – evokes, at the very height of the enclosure movement, a flawless rural harmony.

Just as the commoners were being dragged from their land, their crops destroyed, their houses razed, the dissenters transported or hanged, Constable conjures the definitive English Arcadia. A dog walks a herd of sheep into the deep shade of an August day. A ruddy farm boy drinks from a glittering stream, his donkey quietly behind him. In the background, framed by great elms, men in hats and neckerchiefs work a field of wheat. Beyond them, a river shimmers through water meadows. A church emerges from the trees to bless the happy natives and their other Eden.

In the midst of a rural hell, Constable invents his heaven. It is a glittering lie, and we should not be surprised to read in the gallery's brochure that this is "one of the nation's favourite paintings, reproduced countless times and in thousands of homes". For what Constable has done is what human beings have always done, and continue to do today. Confronted by atrocities, we invoke a prelapsarian wonder. We construct our Gardens of Eden, real or imagined, out of other people's hell.

The timing of the exhibition is good, as it is in this season that we leave our homes in search of paradise. In doing so, we immiserate other people. It is not just the noise with which we fill their lives while pursuing our own tranquillity. In order to create an Eden in which we may disport ourselves in innocence and nakedness, we must first

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commission others to clear its inhabitants out of the way. Like Constable, we are adept at hiding this truth from ourselves.

The Yosemite valley in California was set aside by Abraham Lincoln as the world's first public wilderness. As the historian Simon Schama records: "The brilliant meadow floor which suggested to its first eulogists a pristine Eden was in fact the result of regular fire-clearances by its Ahwahneechee Indian occupants." The first whites to enter the valley were the soldiers sent to kill them. Eden, in an inversion of the biblical story, was thus created by man's expulsion. The colonists redefined the Ahwahneechee's managed habitat as wilderness in order to assert both a temporal and spiritual dominion over it.

America's Garden of Eden, in other words, is in fact its Canaan, the land of milk and honey whose indigenous people had first to be eliminated before the invaders could claim it as their birthright. The Mosaic doctrine of terra nullius (the inhabitants possess no legal rights to their land), which permitted the Lord's appointed to "smite the corners of Moab, and destroy all the children of Sheth", has become the founding creed of the usurper all over the world. It continues to inform the land seizures in modern Israel, seeking now to turn itself into a walled garden; it continues to guide the expropriations upon which much of the global tourism industry is based.

In the second half of the 20th century, as the cost of international transport fell, governments discovered a powerful financial incentive to create, from the lands of the poor, a paradise for the rich. All over east and southern Africa, the most fertile lands of the nomads and hunter-gatherers were declared "primordial wilderness". The inhabitants were shut out; only those who could afford to pay were permitted to enter heaven.

You can read about the Masai Mara reserve on the Kenya tourist board's website, under the heading "Wilderness". It informs you that the indigenous people, the Masai, "regard themselves ... as much a part of the life of the land as the land is part of their lives. Traditionally, the Masai rarely hunt and living alongside wildlife in harmony is an important part of their beliefs." What it does not tell you is that the Masai have been extirpated from the "wilderness" in which they lived in harmony with wildlife, because the tourists did not expect to see them there.

The government of Botswana has just completed its expulsion of the Gana and Gwi bush people from the central Kalahari game reserve, on the grounds that their hunting and gathering has become "obsolete" and their presence is no longer compatible with "preserving wildlife resources".

To get rid of them, as Survival International has shown, it cut off their water supplies, taxed, fined, beat and tortured them. Bushmen have lived there for some 20,000 years.

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The wildlife is not threatened by them, but the freedom of the diamond mining and the tourism industries might be. Having expelled the bushmen from their ancestral lands, the government now invites tourists to visit what its website calls “the last Eden”.

The precursors of these game reserves were the deer parks and other earthly paradises the aristocracy built for itself in Britain. In Stowe gardens in Buckinghamshire, landscaped by Capability Brown in the 1740s on behalf of the Whig politician Lord Cobham, is a valley called the “Elysian Fields”, the paradise of the ancient Greeks.

Hidden in the trees in the heart of paradise is a church: the only remaining evidence of one of the villages cleared to make way for the estate. You can scour the National Trust’s literature for any reference to the people who lived there or in the other places which were turned into the grand estates it preserves, but you will be wasting your time. Britain’s biggest NGO recounts the history of heaven, but shields its eyes from hell.

We deceive ourselves by precisely the same means in building our virtual Edens. Paul Gauguin sought his garden of innocence in the south Pacific, but found instead a society ravaged by French colonisation and venereal disease. Like Constable he painted paradise anyway: the tableau displayed in the National Gallery was largely copied from a frieze in a Javanese temple, into whose implausible Eden Gauguin inserted his ethereal Tahitians.

Perhaps the most disturbing painting in the exhibition is Francois Boucher’s *Landscape With a Watermill*. In the French countryside in 1755, the peasants were living on husks, grass and acorns, but Boucher has plump maids in white linen sauntering through their tasks, while boys lounge in bucolic splendour on the riverbank. The painting appears to have been produced to grace the walls of a landowner’s home.

Today, we find such lies repeated on our television screens, in the travel and wildlife programmes that seek to persuade us that all is well in the white man’s playground. The BBC’s recent series on Congo, filmed in the midst of the massacres there, informed us that “Congo may once have been known as the ‘heart of darkness’ - today it seems more like a bright, beautiful wilderness.” It ignored the killings altogether.

Paradise is the founding myth of the colonist. Unable to contemplate the truth of what we do, we extract from our fathomless collective guilt a story of primordial innocence. #

George Monbiot’s book, The Age of Consent: A Manifesto for a New World Order, is published by Flamingo.