

Ida Marie Olsen. "Outlines of Ecological Consciousness in W.H. Hudson's Environmentalism." *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 63. 2 (2020): 193-210.

This article offers an ecocritical analysis of the work of the Anglo-Argentine writer W.H. Hudson (1841-1922). Hudson was highly regarded in his own lifetime as a writer on nature and birds. He was admired greatly by John Galsworthy, Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford among others. While referring to a number of Hudson's books, the main focus of Ida Marie Olsen's article is an analysis of his novel *Green Mansions*, first published in the United Kingdom in 1904. The critical tools used by Olsen she finds in the work of the contemporary philosopher Timothy Morton (1968-), particularly in *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (2007) and *The Ecological Thought* (2010).

While it is true that earlier critics have claimed Hudson or his work for environmentalism or ecology, to my knowledge they have not argued the case as Olsen does. She presents Hudson as an environmentalist *avant la lettre*. His work is concerned with the description of birds and nature. He was always critical of the plumage trade and in describing his concerns Olsen foregrounds a letter which he wrote to *The Times* in 1893 entitled "Feathered Women". This was an attack on the way that the Victorian fashion industry used bird feathers for ornamental purposes with a reproach from Hudson to those women who wore feathers as fashion ornaments, something "which he rightly argued contributed to the extinction of several bird species" (196).

While she turns to Morton's work to carry out her critical analysis using terms such as "dark ecology", "the mesh" and "strange strangers", as well as the already current "environmentalism" and "ecology" to create a picture of both Hudson and his work as harbingers of the modern awareness of our ecological predicament, Olsen also provides a critique of Morton's ideas. Indeed, this is the premise of her article. She suggests that Morton "oversimplifies the relationship between environmentalism and ecological awareness in his insistence on the rigid distinction between the two" (194). Olsen sums up this crux in Morton's thought thus: "What we traditionally think of as environmentalism, Morton argues, is in fact an ideology that disguises itself as a notion of sustainable environmental ethics, while actually facilitating anthropocentrism and ecological degradation" (194). However, rather than dismiss writers like Hudson, Olsen suggests that it would be more fruitful to "revisit texts that . . . were foundational for the rise of the environmentalist movements of the twentieth century" (194). Her aim is to read "the inherent environmentalism of Hudson's work as exhibiting a form of ecological consciousness" (193-4). In this way the work of an important writer who anticipated the environmental movement is made available to contemporary practitioners of ecocriticism.

It was John Galsworthy who introduced Hudson's novel, *Green Mansions*, to the discerning New York publisher Alfred Knopf in 1912. Knopf republished the novel in the United States in 1916 with a preface by Galsworthy. It was a success until it fell out of favour in the 1960s. *Green Mansions* is a novel about the journey of Abel, a Venezuelan man, into the Guyanese jungle. There he finds Rima, a woman who has her own area of the jungle where she communicates with the animals and speaks to Abel in a language akin to birdsong. Rima's habitat is presented as if it were an Eden and Abel and Rima fall in love. She is the last of her kind, so when she is killed her race and Abel's idyll with her are at an end. This is precisely the sort of Romanticized image of

Nature that Morton argues against. However, from this point onwards, the narrative puts Abel and the creatures in the jungle that surround him on a more equal footing. Olsen detects Morton's idea of the mesh in this part of Hudson's narrative. The mesh is Morton's term for the interconnectedness of various life forms and their habitats. Olsen sees the episode in which Abel shares his temporary shelter with a "monstrous hairy hermit spider" (*Green Mansions* (1998) 185) in the following terms: "This scene illustrates the coexistence and inter-species intimacy that for Morton means becoming aware of 'strange strangers,' a term he uses as an extension of Derrida's notion of the *arrivant*, as a way of thinking about lifeforms by moving beyond human/animal categorisations and hierarchies" (199).

I would not say as Olsen does that Hudson and his work are largely forgotten today. However, it is certainly true that he is not nearly as widely read as he was in his own lifetime. Olsen's sympathetic reading of his work provides a welcome introduction to a new generation of readers, and her analysis of Hudson's work gives his pre-existing readers a valuable point of departure into the world of ecocriticism.

Philip Jenkins
Clare Hall, University of Cambridge