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The Grand (Mount) Monadnock

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They who simply climb to the peak of Monadnock have seen but little of the mountain. I came not to look off from it, but to look at it.

— Thoreau (in Howarth 1982, 347)

A mountain is more than a physical feature to those who live in its shadow. It may represent the mundane, the necessity to survive, or loftier ideals, an expression of humanity's position in the cosmos. To New Englanders, Mount Monadnock represents both these perspectives, as well as a range of sentiments in between. "Monadnock" describes a classic geologic feature; it is a means of livelihood for farmers, loggers, and recreationists; it is a representation of Nature herself. This geographical description of the mountain discusses its "place" in New England from both the physical and cultural perspective. The physical overview provides a foundation for its site prominence, while the cultural history examines how Mount Monadnock has come to embody the soul of the region.

Physical Perspective

Mount Monadnock, elevation 965 meters (3,165 feet), is in the southwestern part of New Hampshire in the towns of Dublin and Jaffrey. The area dominated by the mountain carries the name Monadnock Region and stretches approximately from the
southwestern corner of New Hampshire to the town of Milford, 69 kilometers (43 miles) east, and from the town of Marlow in the north to the Massachusetts state boundary, 53 kilometers (33 miles) south. The mountain towers 510 meters (1,686 feet) above Dublin Lake on its northern flank and approximately 605 meters (2,000 feet) above Thorndike Pond to its east (Figure 1); it is a significant landmark that can be seen for some distance (Figure 2). From the top of the mountain on a clear day one can see 104 kilometers (65 miles) eastward to the Atlantic Ocean and Boston; northward the White Mountains of New Hampshire are visible (152 kilometers [95 miles]), and westward the Green Mountains of Vermont (75 kilometers [47 miles]). On a clear day, the summit view encompasses six New England states. Generations of visitors have examined these rocks and imagined personality (the Imp, the Tooth) or antiquity (Sarcophagus, Doric Temple). Its singular form has also inspired a generic term in geology (Howarth 1982, 287).

Most of the mountain's surficial rocks date from the Lower Devonian and belong to the Littleton formation (Fowler-Billings et al. 1949) (Figure 3). The composition of the rock formation is quite varied and demonstrates a high degree of metamorphism. The southwestern part has Concord Granite from the New Hampshire magma series, which is late Devonian.

The geology of Mount Monadnock reflects a turbulent development in conjunction with drifting continents. Once the floor of a great ocean, the sedimentary rocks were uplifted during the Late Devonian by the collision of the North American and African plates. Escaping magma cooled into granite and also rose, exerting pressure on the sediments. They metamorphosed into hard mica and schists (quartz mica schists,
Mt. Monadnock
New Hampshire
Contour Interval 30 m

Figure 1.

Figure 3. Cross section of Mount Monadnock, west to east.
After Fowler-Billings et al. (1949).
sillimanite schist, sillimanite garnet schist) and formed synclines that later fractured and
jointed. These are best developed and visible today on the south side of the mountain
directly beneath its summit, near the White Arrow Trail (Figure 1).

Ages of erosion, occurring both prior to and following the uplifting, reduced the
region's weaker rocks to a rolling plain (referred to as a peneplain by some authorities),
leaving the more resistant rocks to stand above the peneplain surface. Such erosional
remnants are dubbed monadnocks, a term coined by William Morris Davis in 1894 to
describe a residual landform "that rises over the uplifted plateaus of denudation"
(1894, 99).

Finally, great ice sheets more than 1.6 kilometers thick pushed across the
mountain generally from north to south cutting deep ledges, smoothing, pulling, and
plucking, creating "sheep backs" and deep angular grooves (Howarth 1982, 287). Many
erratics and striations on the south slope demonstrate the great impact glaciation had on
this feature, which is perhaps best characterized as a roche mountonnée. Its singularity in
both form and space therefore gives it a unique place in history.

Although Monadnock is essentially a geographic point, elements of its position
and development imbue it with a unique cultural and historic role in New England. Its
place has evolved from that of a "no man's land," to a zone of marginal agriculture,
toward a more symbolic representation exemplifying the emergence of an "American"
culture via art and literature. Today this symbolic role is played out from a recreational
perspective.
Symbolic Representation

"Monadnock" is an Algonquin name, essentially meaning "place of unsurpassed excellence" (Nutting 1925). While more than 22 spellings have been recorded, the image of the mountain has from the outset been consistently described by such terminology as "one going beyond all others in that vicinity for size," "at the honored or respected mountain," and "a mountain that stands alone" (Chamberlain 1968, 81).

A written account of the mountain first appeared in the chronicles of Governor Winthrop of Massachusetts in 1632. It was initially mapped in 1677 as part of the "White Hills" but not named until 1704 in an account of Indian killings in the region. During these pioneer years of settlement Monadnock was considered of little utility and was actually mapped as a "no man's land." In a citizens' petition, in 1787, Jaffrey residents requested 80 hectares (200 acres) of this "wasteland" for land to till and maintain their minister (Nutting 1925). Monadnock land was offered for sale in the mid-18th century for $0.02 per acre compared with the surrounding agricultural land's value of $3.33 per acre (Chamberlain 1968). Initially, it was at the fringe of a growing New England, and it remained so well into the early 19th century. Its main use was as pasture until about 1850, although several proximate base roads were opened as early as 1766, unknowingly setting the scene for later use.

Nature and landscape were common themes in the American art and literature that blossomed early in the 19th century. The pristine environs of southern New Hampshire thus took on special significance for a host of literary and artistic retreats. Intellectuals strove to create an American culture, unique and free from European dominance,
traditions, and influence. Literature drew inspiration from the inherent conflicts between
nature and an emerging urban society. New Hampshire's unspoiled environment and
open countryside offered a sense of escape, as well as of horizon, perspective, and
distance. It symbolized a place untouched by the harness of civilization. Thus, the
landscape's most visible and prominent feature – Monadnock – came to represent one's
hoped-for condition in life. As early as 1785, Timothy Dwight, the President of Yale
College, wrote that in Mount Monadnock "is seen the richest prospect in New England,
and not improbably in the United States"; several years later he added that "a finer object
can scarcely be conceived" (Nutting 1925, 56). It was grand, unique, solid, and
exemplified permanence and stability. Artists and writers were drawn to the region and
established "retreats in Dublin, Harrisville, Peterborough (MacDowell Colony), and
Claremont (Saint Gaudins) (Shonk 1974). Monadnock was transformed from a point to a
symbol; it was the goal of many writers and artists to capture its essence (Brodie 1974).
The list of notables is long and includes Rudyard Kipling, Allen Scott, Ralph Waldo
Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, William Preston Phelps, Abbott Thayer, Luis Agassiz
Fuertes, William Faulkner, William Ellery Channing, George Whitefield Chadwick, John
Greenleaf Whittier, and Richard Burton.

Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Abbott Thayer were pre-
eminent in setting Monadnock "above the others" and in elevating its position in the
psyche of New England. Thoreau's stature in the emerging American literary base is
well-known. He was the consummate ecologist and hiker. He visited Mount Monadnock
repeatedly and wrote extensive diaries of his trips there. "You must ascend a mountain,"
he wrote, "to learn your relation to matter, and so to your own body" (Thoreau [1857] in
Harding and Bode 1958, 497). Monadnock exemplified "hiking back into Nature."

Thoreau deplored "tourists," those "false pretenders to fame" and the "defacers of
mountain tops," and sought to set the Monadnock experience on a more spiritual,
philosophical plane than was common in the region (1982, 305). He wrote more about
Monadnock than perhaps anyone else. To truly understand the mountain you must
understand Thoreau. In essence Monadnock best reflects the changes of mind and art
that gave shape to his life. In his epic journals of the mountain he wrote, "They who
climb to the peak of Monadnock have seen but little of the mountain. I came not to look
off from it, but to look at it" (Howarth 1982, 347).

Similarly, Emerson, whose central concerns in literature were to impart life,
strength, and above all self-sufficiency to American literature, also focused on Mount
Monadnock as a key to understanding Nature and self (Shonk 1974). Such ideals are
exemplified in numerous poems, *Nature* (1836) and *The Sphinx* (1847) and perhaps most
explicitly in his 1847 work, *Monadnoc*, where he eloquently describes "Cheshire's
[county] haughty hill" in such words as:

> An eyemark and the country's core, Inspirer, prophet evermore;
Pillar which God aloft had set so that men might it not forget
(Emerson 1914, 45).

Abbot Thayer memorialized the mountain in two of his most famous paintings, *Winter
Sunrise, Monadnock* and the *Angel of Monadnock*. The former, exhibited in New York's
Metropolitan Museum, has been described by many as one of the supreme landscape
pictures of the world. Thayer was a painter, a poet, and a naturalist. He wrote:

> The outline of the mountain against the sky is as sharp as steel.
Some painters soften such outlines, for the sake of atmosphere,
but I can't make this one sharp enough. And those tiny spruces
on the skyline - it's incredible how small they are, and yet their exact smallness is one of the things that gives scale to the mountain (Thayer 1956, 12).

Thayer etched the image of Monadnock in the minds of America and, in concert with the aforementioned literary figures, helped create Monadnock as a symbol beyond its mere physical presence. The mountain aura described by Emerson in Nature (1836) came finally to light. As the 20th century dawned, "Cheshire's haughty hill" ushered in a new phase or place for itself - recreation.

Mount Monadnock has always played a recreational role in the Monadnock Region, but only in the 20th century has this role come to dominate its place. During the region's early settlement history, the mountain was a favorite berry-picking and picnicking spot (Royce 1974) (a fact often lamented by Thoreau). The realm was expanded beyond the local scene by the introduction of railroad lines in the 1850's and the concomitant emergence of a tourist and hotel industry. Such landmarks as the Halfway House (1860), Shattuck Inn (1860), the Ark (1874), and the Monadnock Inn (1920) catered to a newly emerging and upwardly mobile middle class. The Woodshed Club and Monadnock Mountain Association were formed (circa 1910) to both enhance recreational opportunities and protect the area's natural beauty (Royce 1974).

Roads further opened the mountain in the 1920's, ushering in the automobile era, and transforming the mountain into a popular retreat for an increasingly urban society. The "Monadnock Experience" was conceived as a retreat from urban life, replete with clean fresh air, fine mountain brooks, and a view exceeding 160 kilometers (100 miles),
the only place where all six New England states are visible (Royce 1974). The intoxicating aroma of Thoreau's "sun-baked spruce odor" assumed a new dimension and meaning.

The state of New Hampshire created a state park in 1930 and over the years has annexed land to produce a protected area of some 2,025 hectares (5,000 acres). Coupled with an adjoining 2,834 hectares (7,000 acres) of, as yet, relatively pristine lands, the region is clearly designed to embody the "Monadnock Experience."

Monadnock holds a special place in the mythology of the region and has done so for more than a century. Each year, since 1986, a dance troupe celebrates its "place" in a special summit performance. The park is one of the most heavily used recreational areas in New England. More than 130,000 visitors annually register to climb to its summit. It has long been known as the second most-climbed peak in the world, after Mount Fuji. In fact, with the recent introduction of motorized transit to Fuji's summit, Julia Older and Steve Sherman (1990) argue that Monadnock is now the most climbed mountain in the world. During the last 150 years use has grown so much that today's summit climate is, in fact, a man-made, arctic-alpine-like zone, reflecting a legacy of denudation, burning and overuse.

The pressures on Mount Monadnock's new "place" in the region are intense. As land values and property taxes rise, proximate large landowners are under increasing pressure to develop "underutilized" land. Growth in New Hampshire has been phenomenal in recent years; the state continues to lose prime agricultural and recreational land to housing tracts, malls, and a host of other urban developments. As such,
Monadnock faces three key development issues: overuse, as well as conflicting use, the vulnerability of privately held parcels to development pressures, and a general lack of coordinated (regional) planning, which ultimately erodes the overall notion of the "Monadnock Experience" so carefully and affectionately crafted over the last three centuries.

Conclusions

Mount Monadnock has attained a place in both the New England and American culture. It is a distinct geophysical event, its proper name having been transformed into "a generic term for all such residual mountains that rise over the uplifted plateaus of denudation." From its physical presence it rose to become a symbol of human achievements and to represent an ideal in the cosmos of human – environment interaction. As an artistic and literary ideal, it came to represent man's hoped-for condition in life; as a modern recreational and aesthetic place it must face the increasing pressures of an encroaching urban society. Time will tell whether it remains, in Emerson's words, "Cheshire's haughty hill."
References


