



ADVICE TO THE STILL-BORN: THE PROSPECTS FOR
GEOGRAPHY AT MONT EAGLE UNIVERSITY IN 1871

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In 1870 an eccentric millionaire, Horace Hawes, proposed to leave the bulk of his estate, almost thirty million dollars, for the establishment of a new university, to be known as Mont (or Mount) Eagle, near Redwood City, California, on the peninsula just south of San Francisco.¹ With the help of an American emigré scholar residing in Germany, Edward Payson Evans, Hawes solicited ideas for the development of this university. Unfortunately, Hawes, who was described by Hubert Howe Bancroft as "a self-made man, a shrewd lawyer, a man of powerful mind, original in his views and methods, but full of conceit, suspicious by nature, always unpopular, and eccentric to the verge of insanity," died in 1871 at the age of 58, and his family "succeeded in breaking the will on the ground of the testator's insanity, and thus defeated his plans for the public good and his own permanent fame."² If he had not died before launching the university, or if the will had not been broken, there might be a Mont Eagle University today, perhaps in the niche that Stanford University, founded in 1885, now occupies. It is conceivable that Mont Eagle would have preempted the place for a large well-endowed private university in the Bay Area and that Leland Stanford's monument might have taken a different form.

In late 1870 E. P. Evans wrote to George Perkins Marsh, American Minister to Italy, and Henry P. Tappan, former President of the University of Michigan, for their views on the ideal construction of Mont Eagle University. Especially interesting to geographers is Marsh's letter of 15 December 1870 (unfortunately not preserved), in which he made some specific suggestions of a geographical nature. The following passages are from Evans' reply, dated 20 January 1871:

I thank you heartily for the valuable suggestions contained in your letter of Dec. 15 in reference to the organization of the recently endowed university in California, and shall be grateful

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for any thought which may occur to you after further reflection and which you may be willing to favor me with.

Your suggestion that the University should inaugurate as soon as possible a series of observations for the purpose of ascertaining the effects of human action on the physical conditions of the Earth is one of great importance, especially in a country like California, where there is such a wide and peculiarly favorable field for investigations of this kind. I shall do what I can to have the project carried out at the earliest possible moment and also be glad to send you the results as fast as they are published, or systematically seconded. I know of no one who could make better use of the facts for the advancement of science than yourself. Mrs. Evans and myself will probably visit Italy next autumn, when I hope to have an opportunity of conversing with you on the subject and obtaining from you some definite ideas as to the best plan of making these observations.³

In his centennial edition of Marsh's great book, Man and Nature(1864), published by Harvard University Press in 1965, David Lowenthal made a brief, but careful citation of Evan's letter in a footnote.⁴ In an essay surveying the early literature of ecology, Frank Egerton cited Lowenthal but said that Marsh "urged the support of ecological research when he was consulted in 1870 about the use of funds for the development of the University of California."⁵ But Marsh did not use the words ecology or ecological (nor did he refer to geography), and the university in question was not the fledgling University of California, which was established in Oakland in 1868 and would move to its present Berkeley site in 1873, but the still-born Mont Eagle. One can only speculate about what form Marsh's proposals would have taken if the University had actually been given life. Would a department or teaching unit have been established with the name Geography? Could a place have been made for another of Marsh's correspondents, the French geographer Elisee Reclus, who was imprisoned in April 1871 for participating in the Paris Commune but who went into exile in Switzerland in March 1872? Reclus had considered the United States, where he had spent more than two years in the 1850's, as a possible refuge.

In an earlier letter to Evans (5 December 1870), a draft of which has been preserved, Marsh speculated about the commanding position that a wealthy new

university would take among the educational establishments of California.

If a donation were absolute, you would be able to provide all the facilities for university education required for the whole population of California, and perhaps for that of the entire Pacific slope of our territory; this idea ought to be kept in view even in the fundamental organization and I cannot but think the legislature and all other persons interested in the cause of secular educ. would do wisely in taking measures for the consolidation of all the great educ. estab. of the state under your general direction.

One can only speculate about the place of power that Mont Eagle University might have assumed vis-a-vis the University of California, which was then only in its infancy. It had been suggested to Horace Hawes that, instead of starting a new university, he should give the money to the struggling state university, but he "utterly repudiated the idea, saying that it would never do, the State University could never succeed."⁷ Could a wealthy private university have placed the University of California in the shade in the way that many of the older private universities of the East had done in their respective states? Could Daniel Coit Gilman have been attracted to the presidency of Mont Eagle University, instead of the state university in Oakland?

Henry Tappan's letters to E. P. Evans are especially interesting for his clear conception of what a university ought to be. Tappan thought that the Hawkes endowment "is sufficiently without aid from other sources to complete a University better than either Harvard or Cornell are likely to be, for these are not real Universities; nor is there in our country yet a real University, although there are many institutions of learning.

A course of four years leading to the degree of A.B. gives us the English College which is by no means a University. It is the English College & something more which the Indenture has in view; an English College & something more which appear in Yale, Harvard, Cornell &c &c, & which appeared also in our University of Michigan, but which I hoped in time to change into the true form of a University. Now, in founding a New University it is well to escape at once from this mongrel pattern, and to make a real University.....

[Mont Eagle indenture calls for an establishment of 35 professors]

I hold that the number of professors in a University can never be fixed. This can be done only in a College or Gymnasium where there is a determined disciplinary course. But in a University which embraces Universal Knowledge, and is designed for the increase as well as the diffusion of knowledge, how is it possible to limit the number of professors? The riper development of different branches of science necessitates a division of departments; and with the increase of knowledge there must be a multiplication of professors...None but genuine men of science ought to be collected at a University. It is better to leave chairs vacant and to depend on the books in the library than to appoint men who cannot speak as well as the books; and who are incapable of advancing beyond what has been written; and cannot even expound what has been developed, or aid in its comprehension.

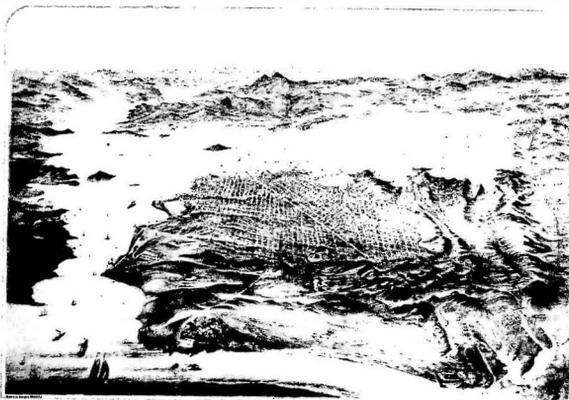
In a later letter Tappan suggested that Evans would be the ideal president of the new university (something that might have been in Evans' mind from the start and he came back to the point that it is professors who make the university.

We want genuine professors--but we shall never have them without a genuine University--so there is the difficulty in making a right beginning--I found that in Michigan--I could not find the right men. If I could found a University according to my own ideas--I would be content to begin with a few men of the right sort--undoubted scholars & of genuine culture--Then I would add to them only as I could find them or rear them up. But library, apparatus, museums of all kinds I would complete as rapidly as possible--These once in existence the men would grow up around them.

Although Mont Eagle University never left the drawing board, Tappan was to see many of his ideas realized in the Johns Hopkins University, which opened in 1876 as the first truly modern university established in the United States. If Horace Hawes had only resisted the blandishments of the Grim Reaper for a few more years, Johns Hopkins might have become known as the Mont Eagle of the East--or perhaps Mont Eagle would be the Hopkins of the West'.

NOTES

1. University of California, Berkeley, Bancroft Library, 4 p. TLS Horace Davis to Henry Morse Stephens, 30 November 1914, and accompanying 1 p. printed "Deed of Foundation of Mont Eagle University" (1871).
2. Hubert Howe Bancroft, Register of Pioneer Inhabitants of California, 1542 to 1848 (Los Angeles: Dawson's Book Shop, 1964), p. 779. This Register was reprinted from Volumes 2-5 of Bancroft's History of California, published 1885-1886.
3. University of Vermont, Bailey Library, George Perkins Marsh Collection, 2 p. ALS E. P. Evans to G. P. Marsh, 20 Jan. 1871.
4. George Perkins Marsh, Man and Nature, edited by David Lowenthal (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965), pp. 49n-50n.
5. Frank N. Egerton, "Ecological Studies and Observations before 1900," in Ideas and Issues in America, edited by Benjamin Taylor and Thurman White (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976). p. 336.
6. University of Vermont, Marsh Collection, 4 p. draft (incomplete) of letter from Marsh to Evans, 5 December 1870.
7. Davis to Stephens, op. cit., note 1,
8. Cornell University, Olin Library, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, E. P. Evans Correspondence, 19 p. ALS Henry Tappan to E. P. Evans, 2 December 1870.
9. Ibid., 4 p. ALS Tappan to Evans, 22 March 1871.



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