

# Someone was here before us: Deep-greenness and Arnold Toynbee

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**Keywords:** values; worldviews

**Citation:** Ramsay C (2023) Someone was here before us: Deep-greenness and Arnold Toynbee. *The Ecological Citizen* 6(2): 118–20.

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To escape the human vanity of being first, or realizing something first, it's good to bump into a forerunner. I never suspected the historian Arnold Toynbee (*vivebat*, as he would say, 1889–1975) of having a deep-green sensibility. So I was startled to read, in JR McNeill's preface to his *Something New Under the Sun*, that “The American humorist Robert Benchley allegedly wrote a history of the Atlantic cod fishery from the point of view of the fish. The British historian Arnold Toynbee published ‘The Roman Revolution from the Flora’s Point of View,’ in which he gave speaking roles to plants” (McNeill, 2001; cf. McNeill, 2014).

Intrigued, I found this fifteen page piece crouching in the back of the second volume of a much larger Toynbee book, *Hannibal’s Legacy: The Hannibalic War’s Effects on Roman Life*. Happily, McNeill didn’t exaggerate: not only do the plants talk, they’re deities into the bargain. The olive trees are Athena; the vines are Bacchus; the grainfields Ceres and the forests Silvanus. And these deities are Homerically pesky with each other – but in the service of Toynbee’s proposition, delivered with the straightest of faces, that

*our planet’s flora shares with the planet’s human inhabitants both the advantages and the limitations of being alive. It, too, is self-centred and self-regarding; and, if it were able to communicate to human minds the subconscious assumptions on which it acts, it would assuredly take it for granted, just as mankind takes it, that it, and it exclusively, is the be-all and the end-all of creation (585–6).<sup>1</sup>*

The plant-deities’ dialogue (they’re just boasting, actually) is about their own cleverness at tricking humans into spreading them geographically. (Toynbee wrote this when Michael Pollan was perhaps five.)

Toynbee's parodic mockery of human ruthlessness toward other species is quite pointed. Athena the olive tells her ally Bacchus the vine:

*We have driven dull Ceres right out of the lowlands, and we have forced uncouth Silvanus to retreat up the mountain-slopes till he has his back against the snowline. [...] [O]ur joint master-stroke has been to make use, for achieving our war-aims, of one of the inferior forms of life. These human parasites of ours: they are parvenus by comparison with the bees; yet we have made them serve us almost as well as the bees have been made to serve our cousins the flowers (586).*

Soon afterward cotton, tomatoes and corn all get their divine innings (an Aztec deity shows up). Yet Toynbee's point is tragic: "it is unquestionable that a number of species of the planet's flora have been propagated by human agency, and that this work of propagation has been most active and effective in times of great upheaval in human affairs, in which the destruction of human life and happiness has risen to a peak" (587–8).

The absence of any progressivist, utilitarian account of the spread of 'useful' species is striking. Further, Toynbee includes climatic shifts, agreeing with a nineteenth-century scholar, Nissen, that "Ancient Italy had more summer rain and greater winter cold – that, in fact, its climate was more like the Central European type than like the present" and adds: "through changing the Peninsula's flora, Man's action may actually have changed its climate too" (590).

These few pages have a vertiginous quality of time travel – between the 3rd century BCE to 19th century descriptions, and between Toynbee's youthful journal and his old age.

He delights in noting that just as different altitudes host different flora, in a way they also host different slices of time. "On Monte Amiata in central Tuscany the olive and the vine do not ascend higher than 600 metres; the chestnut ranges from 600 to 950 metres; the beech climbs to the summit, which is 1,734 metres high" (592). He evokes a time when forests enclosed small societies, telling us that "the forest-god Silvanus's subsidiary role, in historical times, [was] as the tutelary god of international frontiers" (593). And he traces the receding forests not only from the deforestations of the 19th century and earlier, but from indications in classical authors about logging and shipbuilding.

Yet his ultimate focus is not on change but on 'enduringness'. He writes, "If one is seeking to recapture the likeness of Peninsular Italy as it was in the Graeco-Roman Age, one should look for it today, not in the Peninsula, but on the farther side of the Apennines" – and he recalls "the Saltus Ciminius [...] when, on 17 October 1911, I walked over it, from Caprarola to Viterbo, in the track of the pair of Roman spies who are said to have braved its terrors in 310 BC" (598). He quotes his journal from when he was twenty-two:

*Hobble at leisure over the Ciminian Pass. Lie long on top, with grand view. The top is moor; vast forests all round the lake [i.e. the Lago di Vico]. The main*

*summit, heavily wooded, lies to the north-east, with a cluster of heavily wooded peaks round it. The woods apparently still stretch, through broken country, to the Tiber, just north of Orte (598).*

He adds cheerfully that, as of 1962, “The mayor of the town of Vetralla was still being formally married to the trees in an annual ceremony performed on 8 May” (598). And on his walk (at 73) in the Foresta d’Umbra on 25 March 1962, “the fir-woods there reminded me of the Black Forest. At that date, snow was still lying and was still falling.” (599).

He concludes by praising what we might now call a victory of wildness – but not over 20th-century claims of modernization and mastery. Rather,

*By the year AD 1962 nearly two thousand years had passed since Varro had boasted that the post-Hannibalic commercialisation of Peninsular Italian agriculture had transformed the Peninsula into one continuous orchard. Yet in 1962 there were still some surviving vestiges of the shaggier, more northern-looking Italy of the Pre-Hannibalic Age (599).*

My extreme pleasure with Toynbee’s piece comes from how he offered, in 1965, a depth of sensibility which lies for us (if we’re awfully lucky) in one of our possible futures. From deity-plants in motion, to agnosticism about who’s the servant of whom; from climatic differences by altitude to climatic changes across time; from classical authors to motorist guides; and from any texts at all to life. Just a walk, up over the hill from youth down to old age. The snow’s still falling in late March, and, thank God, it’s before the Christian era somewhere.

*Hannibal’s Legacy* isn’t an easy book to get hold of. But there’s always interlibrary loan or the Internet Archive (<https://is.gd/dvtUL6>), and there’s all the time in the world. Once you find the book, you needn’t come to terms with it. Just take the second volume and turn to page 585.

## Note

- 1 All page references are to Toynbee (1965).

## References

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