

Aldo Leopold's Counter-Friction · Sherman Paul

Once you learn to read the land, I
have no fear of what you will do to
it, or with it.

—Leopold, to his students

THE CENTENARY of Aldo Leopold's birth has given "the most significant conservationist of the last seventy years" (Stephen Fox, on the dust-jacket of Curt Meine's *Aldo Leopold: His Life and Work*) more than usual notice and added substantially to the scholarship concerning his life and thought. Meine's book is the first biography, which is to say a fuller account of the life and, accordingly, a somewhat less-focused, issue-oriented study than Susan Flader's *Thinking Like a Mountain: Aldo Leopold and the Evolution of an Ecological Attitude toward Deer, Wolves and Forests* (1974), the first major study and the first to make use of the extensive Leopold Archive, and still the most incisive and best written. Meine's book, some 650 closely packed and heavily documented pages, is more than twice the size of all the commemorative publications, chiefly the *Companion to A Sand County Almanac* edited by J. Baird Callicott and *Aldo Leopold: The Man and His Legacy* edited by Thomas Tanner. The first collection brings together some of the best early essays on Leopold as well as newer work; the second gathers some of the proceedings of a week-long celebration at Iowa State University (which recently announced a recommendation to phase out "environmental studies because of waning interest"). Inevitably, given the handful of Leopold scholars, the collections overlap. Worthy of mention also is the handsome "Special Commemorative Edition" of *A Sand County Almanac* (Oxford University Press), special, I think, because Robert Finch

Aldo Leopold: His Life and Work. Curt Meine. University of Wisconsin Press, 1988. 653 pp. \$29.50. *Companion to A Sand County Almanac: Interpretive & Critical Essays*. Edited by J. Baird Callicott. University of Wisconsin Press, 1987. 318 pp. \$22.50. *Aldo Leopold: The Man and His Legacy*. Edited by Thomas Tanner, with a Foreword by Stewart L. Udall. Soil Conservation Society of America, 1987. 190 pp. \$10.00.

supplies an excellent introduction guided by his concern, as a nature writer, with the poetic understanding of nature and by his literary sense of how Leopold *figures* in his book. All of this work, much of it academic, acknowledges the environmental crisis which more than ever before has awakened interest in nature writing (or better, ecological writing)—writing, according to Barry Lopez, that will “not only one day produce a major and lasting body of American literature, but . . . provide the foundation for a reorganization of American political thought.”

Meine has done large and valuable work, and the wealth of detail in his biography may be said to compensate for its defects. Leopold, in his sometimes folksy way and from pride in outdoor cooking, would have noted both the plentiful raisins and lumpy pudding. For style, in every sense but especially in respect to focus and felicity, is lacking. As with many recent biographies, data not portraiture is primary, and the reader who wants the “life” must do most of the “graphing.” Meine has done more than anyone to fully document Leopold’s family background, childhood, education (at Burlington High School, Lawrenceville Preparatory School, and Yale), early career as a forester in New Mexico and Arizona, and courtship and marriage of Estella Bergere (of a wealthy, long-established New Mexican family). Much of this is recovered in Leopold’s letters, and some of it is told on a daily basis. He sees the importance of Leopold’s birth in Burlington, Iowa, in 1887, for Burlington was a portal to the West, to the frontier whose closing Frederick Jackson Turner would soon announce, and he is aware of the fact that Leopold’s life intersects history, that at birth he was given the issues of economic and industrial expansion and wasteful land use that confronted him (and that he confronted) for the rest of his life. He knows the history of conservation, which he uses, as had both Susan Flader and Stephen Fox (his *John Muir and His Legacy: The American Conservation Movement* is Meine’s model) to provide the context in which Leopold’s life and the transformation of his thought from Pinchot’s narrow economic managerial to all-encompassing ecological views took place. But his grasp of psychological matters is not comparable. He has none of the skills of a psycho-historian (trained, say, by Erik Erikson) and fails to open the foundational material, to probe what most needs probing, how Leopold in his deepest being was “called” to the vocation (the true calling) of naturalist.

The boy who, at Lawrenceville, was known as “the naturalist,” which

is to say by some standards seemed odd, needs explaining, and crucial episodes, such as his probation at Yale, which highlights his relation to his parents, and the failure of his first reconnaissance in the Blue Range need further investigation. Leopold's courtship (much of it epistolary) might have been searched more deeply, and this is also the case with his family life, which, as often in his relation to students, seems to have been remarkably considerate. Meine is aware of Leopold's personality but his assessments belong to throwaway sentences: "It took a large task to balance out Leopold's own high opinion of himself." His literary assessments are equally brief, and more often superficial: "His prose always carried a smooth rhythm." Meine is not a literary critic who appreciates the significance of literary and imaginative activity—all the more important when writing of a man who was so much a writer—or the significance of reading, for example, the "nickel volume of Whitman" that Leopold told Estella that, in their usual fashion, they must read together. What were the books they read together? We need a catalog of them, and all the others. And then there are the clues provided by obsessive words, perhaps the most important for the naturalist the word "adventure," frequently associated with wilderness and given summary point in this early comment: "If I were trying to please myself alone I would be in Canada and Siberia & South America seeing the world." The mythos here belongs to Darwin and Muir, both of whom had read Alexander von Humboldt, and it measures a life, as in the much later comment, "I am glad I shall never be young without wild country to be young in."

In wishing to preserve and restore the open country of his youth—that is, a permanent human possibility—Leopold transformed the received opinion of his intellectual inheritance, so that even adventure, which initially belonged to his days on horseback in the West, finally found a place on some worn out acres of sand county land and the predator control he had once fostered gave way to eco-restoration. The work of the life was nothing if not reeducation, which, for a practical idealist, entailed the advocacy (much of it of a public relations kind) that enlisted his pen. It was an education of such drama that, as Leopold knew, the story of conversion best told it. (This story is now available in the discarded 1947 Preface to *A Sand County Almanac*, published in the *Companion*.) Meine tells it, too, stage by stage, issue by issue, sometimes so close to events that the text reads like a journal in which are noted, say, the trouble Leopold was hav-

ing with trigeminal neuralgia and with the annual committee work on deer population or, it may be, what he was teaching in class or doing at the “shack.” For the most part this many-plied exposition is distracting, but in the accounts of the restoration at the “shack” and of the composition of *A Sand County Almanac*, themselves the fullest we have, it provides a rich context of impinging private and public events.

So I appreciate this veritable archive in lieu of the Archive, and consider it indispensable. To follow Leopold’s development here is one way of entering his thought and realizing, as he and some others did so early, that the largest claim to our concern is the fate of the earth. He knew that science, errant in both its alliance with industrialism and atomic defense, was “false, ignoble, and self-destructive.” From the beginning his thought was ethical and always involved responsibility. Even when he granted the Christian view that the earth exists for the benefit of man, as he did in an early paper, he called for responsibility by defining man’s special nobility in ethical terms and by speaking of a “society decently respectful of its own and all other life, capable of inhabiting the earth without defiling it.” Moreover, he believed that “conservation was something that happened between an individual and his environment”—a belief he derived from his own experience and fully enacted in the restoration of an abandoned farm. It is here that he both delivers his essential message and offers us the decisive example of ethical practice. Meine, to his credit, sees this clearly. And now, having done the work, he should edit a volume of some of the important essays Leopold wrote in order to tell his education and redress the education that he said was not education because it “omits to picture man’s infinitely delicate symbiosis with land.”

The *Companion* is a book about a book, but only three essays treat the literary artifact, and one of these is as much concerned with Leopold’s “doctrine” (John Tallmadge’s word) as most of the others. The editor, J. Baird Callicott, a philosopher of environment, has made the book markedly his, not only in the preponderant attention to Leopold’s aesthetic and ethical ideas but, as the dust jacket has it, by being the “principal contributor.” He includes two essays of his own as well as a preface and an introduction. In the latter he surveys the contents of the volume, enters his disagreements, especially with Roderick Nash, and awards his praise (“Fritzell’s essay is a marvel of subtlety and sophistication and in my opinion the most

insightful study of *A Sand County Almanac*, as a whole, ever made"). Such claims are never measured, neither here nor in the assertion that Leopold's book is "wonderfully unified and tightly organized," and, granted that the "upshot" of the *Almanac* deserves urgent attention, isn't it the part already best known to Leopold's students and associates? As Albert Hochbaum, one of Leopold's closest students, discovered, it was not the "Professor" but the writer of the "shack" and adventure essays who was new to them, the man whose personal education in land use and exemplary practice of wildlife management and restoration clarified what he meant by the land ethic.

Callicott has organized the *Companion* somewhat in the fashion of the *Almanac*, adding to its three parts a fourth on "The Impact." Of the three essays introducing Leopold-the-author in Part I, the most valuable are Susan Flader's abridgement of her classic essay, "The Person and the Place," and Roderick Nash's essay on Leopold's intellectual heritage. A useful biographical profile by Curt Meine is now superseded by his biography—and in another part, his study of the composition of "The Land Ethic," though fuller, is adequately covered in his book.

Flader, among the best writers in the *Companion*, provides the necessary earth and socio-economic history of Wisconsin's sand counties. She tells of the settlement by pioneers such as Daniel Muir and the hardship of farming there as recalled by his son John; and she reminds us of the frontier thesis of Frederick Jackson Turner, who returned to Madison in the year Leopold arrived and lived nearby on the same street and was equally present in his thought. Finally, in the context of the multiplication of governmental agencies in response to the conservation ferment of the 1930s, she sets off Leopold's purchase of a sand farm and his family's dedication to the husbandry of the wild.

Roderick Nash, whose *Wilderness and the American Mind* has become a standard work, considers the antecedents of ideas of ecological community and the rights of nature, ideas that inform Leopold's land ethic; and what he may be said to take away from Leopold in amending Callicott's view (Leopold's "originality," Nash says, "must not be distorted"), he amply repays in supporting testimony. He knows that the guiding principle of intellectual history is that nothing comes from nothing, and so we are asked to remember Thoreau, George Perkins Marsh (who "proposed 'geographical regeneration,' a great healing of the planet beginning with the

control of technology”), Muir, Darwin, Lecky, Edward Payson Evans, J. Howard Moore, Liberty Hyde Bailey, and Schweitzer. In sketching the development of Leopold’s ethical ideas, he shows their reliance on Charles Elton, who advanced the idea of the biotic community, and on P. D. Ouspensky, whose *Tertium Organum* supplied the terminology of *phenomenon-numenon* that Leopold found useful in speaking of the organismic, holistic character of land. (Callicott, in his essay, “The Land Aesthetic,” overlooks this source, first documented by Flader.) Of most importance, Nash challenges us, where Leopold most challenged us, by reminding us that his ideas have not been widely received because they run counter to “basic American priorities and behavior,” priorities and behavior, as both Wallace Stegner and Edwin Pister later testify, that are still too much with us. “The land ethic,” Stegner says in an essay reprinted from *Wilderness*, “is not a widespread public conviction. If it were, the Reagan administration would not have been given a second term.”

As for the book itself, Dennis Ribbens, in an essay published some years ago, provides the primary findings of archival research. He recovers from correspondence Leopold’s thoughts about nature books and nature writing and his wish to write “ecological essays” (inevitable, as we will see, for someone who had learned to read the land). Ribbens also documents the stages of the making of the *Almanac*, which was appreciably altered by the stringent criticism of Albert Hochbaum, who at one time was to illustrate it. And he tells how Leopold wrote it, not, he insists, from the data of the “Shack Journals” (although the familiarization they record was surely ground), but apparently without preparatory notes, in the early morning, in the quiet of his office.

That Leopold altered the kind of nature book we expect is also pointed out by John Tallmadge in what, to my mind, is the best literary study of the *Almanac*. Tallmadge places the book in terms of White’s *The Natural History of Selborne*, Darwin’s *Voyage of the Beagle*, Thoreau’s *Walden*, and Muir’s *My First Summer in the Sierras*, and finds that Leopold shares more with Thoreau than the others because he, too, practices “social criticism based on the standard of nature.” Leopold assimilated the literary strategies of his predecessors but refused his editors’ counsel to write only a “Gilbert White book.” His book is continental in scope rather than local and universal rather than parochial in its truths, and it artfully combines the generic elements of early nature writing and confessional autobiog-

raphy with a program for social transformation. Its end is advocacy, its intent “subversive,” and its style is concordant.

Leopold’s prose, Tallmadge says, is smooth and transparent *and* dense in implication. He likens it to “hand-scrubbed wood” and notes its “epigrammatic conciseness” and “techniques of compression.” Of these, two are notable: *concentration* and *engagement*, the first making every detail advance the plot (the sketches are stories—Finch calls them fables), the second, by way of synecdoche, allusion, irony, understatement, and rhetorical questions, engaging us in filling out the shorthand of the text. These rhetorical means rather than a “poetic vocabulary,” Tallmadge adds, “give [the] prose its memorable succinctness.”

Meine tells us that Leopold studied the Bible and was fond of Psalms, Proverbs, and the prophets (he published in the *Journal of Forestry* an article on “The Forestry of the Prophets”), and Tallmadge, who calls Leopold an “American Jeremiah,” considers his style “parabolic.” The sketches, he says, are parables, and this more than anything else accounts for the “perennial freshness” of the book and its power of changing “our angle of vision,” both our understanding and our commitment.

Attention to style is important because Leopold presences himself in his verbal behavior. His style, according to Tallmadge, is “peculiarly attractive,” giving us a warm and engaging man of conviction and an outsider in an unpopular cause, whose wit entertains and challenges us. Leopold challenges us, of course, because his nature writing is ecological and represents an unusual stance toward nature. Two casual but connected observations about him are of profound philosophic significance:

Landscape as such hardly seems to interest him.
What goes on *in* the land is what fascinates [him].

He read human life in the context of nature and not the other way round.

The first observation tells us that Leopold, as Callicott shows so well in an essay on the land aesthetic, is not an observer of scenic views but a participant in process; the second, that by standing within, not outside and above nature, he has replaced ego- with eco-thought. Nothing is more radical and subversive of the Western tradition of philosophic idealism, as

Whitehead remarked in *Process and Reality* when he said that in Kant's philosophy the world emerges from the subject, where in his own philosophy of organism the subject emerges from the world. This is the conversion experience the *Almanac* records, an education and a praxis that addresses us and may be too little remembered in some of the subsequent philosophical essays on doctrine.

Peter Fritzell's essay, devoted to literary analysis, belongs just as much to the two sections treating Leopold's doctrine because its primary concern is "conflicts of ecological conscience." The conflicts turn on man as conqueror and man as member (citizen) of the biotic community, on dualistic versus holistic conceptions of relationship to nature, and on a reading of evolution that accords man-the-conqueror a natural place in nature. Fritzell, as Callicott notes, deconstructs Leopold's fundamental ideas. For him, the *Almanac* is a "composition of opposites," its coordinates "converging from two radically divergent directions," making it "a fabric of ironies, ambiguities, and paradoxes." The book, he says, may argue overtly for the land community and the land ethic, but covertly it presents (like Fritzell's heavily interrogative prose) a "pattern of questions, doubts, and contrary impulses." By reading it backward, from Part III to Part I, he erodes, with skepticism, what had seemed to be the sure lessons of its doctrine.

This essay, as well as Callicott's on the land ethic, is troublesome because there is too much conceptual finesse, too little awareness of the way practice itself resolves these issues. (Callicott, who, in one essay, nicely describes an excursion to a bog, seems dissociated from the thinker of his other essay.) It also seems to me that the argument from evolution has been clarified by Loren Eiseley, who recognized that the "second nature" (culture) produced by the human brain and hand in the course of evolution is both part of and a threat to primary nature and that, *knowing this*, we must choose to act wisely in respect to the primary. This is what Pister, a fishery biologist, and Stegner emphatically tell us, and Holmes Rolston III, in "Duties to Ecosystems," with admirable speculative richness and good sense, insists on.

Rolston considers the relational complexity of organism and ecosystem, the "tightness" of the one and the necessary "looseness" of the other, and the fact that an ecosystem is a "satisfactory matrix, the projective source of all it contains" and the "survival unit, without which organisms cannot

survive.” The imperative of his essay is that “an ecologically informed society must love lions-in-jungles, organisms-in-ecosystems, or else fail in vision and courage.” He supports Leopold in maintaining that the ecosystem is prior and that humans owe something to it. For “the system creates life, selects for adaptive fit, constructs increasingly richer life in quantity and quality, supports myriads of species, escalates individuality, autonomy, and even subjectivity, within the limits of decentralized community.”

Ecosystem, for literary critical purposes, may be thought of as context(s), and with the salutary “looseness” of the one in mind, I regret the narrowness and “tightness” of the other, as found in the *Companion*. The environmental crisis, acknowledged by Callicott (a crisis “rooted in our whole way of doing things”), is insufficiently addressed. Leopold’s attack on the industrial economy (resumed, for example, in the work of Wendell Berry, who writes in *Sabbaths*, “I go from the woods into the cleared field: / A place no human made, a place unmade / By human greed, and to be made again”) is hardly noticed. Nor is the support his work has in philosophers of relationships, like William James, Whitehead, and Buber, or in the thought of other cultures, or in the work of many contemporary poets and deep ecologists. The land ethic, with its clear demand for better land use, is not an academic issue, as readers of Wes Jackson know. Nothing is more exigent, and Leopold, having himself learned this, knew that the land ethic, as Stegner says, is “a task.”

Aldo Leopold: The Man and His Legacy is “loosely” made, at once less constrained and more diverse than the *Companion* — and more companionable. Only the first section is academic, devoted as it is to essays focusing on the land ethic by several contributors to the *Companion* (the single newcomer is Craig W. Allin). The second section is testimonial, and the third is essentially reminiscential, concerned with recollections by members of the Leopold family (a family of remarkable distinction in science), with the family philosophy, as Sharon Kaufman educes it, and an account of the research and restoration work of the Leopold Memorial Reserve. Like Meine’s book, it is well illustrated.

The overlapping essays in the first section are by Nash, Callicott, and Meine, although there are modifications in each. Callicott takes happier account of Nash’s work and recognizes the Amer-Indian land ethic, and

Meine, in treating Leopold's concern with the farmer as conservationist, gathers material from his biography but, in doing so, points up Leopold's insistence on individual obligation. Allin supports this in tracing Leopold's thought in respect to the wilderness system he did so much to promote, and Flader answers those philosophers, who as Zennists say, "haggle in the weeds."

Flader brilliantly shows how the land ethic developed from Leopold's deepening understanding of erosion and land health. She recognizes, with greater perception than Meine, that "the esthetic appreciation for wildlife that was so integral to his youth . . . and so vital to his mature philosophic reflection was seemingly suppressed at mid-career, when he was chiefly concerned with wildlife management. Later on, fostered by ecological understanding, an esthetic appreciation (his "personal motivation") enabled him to move beyond a manager's determination on the issue of control to the larger work of conserving and restoring the ecosystem. When he learned to appreciate the integrity of the ecosystem and that human beings had their being within it, Leopold, according to Flader, had ground of his own for an ethic and no longer felt the need for "definitive philosophical answers."

The distinction of this collection is its unequivocal endorsement of Leopold's claims for obligation and activism. All the testimony to Leopold's influence—both Raymond Dasman's and Bruce Babbitt's, in the context of the global ecological crisis, and Dale McCullough's and Huey D. Johnson's, in respect to deer ecology and the empowerment of resource professionals—and all the evocation of the "world scene" and the "real world" calls for active engagement. Johnson, a resource manager, remembers the inspiration of Leopold's ideas and "the example of his activism—to carry out action in addition to thought." Like Stegner, he knows that the conservation/land-use policies of the Reagan Administration are "a throwback to the first 100 years of the nation's history when exploitation was the practice of the day." He believes that had Leopold lived he would have acted to reverse such policies and that the most fitting way to commemorate him would be to launch a crusade to that end—"to manage resources for permanence, or what Leopold called a more enduring civilization."