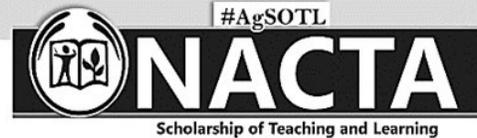


# Book Reviews



BR Bennett Leopold

## **Relationship with the Land: Hugh Hammond Bennett, Aldo Leopold, and the Future of the Conservation Land Ethic**

Mark Anderson-Wilk (editor). 2009. Soil & Water Conservation Society, Ankeny, Iowa.  
Paperback (150 pp)

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Notably lacking in our contemporary agricultural curricula, particularly in most land grant universities, is serious consideration of the history in the U.S. of this most essential of human pursuits. Many consider limited historical perspective a serious fault, as the lessons of the past can hopefully inform a more successful design of the future. A valuable resource to help fill this gap is a compendium of essays edited by Mark Anderson-Wilk and published by the Soil & Water Conservation Society, *Relationship with the Land*.

Not at all outdated, this 2009 collection of historical writings from over a half century starting in 1960 begins with a retrospective on the lives and work of Hugh Hammond Bennett, founder of the Soil Erosion Service that became the Soil Conservation Service, now the Natural Resources Conservation Service, and the more widely known Aldo Leopold, forester, conservationist, and author of the acclaimed book *The Sand County Almanac*.

The intriguing story of how Bennett manipulated his testimony to the U.S. congress to raise money to support conservation efforts is unprecedented in politics, education, or even entertainment. His pure genius and flair for the dramatic compels a re-telling of what transpired. During the 'dirty thirties' in a time of massive soil loss due to wind erosion, news of a particularly strong event in the Midwest was communicated to Bennett. Seeking funds for conservation and knowing that a dust cloud was fast approaching Washington D.C. as a result of high winds, Bennett concluded his testimony to congress and invited the entire body of legislators outside just in time to see the immense dust cloud moving over the capital. His request for funding was passed the next day. Even Barnum could not have staged such an event. This historical book brings history to life, and puts a human face on many of the events that contributed to building a land ethic.

Three essays about the life and contributions of Leopold provide valuable insight into this renaissance man whose legacy lives on in today's environmental movements. Of interest is the chapter by Curt Meine who has written extensively about Leopold and authored the seminal book *The Farmer as Conservationist: Aldo Leopold on Agriculture*, and is a scholar who has dedicated much of his professional life to interpreting Leopold to a broad audience.

The balance of the book includes chapters on the development of conservation ideas and potential futures of the land ethic as viewed at the end of the 20th Century. A historical geographer describes the continual tension between viewing nature through the lens of

aesthetics, philosophy and religion versus that of practical value to humans, a debate that even today permeates discussion of conservation versus utilitarian exploitation to meet human needs. More than a simple dichotomy of opinions and worldviews, there is discussion of how we depend on an intact and viable natural ecosystem and how we as a species are not necessarily unique in the biosphere. It is a conceptual, moral, and religious challenge to some when we consider that the human species is in fact subject to the same biological and evolutionary realities that shape the future prospects of other species. A foundation is provided here for today's discourse on the need for ecosystem services and alternative economic and other valuation schemes that more thoughtfully could guide the human path toward a sustainable future.

The brief essays in this valuable book have great credibility for many because the authors have responsible decision-making positions in society, including the business community, non-profit organizations, and academia. Perhaps except for the final essay by poet, farmer and philosopher Wendell Berry, there is less attention paid to ideas from modern environmentalists and from those who challenge the current move toward further industrialization, more and 'better' clever technologies, and short-term 'band aid approaches' to solve complex problems that will not be solved by the free market. But these are discussions in the current context where there is growing appreciation of ecoservices, thoughtful debate about the limits of growth, and accepted realities of global climate change and negative emergent properties that are ever more apparent as human impacts extend to virtually every square meter of the planet.

We need to study history, and this book of essays compiled by Anderson-Wilk could provide the impetus for more colleges and universities to include greater attention to the factors and forces that have shaped our present farming and food systems. The book could provide a concise and valuable reference for a course in agricultural and environmental history, and a complement to the current research and education initiatives in agroecology.

*Submitted by –*  
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