

Review: David Brower: The Making of the Environmental Movement

By Tom Turner

Reviewed by Byron Anderson

DeKalb, Illinois, USA

Turner, Tom. *David Brower: The Making of the Environmental Movement*. University of California Press, 2015; x, 308 pp. ISBN: 978-0-520-27836-3 US \$29.95 cloth; 978-1-520-96245-3 US\$29.95 ebook . Printed on 30 percent post-consumer waste paper.

In the Foreword, Bill McKibben equates Brower to John Muir and regards Brower as the most important conservationist in twentieth century America. David Brower had an “indomitable spirit” that “drew you in” (p. x). Yet, for those who personally knew him, Brower was a complicated person who, depending on the circumstances, could be labeled as charismatic, imaginative, aggressive, or reckless, among other descriptors. Among his more notable flaws, he had difficulty falling in line with authority, such as, bylaws and board directives.

Brower was a long-time member of the Sierra Club and was its one and only executive director. Brower moved the Sierra Club from an outings club to a conservation club, a move that greatly increased the membership. He led campaigns to create parks, block dams, and in working with Howard Zahniser, win passage of the Wilderness Act of 1964. Brower also had failures, for example, supporting Glen Canyon Dam in trade for blocking two dams in the Dinosaur National Monument. In later years he realized that Glen Canyon would have been well worth saving as well. Brower pioneered in the effective use of mass media, including films, Exhibit Format books, and full newspaper ads. His knowledge of book publication and promotion, developed while employed at the University of California Press, carried over to his work at the Sierra Club. Exhibit format books were popular, frequently profitable, and effective in introducing many readers to both nature’s beauty and potential demise.

In the late 1960s he formed Friends of the Earth as a way to bring environmentalists into politics and elections. Alas, his inability to compromise, among other flaws, eventually got him ejected from both the Sierra Club and Friends of the Earth. This rejection did not deter him from his flamboyant ways to save the environment. He created the John Muir Institute for Environmental Studies (1968) as a means to provide better information for those involved in the environmental movement, and later the Earth Island Institute (1982), an umbrella organization designed to support people with good ideas for the environment. Brower’s tenacious drive for conservation was viewed as a

“fifty-five year run as point man and conscience to the conservation movement” (p. 48). Yet, “an observation by many along the way—namely that had he been more diplomatic, more willing to follow procedures, and accommodating to other people’s positions, he might have accomplished more than he did” (p. 247). Still, Brower’s momentum and determination was a major factor in establishing the environmental movement. He was a visionary who turned many naturalists into activists and conservationists into environmentalists. His legacy is “measured in acres, timeless books, and in thousands of inspired people” (p. 245).

Since Brower’s death in 2000, at least five books have been published about him, including this comprehensive authorized biography. Tom Turner, worked with Brower from 1968 till his death. Combining exhaustive research with personal knowledge allowed Turner to issue an insightful picture of Brower’s complicated life. For the best distillation of Brower’s philosophy, Turner recommends *Let the Mountains Talk, Let the River Run: A Call to Those Who Would Save the Earth* (1995). *David Brower* is complemented with photos, appendix, bibliography, and index, and is highly recommended for general reading and all environmental collections.

Byron Anderson, beau804@yahoo.com, Retired/Northern Illinois University Libraries, DeKalb, IL 60115 USA