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Beginning Again: People and Nature in the New Millenium

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Ehrenfeld, David. *Beginning Again: People and Nature in the New Millenium*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993. 216 pp. US\$22.00 hardcover ISBN: 0-19-507812-8.

Ehrenfeld evidently sees himself as a prophet. What he means by prophesy is not foretelling the future but accurately describing present realities. In these essays, reprinted from a wide variety of sources, the author of *The Arrogance of Humanism* warns us that human survival in the next millennium depends on adherence to what he calls "the qualities of nature -- honesty, reliability, durability, beauty, even humor" (p. ix) and that "we cannot begin again as if the twentieth century had not happened, as if it had caused no lasting damage to the physical world, to nature, or to human culture." (p. 192)

In one of his most appealing essays, Ehrenfeld finds much to admire in the character and views on nature of the writer George Orwell, who was honest even about his own faults and who revelled in immediate contact with the earth. Ehrenfeld follows this with an account of the perennial popularity of the eighteenth century book, *The Natural History of Selborne* by Gilbert White, who described the immediacy of a time and place where natural history and human history were not far apart. Other essays range from the prejudice against dandelions to the Exxon Valdez disaster and weapons of mass destruction, as well as the limitations of such notions as rights and loyalty.

Prominent among Ehrenfeld's dislikes is modern management, particularly because it represents what he considers excessive striving for power and control. An instance was the decision to install, over the protests of its future occupants, a malfunctioning "state of the art" ventilation system in a new building without windows that open. Ehrenfeld warns against entrusting cherished natural preserves to institutions like Harvard, lest they sell the land while keeping most of the endowment left to care for it. Ehrenfeld celebrates diversity and the particular. He prefers these to generalization and even theoretical simplicity, to a degree that will not win him friends among physicists, who strive to explain the universe by reducing particulars to basic laws, the fewer the better. He laments the threatened loss to human memory and understanding of whole scientific subspecialties, such as comparative biochemistry, not because they have been discredited or superseded by better understanding or factual discoveries, but just because they have become scientifically unfashionable.

Ehrenfeld holds strong views with which many might take issue. He argues cogently for them and presents them interestingly for a wide audience. *Beginning Again* is recommended for all libraries.