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Review: Aldo Leopold: A Fierce Green Fire

By Marybeth Lorbiecki

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Lorbiecki, Marybeth. *Aldo Leopold: A Fierce Green Fire*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. 212 pp. US \$13.95 paper ISBN: 0-19-512966-0.

In her introduction, Marybeth Lorbiecki--winner of the John Burroughs Nature Award for her children's book on Aldo Leopold and known for her books and articles on the environment--wonders how the American landscape might look had Aldo Leopold not influenced the course of history. Lorbiecki recognizes that despite his book *A Sand County Almanac*, translated into five languages that sold over a million copies, many Americans have not heard of Leopold. Through her short, readable biography, Lorbiecki attempts to rectify this situation by vividly recreating Leopold's life (1887-1948) as he shaped the development of the young forest service, influenced wildlife management, participated in land restoration, studied soil conservation, came to an understanding of ecology, and promoted environmental ethics.

From the first page, Lorbiecki mimics Leopold's rich prose style--"Each fall and spring, the skies were speckled like the breast of a wood thrush as thousands of migrating birds flew overhead, rousing hunters to their blinds (p.1)." Her descriptions draw the reader into turn-of-the-century Iowa as into a good novel: "Spring migration drew the boys to water like finches to thistle (p.18)." From colorful letters, journals, professional papers and descendants, she deftly infuses Leopold's presence into every page, even as she disappears. Because she puts her reader into such engaging contact with Leopold, her book becomes an ideal choice for instructors wanting to introduce students to American environmental history. Early in the book Lorbiecki sets Leopold within a context of people influential to environmental policy such as Muir, Roosevelt and Pinchot, dramatically highlighting his influence in the development of the forest service, in the creation of official wilderness areas, and in the conservation and preservation movements.

Leopold's early participation and belief in the mass killing of predators later gave way to an ecological vision that called for a change in ethics that would include the land. For many of us, living in a society that has,

at best, a troubled relationship with our natural environment, the story of Leopold's transformation in thinking draws us to his story. Although Lorbiecki does not adequately explain this change, leaving us to infer such things as the national contexts surrounding his beliefs, she whets the reader's appetite for further study.

So entrancing is her portrayal of Leopold's life that by the last page, when I read of the moment of his death, I felt the loss on both a personal and social/cultural level. In the Author's note, Lorbiecki writes, "I continually return to him, so that I too, might learn how to live on the land and pass it on in healthier shape than I encountered it (p. x)." Lorbiecki's skills as a writer transfer Leopold's vital humanity to her readers. Through her book I experienced first-hand Leopold's power as a teacher and influence and began wondering in what ways I could better apply my own skills to making a difference in the world.

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