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Land Man

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For
most

ALDO LEOPOLD'S ODYSSEY

By Julianne Lutz Newton.

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readers, Aldo Leopold is “A Sand County Almanac.” We have a hard time remembering the life that led up to that book, a hard time thinking of it as a posthumous work or imagining what point it represented — except the endpoint — in the arc of Leopold’s thought. In form, it is still an innovative book, a mix of field notes, meditations and a naturalist’s credo. “A Sand County Almanac” often reads more like intuition than reasoning, and it embodies a wisdom that seems quite separate from the debris of even a conservationist’s busy working life. It is a summation instead of the transitional work it might have been if Leopold hadn’t died of a heart attack in April 1948, at the age of 61.

In “Aldo Leopold’s Odyssey,” her new study of Leopold’s intellectual evolution, Julianne Lutz Newton makes us feel the loss of what might have followed “A Sand County Almanac” by showing us in authoritative detail what led up to it. The result is a biography of ideas, a map of how far Leopold had moved between 1909, when he began his Forest Service career in Arizona, and his death in rural Wisconsin 39 years later. The very pattern of Leopold’s life was the excitement of a new idea — drawn from his reading or his hunting or his field research — followed by the melancholy realization of what it implied. He brooded endlessly about the prospects for conservation in America. How far he

got in his thinking can be summed up in these words, from a letter written in 1946: "That the situation is hopeless should not prevent us from doing our best."

Nearly everyone who reads "A Sand County Almanac" comes away moved by a sense of loss as well as a sense of beauty and conviction. This is partly because Leopold is mourning an earlier America, when wolves still roamed and motorized tourists were not so numerous. But it's also because Leopold is tacitly acknowledging his own radicalism. "It is increasingly clear," he wrote in the early 1940's, "that there is a basic antagonism between the philosophy of the industrial age and the philosophy of the conservationist." For "the conservationist," read Leopold himself, of course. He phrases this sentence as if to include a general audience but also as if to conceal the antagonism he felt within himself.

Leopold spent his life talking and lecturing and writing for relatively specialized audiences, usually his professional colleagues. It was his great luck — his great opportunity — to develop his thoughts about land use, and especially his idea of a land ethic, with such inherently cautious audiences in mind, audiences who were not likely to take on faith his argument that we have a moral obligation to the land. But Leopold's final book was written for a general audience and with a radical new intention. In 1944 he confessed to a friend that he had come to a disarming realization — that nothing could be done about conservation "without creating a new kind of people." "A Sand County Almanac" may not be an attempt to create that people. But it is the work of a gifted thinker who has got his public legs under him at last and who knows that his radicalism — rooted, after all, in a profound vision of biological community — is the only common sense worthy of the name.

The antagonisms that Leopold felt, we still feel, in spades. One of the many virtues of Newton's book is that it helps us understand how carefully Leopold worked out positions that sound self-evident to us now, thanks largely to "A Sand County Almanac." We are still at a point, being human, where arguments are worth more than axioms. That is something Leopold grasped about his own field in the 1920's.

“It can be safely said,” he wrote, “that when it comes to actual work on the ground, the objects of conservation are never axiomatic or obvious but always complex and usually conflicting.”

“Aldo Leopold’s Odyssey” has few flaws, but I must mention one. Newton is under the common impression that Leopold had “an unusual gift for lyrical prose.” Sometimes she tries to emulate it, with unfortunate results. But what makes Leopold matter now is not his lyricism. That has dated almost as much as his occasional irony. Leopold still matters as a writer because of his clarity, his directness, even his simplicity, qualities in his prose that mirror the character and the care of his thinking. I would trade all of Leopold’s lyricism, such as it is, for a passage like this: “Our tools are better than we are, and grow better faster than we do. They suffice to crack the atom, to command the tides. But they do not suffice for the oldest task in human history: to live on a piece of land without spoiling it.”

Verlyn Klinkenborg writes editorials for The New York Times. His most recent book is “Timothy; Or, Notes of an Abject Reptile.”

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