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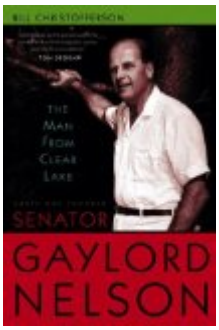

Bill Christofferson. *The Man from Clear Lake: Earth Day Founder Senator Gaylord Nelson.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004. 416 pp. $30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-299-19640-0.

Reviewed by Thomas Brackett Robertson

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April 22, 2005 will be the thirty-fifth anniversary of the first Earth Day. No doubt the media will mark the occasion with stories of how much things have changed from that great landmark of environmental activism, and how George Bush is threatening to roll back the regulations that came out of it.

In *The Man from Clear Lake: Earth Day Founder Senator Gaylord Nelson*, Bill Christofferson offers an illuminating view of events leading up to April 22, 1970, which he views as much as a culmination of a long personal struggle as the beginning of a broad socio-political movement. Taking as his subject Gaylord Nelson, the U.S. senator from Wisconsin who proposed and organized that first Earth Day, Christofferson, a journalist and campaign consultant from Wisconsin, traces the many career twists and legislative struggles that first brought Nelson to the point, in the fall of 1969, when he called for a national "teach-in" on environmental issues the following spring. Admitting that this is not a work of academic history but a political biography, Christofferson stays narrowly focused on Nelson. We learn about Nelson's childhood in small-town pre-war Clear Lake, Wisconsin and about his wife and children, but the focus of this book is Nelson's career in politics. Drawing primarily from Nelson's papers, contemporaneous newspaper accounts, and interviews with people close to Nelson, Christofferson offers a blow-by-blow account of his career, from his election as a state senator from the Madison area in the late 1940s to his unexpected loss in the Reagan landslide of 1980.

This is not a Kitty Kelly-style political expose. The Nelson that emerges from the pages of *The Man from Clear Lake* seems straight out of a Frank Capra script--a small-town boy who becomes a reform-minded missionary in the halls of Congress. Christofferson cannot really be faulted for this; he only had so much material to work with. Nelson ran clean campaigns, he took principled and often visionary stances on many of the key issues of the day, and left the Senate after over thirty years of public service with a net worth of just over a hundred thousand dollars. Although Christofferson's book might provide a rich study in the nostalgic vision that informed an of-

ten nostalgic political movement, in this day of auctioned-off overnight stays in the White House and backroom deals with energy magnates, it is not hard to see why Christofferson might pine for a "Mr. Smith" or two.

Via Nelson, Christofferson introduces us to many of the environmental issues confronting the nation between the mid-1950s and Earth Day in 1970, including efforts to expand parks and trails, to regulate detergents, to protect the Great Lakes, and to ban DDT. Readers looking for broad historiographical interpretation will not find it here, but they will find a succinct, carefully researched, and footnoted record of events that will allow them to make their own connections and conclusions.

One of the things that environmental historians will find most interesting about this book is the light it sheds on environmentalism's connection to Progressive-era politics. Perhaps nowhere did the Progressive impulse last longer and the environmental sensibility take root earlier than in Wisconsin, and Gaylord Nelson was perfectly placed to bridge the two. Born to a small-town doctor and nurse who were both avid followers of "Fighting Bob" Lafollette, Nelson came to his Progressive sensibilities through his family. Himself a member of the Progressive Party until the late 1940s, Nelson helped lead the migration of Wisconsin Progressives to the Democratic Party after World War II. Like many Progressives, Nelson saw government as a way to lend order to a messy social world in order to meet the needs of the common good. His approach to environmentalism came out of this framework.

Nelson's career also seems a good way to explore the liberal environmental agenda stressing "quality of life" that coalesced in the 1950s and early 1960s, and, according to Adam Rome, laid a foundation for late-1960s environmentalism.[1] Using Nelson, this vision can be traced from its emergence in state capitals around the country in the late 1950s to its emergence on the national level in the 1960s. As governor of Wisconsin from 1958 to 1962, Nelson devised an agenda that he would eventually pursue on the national level, including quality-of-life issues such as expanding park and recreation spaces. Christofferson covers Nelson's path-breaking Outdoor Recreation Action Plan (ORAP) in some detail.

The Man from Clear Lake also offers a window onto how the environmental concerns within this broad liberal vision meshed with the civil rights movement, the Great Society, and the antiwar movement. In this book, for instance, readers will learn about Nelson's efforts to regulate detergents in one chapter, and his efforts to extend and preserve the War on Poverty in the next; they will move almost seamlessly from Nelson's tireless efforts to ban DDT to his antiwar positions. It should come as no surprise, then, to hear the broad, almost utopian, vision that informed Nelson's environmental worldview on Earth Day. "Our goal is not just an environment of clean air, and water, and scenic beauty--while forgetting about the Appalachias and the ghettoes where our citizens live in America's worst environment.... Our goal is an environment of decency, quality, and mutual respect for all other human creatures and all other living creatures--an environment without ugliness, without ghettoes, without discrimination, without hunger, poverty, or war. Our goal is a decent environment in the deepest and broadest sense" (p. 6).

Reading between the lines of Christofferson's book, one could put together an interesting list of factors that contributed to the emergence of environmentalism. In addition to Nelson's Progressive background and emerging liberal quality-of-life concerns, this list would include concerns about new synthetic chemicals as well as a general sense of crisis fuelled by war in Vietnam and unrest in American cities--all of which Christofferson documents in detail.

Surprisingly, though, Christofferson does not devote special attention to an issue very close to Nelson's heart: overpopulation. Concern about

population growth, in one form or another, ran throughout Nelson's career. It influenced his park-building plan as governor in 1961 (p. 141), peppered his advice to President Kennedy on conservation in 1963 (p. 177), and, if a speech I heard Nelson give in Madison two years ago is any indication, still deeply concerns Nelson to this day. Indeed, as Christofferson suggests but does not explore, this concern was very much on display right before Earth Day. At the time, Nelson routinely pointed out that the most worrisome environmental problem was unchecked population growth. If such growth continued unchecked, Nelson told a New Haven audience on April 16, 1970, "we might as well forget finding solutions to any of our social and environmental problems."[2]

Looking a little deeper at the population question might have added to the list of factors that explain why Earth Day happened when it did. If Christofferson had dug deeper, he might have found that spiking concern about population growth in the wake of Paul Ehrlich's ***The Population Bomb*** (1968) may have, along with the Santa Barbara oil spill, contributed to Nelson's sense that the moment was ripe for something like Earth Day. In September, 1969, for instance, the very month he made his famous call for an environmental teach-in, Nelson placed an entire article by Paul Ehrlich called "Eco-Catastrophe!" within the ***Congressional Record***.[3] In an article in the ***Progressive*** (Spring 1970), Nelson warned of humanity's "rampaging breeding."[4] While it would be too easy to make too much of Nelson's Malthusian leanings, it seems unfortunate not to give them the attention they deserve, especially because, as the recent controversies within the Sierra Club suggest, modern environmentalism would not have looked the same without them.

The Man from Clear Lake is too narrow a book to be assigned for an undergraduate environmental history survey, but it can be a very useful resource. Through Nelson, Bill Christofferson provides an engaging, well-documented biographical look at one of environmentalism's key political actors.

Notes

[1]. Adam Rome, "'Give Earth a Chance': The Environmental Movement and the Sixties," ***Journal of American History*** 90 (September 2003).

[2]. "Nelson Sees Population as No. 1 Problem," ***Milwaukee Sentinel***, April 17, 1970, quoted in Christofferson, p. 308.

[3]. ***Congressional Record***, September 12, 1969. Ehrlich's article "Eco-Catastrophe!" was originally published in ***Ramparts*** (September 1969), pp. 24-28.

[4]. Gaylord Nelson, "Our Polluted Planet," in ***The Crisis of Survival***, a compilation of the Spring, 1970 issue of the ***Progressive*** (Glenview: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1970), p. 193.

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