

H-Net Reviews

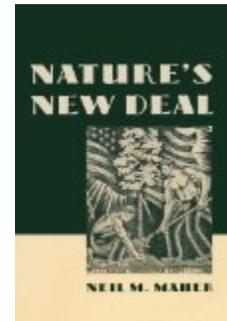
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Neil M. Maher. *Nature's New Deal: The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Roots of the American Environmental Movement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. 328 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-539241-8.

Reviewed by Jack E. Davis (University of Florida)

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Neil M. Maher, *Nature's New Deal: The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Roots of the American Environmental Movement*

Before Maher's fine book, if scholars wanted to learn something about the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) they had to graze at a potluck buffet of local and case studies and heartburn-inducing administrative histories. They also had Leslie Alexander Lacy's *Soil Soldiers: The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Great Depression* and Perry M. Merrill's *Roosevelt's Forest Army: A History of the Civilian Conservation Corps 1933-1942*, 1976 and 1984 servings that reminded one of the need for fresh fare. Many of the published works on the CCC are hard to find (at this writing, you can buy the one copy of Merrill on Amazon for \$111.99), and none is filling on its own. Olen Cole's *The African American Experience in the Civilian Conservation Corps* (1999), for example, limits itself to California camps.

Maher's sensible offering means one no longer has to poke around the buffet table. He has satisfied long unsatiated appetites with a full plate of new ideas and insight about Franklin Roosevelt's beloved agency, and Maher has made clear the relevance of the 1930s in the environmental century. Does his effort also delight the palate? I suppose that depends on your palate. Mine tells me he has served up some superb intellectual nuggets in a presentation that could use a pinch of spice.

Projects of the CCC, or, as Maher prefers to put it, landscapes created by the CCC, formed the defining center of New Deal conservation. There was of course the

art and literature and architecture of the Works Progress Administration and the Civil Works Administration that in some instances spoke to nature. But Maher is interested in the politics and policy of conservation, and he argues convincingly that no agency was such a consummate clearinghouse for conservation ideas and initiatives as the New Deal's most popular. There was also the Bureau of Reclamation and its 1930s and 40s spasm in dam-building, which cast concrete in the name of conservation. But this kind of conservation bore the marks of the growth-oriented, people-first, economy-boosting, wise-use priorities of the Progressive Era. And Maher claims to have found a juncture between eras, a pivot point in history. In the history of dams, such a point came after the end of the New Deal with the Echo Park dam proposal. By then, environmental politics of the 1930s and the science informing it had begun a shift that presaged Echo Park and other environmental events of the post-World War II era. The young men of the CCC, Maher argues, had exerted the force to tilt history on the aforementioned pivot.

Maher should be congratulated for bringing science into the historical equation. The emerging and altogether profound influence of ecology in the American academy and in public policy is too often ignored when scholars follow the trail from Progressive conservation to the modern environmental movement. Maher is at his sophisticated best on this trail. The CCC, which channeled

its manpower into soil conservation, state and national park development, and reforestation, often worked in tandem with scientists, including ecologists. Yet, curiously, many of the boldest critics of the agency's doings were men in the academy. Among them were Aldo Leopold and Bob Marshall. Although the CCC performed the good service of helping farmers to stay on the land, expanding the national and state park systems, and reasserting a conservation ethic in forestry practices, its landscapes were often ecologically sterile places and sometimes representations of wilderness destruction.

That said, the CCC won the hearts of the people, Ma and Tom Joad's people, conservative people who might not have given their vote to Roosevelt and his New Deal if the CCC had not employed their sons and revitalized their malnourished bodies and minds (human conservation, the CCC called it), restored their capacity for making a living off the land, and provided them with welcome outlets for recreation. The CCC democratized conservation, according to Maher, by introducing conservation practices to young men from impoverished families. Their around-the-clock communion with the outdoors instilled in them, in the example of the Boy Scouts of America, a lasting appreciation of nature.

I might take exception with this last claim of Maher's. Nature-inspired sentiments seem an odd corollary to the shovels, pickaxes, and other instruments of power wielded by the forest and soil soldiers. David Nelson, a former park ranger who wrote his dissertation on the CCC and the building of Florida's state parks, discovered in his research an army of wilderness conquerors. In their campaign, they prettied up, reconfigured, and otherwise manhandled nature. One wonders how many of the nation's corpsmen actually were inspired by their CCC tour to go on to do battle in the environmental movement. Maher says a sizable number.[1]

This conclusion is one thread leading to his most remarkable argument. Maher traces the roots of the modern movement to the CCC. Roosevelt, he says, sought but failed to institutionalize an ecological philosophy in federal planning. Special-interest politics in conservation, stimulated by the CCC's emphasis on "human health through outdoor work and play, the need for ecological balance, and interest in wilderness preservation," consequently planted stakes outside government agencies and in post-World War II grassroots environmental organizations (p. 225). Maher may be right, and people who blurb his book think so, but he fails to persuade this reader. Quoting letters and editorials of apparently in-

terested sources is a weak prop for such a bold argument. He maintains that thousands of veteran corpsmen "took jobs with conservation agencies and became actively involved in a host of environmental groups across the country," but he never backs the statement with any sort of discussion, analysis, or evidence (p. 15). The argument also risks denying the presence of historical forces beyond Roosevelt and the federal government—the artists and writers raising awareness and questioning a degenerating quality of life; the grassroots organizations, especially women's organizations, with conservation agendas older than the CCC; the activist scientists who had no connections to government; and the local citizens who had the eyes to see danger when the world around them began turning gray and poisonous and who had the gumption to do something about it. Maher perhaps would have been on better ground if he had qualified the CCC as one of many precursors to postwar activism.

The argument, nevertheless, should excite valuable discussion in the classroom, where students may ultimately dismiss my criticism while appreciating Maher's research in primary and secondary sources and his overall analysis and conclusions. I only wish he were not such a bland writer. Here is where he might have reached for that pinch of spice. His narrative lacks robust life beyond savorless dissertationese. It twitches where it should be doing calisthenics (to use another metaphor). He conveys little sense of place in the places he talks about; he has vivid language in the testimonies and letters of the corpsmen but shies too often from taking advantage of it. The corpsmen also have interesting biographies and stories to tell, and he might have used them as literary devices to frame the existing chapter themes and to lend fluency and structure to the narrative.

Maher is not a lone culprit in the good-writing swindle. Alas, his is the sin of most academic historians, who approach their craft with little attachment to craftsmanship—to wit, without an ear for the ring in words and the harmony in word fluidity, without an eye for art in language and storytelling (which does not require sacrificing analysis), and with a big vocabulary but a largely repetitive one. Historians sometimes justify their writer's sterility by arguing that they are endogamous academics who reserve a fidelity to their own kind. But here is the tragedy in that argument: I cannot imagine assigning Maher's important book to an undergraduate course for knowing that the students will with little difficulty pry themselves from it (the average SAT score among University of Florida freshmen is among the high-

est of state universities).

Yet all is not lost. Maher will be required reading next fall in my graduate seminar, where students are eager to prove they are able connoisseurs, and we will have a filling discussion about the quality of his fare—including the little matter of its presentation.

Note

[1]. David J. Nelson, “Florida Crackers and Yankee Tourists: The Civilian Conservation Corps, the Florida Park Service, and the Emergence of Modern Florida Tourism” (Ph.D. diss., Florida State University, 2008).

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