

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Geoffrey L. Buckley. *America's Conservation Impulse: A Century of Saving Trees in the Old Line State*. Chicago: Center for American Places at Columbia College, Chicago, 2010. xviii + 266 pp. \$39.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-935195-03-0.

Reviewed by Allen J. Dieterich-Ward

Published on H-Environment (September, 2011)

Commissioned by David T. Benac

America's Conservation Impulse comes as a welcome edition to the literature of conservation history, serving as it does to link the evolution of forestry nationwide to case studies of implementation on the state and local levels. Buckley sets out to tell simultaneously the story of rural forestry in Maryland and urban forestry in Baltimore in order to provide "present-day policy makers and resource managers with the critical insights they need to plan wisely for the future" (p. xiv). Much of the book focuses on the careers of the civil servants who directed state and local conservation programs, especially Fred Besley, a protégé of Gifford Pinchot who served as the nation's third and Maryland's first state forester from 1906 to 1942. Connections to the broader political, social, and cultural contexts are largely suggested rather than sustained, but the author provides a coherent and engaging account that will appeal to both scholarly and general audiences.

I have reviewed a number of first-rate books in recent years that bridge the divide between popular and academic histories, suggesting a positive trend among scholars and publishers seeking to maintain public relevance. The current volume provides important historical antecedents for the development of state and local resource management programs during a period in which decreased federal funding has prompted new partnerships for forest conservation. The integrated analysis of the regional and metropolitan canopy is of particular value in framing contemporary public policy concerns, with Baltimore serving as one of the National Science Foundation's two long-term ecological research sites. Uniting a study of trees in both the countryside and

city, the narrative also helps break down the artificial bifurcation between the scholarly tropes of rural forestry and its urban counterpart, landscape architecture—"a neglected piece of forest management history" (p. 65). The book begins with a fine synthetic chapter on "America's Forest Legacy" that provides a succinct introduction to both "Forests and Forestry" and "The Urban Forest" in a "Thickly Wooded" Maryland fast giving way to the denuded landscape that spurred the Progressive-era conservation movement. "One of the first states to hire a state forester and embrace the principles of scientific forest management," Buckley argues, "Maryland serves as a useful yardstick by which other states' progress may be measured, particularly those in the South, where conservation was delayed" (p. xi).

As with Pinchot in Pennsylvania, the story of conservation in Maryland began with the younger generation of a family made wealthy by natural resource extraction expressing concern about the future viability of an exhaustible resource. In response to a gift of several thousand acres in the far west of the state by the grandsons of B&O Railroad magnate John Work Garrett, the legislature passed the Maryland Forest Conservation Act in 1906, paving the way for Besley's appointment. Buckley traces the career of the state's first forester from his background in the National Forest Service, where he began work after taking a degree at the Yale Forest School in 1904, through his introduction of conservation principles in the state, including a "painstaking statewide survey of forest resources," "aggressive fire management policy," "a program of reforestation," "the planting of roadside trees," and additions to the "system of forest reserves"

(p. 23). At the same time, civic organizations in Baltimore were “spearheading the drive to establish an agency to care for and manage the city’s trees” (p. 66). Here, too, forestry began with bequests from wealthy residents that became Patterson Park and Druid Hill Park—public spaces that placed trees at the center of urban place-making. The city passed a street tree ordinance in 1912 under pressure from Progressive reformers advocating environmental solutions to social ills that was intended “to regulate the planting, protection, removing and controlling of all trees planted in the streets of Baltimore,” and created a Forestry Division under Yale Forest School graduate Roger Brooke Maxwell (p. 78). While constrained by a limited archival source base, the author provides glimpses into the activities of the Forestry Division and its relationship with local citizens groups. He pays particular attention to the influential Peabody Heights Improvement Association, which like similar organizations of the era combined support for tree planting and anti-smoke laws with protection “against invasion of the neighborhood by ... Jews as well as by negroes” (p. 82). Those interested in a deeper analysis of these issues should consult Buckley’s more scholarly work, such as a recent chapter on Baltimore’s neighborhood improvement associations in Massard-Guilbaud and Rodger, eds., *Environmental and Social Justice in the City: Historical Perspectives* (2011).

The book does an excellent job of weaving together multiple narratives, but Fred Besley remains the central character and Buckley devotes significant space to covering his influential tenure as the “Dean of State Forestry,” during which time “a lot of states copied what Maryland did” (p. 163). Besley worked to implement and expand the utilitarian conservation principles espoused by Pinchot during the 1920s and 1930s, even as he favored the expansion of state lands rather than the national forests advocated by his mentor. The state forester labored tirelessly during a period of reduced funding to maintain the core practice of fire prevention, and Buckley details the network of local forest wardens, watch towers, and fire crews established in opposition to the automobile drivers, farmers, careless smokers, moonshiners, berry pickers, and “just plain cussedness” that caused “good-for-nothing men and boys to set fires for nothing more than excitement” (p. 98). Buckley uses this method of gleaning local narratives from the records of state agencies also to highlight battles over reforestation programs, which sometimes pitted forestry officials against private nurserymen resentful of state-subsidized tree stock. These conflicts over control of the forests ex-

tended to the relationship with federal authorities as the state depended increasingly during the Great Depression on congressional funding for fire prevention and officials sought to use the manpower provided by the Civilian Conservation Corps as an impetus for expanding forest reserves. However, Besley defended Maryland’s decision to repeal enabling legislation for the federal Weeks Act, thereby preventing the purchase of national forest lands within the state. Federal ownership of large tracts of public land was justified in the West, he argued, but the East was “a very different matter ... likely to cause friction and annoyance and interfere with the state’s carrying forward a strong forest policy of its own” (p. 124).

The latter portion of *America’s Conservation Impulse* covers the postwar “Rebirth and Renewal” of state forestry as well as the “hard economic realities” of the 1970s that curtailed “ambitious development plans” (p. 177). Beginning with Besley’s retirement in 1942, Buckley charts a period of expansion for state forests and parks even as Baltimore officials fought a “losing battle” to preserve the urban canopy (p. 152). Joseph Kaylor, who served as director of the new Maryland Department of Forests and Parks from 1948 to 1964, made few changes to the “visionary” course laid out by Besley, though he did place more emphasis on park creation during a period of rapid urbanization (p. 156). Indeed, the transformation of urban infrastructure to accommodate automobile traffic meant that in some years Baltimore officials actually removed more trees than they planted, a fact highlighted by a table in the book’s appendix. Furthermore, trees themselves were a problem for some residents, with falling leaves and twisted roots contrasting with the smooth poured concrete that often came to symbolize modernity in postwar redevelopment. Steadily declining budgets in the 1980s and 1990s forced government agencies to partner with neighborhood groups and non-profit organizations in order to, in the words of one official, “build the social and environmental equity” (p. 181). The book ends with a call to arms, linking the vision and practical experience of Besley and other Progressive conservationists to the current landscape where “we all benefit from the products derived from the forest, [but] few of us have firsthand knowledge of the damage we inflict on those ecosystems as a result of our consumption” (p. 188).

The most significant scholarly contribution of the book is its integration of multiple analytical frames—local and state, urban and rural, biography and community study—within a synthetic narrative covering more than a century. Buckley surveys this amount of time and ter-

ritory by using representative examples that allow for a deeper analysis of archival sources related to key figures and groups. His most important state-level resources come from reports and contemporary journal articles as well as a number of oral history interviews and a partial autobiography completed by Fred Besley in 1956. In Baltimore, the decision to focus on neighborhood associations seems to be due as much to the dearth of agency records after the Forestry Division was subsumed under the city's Park Department in 1920 as to their importance in shaping public policy. The meeting minutes of the Peabody Heights Improvement Association allows the author to draw out important connections to the broader literature and address less pleasant aspects of Progressive-era forestry rooted in inequalities of class and race. By bringing the story of conservation back to the mid-Atlantic, the book also fits well with a number of recent works seeking to emphasize the importance of the eastern U.S. in environmental history.

The author sets an ambitious agenda that is only partly realized in a photograph-filled text of under two hundred pages, not including notes. Environmental and urban history scholars will find intriguing Buckley's many insights into the political and social dynamics driving forestry in the beginning and middle of the twentieth century. However, this a book that will appeal primarily to those interested specifically in Maryland and the mid-Atlantic region as it fails to fully locate the subject matter within the broader political economy. The author does not completely deliver on the analytical framework of state versus national forest policy raised in the

introduction, nor does his discussion of forestry in Baltimore engage systematically with the broader literature of urban development and redevelopment. While referring at several points to the desire of forestry officials to depoliticize their work, the narrative generally does not explore the political and social contexts in a way that would allow meaningful comparisons to other geographical and thematic areas. These weaknesses are due in part to the book's length and popular audience, but the decision to focus so extensively on Besley's life and career left less than forty pages for examining the second half of the century. For example, there seem to be important connections worth exploring between the earlier statist critique of national forests and the ideology of the Sage Brush Rebellion in the 1970s and 1980s. A discussion of tensions over the management of public lands in Maryland during the period would have provided an important counterpoint to existing studies that focus mainly on the West. Similarly, Buckley's insightful evocation of the tension between trees and concrete as competing symbols of modernity is framed more as an esoteric digression than a systematic analysis. Baltimore's Inner Harbor, one of the nation's first major urban redevelopment projects to really emphasize the natural landscape, is not even mentioned despite the prominence of parks and tree-lined promenades in its design. These critiques aside, *America's Conservation Impulse* will be a welcome addition to the libraries of historians and forestry professionals, and fulfills its mission to inspire "Marylanders of all walks of life ... to appreciate more fully the beauty and value of the nation's forests" (p. xiv).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment>

Citation: Allen J. Dieterich-Ward. Review of Buckley, Geoffrey L., *America's Conservation Impulse: A Century of Saving Trees in the Old Line State*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. September, 2011.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=33164>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.