
DVD Review

Ann Dunskey, Steven Dunskey, and David Steinke (directors), *Green Fire: Aldo Leopold and a Land Ethic for our Time* (Baraboo, WI: Aldo Leopold Foundation, 2011), DVD, \$20.00. Review doi: 10.1558/jsrnc.v5i4.529.

In *The Year of the Flood* (2009), Margaret Atwood imagined a future environmentalist religious group, God's Gardeners, who honor such saints as Saint Rachel Carson, Saint Farley of the Wolves, and Saint Euell of Wild Foods. I admit to being a bit dismayed that Atwood had not included Aldo Leopold amongst the Gardener's hagiographies. As the thoughtful and informative 2011 documentary *Green Fire: Aldo Leopold and a Land Ethic for Our Time* makes plain, Leopold surely deserves recognition as one of the great conceptualizers and practitioners of ecology, as well as for his work as a verbal artist of exceptional clarity and grace.

Green Fire (co-produced by the Aldo Leopold Foundation, the Center for Humans and Nature, and the U.S. Forest Service) shows the ways that Aldo Leopold gained his ecological wisdom through a lifetime of experience, study, and reflection, as well as an epiphany. Leopold's journey toward his mature ecological worldview began in childhood as part of a well-off family in Burlington, Iowa, on the Mississippi River, where he learned an aesthetic and experiential connection to the land from his father as well as to the arts from his mother. Leopold graduated from the Yale School of Forestry and received his first assignment with the U.S. Forest Service in the Apache National Forest, where, as Benjamin Romero, a District Ranger in New Mexico notes, due to the multicultural and political history of New Mexico, 'he had his hands full'. Later, Leopold settled in Wisconsin, held a professorship at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, and undertook a number of environmental restoration projects, including, with the active assistance of his family, that of a devastated area in Baraboo, now the site of the Aldo Leopold Foundation.

Leopold's most enduring concept is that of the 'land ethic', advanced in the essay of that title in *A Sand County Almanac*, which he wrote in 1947. 'The Land Ethic' speaks to human relationships with each other and with 'land', a concept Leopold enlarged to include 'soils, waters, plants and animals' as well as humans, who are not to be conceptualized as a 'conqueror of the land-community', but rather a 'plain member and citizen' of it. The land ethic requires human accountability to non-humans as well as humans, and to current as well as future generations. *Green Fire* explores the full meaning of that ethic and some of its current applications.

The genial and insightful Curt Meine, a historian, conservationist, quintessential Leopold scholar, and Senior Fellow at the Center for Humans and Nature, serves as the film's narrator and guide. He provides background information, converses with participants, and interprets Leopold's legacy. Meine suggests that Leopold's most

significant 'stroke of genius' is the understanding that nothing so important as a land ethic can be written down, but rather 'evolves in the minds of a thinking community'. *Green Fire* introduces viewers to some of these communities, from the ranches of the Southwest to urban centers (e.g. the Forest Preserve District of Cook County in Chicago). Throughout, the film draws upon archival and contemporary visual materials—photographs of ruined as well as restored land, trophy shots of slaughtered 'varmints' as well as visual paeans to resurgent sandhill crane populations. *Green Fire* includes some of the most memorable of Leopold's quotes (voiced by Peter Coyote) and also discourses with an always compelling range of historians, conservationists (urban and rural), wildlife biologists, ecological restorationists, philosophers, and writers (including, for example, M. Scott Momaday and Baird Callicott). Another important Leopold scholar, historian Susan Flader (whose 1974 biography brought Leopold to attention beyond the scientific community) is prominently featured. So are members of Leopold's family, including vocal recordings of his wife Estella and interviews with their children, Estella, Carl, and Nina, and a grandson engaged in ecological research. There are no surviving audio or filmed recordings of Aldo Leopold, yet viewers can gain, perhaps, a sense of his presence and aura from the extensive screen time given to his exuberant daughter Nina Leopold Bradley on her home grounds in Baraboo, where she carried on her father's phenological observations and actively supported the Leopold Foundation, until her death at 93 years of age, in May 2011.

Earlier, I mentioned that this documentary emphasizes a moment of epiphany for Leopold. *Green Fire* takes its title from that event, recounted in Leopold's famous essay, 'Thinking Like A Mountain' and builds up to a visit to the approximate site where it occurred. After killing a mother wolf, Leopold famously told of witnessing a 'fierce green fire' dying in her eyes and realizing his folly. Some have doubted whether this incident actually took place, but Susan Flader recounts a recent find—a letter from Leopold telling of the day in 1909 that he killed two timber wolves. *Green Fire* then shows a wolf released as part of a wolf restoration project, perhaps suggesting some ritual recompense, a returning of *green fire*.

I highly recommend *Green Fire* to any group engaging with environmental history, issues, practices, and crises—in government, science, education, and activism. It is ideal for classroom use (e.g. environmental philosophy and ethics, American studies, environmental history, public intellectualism, conservation, and restoration). That being said, the film could have ventured further into some of the complexities of Leopold's journey (e.g. his role as a young Anglo, Yale-trained forest service supervisor in the Southwest, with its fraught history of European conquest and colonization; the ways that Animal Rights intellectuals and activists might embrace, or not, Leopold's legacy). Still, *Green Fire* will bring Leopold and the land ethic to many who continue to establish (and debate) our roles in the land ethic's continuing evolution.

With full respect to Atwood, to her Gardeners, and to all of their, and our, ecological ancestors, I suggest that this documentary confirms a place in that hallowed company for 'Saint Aldo of the Fierce Green Fire'.

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