

Reiger, John F. *American Sportsmen and the Origins of Conservation*, rev. ed. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986. Pp. 151. Illustrations, notes, selected bibliography, index.

In the national memory, the sport of hunting has always enjoyed, or suffered, an ambiguous position. Detractors have vilified sportsmen, especially hunters, as late-model barbarians. Supporters have attached hunting to all of the measures of civilized progress in America. In recent decades, the anti-hunters seem to have gained the upper hand emotionally in this probably hopelessly polarized debate. But one historian, John F. Reiger, has leaped forth to rescue the sportsmen's image from total demise. His revised edition of *American Sportsmen and the Origins of Conservation* links the late nineteenth-century hunters

and fishermen with the conservation, and to some extent, the preservation movements of those same years.

Reiger, listed on the back cover as the executive director of the Connecticut Audubon Society, earned an M.A. at the University of Florida and a Ph.D. at Northwestern University. In addition to this book, which appeared first in a Winchester Press edition in 1975, Reiger wrote a dissertation and articles on American hunter-naturalist George Bird Grinnell and edited a selected collection of that worthy's papers for the University of Oklahoma Press in 1972. The Press has recently reissued that book, *Passing of the Great West*. In his academic and professional careers, Reiger has certainly hewed close to the environmental matters he explored in *American Sportsmen and the Origins of Conservation*.

In *American Sportsmen*, Reiger seeks to turn the tables on the anti-sportsmen brigades by placing hunters and fishermen at the genesis of the conservation movements the environmentalists cherish so dearly. He argues that those were the first group of Americans to notice the depletion of fish and game and other natural resources and to mobilize to solve the problems. Sportsmen organized on the club level in the 1870s and 1880s and put pressure on the state and federal governments to pass laws restricting the more abusive and wasteful hunting and fishing practices. Sportsmen's magazines such as *American Sportsman*, *Forest and Stream*, *Field and Stream*, and *American Angler* all rallied their readers to the cause of conservation. Like-minded patricians for the most part, these men, such as Charles Hallock, Grinnell, John Lacey, and Theodore Roosevelt, urged each other on to save game, and forests for future hunting and fishing.

Some historians of American conservation have ignored these stalwarts, Reiger contends, because hunters and fishermen would seem to be unlikely sponsors of restriction which would deprive them of their pleasures. Or even when historians have noted outdoorsmen's involvement in the movement, they have neglected the efforts of the 1870s and 1880s and emphasized overly the roles of forester Gifford Pinchot and Roosevelt as President after the turn of the century. Reiger dispels both of these misinterpretations. Their extensive familiarity with fish and game drove this group of sportsmen to decry the actions of the poachers, butchers, and gamehogs, the wastefulness of the market hunters and commercial fishing companies. These were no armchair naturalists nor drawing-room romantics, Reiger asserts, but rather men used to soggy stomps in the woods and rowings at dawn on remote lakes. Moreover, they preceded the more celebrated conservation crusade of the early twentieth-century by two or three decades. Upon noticing the shortages of game and fish and their habitats, these sportsmen welded together their clubs and wielded the power of their class to bring forth needed legislation.

Overall Reiger's book makes several valuable points about the place of hunting and fishing in American cultural history. Both activities had an impact on America beyond the physical act of taking fish and game. Sportsmen pursued their chosen pleasures for a variety of motives, some selfish, but others falling in the positive column. While hunting or fishing, sportsmen arrived at a

level of ecological awareness years before such became a fashionable perspective among the nonhunting and nonfishing public. Protecting the future of their sport, sportsmen helped ensure the protection of some forests, rivers, national parks, and other natural features. Promoting their forms of outdoor recreation, these hunters and anglers espoused sportsmanship, what they perceived as a code of fair chance, personal restraint, ordeal and reward, and unselfishness. For these insights we have Reiger to thank and the University of Oklahoma Press to thank for reissuing this study. Winchester Press, while a very fine press in its own right, is identified with pro-hunting and pro-shooting interests; thus *American Sportsmen* would seem more a polemic than an objective history.

And yet for all of its virtues, the book contains several flaws. It is a polemical book. Reiger makes his point . . . and makes his point . . . and makes his point over and over, often too stridently. At times he takes unnecessary potshots at nonhunting environmentalists. More grievously, he imputes too often a purity that just wasn't that thoroughgoing. In my own studies of American hunting (a 1976 Ohio State dissertation on hunting as a mode of environmental perception in American literature and thought from Cooper to Mailer, and several articles, all of which I hope to expand into a full-scale study of hunting in American culture), I found that the selfsame gentlemanly hunters Reiger praises were also capable of violating their own scruples. Moreover, American sportsmen were by no means as united or monolithic about conservation issues as Reiger's interpretation would imply. Although he lists a sizable number of hunters and fishermen who did support conservation in one fashion or another (see pp. 45-46), the author doesn't distinguish enough between those who hunted or fished regularly and those who were infrequent or former practitioners. For example, Thoreau's attitudes about hunting were far more complex than Reiger suggests [see my " 'Chaplain to the Hunters': Thoreau's Ambivalence Toward Hunting," *American Literature*, 56(3), (October 1984), 345-61]. Similarly the author should have differentiated more clearly between those sportsmen who fished primarily or hunted primarily. And not all members of the prestigious Boone and Crockett Club belonged because of a fervent devotion to hunting or conservation.

Yet even had Reiger shown us those complexities about who made up the sportsmen groups, other problems remain. In chapter after chapter, George Bird Grinnell overshadows the other sportsmen. Certainly Grinnell was a major agent in the conservation movement; perhaps none other matched his indefatigability. But perhaps, too, Reiger overemphasized Grinnell's role. Understandably the writer wished to include the fruits of his research into Grinnell's papers, but had he researched most of the other figures, would Reiger's thesis have been as strong? Maybe he should have retitled the book to indicate Grinnell's prominent place. Likewise, Reiger underestimates the depth of divisions between the preservationists and conservationists. He is correct in asking rhetorically why can't an individual belong in both camps (see pp. 42 and 111), but he dismisses the demarcation too lightly. This is most obvious in his chapter on the development of national parks. Sportsmen did uphold the

idea of national parks and even hunt and fish in them, but support for the idea came from all sorts of quarters: nonhunters, antihunters, progressives, recreation theorists, garden and civic clubs, chambers of commerce, and state governments. Sportsmen played less of a role than Reiger asserts. Admittedly environmental historians might have overdone the canonization of John Muir and the Sierra Club, but they were equally as important in negotiating for national parks. In my own research into the century-long campaign to create a national park in the Bandelier region of northern New Mexico (forthcoming in a University of New Mexico Press book), I didn't find sportsmen involved until the early 1960s and only fishermen's groups at that.

One last objection: this is hardly a "revised edition." Except for a few additions to the selected bibliography, the rest of the book is the same as the 1975 Winchester Press edition. The assemblage of photographs and illustrations after the text is first-rate and worthy of the virtues of the book. Perhaps in a real "revised edition," Reiger would erase several of the aforementioned defects and deliver to us a classic for all environmental and sports history courses of the future.

Metropolitan State College

Thomas L. Altherr