

Conservationist Liberalism

John L. Thomas — decades ago, a prize-winning biographer of abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison — vividly reminds us in *A Country in the Mind: Wallace, Stegner, Bernard DeVoto, History and the American Land* (Routledge, 2001) about the handful of American intellectuals who worked long and hard to preserve public land in the twentieth century. Their mistakes as much as their contributions tell us something important about environmentalism and the less compromised sections of American liberalism.

We won't find ecosocialists Edward Bellamy, Benton MacKaye or Robert Marshall treated here, but Stegner and DeVoto give us plenty of food for thought about the presumed politics of the possible. DeVoto, born in Utah "at the foot of the Wasatch Mountains," grew up a walker and a loner, went to Harvard and throwing off a youthful resistance to warmaking, enlisted in the Army in 1917. He afterward became a regional novelist who sought to capture the contradictions between the beauty of the mountains and their philistine industrial exploitation.

Still writing novels, DeVoto made his way back to Harvard's English Department, where he grew close to some of the most interesting scholars and also some of the most effectively racist scholars (such as Samuel Eliot Morison) of American experience. He meanwhile became a feature writer in *Harpers Magazine*, preaching a progressive regionalism for the West but also polemicizing zestfully against any and all contemporary theoretical "prophets" of sweeping change, including socialists, communists and ecovisionary Lewis Mumford. DeVoto mistrusted the New Deal but supported federal sponsorship of regional improvements, some of them undoubtedly good (like reforestation of logged out areas) and some of them catastrophic (like the building of the great majority of dams). In 1940, DeVoto made a memorable Western walking tour with a close friend, the slippery young intellectual, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., destined within a few years

to become the chief red-baiting liberal, blacklist supporter and intelligence agency asset — and a most baneful influence on DeVoto.

So far so-so. But DeVoto was exceptionally lucky to hook up with Wallace Stegner, another son of the West (who grew up in rural Iowa and Saskatchewan before the family finally moved to Salt Lake City) also become a regional novelist. The two emerged fast friends from one of the annual Bread Loaf Writers conferences in Vermont of the late 1930s. DeVoto was already a bigshot here, with characters like Robert Frost on hand to give the meetings extreme prestige among publishers as well as academics. Out of that friendship came both Stegner's *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian* and DeVoto's *The Year of Decision: 1846*, exceptionally popular works which tried to teach readers lessons about the history and proper use of Western lands but which offered little sympathetic understanding of the removal (or extermination) of those peoples living on the lands to be explored and cultivated.

And yet, from the bully pulpit of *Harpers*, DeVoto herorically fought the redistribution of federal lands to the hands of cattlemen and sheep raisers. After tilting at so many of the wrong enemies, from the Germans of 1917 to the 1930s Left, he had found the right one at last.

Stegner, by now at Stanford, was in some sense the disciple about to outstrip the master. As a novelist, he had written before World War II a couple of extremely wrongheaded and downright malicious volumes, depicting the legendary Joe Hill as a fanatic and slandering the 1930s campus radicals in Wisconsin. But as a savant for *Look* magazine cameramen working with (or for) him in his literary apotheosis *One Nation* (1946), he was a radical democrat. His treatment of contemporary Hispanic Americans and Native Americans contained, in fact, everything that DeVoto's work lacked. Stegner urged cooperatives as the best method for reviving assorted cultures, and himself worked hard within a housing cooperative outside the Stanford campus to offer a model in collaborative living. (It failed when the expected FHA loans did not come through.) His grander plans for conservation and the roughly cooperative society of small farmers found shape in a popular biography of John Wesley Powell, the 19th century Western planner.

Biographer John L. Thomas precisely locates the post-World War II conservation movement as one of scientific expertise and elite guidance, not democratic mass impulse. Given those limitations, Stegner could become close friends with Aldo Leopold and urge resistance against the accelerating, outright plunder of the West. DeVoto especially sought to resist the post-New Deal Republican onslaught against regulation,

much like that in the Bush administration today. As with so many later Democrats, he thereby found himself in a quandary. Adlai Stevenson, a pre-Clintonian "business Democrat" (for whom Arthur Schlesinger, Jr, wrote campaign speeches) flattered DeVoto but used DeVoto's advice sparingly at best during the 1952 presidential campaign; as a Cold War liberal himself, DeVoto simply could not grasp how much Schlesinger and other liberals of the same stripe had prepared the volatile atmosphere of McCarthyism and contributed to the ongoing purge of erstwhile progressives from the State Department to the Forest Service.

The contemporary conservation movement (let alone any incipient ecological movement) was immeasurably damaged by the reactionary mood. Assorted popular magazines turned down DeVoto as he tardily moved against the massive projects of the Army Corps of Engineers, the accelerating dam-building and pork barrel construction projects. He launched arguments in the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Readers Digest* (!) against still worse plans, and Stegner joined with David Brower in the Sierra Club to fight precedents which, if successful, would bring the evisceration of many millions of acres.

DeVoto died in 1955, an intellectual celebrity both politically frustrated and deeply confused on as central a conservation issue as nuclear testing and the widespread poisoning of Western land and water. While Californian Linus Pauling led the anti-testing crusade, DeVoto and his circle could only register themselves ambivalently against it as the wrong means to the proper Cold War ends. Stegner, meanwhile, had just begun to organize. Throwing himself into the Sierra Club's struggle to stop the building of dams inside Dinosaur National Monument was undoubtedly the most radical and probably most successful act of his life. His *This Is Dinosaur*, a collection of photos and essays (some done by Brower) remains a landmark by any measure.

The Sierrans soon learned, to their dismay, that proposing alternatives to major dam projects ended up justifying projects very nearly as bad as the original. Thomas seems to suggest that DeVoto would have cursed the failure of nerve. In reality, DeVoto's life was full of failures or lapses this large, with consequences for all those other liberals right down to Bruce Babbitt. Insisting upon their own "moderate" conservatism, they have nevertheless continued to consent to a broad redesigning of the West, accepting the economic and political power of the military machine and suburbanism with terrible consequences for the environment, not to mention Indians and assorted others.

Stegner predictably broke with Brower over another compromise with developers, this time a land swap for a nuclear power plant that became Diablo Canyon. Brower had become too radical for Stegner's taste, and he helped lead the slate that purged Brower as executive director of the Sierra Club in 1969. From there on, Stegner lost his nerve — and worse. To put it as generously as possible, the excitements of the campus movements were just too much for him.

Always somewhat afraid of radicalism, like most of his contemporaries at Stanford he condemned the student radicals and refused to support their demand (although he was against the Vietnam War) to strip the university of all its hidden ties with military and intelligence operations. What was "smug moralism" to him was, for them, an unwillingness to compromise on the democratic basics for university life. Their experience with campus power-brokers proved an apt primer for the later militant environmentalism of thousands of radicalized students and others who would lead the struggles against future despoilers.

Stegner withdrew, issuing literary invectives bitterly attacking not only Ken Kesey (a noted campus dissident and prankster) but also the much-admired eco-visionary, anarcho-pacifist poet Gary Snyder. By the time of his retirement, and despite a Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *Angle of Repose*, Stegner had become a crabby character more closely allied in campus politics to Reagan think-tank conservatives than a younger self would ever have thought possible. To his credit, he found his way back to usefulness in old age, with preservation projects close at hand, along the California coastline, before his death in 1993.

What had the liberal conservationists wrought? More than one might imagine, surely less than they could have done. Despite their regionalism, they actually chose to work from inside the Establishment, most of their lives, and there they accomplished some real good. The fear or suspicion they manifested of real outsiders, whether Lewis Mumford or the Popular Front entertainers who had contributed so much to democratize the idea of "Americanism" during the 1930s-40s (and were to transform popular environmentalism with songs and films long before *Redwood Summer*), undercut the cerebral pair's capacity to do the unpopular thing, to take chances, and to leave a solid legacy to their best efforts.