

BOOKS & ARTS



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Farms, fields and roads
in the United States were
transformed by the Civilian
Conservation Corps.

Blazing a new trail for nature

Could the army of green workers who transformed the US landscape inspire today's ecological revolution?

Nature's New Deal: The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Roots of the American Environmental Movement

by Neil M. Maher

Oxford University Press: 2007. 328 pp. \$35

Jon Christensen

Imagine a government agency that transforms people's relationship with nature, creates millions of jobs and helps pull a nation out of an economic nadir. While political pundits on the left and right nit-pick, citizens embrace the agency's programme and forge a new constituency and political consensus that lasts for generations. The agency's work profoundly changes the physical landscape — parks, forests, farm fields, trails and roads — in ways that continue to remind people of the benefits of caring for nature within their communities. Such an agency existed, 70 years ago during the Great Depression in the United States. It lasted for less than a decade.

That agency was the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). It put three million unemployed men to work repairing the land, helping communities and themselves. The story of the CCC is recounted in *Nature's New Deal*.

In the midst of current economic and environmental crises, one may muse: "If only we could uncork this dream today!" Historian Neil M. Maher never makes the argument that the CCC should be reinvented in the present. But with jittery financial markets around the world

evoking nervous comparisons to the Depression, we might look to the New Deal — President Franklin D. Roosevelt's response to the 1930s crisis — for historical lessons.

On the financial front, those lessons seem clear. The Glass–Steagall Act was a New Deal law that separated consumer banking from speculative investment banking. Its repeal in the late 1990s was one of the laissez-faire reforms that enabled the current troubles to develop and spread so widely. Now, we are again contemplating the recalibration of government oversight of financial markets on a scale first set by the New Deal.

Would we today mint a New Deal for nature too? The time is right. Global climate change demands policies at a global scale. And nations too must act. So far the United States has not, but with Republican and Democratic presidential candidates advocating a change from the Bush administration's do-nothing approach, a new policy on climate change is expected to emerge in the next administration. Aspects of that policy might look a lot like the CCC. Maher's history of the corps illuminates the possibilities, and limitations, of such an approach.

One can hear echoes of the CCC in a growing US campaign calling for the creation of 'green jobs' that will give 'energy independence' and so slow global warming. The Apollo Alliance — a coalition of labour unions and environmental groups — is even calling for the

same number of jobs: three million workers to install solar panels, insulate homes and build wind turbines. The number is, perhaps, just a curious coincidence. But it does highlight a problem. That problem is scale.

The CCC did a lot with 3 million jobs. It planted more than 2 billion trees, slowed erosion on 16 million hectares of farmland and developed 800 new state parks, while constructing more than 10,000 small reservoirs, 46,000 vehicular bridges, 13,000 miles of hiking trails and nearly 1 million miles of fencing. Maher writes: "All told, conservative estimates indicate that corps projects across the United States altered more than 118 million acres, an area approximately 3 times the size of Connecticut." Actually, that is more than 30 times the size of Connecticut. An area larger than California, yet smaller than Texas, this is still only about 5% of the total land area of the United States.

Most CCC projects were concentrated along the rivers and tributaries of the Mississippi watershed, where erosion and floods were rife. The corps deployed idle manpower in a massive 'green jobs' programme, giving unemployed, single young men work outdoors, plus room and board. The men sent their salaries home, providing relief for their families.

It was also good politics. The CCC was a friendly local face for the New Deal programme. Roosevelt readily hitched his wagon to an agency that enjoyed approval ratings of

better than 80%, even while the rest of the New Deal came under increasing attack. He talked of “a plan of cooperation with nature instead of what we have been doing in the past — trying to buck nature”. This was an appeal for cooperation among the people too.

Maher uses the CCC to make a sophisticated argument within the field of environmental history in the United States. He argues, in effect, that it is the missing link between the simple conservation of the Theodore Roosevelt era (1901–09) and the environmentalism that emerged after the Second World War. The link was forged by Franklin D. Roosevelt’s ‘broader conservation’, which went beyond concern for efficiently managing natural resources to include people and communities in a more ecological form of national planning.

Just as important for Maher’s argument were the grassroots reactions to the CCC. Planting trees seemed to be all for the good until early conservation biologists began to worry about how wildlife habitats were being changed. Meanwhile, the CCC’s mania for blazing trails and building roads inspired a movement to preserve roadless wilderness areas. Maher argues for a bottom-up view of this new deal for nature, effectively turning the significance of the original New Deal (an undeniably top-down enterprise) on its head.

If the New Deal is going to be a touchstone for our economy and environment today, our inspiration should go further than the CCC. Maher leans too heavily on this one agency to explain the enormous changes that took place during the Depression and in its aftermath. One fundamental problem here is making a virtue of necessity. The CCC, like the rest of the New Deal, was tightly constrained by American politics, which was (still is) enamoured with the idea of bottom-up change, and thus wary of economic and environmental planning on a national scale.

Maher briefly opens up a view on this larger context in a chapter on the CCC’s work with the Tennessee Valley Authority, a massive regional development programme undertaken by the national government. He does not follow the story into the authority’s hydroelectric dams and energy. It is there, in the nexus of energy and environment, that we might find the real lessons of the New Deal for our troubled times. Unfortunately, it was not so much the New Deal as the Second World War that ultimately transformed the economy of the United States. Arguably, the war also transformed the country’s relationship with the environment more than the CCC did. But that is another story. One can only hope that particular history does not have to be repeated for the United States to resolve another new deal for nature in this current era of global change. ■

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Bedtime reading

Insomniac

by Gayle Green

University of California Press: 2008.

520 pp. \$29.95

Jim Horne

Californian professor Gayle Green has been an insomniac for 50 years. For her, insomnia has been an ordeal of suffering and anger, directed largely at medical professionals, sleep clinics and the providers of various potions, pills and other sleep aids. In spite of this, her informed insider’s account of insomnia is a testament to how well we can apparently survive on far less than eight hours of sleep per night.

Although her inability to function is a message Green may want to convey, being a professor of literature we must allow her some poetic licence. After pouring out her woes, and pointing out that rats die without sleep and that insomnia may lead to all manner of ills, the book settles down to an interesting read. Green gives a fair reflection of how difficult life can be for insomniacs. Focusing on the United States, she interviews insomnia experts, tries out every conceivable sleep treatment and attends learned conferences on sleep disorders. Albeit from a personal viewpoint, she provides home truths and insights that many sleep researchers and doctors have lost track of; they would benefit from reading this book.

Claiming not to be depressed, obsessive or hypochondriacal, Green believes she has a genetic form of insomnia that leads to

‘physiological hyperarousal’ with additional hormonal underpinnings. For her, it is a physical condition and not ‘all in the mind’. In my mind lingers the thought that “the lady doth protest too much”. Make of the author what you will, *Insomniac* is among the best books of its kind. Besides, there are millions of people just like her, seemingly beyond the bounds of modern medicine.

Insomnia is one of the few disorders that a general practitioner will allow a patient to self-diagnose. The patient may be rewarded with a short course of hypnotic drugs; but even the best of these medicines is unlikely to lengthen night sleep by more than 20 minutes, usually by quickening sleep onset by the same amount. This is not enough to improve daytime alertness, mainly because many sufferers are hyperaroused and constantly ‘on the go’ — that’s why they can’t sleep. Others, such as Green, report being tired all the time, which is different from sleepiness and the propensity to fall asleep.

This tiredness can be linked to insomnia, but both are usually symptoms of something more deep-seated. Treating the insomnia alone (by hypnotic drugs, for example) makes little difference and can be an expensive, frustrating and fruitless course of action, especially in the United States, where sleep induction is a billion-dollar industry. Many, like Green, then seek the solace and sympathies of alternative therapies.

Insomnia comes in many forms: difficulty in falling asleep, too many fitful awakenings or waking up too early. Although there



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