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Review: The Conservation Diaries of Gifford Pinchot

By Gifford Pinchot
Edited by Harold K. Steen

Review: Gifford Pinchot and the Making of Modern Environmentalism

By Char Miller

Reviewed by [William Theodore Johnson](#)
Scottsdale Public Library - Palomino Branch, USA

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Gifford Pinchot. *The Conservation Diaries of Gifford Pinchot*. Durham, NC: The Forest History Society, 2001. 230 pp. ISBN 0-89030-060-7 (paperback). US\$19.00

Char Miller. *Gifford Pinchot and the Making of Modern Environmentalism*. Washington, DC: Island Press, 2001. 457 pp. ISBN 1-55963-822-2 (hardcover). US\$28.00. Recycled, acid-free paper.

Editor Harold Steen has labored long and hard to provide us with a glimpse of the personal side of Gifford Pinchot. *The Conservation Diaries* cover two periods, from 1889 to 1915 and from 1936 to 1946. The 21-year gap between Pinchot's early and final years constitute a significant omission of time and development in the life of this conservation giant.

Steen has organized Pinchot's personal entries into logical groups such as those covering his travels "out west," his work with the "Forest Service," and his relationships with "Theodore Roosevelt" and "Secretary Ballinger." He introduces each section with a very helpful overview and then lists specific entries in chronological order. Unfortunately, many of the entries are so brief and lacking in substantive content, that one can only wonder about their value. For example, in the section on "Youth to Maturity" on 11/17, 1891, the entry reads, "Biltmore ... Met Miss Houghteling after lunch." The section on the "Forest Service" includes an entry on 6/1, 1898, which states, "New York ... Letters and Division work." Most other entries reveal something of Pinchot's personality, self assessment, or feelings. Only those who are serious about conservation history will find this material of interest. Therefore, this title is recommended for special libraries and specialists in North American environmental history.

The birth of modern environmentalism has been made much clearer by *Gifford Pinchot and the Making of Modern Environmentalism*, an excellent contribution to conservation history. Char Miller accurately and fairly reflects the great balancing act between preservation and sustainable use in

this well documented portrait of a pioneer conservationist. The manner in which Gifford Pinchot handled this balancing act, in large measure, formed the basis of the U.S. environmental agenda for the 20th century.

Miller boldly sets the record straight by revealing the unjust treatment of Pinchot by Roderick Nash and Stephen Fox. He clarifies certain noteworthy encounters with John Muir in the most understandable, logical, and historically accurate manner. Miller documents the professional relationship between Muir and Pinchot as one established upon personal respect and admiration, at least early on. Later, their relationship became combative in nature, which ironically, did much to shape the environmental landscape for the remainder of the century.

Miller walks the reader through Pinchot's life beginning with the world of his father in France. Pinchot's father affirmed him and loved him for who he was more than for whom he wanted him to become. He also instructed him in the practical matters of how to handle money and he instilled in his son a strong sense of discipline. Miller skillfully draws attention to the powerful influence of Gifford's mother who was so instrumental in shaping his political skill. She was always in his corner, a fighter and one who persevered over any odds.

Pinchot's forestry experience was not extensive but, considering the time, it was broad and varied. He studied in Europe and gained practical experience in the United States at Vanderbilt's Biltmore project in North Carolina, with Phelps Dodge in Arizona, and in New York with the state forestry department. Forestry education and practice during this time was undergoing a radical shift from a gilded age to a sustainable age. Pinchot was far ahead of his time, being one of the first to explore forest ecology and the relationships between such factors as grazing and forest fires. In light of recent problems with forest fires in the United States, it would behoove land managers and politicians to review the historical nature of this problem and the efforts made by Pinchot to help us understand the intricate interactions between physical factors, biological organisms, and human interests.

The spiritual portrait of Pinchot, as painted by Miller, will surprise some readers. Pinchot felt a nearness to God that went "hand in glove" with his sense of nearness to the land. In fact, he frequently saw the hand of God in nature. For example, he was overwhelmed by an experience at the Grand Canyon and later noted the impressions of power, peace, and the presence of God evoked by the scene. His mother was so confident in his spiritual growth that she felt it would determine the course and quality of his life. He spent time with a number of spiritual mentors at Yale and elsewhere, one of

whom warned young Pinchot about unbelieving scientists who failed to see God in nature or who did not believe in God at all. Pinchot's spiritual interests were so strong that at one point he considered becoming a foreign missionary.

Pinchot made a strong case for government regulation to conserve natural resources in perpetuity during Theodore Roosevelt's administration. He faced heated opposition among western ranchers, miners, and loggers, but used great political skill to defuse tensions and to enhance Roosevelt's political position. His wife was a great source of support and a powerful political activist in her own right. The Pinchots did not push their conservation agenda in a vacuum, since they understood the importance of conservation practice in the context of culture. A good forester must also be a good citizen, Gifford claimed. This interplay between social, political, physical, and biological elements placed Pinchot's conservation agenda in the proper context.

Throughout Pinchot's career, he used his power, wealth, and political connections to improve environmental quality as well as the quality of life for thousands of poor families, especially during his two terms as governor of Pennsylvania. Giving was a part of his family heritage. "With the power to improve came an uplifted sense of station." The progressive politics of the era played well with Pinchot's conservation agenda-energy and water were for all, not just for the large utility companies to amass wealth. He fought hard for labor and during the Depression he used the conservation agenda to help people. As governor of Pennsylvania, he instituted the first state antipollution agency and created the forerunner to the Civilian Conservation Corps.

Pinchot was a key contributor to the women's suffrage movement and women were among his strongest supporters in his race for Governor. As a conservationist with a real heart for human rights and quality of life issues, he was among the few who openly opposed the Nazis. He was a fresh thinker all the way to the end, though his rambunctious, often personal, political squabbles may have hurt the conservation effort as the century progressed. Yet, Gifford Pinchot's contribution to the quality of human life and environmental conservation are beyond measure and Miller's outstanding book presents this case in a fast moving style that is easy to read. This book is highly recommended for academic, public, and special libraries and will be sought by environmentally minded people across the United States.

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