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The Quiet Crisis

By

STEWART L. UDALL, SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR

New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1963.

Pp. xiii, 209, \$5.00

Within the past few days, in a beautiful little village at the northern end of the Helderbergs, lay audiences of 100 or more have heard Secretary Udall, Dr. Charles Dambach and Agnes DeMille. The first two dealt with the problem of conserving our natural resources. Miss DeMille discussed our ambivalence toward the arts. Her words were in striking parallel to those used by Udall, describing *The Quiet Crisis* in his foreword:

America today stands poised on a pinnacle of wealth and power, yet we live in a land of vanishing beauty, of increasing ugliness, of shrinking open space, and of an overall environment that is diminished daily by pollution and noise and blight.

The volume thus keynoted is designed and written with impressive skill. Four groups of plates tell the story, not merely enhance it. The first, all in color, displays the varied beauty of the continent, "The Inherited Land." The second, titled "Ravaged Resources," records with remarkable economy the panorama of waste and destruction. Next is a gallery of friends of the American landscape, from Jefferson to John D. Rockefeller, Jr. The final group exemplifies the impact of unplanned urbanism, but ends with a superb color plate of wilderness as a reminder.

Structurally the text is no less adroitly planned. The first chapter sketches the continent as it was when Indian cultures prevailed. The last two look ahead with hopes, warnings and possibilities. Those between are a running record of what has happened to the American landscape and along with it as a countertheme the slow-swelling chorus of protest leading to eventual activity. Most of these chapters carry, as subtitles, the names of great Americans who have been significantly concerned with natural resources from the beginning of our history.

In the midst of the chapters is one with no subtitle, for it has no hero—only devils. Entitled "The Raid on Resources," it describes the swinish greed and fraud that during the latter half of the 19th century pillaged and wrecked, needlessly destroying forests, soil, wildlife and the general order of the landscape. It makes grim reading. So too does an earlier account of our treatment of the Indian, reminding one of a famous remark of Walpole's regarding Negro slavery: "I should think the souls of the Africans" (read Indians) "would sit heavy on the swords of the Americans."

To get at the essence of *The Quiet Crisis* without trying to abstract it, if there is a better or more succinct historical account of American resource problems, I do not recall it. Nor do I recall any which so combines with the record a strong brief for the intangible values of conservation. True, this plea is reinforced with gems quoted from the heroes, but these are by no means used to replace strong argument in the text itself.

The notable list of consultants whose services are generously acknowledged is guarantee, if any were needed, of an unusual accuracy and completeness. Errors are very few. The origin of the American Association for the Advancement of Science goes back much further than the assigned date of 1873. The otherwise excellent explanation of colonial land use does not mention that agricultural reform had not spread from the Netherlands to Britain at the time of American settlement. It had however reached the continentals of Europe who came in numbers to the mid-Atlantic lands of Pennsylvania, Delaware and Maryland. Here stewardship has been considerably better than in either New England or the South.

This volume makes abundantly clear what has happened and what should be done. As one reader has commented, it is an ideal preface to a vastly more difficult treatise on ways and means of bringing about a sound relationship between Americans and their homeland.

Most important, it is heartening to see such a book, addressed by a cabinet member to the general public and outlining the major problems faced by his department. While I realize that it would probably not be politically realistic to expect a similar undertaking by other secretaries, there is no harm in dreaming. The flood of bulletins and press releases has its uses, and so certainly does the

fine series of modern yearbooks on agriculture begun by Henry Wallace. But what we sorely need are more works such as *The Quiet Crisis* which commercial publishers would be glad to print and the public glad to read.

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