

1999

## Book Review: Places of Quiet Beauty: Parks, Preserves, and Environmentalism

Cornelia F. Mutel

*University of Iowa*, [connie-mutel@uiowa.edu](mailto:connie-mutel@uiowa.edu)

*Let us know how access to this document benefits you*

Copyright © Copyright 1999 by the Iowa Academy of Science, Inc.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/jias>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Life Sciences Commons](#), [Physical Sciences and Mathematics Commons](#), and the [Science and Mathematics Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Mutel, Cornelia F. (1999) "Book Review: Places of Quiet Beauty: Parks, Preserves, and Environmentalism," *Journal of the Iowa Academy of Science: JIAS*, 106(3), 66-67.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/jias/vol106/iss3/5>

This General Interest Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Iowa Academy of Science at UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of the Iowa Academy of Science: JIAS* by an authorized editor of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@uni.edu](mailto:scholarworks@uni.edu).

## REVIEWS

*Reviews and critiques represent the opinions of individual evaluators that are presented for the interest of the readers. These subjective assessments do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the editors or the Iowa Academy of Science.*

**Places of Quiet Beauty: Parks, Preserves, and Environmentalism.** Rebecca Conard. 1997. University of Iowa Press, Iowa City, Iowa. XV + 382 pages. ISBN 0-87745-558-9. \$15.95, pbk.

Well administered, parks become much more than havens for birds and flowers, much more than game-preserves, a refuge for life of every sort; even more than a play-ground for all the people. . . [The well administered park] shall show us real democracy.

So began one of Iowa's preeminent natural historians, Thomas Macbride, in an early-20<sup>th</sup>-century (1922) address on the status of Iowa's parks. And so Rebecca Conard begins her late-20<sup>th</sup>-century analysis of the development of Iowa's parks and preserves. Macbride's quote reflects the multiplicity of expectations that were placed upon parks—for wild species, humans, and society. Conard traces this complex story out in its fullness, outlining the ongoing attempts to balance the pressures for various recreational uses of public lands with the need to conserve natural features and resources. She tells of Macbride's push for the establishment of public parks as early as 1895 and of his conception of parks as sites for the preservation of native communities. She describes the broadening interest in parks in the early 1900s, as the public realized that the wilderness had disappeared and their recreational spaces were shrinking. She explains how once established, Iowa's park system swelled in size so rapidly that Iowa assumed leadership in the nation's state park movement, hosting the first national conference on state parks in 1921.

Conard develops later changes in detail: the importance to parks of New Deal construction efforts and of the Twenty-Five Year Conservation Plan in the 1930s, the commissioning of parks for military use during World War II, and the attention to prairie preservation that finally began in the 1940s when Iowa, once again near the nation's forefront, started to preserve natural areas. But other voices also were being heard. Following the war, interest groups pushed for (and received) larger artificial lakes and greater attention to fishing and hunting activities even as park maintenance and the parks themselves fell into disarray, signaling Iowa's loss of its national leadership position. The authorization of county conservation boards in 1955 and their adopting the management of many smaller state-owned parcels, as well as subsequent parkland reorganization efforts, relieved some of the pressure on scant resources. Finally the 1965 passage of Iowa's State Preserves Act signaled a budding return to environmental activism and the values of earlier park activists. Conard completes her story with analyses of more recent matters such as disputes over the environmental consequences of Saylorville Dam, the development of Brushy Creek State Park, the 1986 reorganization that established the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, and the 1989 passage of REAP legislation.

While Conard's book considers the developing concepts and realities of parks and preserves in Iowa, this book is much more than a narrow history. Because Iowa's parks have been ascribed so many purposes through time, and because they were born from the hope of centralizing control of our natural resources, Conard's consideration encompasses the history of our state forests, wildlife and wa-

terfowl preserves, streams and artificial lakes, historical and archaeological preserves, fishing and hunting interests, and attempts to combat soil erosion, water pollution, and loss of biodiversity. Thus this book is, in effect, a history of environmentalism and land conservation in Iowa.

It is also a history of social mores, environmental groups, government agencies, and legislation pertaining to the land. And it is a history of our leaders. Conard stresses, for example, the strong influence of women and the clubs that they organized early in the century. She includes short biographies of Pammel, Ada Hayden, and others who have influenced our relationship with nature. She likewise points to those moments when we can acknowledge with pride our state's contributions to the nation's consciousness, for Iowa's system of public lands was developing in tandem with similar national efforts, and the efforts of Iowans such as Ding Darling and Aldo Leopold resonated from coast to coast.

Conard has woven a story of great complexity with meticulous attention to detail, managing all the while to write a readable opus, with ideas flowing and merging in words as they must have in actuality. For this she is to be commended. Indeed, *Places of Quiet Beauty* has rightly won two awards: the State Historical Society's Benjamin F. Shambaugh Award for 1997, and a Certificate of Commendation from the American Association for State and Local History. The book contains a useful appendix outlining features of our state-owned lands, voluminous page notes, and a lengthy bibliography. This documentation and the text itself testify to the volumes of primary sources that Conard must have waded through while researching this topic, and to the precision of her work.

Her close, exacting thoroughness is also my major criticism of this book. A writer's challenge lies in following information-gathering with a heartless sorting and winnowing of information and elimination of all but the most cogent facts. Conard seems instead to have given us all that she had. In doing so, I fear that she has effectively closed the book to many readers. Had she been able to distill the book to half of its 300 pages of text, or had she regularly included easily recognized summaries of her information, I feel that she would have reached a far larger audience of both professional and casual readers. I also would have appreciated more mental punctuation points, such as more numerous and explanatory section heads, and regular recapitulations of major ideas to help me sort out concepts, put information into context, and connect it to what I had read the previous evening. Such aids would assure that readers gliding through the book would leave it with a well-riveted and unsinkable outline of Iowa's conservation history anchored in their minds.

Nevertheless, my much-underlined copy of *Places of Quiet Beauty* will remain a valuable reference on my shelf, one that I know I will pull down many times in coming years. For this I thank Conard, as will many others who are professionally involved with our state's natural resources and land. I also thank her for helping me to understand, once again, that no matter how beleaguered we who work for conservation may sometimes feel, we are not alone. Many of us can chuckle at (but may also identify with) a description of Iowa's first Conservation Commission, which "was very strong on conserving anything that could be conserved. Dr. Pammel . . . would take a single tree in the middle of the road if somebody would give it to him." (page 164) Our progenitors faced many of the same battles that we have faced in recent years, in the 1920s for example struggling to find funds to perform a natural history inventory of the state and pushing for the establishment of a national park in Iowa—

at that time along the Mississippi River. Our present-day pleas for preservation of the state's last remaining natural remnants are echoes of the pleas uttered eighty years ago, and we too continue to walk the thin line between assuring availability to the natural world and avoiding its abuse.

These struggles are likely to continue into the coming century. They are best comprehended, and best dealt with, when seen in

historical context—the assumed task of the relatively new discipline of environmental history. Its growing literature is helping us perceive how we, as a society, and in the twinkling of a star, have attempted to destroy and then reclaim the magnificent wilderness that once was America. Conard's book places Iowa on the shelf of our understanding.—CORNELIA F. MUTEL, *Iowa Institute of Hydraulic Research, University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA. 52242.*

---

*Reviews and critiques represent the opinions of individual evaluators that are presented for the interest of the readers. These subjective assessments do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the editors or the Iowa Academy of Science.*

---

**Swallow Summer.** Charles R. Brown. 1998. The University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, NE. 371 pages. ISBN 0-8032-6145-4. \$16.95 pbk.

Charles R. Brown and Mary Bomberger Brown are authors of *Coloniality in the Cliff Swallow: The Effect of Group Size on Social Behavior* (1996, University of Chicago Press). Their monograph details results of the first 12 years, since 1982, of their long term study of Cliff Swallows (*Hirundo pyrrhonota*) in western Nebraska. The Browns still return yearly to continue observations and to maintain an extensive program of mark and recapture.

This book, *Swallow Summer*, is a popular account of the Browns' fifteenth year at Cedar Point Biological Station in Keith County, Nebraska. Brown presents a daily log of the activities that he undertakes for the 1995 field season, describing the work supporting his research program. In the preface, Brown hopes *Swallow Summer* can explain his fascination with Cliff Swallows and why he enjoys his research. His intent is to describe "the challenges, thrills, and frustrations that come with studying wild animals in the field" and to tell the Cliff Swallow story. Brown truly has a love for Cliff Swallows and for the process necessary to understand their complexities of their social behavior. Brown and his field crew—wife Mary and

three field assistants (identified by aliases to prevent embarrassment) maintain a vigorous, repetitious field routine. Their goal (it seems) is to mist net every Cliff Swallow in Keith and Garden counties—several times, if possible. The banding of new birds and recaptures of banded birds (both within and between seasons) provide the framework for the Browns' questions of coloniality. Why do birds switch colonies between years, or even within year? How do colony size, composition and quality change between years? Brown continues with his adventure of discovery.

*Swallow Summer* should appeal to any with even a casual interest in natural history, but Brown hopes it may serve as inspiration for students or others more professionally involved in field biology. The writing is very engaging; it is quite easy to open the book anywhere and get involved in the routine and anecdotes of the swallow crew. The included index seems unnecessary. Unfortunately, for anyone inspired to seek more information, there is little explicit direction for additional readings. I offer the following for this minor omission. With regard to swallow biology, go to the Brown and Browns 1996 monograph (cited above); it has a wealth of information and can lead you as far as you wish to go. For more of Cedar Point Biological Station, two books by John Janovy, Jr., *Keith County Journal* (1978, St. Martin's Press, New York) and *Dunwoody Pond, Reflections on the High Plains Wetlands and the Cultivation of Naturalists* (1994, St. Martin's Press, New York) offer more writing on the love of research. The second of Janovy's book includes a chapter on Brown's swallows.

Enjoyable as casual reading, *Swallow Summer* still dispenses much swallow biology in a painless manner and poses questions of coloniality for contemplation. Read it, and enjoy!—PETER E. LOWTHER, *The Field Museum, Roosevelt Road at Lake Shore Drive, Chicago, IL 60605-2496.*