

This Land, This Nation: Conservation, Rural America, and the New Deal

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This Land, This Nation: Conservation, Rural America, and the New Deal, by Sarah T. Phillips. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. xi, 289 pp. Illustration, map, tables, notes, index. \$75.00 cloth, \$23.99 paper.

Reviewer Michael W. Schuyler is professor emeritus at the University of Nebraska at Kearney. He is the author of *The Dread of Plenty: Agricultural Relief Activities of the Federal Government in the Middle West, 1933–1939* (1989).

This Land, This Nation is an in-depth study of the intellectual and political history of the New Deal's efforts to promote conservation of the nation's resources while simultaneously trying to find a political solution to the problem of rural poverty in the United States. The first chapter explores the conservation movement from the Progressive Era to the beginning of the New Deal. The author credits Progressive reformers and leaders of the Country Life Movement with laying the foundation for the New Deal's response to the farm crisis during the Great Depression. The chapter also includes an excellent discussion of the Hoover administration's approach to conservation and the bitter and prolonged debate about how to provide electricity to rural areas and the nation's farms. The second chapter provides a helpful synthesis of previous scholarship about the New Deal and introduces the author's thesis that the Roosevelt administration's approach to conservation was new because for the first time reformers linked conservation issues to the problems facing the rural poor.

The third chapter includes a careful study of how Lyndon Johnson used New Deal programs to fight poverty in the Texas Hill Country as he rose to power in the Congress. Finally, the last chapter discusses the impact World War II had in bringing to an end the efforts of New Dealers to keep small farmers on the land. An epilogue explains how the United States, during the Cold War, exported New Deal thinking about conservation, rural development, and industrialization to the rest of the world. The chapter on Johnson provides a useful model for other scholars to study the impact of the New Deal's conservation policies on other leaders serving different regions of the country.

The author's primary thesis is that the New Deal's environmental policies were not, as previous scholars have concluded, isolated on the periphery of the New Deal, but central to the New Deal's efforts to end the depression. New Deal reformers believed that the depression had begun in the rural sector of the economy and that rural poverty was caused by poor resource use and the unfair distribution of wealth and resources between city and country. Beginning with the assumption that the depression would end only when the rural poor improved their standard of living, the Roosevelt administration linked the retirement of submarginal land, soil conservation, flood control, and

rural electrification to a general attack on rural poverty. The goal was not only to end the depression, but also to develop programs that would allow poor farmers to improve the quality of their lives and to remain on the land. Ultimately, however, the author concludes that New Dealers failed in their efforts to keep poor farmers on the land because their conservation programs, combined with other agricultural subsidy programs, benefited affluent farmers far more than poor farmers. The result was that well-to-do farmers increased the size of their farms, modernized their farming operations, and increased their productivity. The unforeseen consequence of the New Deal's often contradictory farm programs was to reduce the number of farmers needed to feed the nation.

World War II ushered in the final stage of the Roosevelt administration's conservation programs in rural America as it moved from a philosophy of agrarian liberalism to a philosophy of industrial liberalism. To meet war needs, the Roosevelt administration encouraged poor farmers to seek a better life in the city by filling newly created jobs in the industrial sector of the economy. New Deal efforts to help farmers remain on the land were gradually abandoned, but the author concludes that the liberal assumptions of the 1930s continue to provide the administrative and intellectual foundations of the nation's conservation and farm policies in the twenty-first century.

Simply stated, this is an exceptional book. Other scholars have covered much of the material relating to the New Deal, but this author organizes the material in new ways and provides a superb synthesis of the conservation movement from the Progressive Era to the Cold War. The book's exhaustive footnotes demonstrate the depth and quality of her research. Her writing style is clear and insightful and her conclusions are carefully reasoned. This is a book for serious scholars and students of the New Deal, agriculture, and environmental history. Its account of the politics and policies of the conservation movement significantly increases our understanding of agrarian and industrial liberalism in the twentieth century. General readers looking for dramatic stories about human tragedies and the environmental disasters in the 1930s might be disappointed, but this is an outstanding work of scholarship.