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***The Politics of Conservation:  
Crusades and Controversies, 1897-1913***

By

ELMO R. RICHARDSON

Berkeley: University of California Press. 1962.

Pp. ix, 207, \$4.00

In recent years, historians have been subjecting the policies and controversies of the conservation movement to greater scrutiny. Whereas many of the earlier writings focused upon the contributions of Theodore Roosevelt, Gifford Pinchot, and other leaders of the crusade, recent studies have been paying far more attention to congressional debates, newspaper files, reports of official meetings, manuscript collections, and other primary source material. In addition to this volume, two other books have appeared within the last five years which reflect a reoriented approach upon the part of historians toward the conservation movement.<sup>1</sup> Taken together, these three works add new dimensions to our understanding of the evolution of national resources policies during the crucial decades between 1890 and the advent of the New Deal.

This volume is particularly significant because it is the first careful study of the attitudes of Westerners of the Rocky Mountain and Pacific Coast states to the conservation of resources during the years of 1897 to 1913, the presidential administrations of McKinley, Roosevelt, and Taft. As Richardson notes in his preface, prevailing belief holds that the conservation movement was an eastern-inspired crusade which was universally and wholeheartedly opposed in the West. To test this belief, Richardson spent time in the libraries and archives of many of the western states assessing local and regional viewpoints concerning the federal government's public land policies, the programs of conservation advocates, and the state political campaigns which were waged between pro- and anti-conservation forces. The author's findings are based almost exclusively upon original sources (notably local newspaper files), personal letters, and manuscript collections. In this connection, he was particularly fortunate to

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1. Samuel P. Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation Movement, 1890-1920* (Harvard Univ. Press 1959); Donald P. Swain, *Federal Conservation Policy, 1921-1933* (Univ. of Calif. Press 1963).

be one of the first scholars to have had access to the papers of Richard A. Ballinger, Taft's controversial Secretary of Interior.

Upon the basis of his findings Richardson concludes that "the traditional view of the West as the opponent of resource regulation must be revised."<sup>2</sup> Although some states, such as California, Nevada, and Utah, exhibited stronger support for the conservation movement than others (*e.g.*, Wyoming and Montana), state leaders and interest groups scattered throughout the West cooperated with Pinchot and his associates in pushing federal resources development programs. More often than not, the most vigorous opponents of conservation were the mining, lumbering, and large cattle interests, although the author cites the names of prominent leaders in each of these three industries who out of conviction or for partisan reasons were loyal supporters of Theodore Roosevelt and his policies. And, as might be expected, the most consistent support for conservation in the western states came from urban centers that were interested in protecting water-power sites and the watersheds which furnished municipal water supplies.

Perhaps because the author had early access to the Ballinger papers, much of the analysis of western reaction pivots around the period beginning with Ballinger's assumption of office in March, 1909, and carrying through the aftermath of Ballinger's resignation (November, 1910) until the election of 1912. Although the Ballinger-Pinchot feud personified the conservation debates in the West, there is nothing in this volume to indicate that had Ballinger not held office, opinion and controversies in the western states would have been very much different. Even before the turn of the century, western growth and expansion brought private and public interests in resource exploitation into increasing conflicts that only national understanding and policy could resolve. Viewed in this light, Ballinger and Pinchot were symbols rather than causes for controversy.

The Ballinger papers do not appear to reveal anything startlingly new about Ballinger's philosophy or integrity that we do not already know. His papers show him to be a strict interpreter of federal laws but who nevertheless was opposed to extending the federal government's jurisdiction and management over natural resources, even to the point where he was willing to have the Secretary of Interior's powers curtailed. In fact, he felt Taft went too far in con-

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2. P. viii.

tinuing the conservation policies of his predecessor, Theodore Roosevelt. But Richardson apparently came across no evidence which would indicate that Ballinger in any way betrayed his trust in office. If anything, the author appears to believe that history should now restore Ballinger's reputation.

Richardson's analysis of western attitudes toward conservation begins in 1897, because he maintains that "the first indication of the new federal policy"<sup>3</sup> toward responsible resource regulation in the West became evident in 1896, when President Cleveland, relying upon the recommendations of a special forestry commission of the National Academy of Sciences, created a number of new forest reserves shortly before he left office. I would place the date of the change in federal policy somewhat earlier—in 1891—with the passage of the so-called General Revision Act<sup>4</sup> which, among other things, permitted President Harrison to create in several western states fifteen forest reservations totaling over thirteen million acres. A review of the debates in the succeeding Congresses reveals that western representatives recognized only too well that the federal government had embarked upon a new program, a program which President Cleveland extended under the 1891 legislation. On the other hand, I would agree with Richardson that "by the end of 1913 conservation policy was no longer a political issue in the West."<sup>5</sup> Although during the following years opposition continued to be generated by various groups against specific federal policies, shortly after President Wilson took office the concept of protecting the nation's natural resources heritage had been accepted by the states west of the 100th meridian.

Those who are interested in the history of the conservation movement as well as the evolution of public policy owe a debt to Richardson for setting the record straight. He has shown that the public image of the West as a region which was solidly against the conservation movement does not square with the facts. It may be time for some other scholar to subject the eastern seaboard to a similar analysis, for, on the basis of voting records in the Congress, the public image of New England as a region supporting enlightened resources policies would appear to be considerably tarnished. In any

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3. P. 5.

4. 26 Stat. 1095 (1891).

5. P. 155.

event, this scholarly work serves notice that much research still needs to be done before the development of America's resources policies are placed in their proper perspective.

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