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Review: The Wilderness Writings of Howard Zahniser

By Mark Harvey

Reviewed by Jillian Mycole Slater
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Harvey, Mark. *The Wilderness Writings of Howard Zahniser*. Seattle: WA, University of Washington Press, 2014. 248 pp. ISBN: 978-0-295-99391-1. US \$29.95, hardcover.

Howard Zahniser has been referred to as the ‘quiet visionary’ of the mid-20th century wilderness preservation movement. It is notable then, that this relatively behind-the-scenes writer and activist was a central figure in the protection of wild lands. His efforts ultimately played a critical role in the eventual passage of the Wilderness Act of 1964. Zahniser’s life and work is documented in Mark Harvey’s 2005 biographies, *Wilderness Forever: Howard Zahniser and the Path to the Wilderness Act* (University of Washington Press). In *The Wilderness Writings of Howard Zahniser* (part of Weyerhaeuser Environmental Classics), Harvey offers an efficaciously curated selection of Zahniser’s writing. Articles, speeches, radio broadcasts, essays, and correspondence illustrate the evolution of his work, from his column for Nature Magazine in the mid-1930s through his tenure with the Wilderness Society and pivotal contributions to the Wilderness Act.

The book is organized into seven parts: *The Makings of a Nature Writer*; *Transition to the Wilderness Society*; *Campaigning for Wilderness*; *Threats to Wild Lands*; *The Campaign for the Wilderness Bill*; *The Last Hurdle*; and *Testimonies*. The corpus is preceded by William Cronon’s Forward and Harvey’s Introduction. The book includes archival photographs and is concluded, appropriately, with Excerpts from the Wilderness Act in which Zahniser’s ideas and language are evident.

Wilderness Writings is a natural extension of Harvey’s previous work on Zahniser, exposing the reader to the eloquent and ultimately effective communications that are at the heart of Zahniser’s contributions. The book is also a solid collection of primary source documents that provides historical insights into the postwar America wilderness preservation movement. Accompanying essays by Harvey contextualize each piece and weave a narrative thread through this collection of nearly thirty years of material.

As a nature writer, Zahniser is engaging and poetic: his graceful prose evokes both the placidity and primacy of observing and experiencing wild nature. As a lobbyist and advocate, he was effective at genuinely recognizing the interests of his opponents while tirelessly communicating, to a variety of audiences, the urgent need for wilderness protection.

Collected here for the first time, Zahniser’s work serves as both a notable contribution to the nature writing genre as well as scholarly documentation on the history of the environmental movement and conservation policy in the United States. This title has both academic and leisure reading appeal and is recommended for individuals with an interest in nature writing as well as library collections supporting programs covering the history of conservation policy or environmental movements.

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