

Escaping into Nature: The Making of a Sportsman-Conservationist and Environmental Historian [Book Review]

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Abstract:

A review of the book “Escaping into Nature: The Making of a Sportsman-Conservationist and Environmental Historian” by John F. Reiger.

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Article:

In *Escaping into Nature: The Making of a Sportsman-Conservationist and Environmental Historian*, recently retired environmental historian John Reiger shares his autobiography. Readers will find a number of engaging topics. These include Reiger’s decision to leave a tenured professorship at the University of Miami (and the job security it provided) to work full-time as the executive director of the Connecticut Audubon Society, as well as various hunting, fishing, and traveling stories. Accounts of being pulled into the water by a spotted eagle stingray, working alongside migrant labors in the Pacific Northwest, capsizing and being saved just before dark while hunting in Florida marshes, and turning to drug smugglers to tow him to safety after running into a squall off of Florida’s coast, among other “close calls,” make *Escaping into Nature* an easy way to escape into a good book.

However, there is also scholarly value in this memoir. Historians will find a greater understanding of how Reiger came to his most significant scholarly insight. Reiger is probably best known for his thrice-published monograph *American Sportsmen and the Origins of Conservation* (orig. 1981). *Escaping into Nature* is connected to this major historical contribution. In *American Sportsmen*, Reiger argues that the United States conservationist movement was spawned not by foresters, technocrats, and government officials in the 1890s but earlier, in the 1870s, by middle- and upper-class anglers and hunters, whose primary objective was the protection and preservation of wildlife. Meanwhile, the primary theme of Reiger’s new book is how he gained a greater appreciation of the natural world through his own experiences as an avid hunter and fisherman. Reiger did what many historians (sport historians, not the least) often seem to do. He undertook a historical project intimately entwined with his personal life.

Reiger's back story begins with his relationship with his immediate family, a relationship that was always troubled. Though he does not offer much analysis of this (something surely hard to do), Reiger acknowledges that he was psychologically abused. This was probably best exemplified by a story he tells of his parents leaving him alone in a room so that they could eat dinner, while he cried in pain having just been stung by a poisonous Portuguese man-of-war jellyfish, when he was only eight years old. During his childhood in New York City and Florida, high school years at an elite New Jersey boarding school, and collegiate studies at Duke University, Reiger found solace in what he labeled his "special places." These were secluded natural settings where he often challenged himself by pursuing fish and game. "By escaping into nature," Reiger explains, "I found the constancy, peace, beauty, and spirituality that I never experienced within the family" (8).

Interestingly, it was through his father and older brothers that Reiger learned the skills of hunting and fishing. And it was by hunting and fishing that he gained what he deems to be a unique appreciation of nature. Hunting and fishing, Reiger claims, made him part of and a participant in the natural world, rather than a mere spectator. The knowledge Reiger attained through such participation, moreover, led him to become determined to protect the fish and wildlife he pursued, as well as the wilder places in which they lived.

After deciding to pursue a career as a historian, the time came to choose a dissertation topic, and Reiger hoped to connect his devotion to conservation to his historical research. With this in mind, he came upon the person, and then the collected papers, of George Bird Grinnell, the organizer of the first Audubon Society. Reiger's dual enthusiasm for hunting and conservation prepared him to recognize the way in which Grinnell, as well as Theodore Roosevelt and others, was moved to protect the natural world and its inhabitants, and thereby developed what Reiger calls "the code of the sportsmen."

As Reiger describes, stemming from their interests in recreational hunting (similar to his own), Grinnell and others devised a "self-imposed set of rules ... that a sport hunter and fisherman should adopt." Namely, "[g]ame should not be killed in the breeding season or sold for profit ... should be taken only in reasonable numbers and without waste ... and should only be pursued by means of sporting methods." That is, "[t]he individual fish, bird, or mammal was to have a 'fair chance' to escape, even though its capture was made more doubtful by the result" (94). Later, Reiger would connect this thinking to Aldo Leopold's even more nuanced "Land Ethic"—that, in Leopold's words, "[a] thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise" (1).

Overall, this book is recommended to fellow "sportspeople" and outdoor enthusiasts who will find Reiger's stories enjoyable and relatable. The book is also of interest to those curious about the history of the historian and his work. Such personal narratives of historians are a welcome contribution, for they give critical scholars a clearer picture of how historical narratives have been discovered and constructed.

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