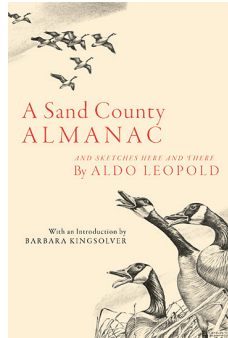


## OTHER

**A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There**

By Aldo Leopold. Introduction by Barbara Kingsolver. 2020. Oxford University Press. 240 pages, 15.95 CAD, Paper. Originally published in 1949.

Aldo Leopold's seminal work, *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There*, is 70 years old this year. In that time, it has become a landmark in popular ecological literature, ranked alongside Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. Yet despite its broad relevance and large impact, the book begins with a narrow focus and a small scale. In the first section, Leopold details chronologically by month (hence, *Almanac*) examples of his own experiences of nature in rural Wisconsin. Through these stories, Leopold portrays nature not only in isolation, or in simple juxtaposition to humans, but in a web of diverse and complex interactions between humans and (the rest of) nature. This is a beautifully written book about nature's raw wonder, but it is equally about nature's give and take in a world increasingly shaped by humans.



Leopold builds on the foundation of tangible local experience to pursue the book's greater ambition: exposing the common human failure to engage with the natural environment, and the loss that ensues. His description of the draba plant could be a metaphor for all of nature in the Anthropocene: "it subsists on the leavings of unwanted time and space", relegated to surviving on the margins of what human society deems to matter, straddling a fine line between being taken for granted and extinction (p. 24).

Yet equally central to Leopold's account is the wild's will to persist in the face of the tame, and the opportunity for awe that this contrast offers the observant human. Throughout the book, Leopold suggests that to struggle in contemplating the grandeur of nature is no more nor less than to be human. In this same struggle lies the potential for insights that stretch the human mind and spirit: an opportunity to be entertained, to be inspired, and to encounter and contemplate the truly unknown.

The second portion of the book, *Sketches Here and There*, features a series of chapters detailing Leopold's experiences in various parts of North America. These verbal vignettes are less detailed and methodical than the *Almanac* but maintain its rhetorical style, recounting eloquently yet accessibly a set of diverse and dynamic interactions between humans

and nature, which to Leopold represent cause for both hope and concern. The third and final section of the book crystallizes these feelings into conclusions about the place of nature in contemporary culture and implications for land management, producing the 'land ethic' for which Leopold became famous.

On the whole, this book has aged well and still rings true. Indeed, the modern reader may gloss over the truth that on several important ideas, Leopold was ahead of his time. His speculations on the complex relationships of wolves, deer, and mountains foreshadow the ecological conceptualization some 20 years later of keystone species and the ensuing reintroduction of wolves to Yellowstone National Park and elsewhere. He questions whether natural richness is adequately considered in calculations of wealth and poverty—"Do economists know about lupines?"—decades before Robert F. Kennedy challenged the premise of Gross National Product or Gro Harlem Brundtland popularized the notion of sustainable development (p. 96).

While many concepts in the book will be familiar, some of the language and facts will likely not. Leopold frequently uses colloquial or archaic terms, which in general are more pleasing than problematic, e.g. bluebill for scaup, teeter-snipe for Spotted Sandpiper. The writing is movingly dated in other ways too. In this book, Passenger Pigeon exists in living memories as well as museums; an offhand reference to Imperial Woodpecker stands out because the bird is since believed to have gone extinct. To journey with Leopold is to journey in time as well as in place.

To guide the reader in this journey, Leopold's essays, accompanied by the original illustrations of Charles W. Schwartz, are collected in this edition with an introduction by modern novelist Barbara Kingsolver, who deftly places the book within the frame of today's environmental movement and crisis. Politicization and polarization are making the communication of ecological imperatives more challenging than ever. Kingsolver is right to suggest that Leopold's effective telling of nature's stories in clear, neutral, loving language is a contribution of perennial value.

These writings were and remain an ecological call to action in the face of a natural world under threat. Yet this is not a work of desperation. To the contrary, Leopold is doubly hopeful: of humans' ability

to acknowledge and conserve nature, and of nature's resilience when given a chance. This book is fundamentally a celebration of the human potential, when nurtured, to notice nature, and of the miraculous experiences possible for those who do. To anyone who

has wondered at the natural world, or who cares about retaining the option, it is well worth reading.

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