

BOOK REVIEW

The Continent in Our Hands. By Charlton Ogburn. William Morrow & Company, Inc., 105 Madison Avenue, New York, N.Y., 10016. 1971. 314 pages with index, bibliography, and maps. \$7.95

One way of experiencing nature is to feel its ancientness. One seems to sense the presence of the past, particularly when watching and contemplating geological formations of millions of years. In *The Continent in Our Hands* Charlton Ogburn explores his sensations of time while observing places like the Rocky Mountains and Grand Canyon.

The book is a kind of ESP geological tour of America. The author describes the geology and his subjective feelings about the sights he sees while traveling from the Appalachians in the East to the Cascade Mountains on the Pacific Coast. He returns, commenting all the way, across terrain like the plains and the Canadian Shield to reach the Adirondacks and White Mountains in the Northeast.

This book is useful simply as a geology guide for the traveler who wants to visit some of these places. Terms like Paleozoic, Mesozoic, Cenozoic and Pleistocene repeatedly accent the book's time theme as Ogburn theorizes on the origins of everything from valleys, deserts and buttes to mountains. At the same time he explains what people actually see.

For example, in the Rocky Mountains he says that "The hollowing out of the slopes by the Pleistocene glaciers has given the immense humps of mountains sharp crests and ridges, and their sculpture is accentuated by the snow that fills the crevasses and clings to the leeward sides."

This work by the author of "The Winter Beach" which won the 1967 John Burroughs Medal for excellent nature writing, is also a guide to some of the subjective feelings that can be experienced while viewing this scenery. This is because Ogburn reveals his own personal reactions as in the Rocky Mountains when he declares that "Everything you feel about mountains you feel here as strongly as you probably could, the sublimity and profundity of their repose, the sense of their looking beyond you to unfathomable reaches of time."

At this point you can take out notebook and pencil and write your own observations and feelings. Your own ideas can be inspired by the author's. If you write notes at each scenic stop, you can accumulate a notebook of meaningful descriptions and thoughts that are your own.

Try this after reading Ogburn at Grand Canyon. He explains what periods the various layers you see represent. Then standing at the east rim one morning he bursts into his tape recorder that "You feel here that all time is present at once."

This leads him to an interesting feeling about birds. The canyon's great impact of time also "makes you see the actual, living moment in which you are having your being. . . . More than any other organisms, birds seem to me vibrant upon the very point of the present. Expressing and symbolizing life in the sharpness of the moment, they have an uncommon power of recalling me to it."

The dynamic descriptions of birds that often flash into view throughout the book seem to have this effect on the reader:

"A pair of California quail scuttle across the road, plump wooden toys on a blur of legs, the male with frontal plume erected like an apostrophe curving forward from his forehead."

"... a magpie takes off, flying in a leisurely way, hardly more than opening and closing its wings. It is a fine, consequential bird, the magpie,

streaming its long, graduated tail and unabashed at being the most conspicuous object in the landscape in its sartorial bravura of whitest white and greenest black."

". . . a Turkey vulture coasts by with a *whooh* of pinions. . . ."

"Ring-billed gulls . . . are sailing across the rock face and the air resounds with their yearning, threatening, jubilant *klee-ah, klee-ah!* In this setting, they might be the progeny of a dawn world."

"From the top of protruding sandstone slabs, meadowlarks blurt their warbled whistles, stirred by the bright and spacious new day."

Ogburn discusses other natural phenomenon like trees and mammals. He dwells extensively on the human impact on nature. This accounts for the book's rather rhetorical title.

But always he returns to his most personal theme—the magnificence of the time he feels in nature. He verges on religious expression. He describes himself as "an acolyte of the continental mysteries and of the millions and millions of years of geologic time."

In the North Woods, Ogburn writes, "I am apt to feel aware of a Presence in Nature. . . . It is one I feel an indefinable reassurance in acknowledging and have an instinct to honor and revere, and to celebrate. But whether my feeling testifies to anything outside myself, whether it is a mere reflection of an inner need, I have no way of knowing."

His question is a meaningful one to ponder around a campfire after a day's climb of an Adirondack peak or under the ancient stars on a backpacking trip in the West.

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