Pinchot, Gifford (1865-1946)

Gifford Pinchot is known primarily as a forester and progressive politician in early twentieth century America. Generally acknowledged as the first professional forester in the United States, Pinchot also emerged as a major figure in the Progressive and Republican Parties, leading to his election as governor of Pennsylvania in the 1920s. His work in forestry and progressive politics crystallized in his leadership of the movement to conserve natural resources, countering years of unrestrained exploitation of nature. Pinchot, sometimes called the “apostle of conservation,” helped to cast conservation as a moral crusade for social reform.

Pinchot was born in 1865 in Connecticut to a wealthy Huguenot family from Pennsylvania with business ties to New York City. As a youth, Pinchot was immersed in the widespread evangelical Protestantism of his time. He read religious classics, attended Presbyterian services, taught Sunday School, and was class deacon at Yale, responsible for conducting the religious activities of the class, such as weekday prayer meetings. Upon college graduation, however, Pinchot declined a religiously-oriented job with the Young Men’s Christian Association and instead cultivated his love of the outdoors, pursuing a career in the not-yet-established profession of forestry.

As an adult, Pinchot was involved with the Episcopal Church, but more important than institutional affiliation was his exposure to the social reform currents of evangelical Protestantism. He may be seen as part of a generational cohort that one historian has called “ministers of reform,” who eschewed the Protestant ministry but invoked Protestant values to push for social reform. Pinchot’s writings and activities revealed the
influence of the then-popular social gospel, sometimes referred to as “the Progressive movement at prayer.” Social gospelers, eager to build the Kingdom of God on earth, sought to apply Christian principles to the myriad social problems arising from industrialization. Pinchot’s choice of location in setting up his forestry consultancy office disclosed his early conception of forestry (and later, conservation) as part of the broad movement for social reform. He opened his New York forestry office in the United Charities Building, the well-known headquarters in the 1890s for mission and tract societies, organizations fighting to end child labor and poverty, women’s rights groups, and consumer rights groups, among others.

Pinchot’s pioneering research in the vast woods of the Vanderbilt estate in North Carolina launched his forestry career. His work there formed the basis of his groundbreaking exhibit on scientific forest management at the World’s Columbian Exhibition in Chicago in 1893. Pinchot advanced as a national figure in forestry, and was appointed Chief Forester of the U.S. by President McKinley in 1899, a position he held until dismissed by President Taft in 1910. Taking advantage of his close friendship with Theodore Roosevelt, Pinchot combined forestry with issues of irrigation and land reclamation and developed the conservation of natural resources as a primary domestic policy of Roosevelt’s presidency. The 1908 White House Conference of Governors on the Conservation of Natural Resources, masterminded by Pinchot, was a high point for conservation as a national movement, and led to historic conservation policies, a national inventory of natural resources, and later, joint conservation agreements with Canada and Mexico.

Pinchot’s popularization of the term “conservation of natural resources” revealed
his utilitarian approach to nature. While an outdoorsman throughout his life, and a
onetime camping companion of John Muir, Pinchot was, nonetheless, wedded to ideas of
scientific management, efficiency, and economic benefit in relation to nature. Never an
absolute preservationist, he sought to apply scientific principles to the maintenance and
use of forests and rivers for the good of humankind. His typically progressive concern for
“the greatest good for the greatest number for the longest time” thrust him into battles
against monopolistic corporate abusers of the land and cast him as a crusader for the
public good.

Pinchot’s devotion to the public good was steeped in democratic idealism and was
informed by the social gospel emphasis on relieving economic exploitation. Pinchot
linked monopolies and economic inequality to the ruinous exploitation of nature and
argued for moral reform. His rendering of conservation was a blend of applied science
(his forestry background) and applied religion (the social gospel influence) that became a
hallmark of the Progressive Era.

Pinchot’s autobiography, Breaking New Ground, completed shortly before his
death in 1946, serves as a significant history of American forestry and conservation. It
documents Pinchot’s practical, utilitarian approach to nature, and perhaps more
important, it registers his religiously-based emphasis on the use and care of nature and its
resources as a moral issue.

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**Further Reading**


