

Book Review

The Genius of Earth Day: How a 1970 Teach-In Unexpectedly Made the First Green Generation

Adam Rome

New York: Hill & Wang Press, 2013

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In *The Genius of Earth Day: How a 1970 Teach-In Unexpectedly Made the First Green Generation* author Adam Rome, a former journalist, who is currently a history professor at the University of Delaware, in Newark, Delaware, introduces his readers to the “roots” of Earth Day. Many, in fact most, Americans of the current generation know that we mark Earth Day every April 22nd and celebrate the event, particularly if Mother Nature obligingly blesses the celebrants with mild weather, by getting out and enjoying the day. Rome, however, digs deeply into the historical, cultural, and sociological origins of Earth Day, and he tells his story with verve and passion.

Rome argues that the first Earth Day, celebrated in April of 1970, was not a simple feel-good demonstration of the 1960s type. It was, instead a massive grassroots “teach-in” involving hundreds of thousands of people. Rome further contends that the inaugural Earth Day actually created the first “Green” generation by mobilizing thousands of volunteers for activism, pressure, and social change. Rome takes pains to explain to the reader that Earth Day, while originating during and emerging from the ferment of the late-1960s, was not the product of a well-established social movement. He notes that liberal politicians, (mostly Democrats), conservationists, scientists, upper middle class women, and those described as “young critics of American institutions” (p. 10) formed the core of the early “Green” movement. However, they never saw themselves as such and did not partner together for a common purpose. Rome argues, in fact, that while Senator Gaylord Nelson (D-Wisconsin) started the movement by proposing a “national environmental Teach-In,” his decentralized and largely hands-off approach allowed local organizers the freedom to take control of the movement and make it their own.

The volume is structured in a straight forward fashion. Rome begins with a prologue, then a chapter on the “pre-history” of the movement, and he then proceeds to chronicle the organizers, events, and speakers. The concluding chapters deal with the eco-infrastructure and there is an epilogue on the first Green Generation. The complete volume runs to 280 pages of text, and over 50 pages of source notes. As noted above, Rome tells his tale with enthusiasm, zeal, and sprightly prose.

The main criticism that a reviewer could credibly offer is the fact that Rome does seem to be more of a cheerleader for rather than a chronicler of Earth Day. He has written the story with a distinctly favourable slant, which on occasion slips into near-triumphalism. According to the

book dust-jacket, Rome specializes in environmental history and environmental nonfiction. He certainly supports the environmental movement, and he might be a little too close to the environmental cause to chronicle it in an even-handed fashion. While it might have served to make the book unmanageably large, it might have been helpful if Rome had explored some of the opposition to the movement or looked at the infighting among various Green factions so that the readers could have seen the movement in a fuller and more thorough fashion.

These caveats aside, Rome has written a good and timely book. He illustrates the early Green movement and vividly characterizes the originality, passion, and the inspired nature of the movement. Rome writes very well, as befits a former journalist, and he tells his tale with zeal and gusto. This work is very original in nature and will likely remain the standard work on the origins of Earth Day for a number of years to come. As such, it stands as a unique contribution to environmental history and could serve as a jumping off point to further environmental studies. A sequel to this volume, perhaps chronicling the history of Earth Day since the epochal 1970 beginning might be a worthy endeavor, and Rome, given his command of the subject matter, would be a logical candidate for the task.

Brian E. Birdnow is a 2000 graduate of Saint Louis University with a doctoral degree in American History. I am the author of two books, with another in production, and chapter length essays in four more collections, including six chapters of the *American Presidential Encyclopedia*, for Facts On File.