Battleground Alaska

The Trans-Alaska Oil Pipeline snakes across the Alaska wilderness 176 miles from Prudhoe Bay, Alaska, in Atigun Pass, Alaska, as it carries North Slope crude oil about 800 miles to Valdez, Alaska.

In a sequel, of sorts, to his biography of Theodore Roosevelt, Douglas Brinkley tells the story of the battles to save Alaska's wilderness and wildlife.

By GLENN C. ALTSCHLER, Special to the Star Tribune

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Despite its nickname of "Seward's Folly," Alaska was anything but a dumb real estate deal, or an empty icebox. It was a vast expanse of land, with rich deposits of gold, coal, timber and oil -- and great varieties of fish, birds and wildlife. After the United States acquired Alaska from Russia in 1867, Douglas Brinkley reminds us, the territory became a battleground between Americans in search of an economic bonanza, for whom "nothing dollarable was safe," and conservationists intent on preserving it as "nature's own reservation."

In "The Quiet World: Saving Alaska's Wilderness Kingdom 1879-1960," a sequel of sorts to his biography of Theodore Roosevelt, Brinkley provides a richly detailed, passionate and partisan account of the efforts of an environmentalist minority to buck and block corporate "extractors" from despoiling and destroying Alaska's wilderness. Although they lost lots of battles, he argues, they won their fair share -- and helped set the stage for the modern environmental movement that took hold in the 1970s.

"The Quiet World" is full of heroes and (mostly nameless) villains. Brinkley lavishes praise on "the noble band of conservationist revolutionaries," including Teddy Roosevelt, Gifford Pinchot, William Temple Hornaday, Aldo Leopold, Robert Marshall, Franklin Roosevelt and William O. Douglas, rarely examining policy differences between and...
among them. He is contemptuous of "Alaska boomers and sourdoughs." Greedy and shortsighted, he writes, they "turned livid at what they considered two blasphemous words: national forest," complained that "maniacal public land conservationists would even try to save worthless muskeg bogs and thaw lakes," and in the 21st century (joined by Sarah Palin) scoffed at federal law, insisting that shooting wolves from airplanes "was an all-American sport."

Clearly, Brinkley is preaching to the choir. Nonetheless, his sermon is often compelling. In lush prose, he captures Alaska's pristine beauty. In its Arctic regions, he observes, "every quiet slope seemed to sing a hymn." As Bob Marshall suggested, the raw wilderness lets Americans of all backgrounds find an "amount of freedom, tolerance, beauty, and contentment such as few human beings are ever fortunate enough to achieve."

Like Justice William O. Douglas, Brinkley wants environmental groups to have standing to fight in court (to defend the constitutional rights of sequoias, streams and salmon). He also believes, with his idol, Theodore Roosevelt, that only an exercise of power by the federal government can check and balance the bulldozers of "progress." If government doesn't act on behalf of the collective good against the special interests, he warns, those bulldozers will clear-cut, strip-mine and plow under our awe-inspiring -- and invaluable -- wilderness alcoves. Forever.

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