Environmentally friendly

Walt Patterson

Promising the Earth. By Robert Lamb. Routledge: 1996. £30 (hbk); £9.99 (pbk).

THE environment is no longer the issue it was 25 years ago. In the early 1970s, the environment was front-page news. In the run-up to the UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972, print and broadcast media were saturated with coverage about pollution, waste and other assaults on the planet. 'Ecology' became not a science but a bar-room cliché.

In the 1990s, by contrast, the media tend to feature the 'contrarians', who dismiss all talk of global warming or resource depletion as alarmist nonsense, and disparage organizations such as Friends of the Earth (with its contradictory acronym FoE) and Greenpeace as at best mischievous, at worst 'eco-fascists' and 'eco-terrorists'. The paradox is that the 'contrarians' now attract media attention precisely because their argument is so out of step with accepted opinion. In the past 25 years, the environment as an issue has evolved from a marginal if irksome afterthought into an essential dimension of international, governmental and corporate policy almost worldwide.

How did this extraordinary metamorphosis come about? Robert Lamb's book offers some enlightenment. One-time head of information services for the United Nations Environment Programme, Lamb is an experienced and knowledgeable commentator. Commissioned by FoE in Britain to write a history of its first 25 years, he has carried out a potentially difficult task with commendable flair. Throughout its quarter-century, FoE has engaged the dedicated commitment of many able, articulate and combative individuals, working at full stretch, often against daunting odds. Conveying accurately the flavour of such activities, including the inevitable internal tensions, is not easy. I know: in the 1970s I was the first energy campaigner for FoE UK, and my short history of the first decade appeared in 1984 as a chapter in a book by a former FoE chairman, Des Wilson.

Despite some minor niggles — misspelled names and some inaccurate chronology — Lamb weaves an engrossing narrative. Studded with sharply etched personal portraits and vignettes, it captures vividly the feel of those early days, when the environment excited radical passions and provoked furious controversy, with environmental activists on one

IMAGE UNAVAILABLE FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS

Fashion statement: environmental campaigning has come a long way since the 1970s.

side and governments and corporations almost invariably on the other.

But the book is more than a history of a single organization. It is a thoughtful overview of the development and evolution of environmental concern and campaigning for more than a century, focusing on FoE UK but setting its activities in a much wider context.

Lamb identifies and scrutinizes key themes that still echo through environmental issues in the 1990s. Can rational scientific and economic argument win a policy decision against the opposition of powerful government and corporate interests? Or must activists take to the streets and the barricades to defend the environment against the destroyers? Lamb analyses the Windscale (later Sellafield) nuclear reprocessing controversy of the 1970s as an example of the former approach, and the campaign to stop the Newbury bypass road in the 1990s as an example of the latter.

He also contrasts FoE's campaign tactics with those of Greenpeace as intensively researched lobbying versus media spectacles. The contrast is overstated. Even in the 1970s, the most effective FoE campaigns combined solid research and policy development with the multiplicative potency of effective media relations and street-level popular support. A more striking contrast, perhaps, is that between the centrally directed global operations of Greenpeace International and the decentralized network of more than 50 autonomous national member organizations of Friends of the Earth International, one of the oldest being FoE UK.

In the 1990s, however, environmental campaigning is no longer primarily about sounding the alarm. Despite the protests of the contrarians, the urgency of environmental concern has been broadly acknowledged at the highest government

and corporate levels. The UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 initiated a global process, whose progress, however uneven, continues to gather momentum.

As we approach the twenty-first century, environmental policy will focus more and more on striving for sustainable solutions. As Lamb describes, the issues are less polarized than in the 1970s, partly because alumni of FoE and other activists are now in senior political and corporate positions. Environmental campaigning is not what it was. It may be better. It had better be. □

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Femme fatale?

Roy Porter

Typhoid Mary: Captive to the Public's Health. By Judith Walzer Leavitt. Beacon: 1996. Pp. 331. \$25.

TYPHOID Mary pops up time and again as one of the colourful villains of medical history — indeed a *femme fatale* in the most literal sense. She was the cook who, while healthy herself, infected nearly 50 people with enteric fever in New York early this century. Her tale forms a *cause célèbre* because it contains all the gripping elements of a good detective story.

From 1900, mysterious typhoid cases multiply in swish New York households; medical investigators are called in; and a bacteriological sleuth points the finger of blame at an Irish-born cook called Mary Mallon. She struggles with a carving fork