

Book Review

Malabar Farm: Louis Bromfield, Friends of the Land, and the Rise of Sustainable Agriculture

Abbott, Anneliese. November 2021. *Malabar Farm: Louis Bromfield, friends of the land, and the rise of sustainable agriculture*. Kent (OH): Kent State University Press. 312 p. 7 × 10 in., paper. \$29.95. ISBN-13: 978-1-60635-431-5.

THIS BOOK IS A FASCINATING TOUR THROUGH the history of environmentalism, ecology, intelligent land use, and sustainable agriculture using the lens of Louis Bromfield and his Malabar Farm in north-central Ohio. It is a must-read for anyone involved in these disparate movements to understand how we got here, how we almost got derailed, and how we got back on track.

Eleven chapters—with well-documented text and historic photographs—chronicle the soil conservation efforts of Bromfield from 1939 until his death in 1956. The book lays bare the financial uncertainty of Malabar after Bromfield's death until the state of Ohio created Malabar Farm State Park in 1976.

People came from far and wide to see Bromfield's efforts to stop soil erosion, improve yields, and increase livestock health. Yet in reality, it has been a tough slog to get his methods adopted widely. Every Sunday in the 1940s and '50s, hundreds traipsed through and over his beloved Malabar, ate his sandwiches, and left for home still afraid to challenge the local standards: where you moldboard-plowed everything in sight, because that is what your grandfather did. The beginning of the soil conservation movement, plus ecology, land use, and a host of other science-based movements (many in response to the devastating Dust Bowl of the 1930s) owe their existence to Bromfield's tireless work—even though the agricultural authorities never embraced his ideas during his era.

As we arrive on the 25th anniversary of the Ohio Farmland Preservation Task Force report, it is highly beneficial to review the history of Malabar Farm.

As a member of the aforementioned task force, I heard Bromfield and Malabar referenced often; yet the knowledge base was thin on the specifics of what it meant. As the book makes clear, the powers of the *status quo* in the middle of the 20th century, and to this day, view farmland preservation and associated policies as a nice spectator sport: something to watch and keep at arm's length lest you get yourself dirty. If the task force report had been aggressively adopted by the then Voinovich and later Taft Administrations, Ohio would be in a stronger position financially with an increasing population yet denser cities, more greenspace, and much more preserved farmland. If the agricultural authorities of the time had not viewed Bromfield with so much suspicion, Ohio (and America) would be better off. Economic development in Ohio, and

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indeed in most states, is still “smokestack chasing,” where local governments pursue, with bags of cash, the legacy industries of the previous generation—but not the cutting-edge new ones. Raising local food in an environmentally sensitive manner was Bromfield's goal, and he

achieved it; however, he was derided by the same establishment that now pays lip service to his work.

The book revolves around soil husbandry. I've been consistently and continuously no-tilling on our 400-acre farm in southwestern Ohio since 1978, and as such was one of the first hundred (or so) in the state to adopt such an approach. My neighbors see my yields, see my results, but only a fifth of the row crops in America are continuously no-tilled, and those numbers are also represented locally here. In addition, I've planted *by hand* a mix of 10,000 walnut, locust, and alder trees overall on our farms. Yet few have copied the silviculture that both Bromfield and I embraced.

As you can tell, I empathize strongly with Bromfield. He saw with clarity what needed to be done; yet even though he spent two decades—and much of his fortune—on this project, it did not come to true bloom until well past his death.



In addition to his fortune, which was considerable, Bromfield put his hand to writing on this issue in every major and minor publication of the time. Now largely forgotten as a writer, he was famous in his day for both his bestselling books and many screenplays. It was his screenplay work that brought him into contact with all the movie stars of the 1930s, including Humphry Bogart and Lauren Bacall, who were famously married at Malabar Farm in 1945.

This is not a happy book; it is about the real lives of real people, with real foibles and much bad money management. There are pig-headed bureaucrats here, and folks blinded by ideological adherence to one method of farming or another, one value of land over another. Except for Bromfield, however, who was always about what worked—and that is where he got ahead of the native farmer population. In his youth, Bromfield would only *visit* his grandparent's farm; while he loved it, he was not married to a specific method or type of farming: so he tried darn-near everything. In the end what wore down the farm was the fact that in farming, like any mature industry, long-term profits tend to average out with long-term losses. He had the best dairy farm in that

region of Ohio, yet milk was now a commodity, and even he could not make money. This despite his cows producing far more milk, and at far less cost, than his neighbors. He tried various niche farming businesses, and in a fit of armchair quarterbacking, I think he missed the mark by not getting into the cheese business when he considered entering that discipline. With his celebrity (he was on par with Beyonce or J.Lo today) in the 1950s, middle-class hostesses everywhere

would have loved to say that “the cheese came from Malabar Farms.”

So, as you can gather, Malabar is a complex story. Anneliese Abbott has done a superb job of making it an easy, entertaining, and yet thought-provoking read for anyone, in any discipline or interest, in the various topics covered by Bromfield in his tumultuous, short life. You can apply many lessons learned by Bromfield as you approach your own work.

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