

THE  
HOLY EARTH

*By*  
L. H. BAILEY

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## Preface

IN 1520, Robert Whittinton coined the phrase “a man for all seasons” to describe his friend, Thomas More. Whatever Whittinton’s original intent, we have come to use the phrase to describe the rare polymath whose influence extends far beyond a parochial definition of vocation. Liberty Hyde Bailey’s life perfectly straddles the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, perhaps the last time when such a term might comfortably be applied. In innumerable ways, Bailey’s life also mirrors the idealized expectations of the American experience—a person of humble and rural origin, who, by virtue of hard work and talent, rises to a position of prominence in the plant sciences, plant breeding, education, public administration and policy, public speaking, commerce, sociology, philosophy, and the arts. Bailey was a prodigious writer, authoring 63 books (including his 1,000 page monograph on raspberries), more than 100 scientific papers, and at least 1,300 articles on a wide variety of subjects. In addition, he edited more than 100 other books as well as numerous magazines.

Nestled among this considerable output is a seemingly modest collection of five titles, ranging from philosophy to poetry, variously known as the “Background Books” or the “Philosophy of the Holy Earth series.” These books represent an extended discourse, interconnected across multiple dimensions, dealing with the overarching theme of humanity’s place in the universe, with a common focus on our relationship with and responsibilities to the natural world. *The Holy Earth* is the first title in the series (1915) and is an extremely well-crafted argument that, despite a slightly dated style, pulls the reader inexorably toward a new perspective of environmental stewardship.

The title implies a religious basis for Bailey's polemic, but the reality is more nuanced. Contemporary discourse in the area of environmental policy is strongly influenced by the tension created by the claim of some environmentalists that our present problems are the result of a Judeo-Christian doctrine of environmental domination rather than constructive engagement. Bailey sidesteps many of the elements of the current debate and, in doing so, promotes a doctrine that is both transcendental and transforming. I find it doubtful that Bailey's discourse reflects a specific religious doctrine. Rather we see a Deist of strong spiritual sensitivity, struggling to redefine relationships that he feels have been corrupted by history.

Much of the discourse on the subject of human domination of nature involves images of conquest behaviors that pacify and subjugate nature for the sake of human good. Bailey rejects such notions out-of-hand. While nature may have a very wide scope, the earth—the abode of all life—cannot be anything but good:

It is good to live. We talk of death and of lifelessness, but we know only of life. Even our prophecies of death are prophecies of more life. We know no better world: whatever else there may be is of things hoped for, not of things seen.

His second key proposition, embodied in the book's title, is the concept of the Earth as a holy system. In Bailey's view, this attribute of holiness arises directly out of the fact that the Earth, and everything that was initially in it, was the product of divine creation. Bailey does not dispute that idea that humans have dominion over the planet, but proposes that the confluence of holiness and dominion generate a new mandate:

If the earth is holy, then the things that grow out of the earth are also holy. They do not belong to man to do with them as he will. There are many generations of folk yet to come after us, who will have equal right with us to the products of the globe.

In Bailey's view, righteous use—what others might call righteous stewardship—demands a new formulation of the relationship between humans and nature and that the nature of that reformulation rests solidly on moral propositions.

Bailey was a thorough-going Darwinian, and he knew that the world of life has been changing from the beginning. The advent of humans, their subsequent proliferation, and their mastery of science and technology combined to increase the potential for change. If numbers and technology were unbridled by moral imperatives, he saw a future of increasing degradation of humanity's birthright. Contemporary environmental debate tends to take two approaches to persuasion, both of which are evident in polemics such as Al Gore's *Inconvenient Truth*. The first is an appeal to numbers—science of the case—while the second is an appeal to self interest, be it our own or that of our grandchildren. Bailey avoids both of these arguments. He feels no need to appeal to science when the degradation of the environment should be plainly visible to anyone who looks at the issue with an unbiased eye. He also avoids a direct appeal to self interest, for he appears to feel that self interest is a key element in the historical evolution of the current crisis.

We live a technologically more sophisticated world than that of Bailey and, given the issues, an appeal to moral precepts and a new, spiritually based environmental ethic may seem naïve. This view is almost certainly short sighted. The majority of the humans with whom we share this fragile planet consider spirituality, in a myriad of forms, to be an essential part of their worldview. Much of what Bailey proposes has the potential to resonate with large numbers of people who are not part of the scientific mainstream. As such, this reprint of Bailey's seminal environmental work is not simply a matter of bringing a 90-year-old book back into the marketplace. Instead, it opens the mind of a true "man for all seasons" and hopefully can contribute to a long-delayed consensus regarding our place in nature.

RALPH E. TAGGART  
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*Michigan State University*



## Retrospect for the 1943 Edition by L. H. Bailey

MANY YEARS have passed since *The Holy Earth* was written. I think I have not read the book since the proofs left my hands nearly thirty years ago. Others have read it in more recent time, and I have agreed to their request for a reprint.

The book was my expression of an experience in life. I was born against the primeval forest. My youth was on the farm cut from that forest. I grew up with woodsmen and settlers and pioneers. Indians still inhabited the region. Wild animals were numerous. Passenger pigeons had a vast colony. It was a rigorous and wholesome discipline. Then I taught with and for country folk. All these experiences were against the background of simple and natural conditions.

I had been impressed with the fact that nature repairs and reconstructs itself. It provides its own healing. If the farm is wholly abandoned, nature takes it over and in time rears a new forest and builds new land. The city and the factory do not rebuild themselves when neglected or abandoned: they, too, in the processes of time return to forest or desert or plain. The circumstances of the native earth are the essential background of the race of men. What should be the spiritual and emotional reaction of the race of men to these circumstances? The book attempted to express an attitude.

*The Holy Earth* was written mostly on ship in the South Seas. I had been impressed again on long journeys with the majesty and fertility of the waters. I was not thinking of land alone. The sea is the larger part of the earth. I had in mind the planet on which men live. The planet is part of a program

we do not comprehend but in which we may partake. We manipulate the surface of the earth for good or for ill. We must keep and protect the heritage for the millions who are to come after us. This is a moral obligation.

We did not make the earth. We have received it and its bounties. If it is beyond us, so is it divine. We have inescapable responsibilities. It is our privilege so to comprehend the use of the earth as to develop a spiritual stature. When the epoch of mere exploitation of the earth shall have worn itself out, we shall realize the heritage that remains and enter new realms of satisfaction.

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## *First, the Statement*

SO BOUNTIFUL hath been the earth and so securely have we drawn from it our substance, that we have taken it all for granted as if it were only a gift, and with little care or conscious thought of the consequences of our use of it; nor have we very much considered the essential relation that we bear to it as living parts in the vast creation.

It is good to think of ourselves—of this teeming, tense, and aspiring human race—as a helpful and contributing part in the plan of a cosmos, and as participators in some far-reaching destiny. The idea of responsibility is much asserted of late, but we relate it mostly to the attitude of persons in the realm of conventional conduct, which we have come to regard as very exclusively the realm of morals; and we have established certain formalities that satisfy the conscience. But there is some deeper relation than all this, which we must recognize and the consequences of which we must practise. There is a directer and more personal obligation than that which expends itself in loyalty to the manifold organizations and social requirements of the present day. There is a more fundamental co-operation in the scheme of things than that which deals with the proprieties or which centres about the selfishness too often expressed in the salvation of one's soul.

We can be only onlookers on that part of the cosmos that we call the far heavens, but it is possible to co-operate in the processes on the surface of the sphere. This co-operation may

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be conscious and definite, and also useful to the earth; that is, it may be real. What means this contact with our natural situation, this relationship to the earth to which we are born, and what signify this new exploration and conquest of the planet and these accumulating prophecies of science? Does the mothership of the earth have any real meaning to us?

All this does not imply a relation only with material and physical things, nor any effort to substitute a nature religion. Our relation with the planet must be raised into the realm of spirit; we cannot be fully useful otherwise. We must find a way to maintain the emotions in the abounding commercial civilization. There are two kinds of materials,—those of the native earth and the idols of one's hands. The latter are much in evidence in modern life, with the conquests of engineering, mechanics, architecture, and all the rest. We visualize them everywhere, and particularly in the great centres of population. The tendency is to be removed farther and farther from the everlasting backgrounds. Our religion is detached.

We come out of the earth and we have a right to the use of the materials; and there is no danger of crass materialism if we recognize the original materials as divine and if we understand our proper relation to the creation, for then will gross selfishness in the use of them be removed. This will necessarily mean a better conception of property and of one's obligation in the use of it. We shall conceive of the earth, which is the common habitation, as inviolable. One does not act rightly toward one's fellows if one does not know how to act rightly toward the earth.

Nor does this close regard for the mother earth imply any loss of mysticism or of exaltation: quite the contrary. Science but increases the mystery of the unknown and enlarges the boundaries of the spiritual vision. To feel that one is a useful and co-operating part in nature is to give one kinship, and to open the mind to the great resources and the high enthusiasms. Here arise the fundamental common relations. Here arise also the great emotions and conceptions of sublimity and