

## Review

*Freedom from Want*  
**By Ian Smillie**  
**Reviewed by Sally Osberg**

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## The House That BRAC Built

Review by Sally Osberg

**FREEDOM FROM WANT: The Remarkable Success Story of BRAC, the Global Grassroots Organization That's Winning the Fight Against Poverty**

Ian Smillie

300 pages, Kumarian Press, 2009

1970. Killing as many as 500,000, the event was profound in its impact, devastating the lives of more than 3 million people, leading ultimately to the bloody liberation of Bangladesh, and launching one Shell Oil executive on an entirely new career path.

In *Freedom from Want*, Ian Smillie chronicles the life and times of the newly formed nation of Bangladesh, its largely impoverished people, and an organization that would come to master both the art and science of development. Told as a laudatory case history, the book proceeds predictably. Smillie begins by tracing Abed's privileged upbringing and early career, digressing to document the Abed family's Bengali roots and the British imperialism that would lead ultimately to independence for Bangladesh, but quickly establishes a narrative pattern: Issue by issue, we learn how BRAC experiments with education, health care, and income generation; figures out how to integrate and scale up effective programs and enterprises; and drives to ensure lasting benefit to those served.

This is a well-told account of an unlikely NGO leader who learns early on that development is a humbling business. Abed and his colleagues, many of them extraordinary individuals themselves, graduate quickly from their

Neither those who knew the debonair young Fazle Abed nor Abed himself would have imagined how the course of his life would change forever with the deadly cyclone that hit Bangladesh in

early experiences with relief—distributing blankets, food, water, and medical supplies to those suffering in the cyclone's aftermath—to take on the challenge of a society defined by endemic poverty, with its underlying conditions of illiteracy, the oppression of women, and hand-to-mouth livelihoods.

That the organization's first giddy forays at development fall short of expectations is not all that surprising. What sets BRAC apart, however, is an unflinching willingness to acknowledge failure. Early attempts to reform education and shape new fishing and farming cooperatives considered “not too difficult to achieve,” for example, fall flat, with BRAC reporting “disappointing results” and sobering lessons back to its funder, Oxfam, a practice as remarkable

then as it would be today. For Smillie and others, BRAC is a learning organization, committed to investing whatever it takes and as long as it takes to figure out what works. Failures are grist to the mill of better ideas, and that mill a laboratory for systemic solutions.

Smillie's account of BRAC's entry into microfinance, the field

identified with Muhammad Yunus, founder of Bangladesh's Grameen Bank and winner of the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize, sounds one of the book's only sour notes. After establishing the roots of microlending in 18th-century Irish Loan Funds, Smillie ultimately characterizes as “fantasy” current popularization of this “idea of a miracle cure that will emerge fully formed from the womb, end poverty, and be completely sustainable from the outset.” He juxtaposes a microfinance paradigm that begins and ends with the “loan as the point of departure, on the assumption that development will follow” with BRAC's more enlightened view of the development enterprise as first and foremost. For Smillie, Yunus' dictum that the “borrower knows best” and the Grameen model wind up reinforcing “subsistence activity,” whereas BRAC's superior method advances scalable enterprise. As an admirer of both Abed and Yunus, BRAC and Grameen, I found this invidious com-

parison off-putting, even demeaning to the towering achievements of both men and their organizations.

But this is a minor cavil. Smillie's account of Abed's journey and BRAC's stunning record over nearly four decades evokes Amartya Sen's characterization of “development as freedom.” BRAC has proven through its holistic approach that poverty can be defeated, lives transformed, and prosperity sustained. Moreover, the organization has insisted that the innovations necessary to drive such change achieve scale. “Small is beautiful,” says Abed, “but big is necessary.” Today, BRAC generates 80 percent of its nearly \$500 million annual budget, exceeds \$1 billion in its microfinance lending, and operates in multiple countries, including Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Sudan. *Freedom from Want* pays well-deserved tribute to an exemplar of indigenous development and its magnificent leader. ■

## Good Guy vs. Good Guy

Review by Bill Adams

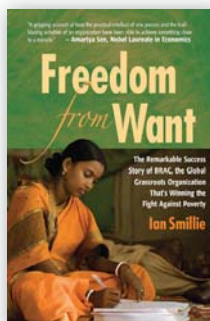
**CONSERVATION REFUGEES: The Hundred-Year Conflict Between Global Conservation and Native Peoples**

Mark Dowie

341 pages, MIT Press, 2009

In October 2003, Sayyaad Soltani, the elected chair of the Council of Elders of the Qashqai Confederation in Iran, gave a plenary speech to the World Parks Congress in Durban, South Africa. He spoke of the relentless pressure on his nomadic pastoral people in the 20th century: “Pastures and natural resources were seized from us by various governments. Our migratory paths were interrupted by all sorts of ‘development’ initiatives, including dams, oil refineries, and military bases. Our summering and wintering pastures were consistently degraded and fragmented by outsiders. Not even our social identity was left alone.”

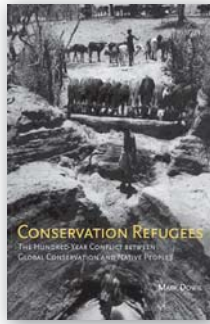
BILL ADAMS is Moran Professor of Conservation and Development in the Department of Geography at the University of Cambridge. He is the author of *Against Extinction: The Story of Conservation*, and co-editor of *Decolonizing Nature: Strategies of Conservation in a Post-Colonial Era*.



SALLY OSBERG is the president and CEO of the Skoll Foundation. Before joining Skoll, Osberg was executive director of the Children's Discovery Museum of San Jose.

This speech, cited at length in Mark Dowie's thought-provoking book *Conservation Refugees*, tells a story that is, tragically, repeated by indigenous people the world over. For centuries, governments, adventurers, settlers, and corporations have thrust aside anyone who stood between them and the resources and territory they craved.

In Dowie's version of this story, however, the villains are not big business or corrupt governments, but biodiversity conservationists. Those driven by the desire to protect biodiversity inevitably find themselves trying to do so in the remaining areas of undeveloped land, which is almost everywhere occupied by people making their living by hunting, gathering, grazing livestock,



or farming. In their enthusiasm for nature, conservationists have too often ended up riding roughshod over human rights.

In particular, Dowie targets the conservation "BINGOs" (big, international, nongovernmental organizations), a group of five philanthropic organizations: Conservation International (CI), the Nature Conservancy, the World Wide Fund for Nature, the Wildlife Conservation Society, and the African Wildlife Foundation. Together, these organizations control budgets of many hundreds of millions of dollars. They are also conduits of billions of dollars more from bilateral and multilateral aid donors such as the World Bank, the European Union, and the United

States Agency for International Development. The BINGOs' scientific expertise, their capacity to plan and implement projects on the ground, and their ability to conjure up vast investments make them agencies of great power.

Dowie is something of a doyen of the global anticonservation movement, following articles in *Orion* magazine in 2005 and in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* in 2006, which indicted the BINGOs for their close and cozy links with corporate interests and their uncaring and destructive impact on indigenous people. In *Conservation Refugees*, Dowie returns to the fray. In alternating chapters Dowie describes the displacement of a range of different peoples (including Maasai, Ba'Aka, Basarwa, Mursi, and Karen) with brief descriptions of field visits and in-

## DOG-EARED

# Staying Vibrant and Curious

Review by Jacqueline Novogratz

**SELF-RENEWAL:  
The Individual and  
the Innovative  
Society**

John W. Gardner  
176 pages, W.W. Norton &  
Co., 1995

I remember meeting John Gardner as if it were yesterday. It was 1989 and I was an MBA student at the Stanford Graduate School of Business. I was sitting in a preview session of upcoming classes when a tall, graceful, elderly man in a gray suit and a fedora stood up to speak. His figure was lithe and his step was easy. He carried a sense of gravitas that made it impossible not to listen to what he had to say. "Why do civilizations rise and fall?" he asked. "Why do some people stop growing at age 30, just going from work to the couch and television, when others stay vibrant, curious, almost childlike, into their 80s and 90s?"

I was hooked. I knew I needed to know this man, for it was clear to me even then that he would play an important role in my life.

The grace and humility with which John spoke that day belied his powerful career. He'd been secretary of health, education, and welfare under President Lyndon Johnson, and president of the Carnegie Foundation. He'd written numerous books. And most thrilling from my perspective, he was an extraordinary social—and serial—entrepreneur, having founded Common Cause, Independent Sector, and the White House Fellows. Later, while in his 80s, John founded Experience Corps to encourage older people to become more engaged in civic life.

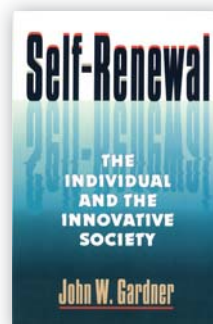
While at Stanford, I resolved to read everything that John had written. No book of his affected me more than *Self-Renewal: The Individual and the Innovative Society*. Written in 1963, it still held great relevance for me in 1989. Having just reread it 20 years later, I was struck again by how John's words of wisdom resonate even more strongly today.

In *Self-Renewal*, John writes about the contribution of individual innovators in renewing societies. Although he doesn't use the language of social entrepreneurship, he describes it beautifully. He writes of the importance of a "tough-minded optimism," stamina, and taking risks. He stresses the need for experimentation, failure, and, yes, for love. People who continually renew themselves have the capacity for innovation. John writes that "they can see life through another's eyes and feel it through another's heart."

At Acumen Fund, a nonprofit venture capital firm for the poor that I founded in 2001, we call this quality "moral imagination" and believe it is critical to solving the tough problems of poverty. Indeed, much of Acumen's value system is linked to John's philosophy. He believed in the creative potential of markets and the need for good governance. He stressed the importance of human dignity and understood it in the context of our global community. He warned of the pitfalls to renewal, counseling innovators to

"travel light" and be aware of vested interests and the allure of traps that make us pull back from our ultimate goals.

I miss John, though I feel forever blessed for having been mentored by him. He had an enormous impact on my life, encouraging me to focus on being interested rather than interesting, and to commit to something bigger than myself. I know that I'm among hundreds, if not thousands, of people who feel that way, and together we form an army working toward similar ends. There can be no greater legacy than that. ■



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interviews. These are curiously lackluster accounts, highly romanticized, and surprisingly vague about the specifics of human or environmental history, but their cumulative force is indisputable. In between, Dowie offers sharp summaries of the strange world of international conservation, including the American obsession with “wilderness” and the associated need to “protect” nature by keeping local people out (but, too often, letting scientists, tourists, timber concessionaires, oil or mining companies, and corrupt politicians in).

Whether conservation is, as Dowie argues, Public Enemy No. 1 for indigenous people, is more difficult to judge. At various points he quotes very large but highly speculative figures for the total number of people displaced from protected areas (a lack of good data makes it hard to know the real extent of conservation displacement). And it would be a mistake to focus so much blame on conservationists that it distracts attention from the very real harm caused by corporate and government enclosure of rural land for commercial purposes.

The case against conservation is not novel—books like Marcus Colchester’s *Salvaging Nature*, published in 2002, for example, have traversed this terrain before. The difference now, perhaps, is that Dowie sees glimmers of light at the end of the tunnel, citing places where relations between indigenous people and conservation have improved (for example, in relations between the Kayapo and CI in Brazil), and where the rights of indigenous peoples have been upheld (for example, in the legal decision in December 2006 that the eviction of the San from the Central Kalahari Game Reserve in Botswana was illegal). Times are, perhaps, changing.

This is, as Dowie is at pains to say, a “good guy vs. good guy” story—very often, Western indigenous peoples’ activists vs. Western conservationists, both speaking for their clients with passion and good intentions. Despite the clogged arteries of corporate conservation, new partnerships must be possible. Although Dowie remains suspicious, and the international indigenous peoples movement activists he quotes are even more so, it is possible to imagine conservation taking full account of human rights. But as this book makes clear, a lot will have to change if this is to happen. ■

## Rethinking Human Nature

Review by Maria Surricchio

**BORN TO BE GOOD:  
The Science of a  
Meaningful Life**

Dacher Keltner  
352 pages, W.W. Norton & Co.,  
2009

The conventional view of human nature is that self-interest is our strongest instinct. In this narrative, every action and decision that *Homo economicus* makes—the choice of a mate, what work to pursue, whom to befriend—is ultimately driven by self-interest. Even child rearing is merely a way to propagate one’s genes.

This view of human nature is not without merit. Most people would agree that self-interest is a powerful driver of human activity. But is this a complete and accurate portrait of human nature? What about people’s proclivity to act cooperatively and altruistically? Is it the case, as Adam Smith and T.H. Huxley believe, that prosocial behavior is solely a cultural construct created to curb our supremely selfish base impulses?

These are the questions that Dacher Keltner tackles in his new book, *Born to Be Good: The Science of a Meaningful Life*. Keltner, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, strives to unearth clues about the neglected dimension of human nature: “positive emotions that bring the good in others to completion”—emotions that he believes have been serving mankind for millions of years.

As a postgraduate student Keltner worked with Paul Eckman, a pioneer in the study of emotions and their relation to facial expressions. Eckman’s research built on the work of Charles Darwin, who in 1872 authored *The Expression of the Emotions in Man & Animals*, in which he tried to uncover the evolutionary value of facial expressions. Eckman’s research proved the universality of both facial expressions and the physiological changes they create. It established that human emo-

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tions are genetically encoded physiological processes that are shaped by our evolutionary past, and that these emotions include not just the basic emotions (like anger and fear), but also what he calls higher order “ethical emotions” such as sympathy and awe.

In *Born to Be Good*, Keltner takes Eckman’s insights one step further by proposing a new model of human nature that turns the conventional one on its head. Instead of the survival of the fittest, Keltner proposes the survival of the kindest. He demonstrates that in early human society prosocial behavior was the most effective survival strategy. Early humans needed to take care of “vulnerable, big-brained offspring,” a job that required two parents. As a result, males

evolved to know their own offspring and to take care of them, which in turn created a fragile sexual monogamy. The hunting of stronger, faster, and ferocious prey required teamwork, which in turn facilitated the development of communication. Gossiping amongst the lower ranks of early humans put pressure on high-status members to build

consensus rather than rule through force.

Keltner argues that emotions work to promote kindness, humanity, and respect between people, which is of immense evolutionary value. Embarrassment is a way of restoring social order by eliciting reconciliation and forgiveness after a transgression. Touching triggers a cascade of emotions, such as devotion, trust, and even a sense of reward. Compassion holds a special place in the canon of emotions (for Darwin it was the strongest instinct). Its physiological embodiment—via the many touch points of the vagus nerve—encompasses our communicative system, heart rate, and release of oxytocin, which sends feelings of trust, love, and warmth throughout the body.

In *Born to Be Good*, Keltner shows that people receive significant emotional rewards when acting for the benefit of others, even when it means operating against one’s self-interest. Our ability to work for the greater good comes from fundamental instincts honed over millions of years. If Keltner is right, and I think he is, our most modern problems will be solved by our most ancient responses. ■

