In *My Work Is That of Conservation*, Mark D. Hersey takes a fresh look at the life of George Washington Carver. The exact date of Carver’s birth is unknown, most likely he was born in 1864 or 1865. He died on January 5, 1943, after spending many decades as a scientist, teacher, and conservationist at the Tuskegee Institute in Macon County, Alabama. Carver is perhaps best known for his advocacy of the humble peanut as a replacement for soil-exhausting cotton, ultimately developing more than one hundred peanut-based consumer products. Noting that Carver’s place in the public imagination is still that of the “Peanut Man,” Hersey attempts to provide a corrective to what he considers to be Carver’s "disjointed legacy" (Hersey, 2). Rather than just the image of the “Peanut Man,” Carver’s legacy has been portrayed at various times as a “Black Leonardo” and an Uncle Tom. In David Herbert Donald’s review of Linda O. McMurry’s *George Washington Carver: Scientist and Symbol*, he concludes that Carver was “no longer part of our usable past” (Donald, 3). Hersey disagrees with this assertion, and in this relatively brief biography he artfully demonstrates Carver’s relevance as more than a scientist, or even an educator, but as a uniquely equipped agrarian conservationist.

Hersey considers Carver still relevant for two reasons: 1.) He was the most important African American involved in the conservation movement; 2.) His work on the fringes of the mainstream conservation movement highlights the neglected agrarian component of that movement. Even though Carver’s program of ecological restoration and African American uplift ultimately produced few permanent results, his life story still provides readers with a different prism through which to view conservation. His life’s work demonstrates a route not taken by mainstream conservationists in the early twentieth century.

In its scope this book succinctly encapsulates the entirety of Carver’s life and career beginning with his early life in the Midwest and ending with his long tenure at Tuskegee Institute in the Deep South. Hersey organizes the book largely along chronological lines. The exception to this is Chapter Three in which Hersey briefly digresses to discuss the environmental history of Macon County, Alabama, where Carver would spend the rest of his adult life. Hersey relies on previous Carver biographies as well as Carver’s own correspondence with his friends and acquaintances in order to present an accurate narrative of Carver’s life. He does a superb job of presenting his findings in an approachable manner as well as grounding those findings in the context of the times in which Carver lived, commenting on such important events as the Populist Movement and the First World War and how they impacted Carver personally.

One of the book’s greatest strengths is how clearly Carver’s voice and environmental vision come through throughout the entire length of the book. Hersey accomplishes this through a systemic and generous use of quotes from Carver himself. An additional strength of the book is the author’s discussion of how Carver’s faith and his scientific perspective interacted with each other to create a composite worldview in which science and religion were not diametrically opposed, but rather contributed equally to Carver’s vision of conservation.

Other than a somewhat abrupt digression from Carver in Chapter Three, there is little in this book which merits criticism. There are instances when Carver does not come across explicitly as an African American in a segregationist South and his race often seems to fade into the background. It is quite clear that Carver was working within the African American community, but there are times when it seems as though Carver was not a part of that community
as it labored under an oppressive system of segregation. The author does discuss the effects of a lynching that Carver witnessed and how it “left an indelible impression on Carver,” haunting him to the end of his life (Hersey, 16). He also briefly mentions an occasion when Carver himself was almost lynched. Nevertheless, the oppression Carver must have felt as an African American in the early twentieth century South is somewhat underdeveloped.

This environmental biography of George Washington Carver would be of interest to academics and the general public as well as anyone interested in conservation, African American history, and the early twentieth century rural South. Hersey provides an alternative view of Carver and demolishes the myth of Carver as the “Peanut Man.” Hersey strips away layers of mythology and presents readers with a picture of Carver the conservationist: a man who used his scientific know-how in an attempt to provide poor African American sharecroppers with an economically liberating and ecologically sustainable method of farming in the Deep South.

—Matt Simmons, University of Florida