

Going to set the night on Fire!

Story of the Earth Liberation Front

Chris Clancy

2025

a review of

Burning Rage of a Dying Planet: The FBI vs. The Earth Liberation Front (Second Edition) by Craig Rosebraugh. Microcosm Publishing 2024.

Burning Rage of a Dying Planet is a history of the rise of the radical environmental movement the Earth Liberation Front (ELF), as told by Craig Rosebraugh, who served as the spokesperson for the ELF during its arguably most consequential years, 1997 to late 2001.

Originally published by Lantern Books in 2004, *Burning Rage* does a nice job of detailing the radical actions of the ELF, the leaderless band of environmental activists that at the turn of the century sabotaged dozens of ecologically destructive projects and organizations, mostly timber mills and farms, expanding ski resorts and gas-guzzling SUV dealerships. Arson was their primary tactic, though spiking trees, smashing glass, and pouring sugar into the fuel tanks of logging trucks and asphalt pavers were all part of the ELF repertoire. From 1997 to 2001, the ELF was responsible for over \$40 million in property damage, all without a single human or animal life lost.

One particularly interesting aspect of the book is the progress with which the ELF expanded its reach in the late 1990s, starting with tree spiking actions around the Pacific Northwest and leveling up to the burning of biotech-friendly agriculture departments within the University of Minnesota, Michigan State, and elsewhere.

Nike (for its use of child labor), McDonald's (for its clearing of rainforests to raise cattle), Old Navy (for its owner's involvement in the clearcutting of old growth forest in the Pacific Northwest)—it felt like no corporation dependent on the exploitation of animals or wilderness was safe from stealth, dead-of-night attacks by the ELF. "If you build it, we will burn it," promised a spray-painted message on a new luxury home under construction on Long Island in 2000.

The author writes with honesty, sympathy, and admiration for the ELF during his years as its spokesperson, a role that was all but thrust upon him the day he received his first ELF communique while working as a public relations assistant with the Animal Liberation Front (ALF), a radical animal rights group with a decentralized structure similar to that of the ELF.

Because the ELF was decentralized—consisting entirely of self-funded cells made up of "elves"—it fell to Rosebraugh to step into the role of, as a December 1998 *New York Times* story put it, "the face of eco-terrorism."

"Any social or political movement or organization must constantly evaluate and re-examine its strategies and tactics to ensure effectiveness and progress toward success," he writes. "I asked myself daily how I could assist in creating a more organized and, therefore, more effective, social change organization."

Effecting social change naturally places one in the cross hairs of authority. Rosebraugh suffered more than his share of government harassment. Surveillance, grand jury hearings, and ill-timed home, office, and vehicle raids upended the author's life during this time, disrupting not just his community work, but his day job (at a vegan bakery in Portland) and his personal affairs.

This new edition is subtitled, “The FBI vs. The Earth Liberation Front,” but, in fact, Rosebraugh and the ELF took on all comers, from the Portland cops to deep-pocketed corporations to craven politicians to the mainstream media, all of which played their part in shielding corporate interests from the kind of deeper public scrutiny the ELF was trying to effect.

“I became the public face of eco-saboteurs, someone for the media to use and abuse and for the public and industry to despise,” he writes.

Rosebraugh recounts an especially weird interview with ABC-TV journalist-turned-libertarian pundit John Stossel on 20/20, who called him, “just a kid who doesn’t know anything” and “a thug.” This resulted in Barbara Walters saying, after the interview aired, “I find him absolutely chilling.”

Such moments add color to the narrative, which, at 300-plus pages, can start to feel repetitive, as every new ELF attack brings with it a new communique, a new flurry of publicity, a fresh round of FBI questioning he endures.

So, how come Rosebraugh, in all his enthusiasm for the radical environmental movement, decided to call it quits in 2001? To his credit, the author devotes a chapter (“Stepping Down”) to the fielding of this question. In speaking for the ELF during its headiest years, he argues, he had come to be seen in the eyes of the public as the leader of the entire radical environmental movement. Such a concentration of public image was not just wrong, it ran counter to the ELF’S mission.

“I realized that in order for the movement to continue to grow, more people would need to speak out on behalf of the ELF,” he writes. “[T]he more people who publicly spoke out on behalf of groups such as the ELF, the less able the government would be to repress and neutralize the supportive efforts.”

The point here is sound. Still, one can’t help but wonder if he didn’t experience that most common of life maladies: professional burnout.

In any event, his timing was fantastic. On September 5, 2001, Rosebraugh released a statement saying he would no longer be running the North American Earth Liberation Front press office. One week later, the menace implied in the already loaded media and law enforcement terms, “eco-terrorist” and “domestic terrorist groups” began growing exponentially. The ELF, once merely notorious, was now downright toxic to the authorities.

“Even during this hour of national crisis, ELF and ALF continue to terrorize Americans in pursuit of their militant agenda,” went an October 2001 letter from U.S. Congressman Scott McInnis that called for “key environmental organizations” to publicly disavow the actions of the ELF and the ALF.

Not long after, authorities began making significant strides in their ELF investigations with a pair of key arrests of ELF activists in Portland, Ore. and the gain of a confidential informant in Eugene, Ore. In late 2005 and early 2006, as part of the FBI’s “Operation Backfire,” U.S. grand juries indicted a total of 18 activists on charges related to “violent acts in the name of animal rights and environmental causes.”

“At best, the Earth Liberation Front was a source of inspiration,” Rosebraugh writes. “It was an example of people being so upset at the powers that be ruining our world that they decided to do something different about it. The main problem with their strategy is that, for it to work, it requires—as history has shown—a strong, diverse, and open-minded mass movement, one that understands a diversity of tactics is required for any change to occur. And that movement didn’t exist.”

Microcosm Publishing’s new edition of *Burning Rage* includes a host of add-ons to the original text, including an updated timeline of ELF activities and a short foreword from British writer and environmental activist Tamsin Omond.

A new prologue by Rosebraugh recounts, in fascinating detail, the FBI’s PSYOP-lite ruse to get him to spill ELF secrets via a phony book publishing deal. Even if you’ve read *Burning Rage of a Dying Planet* at some point in the last twenty years, the account of this bizarre episode alone makes it worth revisiting.

Christopher Clancy is the author of the anti-war dystopian thriller *We Take Care of Our Own*. He lives in Nashville.

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