

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Robert F. Sayre, PhD

## **Wendell Berry** (1934- ) *The Making of a Marginal Farm*

As this autobiographical essay perfectly illustrates, Wendell Berry is both a farmer and a writer, and he seems to allow neither a permanent priority.

He was, as he explains, born in Henry County, Kentucky, and now lives there. In between, he went to the University of Kentucky (A.B., 1956; M.A., 1957) and the writing program at Stanford University. He also taught at Stanford, Georgetown, and New York University, and held a Guggenheim Fellowship in Italy and France. But unlike many distinguished contemporary writers and professors he no longer moves.

Berry is an eloquent advocate of the eighteenth-century Jeffersonian farmer. For him, the small, self-supporting yeoman is independent and the backbone of democracy. He thinks and acts for himself and resists demagoguery. He in turn supports democratic government because it represents and supports him. He is also the best husbandman to the land because he wants it to continue to sustain him and his family.

With these virtues under great pressure from all sides—corporations, universities, city-dwellers, and larger farmers—meanwhile forgotten or turned into slogans and shibboleths, Berry has not only written about them but attempted to prove that a person can still live by them. He also used the standard of the Jeffersonian farmer-intellectual to write harsh and prophetic judgments of modern industrial capitalism, such as *The Unsettling of America* (1977).

To Berry, therefore, “marginal farming,” is not something to eliminate but the very opposite: the wise, just, instructive, environmentally right and socially and aesthetically beneficial way to live. What’s more, as he says, in “settling on his place, I began to live in my subject.” He “pass(ed) through the surface.” The farm became the expression of himself, as he was the caretaker, keeper, defender, and voice of the farm. Yet Berry might also say that this formulation is too fancy, or too neat. He says it better himself: “our reclamation project has been, for me, less a matter of idealism or morality than a kind of self-preservation.”

The source of “Making of a Marginal Farm” is *Recollected Essays, 1965-1980* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981). There is no biography of Berry. The article by Gary Tolliver in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, vol 5 (1980), is authoritative, however, Tolliver also having written his Ph.D. dissertation on Berry (Ohio Univ., 1978). A good critical article is William Merrill Decker’s “The Wild, the Divine, and the Human World: Rereading Wendell Berry,” *North Dakota Quarterly* 59 (Spring 1991): 242-58.

“The Making of a Marginal Farm” is reprinted from *Recollected Essays 1965-1980*, copyright 1980, 1981 by Wendell Berry. Published by North Point Press and reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Inc.