

torical trap of "western exceptionalism" (as a southerner I well recognize the argument that "place" defines everything), a consensus seems to be emerging that process is the best way to tie the significance of the new western history to the major themes of American history in general. Indeed, William Deverell's essay, "Fighting Words: The Significance of the American West in the History of the United States," explores how the events, peoples, and places of the West document the role of "power," especially the power of the state, in shaping American history and American institutions. "We have a great deal to learn," he rightly concludes, "about the ways in which national power gets consolidated and extended, attracted and wooed, not to mention contested" (40). The West, like other regions once treated in a colonial fashion, has important information to be discovered. So too does this useful collection of scholarship and perspectives on the significance of the West one hundred years after Turner.

The Culture of Wilderness: Agriculture as Colonization in the American West, by Frieda Knobloch. Studies in Rural Culture. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996. xi, 204 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95 cloth, \$14.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY PHILIP J. NELSON, HAWKEYE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Frieda Knobloch's examination of the settlement and agriculture of the American West from 1862 to 1945 aptly demonstrates the inherent link between food production and environmental conditions. Thus aptly joining agricultural history and environmental history, Knobloch goes on to achieve a truly multidisciplinary study by incorporating aspects of political, social, and technological history. This makes for a rather unconventional history of agriculture, especially when it is tied to the metaphorical vehicle of colonization.

Knobloch argues that settlement took place by means of deliberate, calculated acts of aggression and exploitation, with no traces of inevitability about them, despite claims to the contrary by the historical agents themselves. Her purpose is not to bring to light new data on western agriculture, but to challenge the old myth of the inevitable march of progress. This critique of western agriculture and the social order that created it ultimately calls into question many of America's cultural core values.

Readers familiar with the "new western history" and its revisionist message will see much of that perspective in *The Culture of Wilderness*. Without mentioning them by name, Knobloch draws heavily on

historians Richard White and Patricia Limerick and their concept of conquest of the material world. She is also indebted to the "myth and symbol school" of Henry Nash Smith and Annette Kolodny for ideological background. She explicitly searches for both the material and ideational "facts" underlying the transformation of a wilderness West into an agricultural West. In the discourse arising out of the varied agricultural literature—including textbooks, "official" documents, travelogues, and memoirs—she finds evidence suggesting a near obsession with land ownership, management, and "improvement." In this case, bringing culture to nature means constructing a hierarchical, bureaucratic system of control from which nothing random or indigenous can escape or have any significance.

The streamlined structure of the book—four chapters titled simply "Trees," "Plows," "Grass," and "Weeds"—belies the complexities of the author's arguments and interpretations. For example, she shows that as trees became a commodity and pervasive deforestation became a reality over much of the nation, the federal government, relying on the authority of scientifically trained professionals, moved to protect trees and forest land. As forestry professionals demanded that the objects of their craft be made permanent, the state staked out a large role in the control of forest resources. By acting as the first line of defense against fire, wartime demands, and Indian land claims, the state appropriated even more authority over forests.

Knobloch traces the development of the plow back to ancient times, noting that it has become associated with civilized, modern agriculture and an "ideology of 'improvement'" (50). In the West, the breaker plow was linked to control and management of the land, often displacing native flora, fauna, and peoples. Knobloch also links the dominance of the plow and large machinery to a division of labor by gender "that removed women's expertise, though certainly not labor, from the field" (50).

To Knobloch, the colonization of the grasslands by pastoralists such as livestock raisers represents a more "primitive"—and more environmentally friendly—adaptation to aridity than crop farming. But it also represents doing the right thing (ecological soundness) for the wrong reason (in some cases, the creation of "authoritarian processes of domestication").

The final chapter on weeds is perhaps the most interesting. Knobloch expertly demonstrates how flora are categorized as either useful plants or weeds based largely on their utility in the modern agricultural system. Agriculturalists spend much of their time and energy battling plants that either fail to serve current needs or per-

ennially escape control. Such efforts reflect the intolerance and exclusivity of the larger society.

For such a short book, *The Culture of Wilderness* touches on many topics, so any reader with agricultural interests will likely find some part of the narrative informative. On the other hand, sometimes it is hard to tell if Knobloch's book is a history of colonization, a pre-history of industrial agriculture, a history of agricultural science, or a political history of bureaucratic control. Among the targets of the book's many broadsides, the U.S. Department of Agriculture stands out. Knobloch especially finds fault with the purpose of its research and information management: "the USDA archive represents the fantasy of empire, the unrealizable goal of comprehensive control and uninterrupted progress" (152-53). The uncertain focus accompanying the book's broad sweep may be necessary since it critiques such big chunks of the worldview of American culture. In any case, in an age increasingly influenced by technicians and experts, Knobloch's call for reclaiming knowledge from large institutions, not for nostalgic or escapist purposes, but for reasons of information and accountability, makes sense.

Mixed Harvest: The Second Great Transformation in the Rural North, 1870-1930, by Hal S. Barron. Studies in Rural Culture. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997. xiv, 301 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, index. \$49.95 cloth, \$18.95 paper.

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Writing in his diary on an autumn evening in 1931, Iowa farmer Elmer G. Powers noted, "We tuned in and listened to the National Husking Contest. This evening we have not yet learned who the winners are. . . . Many people are of the opinion that the husking contests will become the greatest sporting event of the year" (H. Roger Grant and L. Edward Purcell, eds., *Years of Struggle: The Farm Diary of Elmer G. Powers*, [1995], 30). In that deceptively simple entry, Powers commented on the results of a transformation that had taken place across the Midwest and the Northeast during the previous sixty years. Between 1870 and 1930, farm residents throughout the northern United States had created a subculture in which they adapted traditional rural practices to the contours of a modern industrial society. Thus, farmers like Powers, who had once attended corn husking contests at the local country school, now listened anxiously for the results of a national competition broadcast over

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