

organizations, and newsletters, newspapers, and other publications of farm organizations, new and old.

As an encyclopedia containing lively and reliable essays, Dyson's work is useful for the history of Iowa and for all regions of the United States. It goes far in filling a major gap on farmers' movements in the still developing field of American agricultural history, and it provides a foundation for further research.

UNIVERSITY OF IOWA

EARL M. ROGERS

Land Fever: Dispossession and the Frontier Myth, by James M. Marshall. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1986. viii, 239 pp. Appendixes, notes, bibliography, index. \$21.00 cloth.

James M. Marshall offers an account of failure on the American frontier. It is based on the autobiography of one man, Omar Morse (1824–1901), who pioneered on the land in three different places on the agricultural frontier in Wisconsin and Minnesota. Morse's "autobiography," written at various times over thirty years, runs to seventy printed pages; another twenty pages of his letters are included in an appendix.

Morse is a farmer without capital who goes into debt at high interest rates to develop ever more marginal land. He is also unlucky. His wife is often ill, and the doctor's bills are an added burden on his already straitened account ledger. In the end, Morse loses three farms, his wife dies, leaving him with three small children, and he struggles to make a life for his impoverished family by unremitting labor in the woods and in the fields. It is a story both bitter about grasping bankers and high-priced doctors and filled with sardonic humor about his own foibles. Morse's life is a story repeated many times on the frontier, a story of hard work and bad luck.

On either side of Morse's straightforward and sometimes moving account, Marshall has included an introduction and a long essay around the theme of "dispossession," the forced eviction of pioneers from their homesteads. He subtitles his analysis "Dispossession and the Frontier Myth," and he argues that dispossession, not success, was the theme of land taking, that the vision of a garden of plenty for individual settlers on their own quarter-section tracts was a myth. To sum up his views, he uses the phrase "the unweeded garden" (8–9). Marshall finds much to support his dark-hued thesis in his analysis of literary figures and their works and in folklore and popular songs. He fails to recognize, however, that Hamlin Garland wrote not only about failure; he wrote about the limiting aspects of agrarian life, whether

successful or failed. In Garland's accounts, those who succeeded on the land were scarcely better off than those who failed.

The historical aspects of Marshall's analysis are far less successful. His assaults on historians are generally unconvincing and querulous. First, his persistent argument that historians have failed to address the question of debt and failure (6, 8, 11, 54) ignores a substantial list of some of our most able historians—Paul Wallace Gates, Allan Bogue, Robert P. Swierenga, and Donald Winters, to mention only four—who have dealt directly with that issue. That Marshall does not agree with some of them does not mean that they have not addressed the issue. Second, Marshall wants to examine cultural themes, but he wishes to make judgments that demand statistical evidence. He wonders, for example, why agricultural historians have not given overall figures for those farmers who suffered "dispossession." The reason is that historians need substantial evidence beyond a single autobiographical account and an examination of a few selected townships where Morse lived. Marshall's mixture of cultural analysis and bold unsupported generalizations about the financial aspects of agriculture give his book a split personality.

In his failure, Omar Morse embraced the Populist programs of the 1890s, a set of principles that spoke to hard-pressed farmers but drew little support elsewhere. In spite of high interest rates and doctors' fees, hundreds of thousands of settlers succeeded and built substantial farms. Morse did not. Did he fail because he was victimized by large corporate forces and individual greed beyond his control and beyond reason, or did he fail because he was a marginal undercapitalized farmer on marginal land? His account is not sufficiently precise to tell us. Marshall opts for the conspiracy theory, but his analysis strains awkwardly to support the point.

Marshall's essay might more profitably have been cast in the context of the period. The years from the Civil War to the turn of the century were marked by a continuous depression in American agriculture. Yet in the face of the many difficulties that caused and resulted from that depression, farmers were chronically unable to unite, preferring instead their vaunted independence. Morse's experience is a case in point.

Furthermore, farming in the northern plains (like farming elsewhere in the last half of the nineteenth century) demanded capital. Allan Bogue's study of Iowa and Illinois demonstrates this need; elsewhere, a German immigrant to Wisconsin as early as the 1850s wrote to his fellow countrymen that families needed to bring at least five hundred dollars to establish a farm. Morse's generation was no different; indeed, capital had become more necessary than ever. Morse had

little capital, and he had to borrow. He was also unlucky, and he failed. Morse was one of thousands of underfinanced farmers who tried to make a farm by hard labor in the increasingly capital intensive agricultural world of the late nineteenth century. That he failed is not surprising. That Marshall finds his failure surprising is curious.

There were many others like Morse who began to leave the land within a few years of their arrival. The censuses tell their story in the diminished populations in rural counties, in the growing size of individual farms, and in the larger sums invested in equipment and livestock. Farming had become a business. Those who could not make it as a business retreated to farming as a lifestyle on twenty acres, the small estate that was the final resting place of Omar Morse.

Marshall sometimes lets his heart speak for his head. When he describes Morse's account as "unique" (4) and "among our national treasures as a witness to the frontier" (6), he displays either ignorance of the manuscript materials in the field or an overly protective attitude toward a distant family member. Morse's account is strong enough to stand by itself without resort to hyperbole.

UNIVERSITY OF IOWA

MALCOLM J. ROHRBOUGH

After the West Was Won: Homesteaders and Town-Builders in Western South Dakota, 1900-1917, by Paula M. Nelson. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1986. xvi, 220 pp. Notes, illustrations, bibliography, index. \$22.50 cloth.

West of Wichita: Settling the High Plains of Kansas, 1865-1890, by Craig Miner. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986. viii, 303 pp. Notes, illustrations, bibliography, index. \$19.95 cloth.

Travel west past the Ninety-eighth Parallel, and as the miles slip by you will notice the changes. Fields become larger. There is less cropland and more pasture land. The land turns brown earlier. There are fewer towns, and farm and ranch houses are farther apart. Even the grass changes from the tall grass of the prairie into the short bunch grass of the plains. There are fewer streams and a lot less rain. The people, men and women, somehow look stronger and tougher, and they probably are. The conquest of nature is a difficult thing; some succeed while more fail. This is a land portrayed by Paula Nelson and Craig Miner. The one has studied western South Dakota, the other Kansas. Both shed a good deal of light on the high plains environment and its peoples.

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