

that monogamous marriage was the most rational sexual lifestyle, necessary to establish stable homes. . . . Free Lovers, on the other hand, sought to abolish both censorship of sexually honest information and separate spheres" (101). Kirkley creates a matrix to explain differences within the movement: "biological determinists and spheres preservers, viewed women and men as essentially different from one another," while "historical constructionists, Free Lovers, and spheres synthesizers, perceived women and men as essentially similar and entitled to identical rights and responsibilities" (114). A special case was woman suffrage. How the various factions handled the suffrage issue is a fascinating study. For prosuffrage Freethinkers, "their understanding of gender predisposed them to favor woman suffrage, while political expediency dictated the opposite" (128).

By way of criticism, first, the book is ill served by its title. The evidence surveyed is wider than the categories implied by the title. For example, Freethinkers varied in their views on religion from atheism to agnosticism to rational religion. Second, some important figures are not included. Victoria Claflin Woodhull, who fixed the negative public image of the Free Lover, is not mentioned. Third, the historical, analytical concepts of reason/rational/rationalism are assumed or inferred rather than defined and explored. Did rational mean evolutionary evidence, common sense, Lockean logic, or legal rhetoric? But these are relatively minor matters. The book is a significant contribution to the intellectual history of the Gilded Age, to women's history, to gender analysis, and to the history of Iowa and the Midwest.

Consumers in the Country: Technology and Social Change in Rural America, by Ronald R. Kline. Revisiting Rural America Series. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000. xii, 372 pp. Illustrations, tables, appendix, notes, index. \$41.95 cloth.

Reviewer David Blanke is assistant professor of history at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi. He is the author of *Sowing the American Dream: How Consumer Culture Took Root in the Rural Midwest* (2000).

Unquestionably, technology has the power to change, accelerate, and even redefine important components of everyday life. Innovations such as the telephone, automobile, and radio certainly did this and more in rural America. The real question, however, is not whether technologies are influential, but whether it is these impersonal forces or the actions of their human operators that chiefly *determine* the social structures that result from change. Stated more bluntly, do technologies accomplish old tasks in new ways, or do they obliterate the old

tasks and the traditional forms of human behavior that accompanied them? Historians may be quick to assume that technological determinism does not command our understanding of rural America, but perhaps we should be more cautious. The sweep of farm mechanization—from the McCormick reaper and Oliver “chilled plows” of the nineteenth century to the Sears cream separator and space-age combines of the twentieth century—makes the process of historical change seem fairly automatic.

Ronald Kline’s text warns of the pitfalls of such technological determinism. From 1900 to 1960, American farmers adopted a host of modern technologies that had the power to transform the countryside. In a careful, meticulously researched, and well-written analysis, Kline shows how this power, ultimately, remained in the hands of rural men and women. He persuasively contends that the efforts “to connect the farm to town and city through communication and transportation technologies,” conducted by reformers who sought electrification and manufacturers who sought consumers, resulted not in a witless pattern of modernization, but rather “a contested process . . . in which farm people resisted, modified, and selectively used these technologies to create new rural cultures” (7–8).

In an effort to unravel the delicate historical threads that are woven through technology, community, and consumer agency in the countryside, Kline divides his text into three sections. The first is a comprehensive and well-paced narrative of the arrival of four particularly influential modern technologies: the telephone, automobile, high-line electricity, and radio. The section is an informative synthesis of a mountain of primary and secondary sources, and should be required reading for all scholars of contemporary rural consumer history. Kline recounts how farmers used fences for phone lines, preserved the party line to foster local community, and adapted the automobile to serve as a versatile power plant, for example, as ways of adopting technologies to further the farmer’s own ends. Kline concludes that rural people approached these technologies “on their own terms, allow[ing] them to weave [modern goods] into the fabric of rural life. Although the fabric expanded into a new social geography, farm men and women exercised a good deal of control over this process” (57).

Of course, it is in this contest over technology that Kline finds a chief source of cultural conflict. Ironically, a simple silhouette cartoon taken from a 1930s periodical, showing a backward and disheartened farm family of 1900 being morphed into an air-conditioned and enlightened brood of (sub)urban leisure, serves as a powerful symbol. Throughout the era, the Country Life Movement, farm extension pro-

grams, and a host of urban stereotypes asserted that rural people needed to be "modernized" or, more accurately, "urbanized" if the country was to thrive. It was assumed that the spread of new, mostly electric technologies was the best way for farmers to learn how to emulate their more advanced city cousins. In the last two sections of the book, Kline returns to this theme to show how institutions were pivotal in resisting this urban cultural hegemony.

Cooperatives and the Rural Electrification Administration (REA) were at the heart of this battle. Adding to a number of recent studies that have reinvigorated an appreciation for the cooperative movement, Kline shows how farm families actively created self-help institutions that modernized the countryside on their own terms. In regions that were active in the cooperative movement, such as the Midwest, where Iowa led the nation in electrical cooperatives, rural residents were quick to lend their support to federal bodies such as the REA, which then financed such grass-roots programs to achieve more global benefits. The existence of local institutions was key to the success of the national programs, and supports Kline's contention that the farm population retained a choice in how technology was first introduced and used. When, in early 1937, many rural cooperatives agreed to collaborate with the REA, department head Morris Cooke wrote, "The co-ops have been our help in our time of great need. . . . They seem to be a God-sent agency which makes it possible for us—the REA—to 'do its stuff'" (145). The pattern endured: without a control over technology, there would be no mass mechanization; without the cooperative, there would be no rapid rural electrification.

Close cooperation gave farmers a significant role in determining how technologies would be implemented, but unintentionally also weakened the local institutions. There were many problems inherent in a cooperative—not the least of which was their perceived financial fragility. As a result, farmers slowly abandoned and ignored these rural institutions in the modern era. Aided by campaigns to promote higher electric usage and an ideological backlash against the New Deal, private suppliers soon bought out the weakened co-ops. Having reached their goal of rural electrification (more than 93 percent of American farms were electrified by 1954), many institutions proved less able to sustain a strict rural vision for future development.

Although Kline's intelligent work suffers from its national perspective (regional identity is only occasionally addressed) and, at times, from an unclear definition of what exactly is meant by "rural" (everything from suburban farms to the Wheat Belt seems to be included), such ambiguities should spur productive new ideas about

technology and social change rather than seriously undermine the author's intent. More importantly, Kline succeeds in explaining why the "surprising persistence of rural culture in the face of its near disappearance . . . is best understood as a mutual construction of technology and society" (280). The unique consumer practices of rural Americans shaped their world. At least until 1965, such practices remained one of the chief cultural assets of rural America and a powerful barricade against the normative values of an undifferentiated (deterministic?) national culture.

Hoover, Conservation, and Consumerism: Engineering the Good Life, by Kendrick A. Clements. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000. xiii, 332 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00 cloth.

Reviewer Ellis W. Hawley is emeritus professor of history at the University of Iowa. His research and publications have dealt chiefly with U.S. public policy in the 1920s and 1930s.

The book under review, Kendrick Clements tells us, was originally envisioned as "gap" history, using what he had learned about Herbert Hoover and conservation to illuminate a neglected and misunderstood period in the history of American conservation policy. As published, however, it does much more than fill this gap. It breaks new ground, in particular, in linking conservation to an emerging consumer society, providing a new context for understanding conservation debates in the 1920s, and adding a new dimension to the story of Hoover's efforts to have expertly informed planning without creating centralized bureaucracies. Conceptually innovative, massively researched, and thoughtfully and clearly written, its contributions make it "must" reading not only for scholars of Hoover but also for historians of environmental policy and mass consumption. For the years 1920–1933, Clements shows, an understanding of each is crucial to an understanding of the others.

As convincingly depicted by Clements, Hoover's upbringing and pre-1920 experience led him to embrace a vision of conservation that accepted the new mass consumption society and sought to improve its operation by bringing planning and management to the use of resources and providing constructive recreational outlets for mass leisure. Yet upbringing and experience also led him to believe that this could be done without sacrificing cherished forms of liberty, primarily through the engineering of fact-finding, educational, and coordinative structures that were capable of securing appropriate local and private action. He sought, vigorously and creatively as secretary of commerce

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.