

BOOK REVIEWS

Michael D. Gibson, Book Review Editor

The Fruited Plain: The Story of American Agriculture, by Walter Ebeling. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979. pp. xiv, 433. Photographs, maps, index. \$22.50.

The Fruited Plain presents the *story*—not the history—of American agriculture. The distinction is important. This is a very personal, anecdotal account, a sort of “sentimental journey” by an eminent agricultural scientist imbued with the philosophy of secular humanism and technocracy. Ebeling, professor emeritus of entomology (UCLA), is convinced that the agricultural-industrial revolution spells disaster for humankind unless population growth is curbed and scientists create more sophisticated and benevolent technologies and new sociopolitical institutions. Despite his forebodings, the author rests his hope on “the seemingly boundless human ingenuity for solving problems” (p. 20). It is this ingenuity in the development of the American agricultural “miracle” that provides the major theme of the book.

The story of the *Fruited Plain* covers the full sweep of agricultural progress, from neolithic nomads and American aboriginals to European colonists of the eastern forests, the monocultural farmers of the Midwest and Great Plains, and finally the diversified, irrigated farms of the western arid lands. The organization of the book is regional, within a loosely chronological framework. One chapter is devoted to each of the major geographic regions—East, South, Midwest, Great Plains, Pacific Northwest, Great Basin, and California—and within each chapter the ordering is topical, proceeding from flora and fauna to Indian culture, white settlement, and finally modern technological developments.

The book contains nearly two hundred topical subheadings, ranging from the traditional—“The Dutch in New York,” “Big and Middle

Class Planters," "Longhorn Cattle"—to such esoteric subjects as "Lactose Deficiency," "Triticale," "Conversion of Biomass to Fuel," and "Ocean Farming." Readers accustomed to chronological, narrative history will find disconcerting the sudden topical transitions: from the frontier fur trade to living historical farms (p. 65), from nineteenth-century crop pests to the registration and labeling of pesticides by the Food and Drug Administration (p. 69), and from colonial agricultural societies and periodicals to the history of the USDA (p. 89). This disjointed narration, connected by only tenuous themes, betrays the author's lack of training in historical writing.

On the other hand, what sets this fascinating book apart from the eminently readable agricultural history of John T. Schlebecker, *Whereby We Thrive* (1975), is the emphasis on the scientific aspects of farm crops, insect pests, fertilizers, and environmental problems. Ebeling's career in entomology enables him to discuss such topics as the development of plant "gene banks." Since one-crop agriculture is prone to diseases and pests, the author relates how plant breeders, utilizing the USDA's gene bank with its 100,000 grain varieties, have developed resistant plants by hybridization (p. 244).

While the scientific sections of the book are original and reliable, readers unfamiliar with recent agricultural writings will find old stereotypes reinforced willy-nilly. For instance, Ebeling relies upon Webb's *Great Plains* (pp. 216-217) without taking account of Fred A. Shannon's incisive critique. Midwestern "claim clubs" are portrayed as squatters' rights organizations (p. 163) rather than land speculation ventures, as Allan Bogue has convincingly demonstrated. Ebeling asserts that "sod was the common building material" on the plains (p. 162), whereas James Malin in his Kansas studies found the "sawed" rather than sod houses were the norm on the prairies. Similarly, in the old tradition of Benjamin Rush and James D. Foust, colonial German farmers in Pennsylvania and elsewhere are touted as superior to all other ethnic groups (pp. 76, 82-87, 169), despite James T. Lemon's careful analysis in *Poor Man's Country*, which showed that all ethnic groups in eastern Pennsylvania adopted similar cropping and animal husbandry practices.

These misinterpretations, and many more not cited here, are the result of bibliographic oversights. Standard works which the author could have consulted with profit are: Paul W. Gates, *The Farmers Age*; Allan G. Bogue, *From Prairie to Corn Belt*; Eric Lampard, *The Rise of the Dairy Industry in Wisconsin*; Philip Jordan, *German Seeds in Texas Soil*; Robert R. Dykstra, *Kansas Cattle Towns*; Gilbert Fite,

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The Farmers Frontier, 1865-1900; and Donald Winters, *Farmers Without Farms*, to list only a few.

More important, Ebeling extols the virtues of the American system of agriculture throughout the book without once acknowledging the impact of the giant agribusiness corporations that now virtually control American agricultural enterprise. As John Shover noted pointedly in *First Majority—Last Minority: The Transformation of Rural Life in America* (1976), 90 percent of America's largest export crop, grain, is handled by only five concerns: Cargill, Continental, Cook, Dreyfuss, and Bunge (p. 197). The term agribusiness, coined already in 1956 and much in vogue recently, fails even to appear in the detailed index of the book.

The strength of the *Fruited Plain* is its discussion of the scientific aspects of agriculture and the extensive discussion of California farming in the twentieth century, including the aquaduct and irrigation systems. The colonial and midwestern portions of the story suffer by comparison and readers should rely on the newer works mentioned above. That an entomologist would undertake a venture as ambitious as this in agricultural history deserves commendation. Despite the shortcomings, the book can be used with profit by students of American agriculture.

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Joe Hill, by Wallace Stegner. (First published as *The Preacher and the Slave*, 1950). Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980. pp. xiv, 367. \$19.50, \$5.95 paper.

Wallace Stegner's novel *Joe Hill*, first published in 1950 as *The Preacher and the Slave*, was recently reissued by the University of Nebraska Press. It merits rereading, if not for Stegner's insights into the mind and spirit of Joe Hill, who remains stubbornly enigmatic, then for the convincing portrait of the age in which Joe lived and died, and the crucible of labor exploitation and agitation in which he and his many songs were formed. Joe Hill, born Joel Hägglund, and sometimes known as Joseph Hillstrom, was a Swedish immigrant and former sailor who joined the International Workers of the World in 1910, after the age of thirty. In the service of the "One Big Union," Joe's gifts

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