

## Book Reviews

*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

as a musician and artist bloomed, for he was able to capture in the songs he wrote the spirit of angry brotherhood that infused the militant anarchist organization. Only five years after joining up, Joe Hill was executed by a firing squad in Salt Lake City, Utah for a murder he may or may not have committed, after a trial that drew the attention of the entire nation, President Wilson, and the government of Sweden, as well as IWW members around the world.

Not many details are known about the life and the personality of Joe Hill, and so Stegner styles his work "a biographical novel," a speculation on the character of Joe Hill as it might have been, but in every way a work of fiction. And with the sure hand of a master novelist, he writes of Joe's times and his surroundings with an almost palpable richness. He recreates the edgy, busy life of California wharves and ranches and missions for the down and out, of the alien Mormon city, and of the prison where Joe is held through endless litigations and delays and then finally executed. He reminds us forcibly of the roots of the labor movement in the United States, of the exploitation and misery of countless workers, and of the violent revolution that seemed possible, or even probable, from time to time in the second decade of this century. Occasionally, in fact, the detail is so rich that the narrative gets bogged down, but in general, anyone who would like to get the feel of Joe Hill's times could do no better than to read Stegner's novel.

Not so successful is Stegner's portrayal of Joe himself, for it is here that the silence of the record works to the author's disadvantage. No one yet knows whether Joe Hill committed the murder of which he was convicted (on circumstantial evidence), and Joe seems never to have said, instead insisting only that he was innocent until proven guilty, and that his guilt could not be proven. The IWW remained convinced that Joe's death was the result of a conspiracy between copper mining interests and police, and they made Joe a political martyr. Recent historians who have sifted the evidence find no indication of any political element in the execution. Stegner, who also spent a great deal of time researching the evidence, tries to have it both ways. He strongly implies that Joe did commit the murder (of a grocer and his son, during a robbery) but allows Joe's friend, the Lutheran minister Gus Lund, who speaks for the author throughout his novel, to maintain his own doubts in the matter. After almost 250 pages of following Joe's every move, and being allowed into Joe's consciousness, the reader is disconcerted by the sudden change of point of view that the missing facts demand. For the last 130 pages of the novel, we are allowed to see Joe only from a distance, and his character, which

## Book Reviews

had seemed convincing and rather sympathetic, becomes a riddle. The legal arguments and delays which precede his execution are not of sufficient intrinsic interest to carry the narrative without Joe, and so the novel tends to lose momentum. The re-introduction of Lund as the central character only partially corrects this difficulty.

Wallace Stegner has written numerous novels, volumes of stories, and essays. He is particularly interested in the experience of the American West, and of artists who grow up on the periphery of the artistic world. Stegner himself was born in Lake Mills, Iowa, and taught in Muscatine while earning his M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from the University of Iowa. His first book was published in 1938 by Carroll Coleman's Prairie Press, of Muscatine. Although thirty years old, his novel *Joe Hill* remains as interesting a piece of fiction and as plausible a biographical speculation as it was on publication.

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*Gold Dust*, by Donald Dale Jackson. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980. pp. x, 361. Maps, illustrations, source notes, index. \$13.95.

The discovery of gold in California on John Sutter's land grant in December 1848 set in motion one of the greatest folk movements in American history, created a new state almost overnight, and hastened the occupation of western America. The gold rush also produced a vast literature consisting of over two hundred published diaries of forty-niners, and a stream of books about this great event. Considering the bulk of literature about the gold rush, it might be concluded that there has been no need for another book on the event. However, *Gold Dust* is the most complete account of the California gold rush as a human experience that has ever been written.

The author grew up in San Francisco and has written several books about western America. In this book he achieves his goal of presenting an historical experience that has the quality of well-written fiction, while never violating historical canons. Sources are given in the text rather than through footnotes and are listed chapter by chapter in source notes. His goal, he says, was to "tell the story of the gold rush through the experiences, feelings, and thoughts of the people who participated in it. I want to convey what it was like to be on the trail and in the diggings, what the forty-niners felt and feared and dreamed,

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