

some aspect of raising corn or of its social and economic significance such as: origins of corn, colonial uses, preparation for planting, techniques of cultivation, food uses, enemies of corn, etc. In each case the emphasis is upon the actions of people in dealing with corn—the social organization that accompanied agriculture. There is a wealth of detailed information—lore—about how people did what.

The title implies the book covers from 1607 on, but most of the material and evidence concerns the first half of the nineteenth century and the region historians would call the border states—Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, Missouri—the areas most familiar to the author from his family history research.

One can certainly get a fuller sense of the significance of corn for the American economy and social organization past and present from this book, but some may find the style annoying. Corn is personified, the writing is a sort of breathless gee-whiz style. Many customs associated with rural life are attributed to the presence of corn even though they could have developed with any other pioneer grain-based agriculture. For example, the author makes much of the fact that the labor requirements for corn tied the family together as a unit—many kinds of agriculture could do that. Thus it seems he unnecessarily overstates his case. He wants to claim all rural virtues of work came from raising corn. There are no notes, but there is an extensive bibliography. The book is rich in detail which on occasion seems miscellaneous. It was clearly a labor of love for the author and one can get a clear sense of how a system of agriculture has social significance far beyond just a way to make a buck. This is an interesting and useful book for historians but also in part for social scientists and engineers who ought to be concerned about the social consequences of current agricultural change and development. Some review of the social consequences of agriculture in the past can be an enlightening comparison.

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Feeding Multitudes: A History of How Farmers Made America Rich, by Wheeler McMillen. Danville, Illinois: Interstate Printers and Publishers, 1981. pp. xviii, 491. Appendixes. \$12.00 paper.

Agricultural economists use the phrase "farm fundamentalism" to describe farmers' beliefs that their enterprise is basic to economic welfare and that their character is superior through agrarian simplicity. Wheeler McMillen, who presents *Feeding Multitudes* as "a fairly

comprehensive non-academic history of what American farmers have accomplished" (p. v), is a farm fundamentalist run amok. This is not to imply that the sub-discipline which today passes as agricultural history could not benefit from a dose of grass-roots agrarian perspective, but merely to observe that simple contentiousness is no substitute for honest argument.

If "non-academic" means of interest to a readership outside of college campuses, then it is praiseworthy. McMillen seems to think it means simply a peppy style of writing full of rhetorical questions and exclamation points. Vigorous prose requires no such crutches. Often it seems as if he is writing down to the farmers he hopes will be readers. Worse is his attempt to pose as a repository of common sense, which instead results in a sort of folk pedantry. "Through the centuries the strong have prevailed" (p. 15), he announces, and later, "In the long run, economics will make wiser decisions than legislatures" (p. 353). At times he seems to flaunt the vacuousness of his prose. One chapter begins, "It seems fitting that the first oranges to reach the western hemisphere came from an island that is shaped like an orange" (p. 178).

The content of the book otherwise is an odd mixture of hyperbole and calumny. Hugh Hammond Bennett, the soil conservationist, fairs remarkably well as one who "perhaps accomplished more good for mankind's future than any other figure who lived in the twentieth century" (p. 32), but poor Eli Whitney suffers condemnation for inventing the cotton gin (thereby enslaving millions) instead of developing polyester. Astonishing as it is that an author can dismiss the agriculture of American Indians with the ungrammatical observation, "They practiced neither the industry nor the thrift which characterize true farmers" (p. 12), the amazement cannot compare with that of Ivy Leaguers who will learn from *Feeding Multitudes* that entrance requirements are tougher at agricultural colleges than at Princeton.

McMillen eschews chronology and arranges the book into a series of topical essays. As a scheme for the organization of a survey of American agricultural history, the approach may have merit; this book lacks the seriousness of intent and the underpinning of research to give it a fair trial.

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