

occupy chapter two. The next three sections use aggregate census data and secondary sources to illustrate how that thesis might help explain long-term changes in American agriculture. While these empirical chapters do not uncover any new evidence, they do suggest new ways of looking at familiar issues. In the two chapters on cotton production, for example, Mann argues persuasively that natural obstacles to capitalist development may have contributed to the succession of slavery, sharecropping, and wage labor in the American South. The final chapter and appendixes explore the possibility of extending the Mann-Dickinson thesis to other areas, including housework and biotechnology.

Agrarian Capitalism is clearly written and logically organized. It is not always easy reading, but it is remarkably free from the thickets of obscurantist prose that typically flourish in theoretical writing. Nevertheless, the book will appeal chiefly to specialists in agrarian issues, southern history, or Marxist theory. Historians of midwestern agriculture may find the Mann-Dickinson thesis helpful in explaining the persistence of family farming in their region. The concept of natural obstacles may also offer new insights into early industrialization, especially in resource-oriented activities like lumbering. Like the best interdisciplinary works, *Agrarian Capitalism* demonstrates the benefits to be gained from a closer alliance of social theory and historical practice.

Bull Threshers and Bindlestiffs: Harvesting and Threshing on the North American Plains, by Thomas D. Isern. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1990. xiii, 248 pp. Illustrations, tables, graphs, notes, index. \$29.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY JAMES L. FORSYTHE, FORT HAYS STATE UNIVERSITY

Thomas Isern's richly illustrated, well-documented, and well-written book is an excellent scholarly study of harvesting and threshing on the North American plains. He gracefully tells the story of harvesting and threshing from antiquity to the initial settlement of the plains. Then he artfully crafts chapters on the development of harvesting and threshing on the plains. He adds interest to the study by combining folklife with the machine and tells about the bindlestiffs, or the migrant agricultural workers, and the bull threshers. He carefully explains the developing practices of harvesting and threshing from Texas to the Canadian plains and from the Ohio valley to the Palouse valley of Washington. He ties it all together with his discussion of the development of the combine.

The book begins with a chapter on threshing and harvesting from early beginnings with the labor intensive use of the sickle and the scythe in antiquity to the newer processes of reaping in the early nineteenth century. He carefully describes early inventions that improved the reaper in Europe and traces these efforts to the North American continent and to the prairies and the plains. He traces the invention of binders and headers and the change as horsepower slowly gave way to steam power. He relates how farmers and inventors constantly sought ways to reduce the need for agricultural labor and to rely more upon mechanization.

The chapter on harvesting traces the harvesting technique through the development of binders and headers. Interspersed in the chapter are such terms as header stack-barges, spikes, stockers, back-swaths, zerks, and ricks, all terms relating to various aspects of harvesting. Anyone who experienced the earlier wheat harvests will enjoy revisiting that earlier experience through Isern's graphic descriptions. An example of Isern's careful attention to detail is his extensive discussion in this chapter of the various methods of arranging stacks in the stack yard for threshing. He also discusses with clarity and in detail the curing of the grain, the color of the berry, and sweating grain.

Isern notes in his chapter on threshing that threshing technology developed slowly on the plains. He illustrates this by describing the traditional threshing on the plains and the prairies, such as dragging logs on the threshing floor by the Doukhobors in Saskatchewan, pounding out the berries by the German-Russian Baptists in North Dakota, pulling of threshing stones by Mennonites in Kansas, and the use of horses to tramp the grain in Texas. He notes that the expansion of the railroads onto the plains aided in the expansion of the threshing machine technology to the plains. And when steam replaced horsepower, the old methods of harvesting and threshing were doomed.

The farm hand chapter is excellent. Isern agrees with Carey McWilliams's contentions in *Ill Fares the Land* that the bindlestiffs differed from transient laborers outside the wheat-growing region. However, he disagrees that the use of transient labor provided opportunities for small farmers to work during harvest to earn extra income. The wages were too low and the cost of travel reduced potential income.

The switch to combines on the plains was slow as the existing harvesting and threshing system that had evolved into the early twentieth century was working effectively. The increased mechanization that came by wedding the tractor to the harvesting and threshing process and the savings in labor costs were the keys to a new era of

change. From the marriage evolved the modern self-propelled combine. The results were substantial savings, especially in labor costs. Adoption of the combine was faster on the southern plains than on the northern prairies, and Isern explains the many reasons for this pattern.

The concluding chapter is an insightful essay on the plains. Isern reviews the interpretations of the plains by both American and Canadian scholars. He evaluates the environmental studies of the plains and the prairies and considers the studies of ethnicity and the cultural heritage of the area. All play a role in interpreting the plains.

The notes illustrate the author's complete command of the primary and secondary sources. The book is profusely illustrated with period photographs, one of the features of the study. The demands of both the public and the professional reader are met by the author's graceful writing, full descriptions, interesting narrative, and accurate detail. Thus Isern provides a lucid visual and written account of harvesting and threshing on the North American plains for all readers.

This book is must reading for anyone interested in agricultural history, local and regional history, folklife, and the history of agricultural technology. Scholars in the field will find the book to be indispensable, as Isern's excellent study will be the standard work on harvesting and threshing on the plains for many years.

Eighty Acres: Elegy for a Family Farm, by Ronald Jager. Boston: Beacon Press, 1990. xv, 257 pp. \$15.00 cloth.

REVIEWED BY JOHN DE JONG, CENTRAL COLLEGE

"Poetry would have to wait; we were working class" (161). With these words Ronald Jager recalls the unsentimental approach to work on the Michigan farm where he spent his youth in the 1930s and 1940s. In this elegy for his family farm, the time for poetry has arrived.

Formerly a philosophy professor and now a free-lance writer, Jager is a master storyteller who creates strong visual images of places, characters, and activities. Witty lines abound: "We had enough Puritanism bred into us to spoil some fun, but not enough to find comfort in doctrine" (207). Occasionally, the philosopher surfaces to discover meaning in prosaic episodes. A description of the unvarying seating arrangement in the family auto leads to light philosophizing on the value of structure, of which there was an abundance on the Jager farm. But philosophizing is kept well in the background as events are allowed to speak for themselves—to entertain, evoke nostalgic recol-

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