

Agriculture and National Development: Views on the Nineteenth Century, edited by Lou Ferleger. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1990. xxiii, 357 pp. Tables, notes, bibliography, appendixes, index. \$39.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY JON GJERDE, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA AT BERKELEY

Two very dissimilar "peculiar institutions" dominated rural America in the nineteenth century, as this important collection of essays illustrates. The most familiar, of course, was racial slavery, which profoundly shaped agricultural production and rural life in the antebellum South and whose impact continued to influence the region even after its abolition. Yet there was another, more propitious "peculiar institution," which, according to Jeremy Atack and Fred Batemen, was even rarer in world history than agricultural slavery (25). The system of independent freehold farming that dominated the agricultural North throughout much of the nineteenth century created a society replete with opportunities and constraints, tensions and dynamics, that differed radically from both the South and urbanizing East.

Since few rural systems are so divergent as the slave South and the freeholding North, the volume is arranged by region. Five selections form the section on the agricultural South. In a lengthy essay, David F. Weiman critiques the "staple thesis" in the antebellum South, which, he argues, is a less viable explanation of southern development than his own "institutional perspective" (120) an approach that stresses the institutions of plantation and human slavery. His argument would have been more convincing had he focused on the American colonial era, when, as advocates of the staple thesis point out, choices of crop production were made that inexorably shaped that very institutional development. Richard H. Steckel's review summarizes significant historiographical issues in the antebellum South, such as its distinctive patterns of fertility, health, and migration. The remaining three contributions pertain to agriculture in the postbellum South following the abolishment of slavery. Since the authors of these essays premise their arguments on either Marxist or neoclassical economics, they provide very different views on the nature of the southern agricultural economy and society. Whereas Lee J. Alston reiterates Robert Higgs's contention that it was the political culture of the South rather than market arrangements that caused the region to languish amidst racism and slow development, Joseph P. Reidy and Jay R. Mandle focus on the economic and political structures that created the southern "agricultural proletariat."

The five essays on northern agriculture and two essays on special topics of women and immigrants in nineteenth-century agriculture will be of greater interest to the reader of Iowa history than those on the South. The issues they address, moreover, seem much fresher. That may be due, as Hal S. Barron points out in his essay, to a recent "rediscovery" (3) and reconsideration by historians of the tensions within the northern rural world. A starting point for this fascinating reassessment is economists Atack and Bateman's exploration of the "peculiar" economic and political institutions that worked to create rural northern society. In their essay, a summary of the argument in their recently published book, *To Their Own Soil: Agriculture in the Antebellum North* (1987), Atack and Bateman depict the region as one with relative equality—especially when compared to the slave South or the industrializing East—and less profitability. This relatively equal distribution of wealth in the Midwest was principally a product of the widespread opportunity to acquire ownership of land. Yet it was precisely the peculiar rates of landedness that tended to drive down farmers' returns on investment compared to returns in manufacturing and transportation. Those who remained on the land despite its lower rates of return did so, the authors conclude, because they clung to the Yeoman Dream. They were happy to "satisfice" with acceptable returns while they enjoyed the independent self-reliance that farming bestowed.

The remaining essays on the North, which review the literature of northern agriculturalists and suggest new directions for research, explore issues that follow from the "peculiarities" cited by Atack and Bateman. Barron, for example, writes a stimulating review article on life among what he calls the "silent majority" of nineteenth-century Americans: rural northerners who then composed the bulk of the population of the United States but whose history has been relatively ignored by recent historians. He concentrates on social issues that have recently captivated social historians, such the expansion of the market economy, the relationship between family and farm, relations of class and status on the countryside, and relationships between men and women on the farm. Donald L. Winters surveys the economic issues of the postbellum Middle West. He examines questions of land disposal and the mechanization and commercialization of midwestern agriculture, concerns on which he himself has conducted important empirical research, and sets the differing schools of interpretation into historiographical context. Finally, Dorothy Schwieder and R. Douglas Hurt explore political and social developments of the Midwest and Northeast, respectively, from the end of the Civil War until around the turn of the century.

The review essays on women and immigrants in agriculture are thoughtful explorations of gender and European ethnicity in the agricultural context. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese ambitiously—perhaps too ambitiously—attempts to assess the experience of rural women in North and South, in slavery and freedom, throughout the century. Kathleen Neils Conzen's splendid essay on immigrants in agriculture concludes the collection. A masterful consolidation of historiographical schools and empirical research, Conzen underscores the "cultural degrees of freedom" (326) possessed by folk in the rural immigrant communities situated mainly in the Middle West. That freedom encouraged the immigrants to become capitalist farmers while they nurtured ethnic traditions. In yet another context, we observe the ambiguities and tensions bestowed by that peculiar mid-western institution that simultaneously encouraged market integration and independence.

This collection, like any anthology, is uneven in quality, and the essays as a group would have been more coherent had the authors engaged one another in interpretation and substance. Alston and Reidy, who fundamentally disagree on the trajectory of economic condition for African-American farmers around the turn of the century, for example, trot out the same numerical evidence and draw differing conclusions from it. Nonetheless, readers of this volume will profit from sampling the exciting recent historical explorations of farmers in North and South who, enmeshed within their "peculiar" conditions, contributed to the making of the United States.

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The Sociology of U.S. Agriculture: An Ecological Perspective, by Don E. Albrecht and Steve H. Murdock. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1990. vii, 249 pp. Graphs, references, index. \$27.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY JOHN OPIE, NEW JERSEY INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

This book, by rural sociologists from Texas A&M University, offers a comprehensive and up-to-date textbook summary of American agriculture from a sociological viewpoint. I know of nothing comparable in print today. There is a chapter on institutional infrastructure that depends heavily on useful historical statistics. Another chapter covers agriculture's physical environment, including farm size, soil, water, and resource depletion. Separate chapters are also dedicated to traditional sociological topics, such as population and rural communities. Particularly useful today is the authors' solid chapter on nonfarm organizations.

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