

Book Reviews

Les Icariens: The Utopian Dream in Europe and America, by Robert P. Sutton. Statue of Liberty–Ellis Island Centennial Series. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994. xiv, 199 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$26.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY CARL J. GUARNERI, SAINT MARY'S COLLEGE OF CALIFORNIA

Étienne Cabet (1788–1856) was a French socialist with working-class roots, militant tendencies, and grandiose dreams. In his romantic novel *Voyage en Icarie* (1839), Cabet pictured a model society whose proscription of money, property, and immorality left everyone equal and happy. In 1848, having decided that the Second Republic was no closer to this ideal than the July Monarchy it replaced, Cabet chose emigration over insurrection. More than four hundred followers set off with him for the United States, beginning a tireless quest for the elusive "community of goods" that spawned no fewer than six experiments. On the Red River at Icarie, Texas (1848–49), at the former Mormon settlement of Nauvoo, Illinois (1849–1857), at Cheltenham outside St. Louis (1857–1864), at Icaria Speranza near Cloverdale, California (1881–1886), and finally in a community split into two experiments near Corning, Iowa (1857–1898) the Icarian dream lived, died, and was born again. Not until a half-century after Cabet landed in New Orleans, when the tiny remnant of aged farmers in southwestern Iowa quietly agreed to disband, did the saga of Icaria come to a close.

Two decades ago, Christopher Johnson's *Utopian Communism in France: Cabet and the Icarians, 1839–1851* (1974) provided the first scholarly analysis of Cabet's influence in his homeland. Now Robert P. Sutton, after gathering a sizable collection of Icarian writings at Western Illinois University, has written an equally impressive study of the American Icarian colonies. Although modest in size, his book features a brisk, clear narrative and draws on a wide range of sources from Europe and the United States. Given these disparate materials and the profusion of conflicting testimony by Icaria's fractious members, Sutton's careful but decisive sorting of the record is a triumph of energy and judgment. The appearance of this first reliable history of Icaria will be applauded by devotees of communitarian and Great Plains history.

Taken as a whole, Icaria was the longest-lived nineteenth-century secular utopia; viewed from any of its fragment communities, however, it was among the most disastrous. In support of the more positive view, Sutton notes the enduring power of Cabet's charismatic appeal. As its leader evolved "from propagandist to messiah" (41), the Icarian movement became a cult-like sect. Effectively but not always accurately, Sutton contrasts Cabet's charisma, the Icarians' self-imposed isolation, and their strict communal principles with the popular but short-lived Fourierist utopian experiments of the 1840s. More revealing is Sutton's portrayal of the ethic of idealism and self-sacrifice that the Icarian dream instilled. Drawing on Jacques Rancière's evocative deconstruction of nineteenth-century French workers' writings, *La nuit des prolétaires* (1981), Sutton describes an Icarian temperament that despised bourgeois materialism and in compensatory fashion revelled in utopian dreams. Their near-religious faith in Icaria enabled Cabet's communists to keep going after his death in 1856, to view failure as the result of apostasy rather than incompetence, and to start over when communities went bankrupt. In good times, a fraternal ethos lent the communities a warm, festive ambiance that Sutton allows himself to linger over in appreciative descriptions of communal anniversaries, picnics, and concerts.

On the other hand, the Icarians were more like the contentious and often incompetent Fourierist communitarians than Sutton suggests. At every location they started with crippling debt and failed to attain economic viability. Like most Fourierists, Cabet's recruits were skilled urban artisans who never reconciled themselves to hot, backbreaking work on isolated farms. They compiled, moreover, an astounding record of community-shattering disputes over tobacco and alcohol, private property, democracy versus authoritarian rule, and personal allegiance to the wildly erratic Cabet, who stretched his followers' patience. (He was expelled from his own community at Nauvoo.)

To Sutton's credit, even while sympathizing with the Icarians' aims, he does not conceal their serious flaws. Readers will find evidence for both "success" and "failure" interpretations in Sutton's tight and balanced narrative. *Les Icariens* is so concise, however, that it will leave scholars with deeper interest somewhat frustrated. To take just one example, Icaria Speranza, which has been the subject of substantial book chapters elsewhere, is described in only two pages. More importantly, due to the book's brevity Sutton fails to pursue several promising contextual angles. Cabet and the Icarians' ties to French social romanticism, their relation to the history of American utopianism, and their views on American politics are quickly passed over.

One surprisingly neglected area, especially for a monograph in a series on immigration, is the role of ethnicity. Although Sutton does not address this issue, it appears from his evidence that the Icarians' strong allegiance to French culture and language may have been as important as communist ideology in keeping the sect intact amid New World opportunities and distractions. Conversely, the Icarians' ethnocentrism and their requirement that applicants be fluent in French prevented them from attracting or admitting Americans interested in their communities. Too little is said in *Les Icariens* about the group's interactions with Americans and their culture.

These, however, are minor criticisms of a book that is both a good story and a solid scholarly work. Although *Les Icariens* is not the last word on the Icarian movement, together with Christopher Johnson's study it provides the firm foundation upon which future scholarship on Cabet and his colonies will be built.

Making the Corn Belt: A Geographical History of Middle-Western Agriculture, by John C. Hudson. *Midwestern History and Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994. ix, 254 pp. Illustrations, maps, charts, notes, index. \$35.00 cloth.

REVIEWED BY MARY ESCHELBACH GREGSON, KNOX COLLEGE

John Hudson weaves social, demographic, economic, and agricultural history together with geological and anthropological evidence to produce his masterful *Making the Corn Belt*. Hudson gives us a sense of the Corn Belt landscape from European settlement through the present.

Hudson defines the Corn Belt as counties in which aggregate corn output exceeds 7.5 bushels per improved acre; additionally, the county's farmers must raise at least 18.5 bushels of corn for each head of livestock. From "five islands" of productive farmland in Tennessee, Kentucky, and Ohio in 1840, the Corn Belt spread west along waterways into Indiana, Illinois, and Missouri during the next decade, then north to Iowa and the eastern fringe of Nebraska and Kansas by 1880.

Geologic and climatic change shaped the contours of the Corn Belt, but the land white settlers found was not primeval. Native American hunting and ground-clearing techniques included regular firing of the land; woody plants were held in check and grasses were favored. Hudson's story suggests that historians should revise their estimates of the cost of land clearing. White settlers who arrived shortly after the Native Americans were pushed west tilled land that had only begun to be retaken from the grass by the shrubs and trees. For example, the Barrens of southern Kentucky were "the first extensive tract of grassland settled by the white population of North America"

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