

questions invite consideration as we await the reinvention of Indian and white relations at this cultural border.

Rural Radicals: Righteous Rage in the American Grain, by Catherine McNicol Stock. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996. xi, 219 pp. Illustrations, notes, note on methods, note on sources, index. \$24.95 cloth.

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Catherine McNicol Stock's imaginative book tries to latch on to the uproar brought on by incidents in the past decade at Oklahoma City, Waco, and Ruby Ridge. Judging from advertisements in literary magazines, *Rural Radicals* had an unusual amount of publicity when it first appeared. As the preface makes clear, Stock's editor convinced her that "there was such a thing as a general-interest book written by an academically trained historian," and welcomed her proposal. However, the book received only two reviews in the eastern press. Perhaps one of the reasons it was ignored was because of its academic style. While *Rural Radicals* has several admirable characteristics, accessibility to a lay audience is not one of them.

A ritual of academic writing is the "touching of the cap" to distinguished scholars who plowed the ground earlier. Given the boldness of the project—a brief survey of the contradictory legacy of rural activism over the past 250 years—Stock depends on the secondary literature for most of her coverage. As the book contains the full scholarly apparatus of bibliographical essay and endnotes, the name dropping may be annoying for the general reader. One other reason why *Rural Radicals* is not very appealing to laypersons is that the two main historical chapters are stodgy. Nonspecialists are not adept at writing entertainingly about early American history. Stock spends a good deal of time on Bacon's Rebellion, Shay's Rebellion, and the colonial regulator movement—to show the reader that rural rage today has a precedent. These stories—Stock uses the hip academic term to describe some of her historical coverage—unfortunately lack a storytelling flair to hold interest.

The book is more successful as an academic historical essay. Indeed, few scholars to whom Stock shows deference would have dared to produce such a bold analysis. She asks three questions at the outset. Why, over the course of history, has rural America spawned so much anger? Why is the political legacy of this activism so contradictory? And why has an earlier reform mode of activism been overwhelmed recently by intolerant right-wing paranoia? The book is

divided into three chapters. The first discusses the reform mode—what Stock terms rural producer radicalism—the legacy of the Whiskey Rebels, the sub-treasury populists, and the Farmers' Holiday protesters. The next treats the culture of vigilantism: the ugly extremism of the colonial regulators, the KKK, and the World War I patriots. A final chapter analyzes current white rural radicalism.

Stock suggests that one of the reasons for the confusing legacy of rural radicalism is its context: its frontier past, its class, race, and gender makeup, and the ubiquity of evangelical Protestantism. For example, ruralists were often in a peripheral economic and cultural relationship to the metropolis, which left them at a disadvantage and resulted in protests. Stock, in an earlier book, wrote about the tensions between the "old middle class" of the small towns of the upper Midwest—the store owners, physicians, and farmers—and the technocrat "new middle class"—the New Dealer extension agents with government pay checks. In the same context she also underlined the tensions between dirt farmers and town merchants, and old stock Americans and Scandinavians. The latter supported insurgent political forces such as the Non-Partisan League, while the former remained Republicans and formed their own organization, the Independent Voter Association. Racial conflict was virulent in rural areas. Blacks, whites, and browns competed for a meager living as sharecroppers, tenants, or day laborers. Rural people also had contradictory experiences with gender. While farm women did much of the work, they rarely received either monetary or legal recognition for their efforts. Finally, although the fundamentalist and evangelical church eventually became a bastion of conservatism, in the early nineteenth century it battled more established denominations to democratize religion.

While the producer radicalism thesis is convincing, the culture of vigilantism thesis seems less so. Despite Stock's wide reading on the subject, she seems to have ignored Richard Maxwell Brown's article on violence in the *Oxford History of the American West*. Brown shows that vigilantism was instigated by an establishment that tried to "incorporate" the countryside by intimidating the locals. Surely much of the vigilantism in American history—by the Klan, by super-patriots during World War I, indeed by Nathaniel Bacon's rebels—could be seen in this light: as a manipulation of events by elites for their own ends.

Similarly, I am not convinced by Stock's efforts to show that recent irrational and sometimes violent behavior in rural America has much of a precedent. Certainly one of the purposes of writing history is to emphasize continuities with the present, yet rural radicalism today has as much to do with the condition of postmodernity—the

easy availability of information, the rurbanization of the countryside, the power of the media and the desire to manipulate its message—as it does with any legacy of the past. Here I am thinking of the use of tractorcades by the AAM to generate publicity in the media, the exploitation of the internet and talk radio to dispense controversy, and the fact that Randy Weaver and the Texas Republicans were rural transplants who went to rural areas because the living was cheap and they liked wide-open spaces.

One can underline this point in the Iowa context. As Stock suggests, locality seems to affect behavior. Although Weaver came from Iowa, he became radicalized in Idaho, a state recognized for its extremism. To be sure, Iowa farm families in the 1980s sometimes behaved irrationally under extreme economic stress. They sold government grain, threatened suicide, and were influenced by *Posse Comitatus* literature to file nuisance suits in the local county court. But regardless of whether they stayed in farming or not, they were generally rooted in their communities and quickly righted their course.

Stock's book would work well as a vehicle for class discussion, but not as a mass-market paperback. She is a talented historian; her future lies in writing scholarly books, not popular ones.

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