

the presentations challenging and informative. Certainly it will be difficult for anyone interested in the subject of farmland to ignore this book.

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

GILBERT C. FITE

*New Roots for Agriculture*, by Wes Jackson. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985. xv, 150 pp. \$6.95 paper.

*New Roots for Agriculture* is a new edition of Wes Jackson's 1980 volume on the ecological shortcomings of American agriculture. Jackson believes that our heavily-mechanized, chemically-oriented agriculture is indictable on many grounds, but especially for its destructiveness of soil resources. He suggests a shift away from the cultivation of annual grains and toward "perennial polyculture"—the growth of self-perpetuating grains in an uncultivated prairie setting. Not only does Jackson believe that this would save, and perhaps even restore, the soil but he also sees it as an integral part of a new and more fulfilling rural life. In a new afterword, Jackson discusses his recent experiments with perennial grains at his land institute near Salina, Kansas.

It is appropriate that a new edition of Jackson's book should come out in the mid-eighties, when agriculture faces an immediate economic crisis and perhaps a long-term environmental one. One of the thoughtful spokespeople for alternative agriculture, Jackson deserves the attention of people concerned about the future of our food and farming system.

NORTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY

DAVID DANBOM

*Cotton Crisis*, by Robert E. Snyder. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984. xvii, 174 pp. Notes, illustrations, bibliography, index. \$19.95 cloth.

Throughout most of its history the economy of the Deep South was in thrall to a single crop: cotton. An inedible commodity produced largely for sale on a far-flung market, the fleecy staple rewarded its servants handsomely in antebellum times but its sway became increasingly burdensome in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Inhibited from developing a diversified agricultural base by numerous structural and technological impediments, southern farmers not only suffered from chronic poverty, but were subject to the constant risk that the intricate web of market relations which attached them to Boston and Liverpool might be disrupted, plunging an already precarious

economy into a tailspin. The political and social ramifications of one of those periodic collapses is the theme of Robert Snyder's *Cotton Crisis*.

Snyder presents the book as a case study, noting that "the traditional cotton crisis, in which such cross-currents as crop size, government forecasts, carry-overs, and labor unrest broke the price on commodity exchanges and threw the South into a financial and psychological tailspin, has been neglected" (xv). The case he has chosen to study is the crisis of 1931, one fraught with spectacular political consequences. This year was the second crop year of the Great Depression, and the cotton belt was already staggering under an 8.7 million bale carryover equal to nearly three-quarters of annual consumption. On top of this came word that the 1931 harvest would be bountiful; indeed, at 17 million bales, it turned out to be the second largest on record. The Federal Farm Board, unable to stabilize the situation through its commodity purchase program, proposed that every third row of cotton be plowed under. This suggestion met with derision from the South.

Farmers, however, were desperate for some relief, and the man most prepared to offer it was Louisiana Governor Huey Long. While the proposal to prohibit cottonraising in the southern states did not originate with the "Kingfish," he speedily made the "drop-a-crop" idea his own and used his command of such emerging media as Shreveport radio station KWKH to make it the foundation of a mass movement. Meetings of farmers throughout Dixie enthusiastically endorsed the scheme and, in the process, supplied Long with his first major following outside the confines of the Pelican State. The success of the movement, however, required participation from all the major producing states—especially Texas, which alone raised nearly one third of the total crop. Governor Ross Sterling complained that the scheme violated property rights, adamantly opposed it, and thus embroiled himself and the Texas state legislature in an interstate shouting match with Long, who accused them of pandering to special interests. In the end, Texas turned down "drop-a-crop" and substituted an acreage-control law which found few followers elsewhere in the region and which was finally struck down by a state court.

Snyder has provided an excellent narrative of this striking event in southern history. For those historians who have encountered such crises but have been unwilling to make sense of the reams of commentary they produced, he has given a welcome guide which can help grasp the course of events in such other famous crises as that of 1914. His implicit claim of typicality for the events of 1931, however, seems wide of the mark. The break in cotton prices of that year was hardly a bolt out of the blue, as was the case in 1914, but was part of a continuing collapse that had begun earlier and that continued later. The existence of

an agricultural stabilization program in the form of the Farm Board was, of course, a new development.

Snyder's stress on the importance of labor unrest as a factor in the crisis suggests similar problems. He argues that cotton farmers were heavily and chronically dependent on casual labor to harvest the crop and that the possibility of collective action by pickers to raise wages posed a serious threat of disruption. This may well be true with regard to the 1931 situation. However, as Warren Whately has recently suggested (in "Labor for the Picking: The New Deal in the South," *Journal of Economic History*, December 1983), transient labor had traditionally been used chiefly on farms with relatively large acreage and at least partial mechanization, and was marginal to tenant and sharecrop farms. The impact of the depression, and later the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, drastically altered the proportion of large to small units, while creating a large floating labor force available for picking. By 1931, then, the role of transient labor in the cotton harvest may have been unprecedentedly large, which would have increased the impact of labor unrest on the cotton market.

Snyder's book also suffers to some degree from a journalistic perspective that all day-to-day events are of roughly equivalent value. An entire chapter on southern complaints about the bad tidings which the U.S. Crop Reporting Service brought, for instance, seems a bit excessive; the service was, after all, only the messenger. More seriously, Snyder seems to be overly sympathetic to Long's "drop-a-crop" crusade. He disposes effectively of some objections to the scheme (e.g. fear of foreign competition), but too easily dismisses the problem of finding alternative crops and the difficulties of transforming a rigid economic structure for the sake of a short-term goal. He also neglects problems of enforcement which, he notes, contributed significantly to scuttling the alternative program of acreage reduction. These are minor objections, however, and generally do not affect the value of the work. All told, Snyder has succeeded admirably in illuminating a pivotal moment of the southern agricultural past.

VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY

DAVID L. CARLTON

*Cotton Fields No More: Southern Agriculture, 1865-1980*, by Gilbert C. Fite. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1984. xiii, 273 pp. Notes, illustrations, bibliography, index. \$28.00 cloth, \$10.00 paper.

In the course of forty years experience in historical research and writing, Gilbert C. Fite has amassed a huge amount of material. Some of it is new, some of it is old, but all of it is melded into his history of south-

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