

An Agrarian Republic: Farming, Antislavery Politics, and Nature Parks in the Civil War Era

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The letters, journals, and memoirs of trail migrants demonstrate both the commonalities and uniqueness of their experiences. Amid the sameness of miles gained and landmarks noted, they left a fascinating and informative record of what they saw and the choices they faced. In this second of a proposed four-volume series about going west along the Overland Trail, editor Michael L. Tate (assisted by Will Bagley and Richard Rieck) focuses on '49ers bound for California. This volume continues to satisfy the project's initial goal of finding documents "truly representative of the great migrations" (15). In *A Treatise, Showing the Best Way to California*, Sidney Roberts, a Mormon from Iowa City and early promoter of Kaneshville as a jumping-off point, argued against sea travel in favor of the land route passing through Salt Lake City, and he assured his readers that Mormons could provide assistance anywhere along the way. The remaining narratives, like those by Ferguson and Hawley, describe trail life and provide insights into their authors' attitudes and character. Benjamin Robert Biddle, for example, paid east-bound travelers to carry his mail to Springfield, Illinois, where his journal entries appeared in the *Daily Illinois State Journal*. He lamented being far from home and family, but, he said, "As the world is, there is a necessity for gold" (101). Because of this, many on the trail had "adopted a coarseness of manners and language," yet he hoped that "all may learn lessons of wisdom by the study of themselves" (102).

This volume, like its predecessor (and presumably those to follow), will prove helpful for researchers and excite readers interested in the lives of gold-seeking pioneers. The editors provide four maps reprinted from studies such as Merrill Mattes's *Platte River Road Narratives*, photographs and illustrations, a lengthy bibliography, and explanatory introductions and footnotes. It is an impressive effort and an important addition to trail studies.

An Agrarian Republic: Farming, Antislavery Politics, and Nature Parks in the Civil War Era, by Adam Wesley Dean. Civil War America Series. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015. x, 230 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95 paperback.

Reviewer Tim Lehman is professor of history at Rocky Mountain College, Billings, Montana. He is the author of *Public Values, Private Lands: Farmland Preservation Policy, 1933–1985* (1995).

An Agrarian Republic reminds us that most mid-nineteenth-century Americans lived in a world of small, self-sufficient farms, not yet dominated by the industrial juggernaut looming on the horizon by century's end. That agrarian world generated a system of values, beliefs, and fears

that affirmed the northern and midwestern small-farm society even as it disapproved of southern plantation society. According to this ideal, only small, family-owned farms could produce virtuous citizens, wise land-use patterns, stable multigenerational communities, and a strong Union. Plantation slavery, in contrast, yielded, in this view, an inefficient system of agriculture that wasted soils, degraded both white and black labor, and raised up an artificial aristocracy of slaveowners whose illegitimate power threatened the Union.

Land laws that dated to the early republic—the Land Ordinance of 1785 and the Northwest Ordinance of 1787—intended to promote small-scale farming, education, local autonomy, and a virtuous citizenry but by the 1850s were threatened by the corrupt “Slave Power” that wanted to monopolize the public domain lands of the West. Adam Wesley Dean brings to this familiar story a refreshing emphasis on wise use of the soil as a key element enabling multigenerational community stability in the Midwest. If good soil made good citizens in these regions, the soil-exhausting practices of slave plantations left behind a degraded natural environment and required a constant search for new land in order for the unnatural oligarchy of slaveowners to maintain their unjust power over land and society alike.

During the Civil War, the Republican-dominated Congress was able to spread this model republic across the continent by enshrining these agrarian ideals into a series of familiar laws: the Homestead Act, the Land Grant College Act, and the Pacific Railway Act. Even federal subsidies for the transcontinental railroad, Dean contends, were motivated not primarily by a view to industrialization but by the need to tie the small farming communities of the West to their midwestern and eastern markets. Along with establishing the Department of Agriculture, these policies would ensure the orderly development of farms, churches, and schools that would “civilize” the West, defeat the “barbarism” of plantation agriculture, and promote a permanent, unified agrarian republic (80).

In the most intriguing chapters of this fine book, Dean follows this agrarian ideology into the unfamiliar territory of nature parks and Reconstruction in the West, areas that exposed fissures and failures in this agrarian ideology. The creation of a public park in the magnificent Yosemite Valley of California pitted those who held to the ideal of privately owned small farms against others who believed that areas of spectacular natural beauty “would improve the mind and spirit,” hasten California’s transformation from “barbarism” to “civilization,” and demonstrate to the world that a republican government was capable of grand accomplishments.

Reconstruction Republicans demonstrated their “environmental view of citizenship” in their treatment of southern freedpeople and western Indians. Both groups, Dean’s agrarians held, should learn to “farm the soil in soil-enhancing ways” and follow the agricultural path that would transform them into civilized Victorian Christians. This civilizing project stalled in the South because the “violent opposition” of southern whites blocked land redistribution and failed in the West because the Indians preferred “to maintain a hunting-and-gathering lifestyle” rather than take up farming (136). In Dean’s view, Reconstruction ended not with the withdrawal of federal troops from the South in 1877 but with the 1887 Dawes Act, a kind of Indian homestead act that allotted reservation land into private ownership in order to coerce native peoples into habits of cultivation.

The strength of this book is that it brings together several subfields of history—environmental, agricultural, and the history of the Civil War and of native peoples—all understood through the lens of agrarian fundamentalism. While some specialists in each subfield may quibble with details, this approach generates fascinating insights and should spark new lines of inquiry. Dean’s sources are almost all national in scope; how would this analysis look at the local level? If republicanism led to nature parks on a grand scale, did it also contribute to the appreciation of nature in cities and towns? How did the project of civilizing southern freedpeople and western natives play out in the sermons and newspapers of midwestern communities where those republican farmers already lived? To what extent did race play a role in defining the paired opposites of “barbarism” and “civilization?” Overall, *An Agrarian Republic* is a well-written, important book for specialists and general readers alike and should spark renewed interest in nineteenth-century midwestern agrarian values and practices.

Lincoln and the Immigrant, by Jason H. Silverman. Concise Lincoln Library. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2015. 159 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$24.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Bruce Bigelow is professor of geography at Butler University. He is the author of “Who Voted for Lincoln in Indiana? The Voting Behavior of Ethno-Religious Groups in the Presidential Elections of 1860 and 1864” (*Journal of the Indiana Academy of Social Sciences*, 2005).

Jason Silverman has provided a succinct overview of Abraham Lincoln’s views and relationships with immigrants from his years as a young adult in Springfield to his term as president. Historiographically, Silverman has not actually broken new ground so much as he has gath-

James L. Huston, *The British Gentry, The Southern Planter, and the Northern Family Farmer: Agriculture and Sectional Antagonism in North America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015), xi–xvi, 75–128; Adam Wesley Dean, *An Agrarian Republic: Farming, Antislavery Politics, and Nature Parks in the Civil War Era* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2015); Ariel Ron, *Grassroots Leviathan: Northern*.
Seymour Drescher, "Cart Whip and Billy Roller: Antislavery and Reform Symbolism in Industrializing Britain," *Journal of Social History* 15 (Autumn 1981), 3–24; Betty Fladeland, *Abolitionists and Working-Class Problems in the Age of Revolution* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984). *An Agrarian Republic: Farming, Antislavery Politics, and Nature Parks in the Civil War Era*. Civil War America Series. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015. 256 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4696-1991-0. Dean maintains that historians "cannot understand the complexity and nuance of the Civil War era without understanding the agrarian world that the participants lived in." The historiography of the era, he argues, slips far too often into what he senses as the prevailing "leitmotif" of nineteenth-century American history—namely, that of ever-increasing industrialization. The Arab Agricultural Revolution was the transformation in agriculture from the 8th to the 13th century in the Islamic region of the Old World. The agronomic literature of the time, with major books by Ibn Bassal and Abū l-Khayr al-Ishbāli, demonstrates the extensive diffusion of useful plants to Medieval Spain (al-Andalus), and the growth in Islamic scientific knowledge of agriculture and horticulture. Medieval Arab historians and geographers described al-Andalus as a fertile and prosperous region. *An Agrarian Republic: Farming, Antislavery Politics, and Nature Parks in the Civil War Era* Paperback – 28 February 2015. by Adam Wesley Dean (Author). 4.8 out of 5 stars 4 ratings. Review. Precisely the sort of direction in which Civil War environmental history needs to travel.--Civil War Monitor Makes original and important contributions to the political history of the Civil War era. . . . Early Republicans, he explains, were not the champions of industrialism we associate with Republican hegemony during the Gilded Age, but rather flirted with the Jeffersonian dream of an "agrarian republic" of smallholding yeomen farmers -- even to the extent of co-opting the name of the third President's party.