

From Prairie Farmer to Entrepreneur: The Transformation of Midwestern Agriculture. By Dennis S. Nordin and Roy V. Scott. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005. xvi + 356 pp. Tables, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$65.00. ISBN: 0-253-34571-5.

Reviewed by Claire Strom

Dennis S. Nordin and Roy V. Scott are both respected scholars of agricultural history whose previous works, especially those on the Grange and agricultural extension, were well researched and clearly written and have withstood the test of time. Therefore, it is no surprise that their new, collaborative effort, *From Prairie Farmer to Entrepreneur: The Transformation of Midwestern Agriculture*, is an ambitious, sweeping project. In this book, they argue that the twentieth century witnessed a radical change in agriculture as farmers adopted technologies, scientific advances, and business methodologies to increase production. While their assertion is not new, what is controversial is Nordin and Scott's claim that this change was ultimately beneficial to the nation, enabling farmers to "provide an ever-growing population of consumers with abundant food at low prices" (p. 205).

Based on exhaustive research in both primary and secondary sources, *From Prairie Farmer to Entrepreneur* offers the reader much more than the authors' controversial conclusion. Carefully tracking the involvement of the federal government in agriculture through the administrations of the twentieth century, Scott and Nordin provide a valuable update to Gilbert Fite's *American Agriculture and Farm Policy since 1900*, published in 1964. Their book also effectively synthesizes the changes that have occurred in agricultural science and technology in the twentieth century, the developments in rural education and rural life in general, and the changing perspectives on farmers and farm work, as well as summarizing the multitude of farm organizations that emerged during the century. Especially useful are the book's many tables, documenting the changes in everything from radio ownership and rural propensity for disease to hog raising and average farm acreage.

Despite being geographically limited to the Midwest, the book is important because of its broad, encompassing sweep. Few agricultural works have tried to cover all

aspects of farm life over such a long period. As such, this work is an excellent introduction to American agricultural history, especially, as one would expect from the title, when it considers farming as a money-generating enterprise. Nordin and Scott make the point that farmers who invested capital wisely in machinery and other developments prospered more than those who either could not or would not follow suit. They also argue successfully that farming during the twentieth century was always a difficult proposition, and that farmers were consistently unsure of their place in society at large.

It is to be expected that a work of such scope would simplify certain issues. *From Prairie Farmer to Entrepreneur* deals especially well with technology and agricultural policy, but its coverage of social topics, of gender issues, and even of farmers' organizations is somewhat superficial. More important for their thesis, the authors do not grapple sufficiently with matters of class. Although they do talk about trends in farm labor and tenancy, they do not articulate the effects of class on federal policies and on the development of economies of scale. Although stating that payments of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) during the Great Depression had a minimal impact on farmers' incomes, they fail to note that, under the provisions of the various federal laws, most of the \$259,000,000 distributed by the agency went to larger producers, often to agricultural corporations such as the Delta and Pine Land Company, which was the single largest recipient of agricultural subsidies in the American South (p. 112). Thus, although farm income across the board was not particularly impacted by New Deal programs, federal money during the 1930s enabled larger farm operations to expand and purchase machinery, positioning them to benefit more than their smaller neighbors from the agricultural boom of the 1940s and 1950s. Success, in the postwar period, therefore, was not solely dependent on an individual farmer's "entrepreneurial skill," as Scott and Nordin assert, but was fueled also by the distribution of federal benefits, over which small farmers had little or no control (p. 149).

Along with issues of class, the authors tend to gloss over the environmental effects of capitalistic agriculture. Although criticizing farmers' "blind faith" in chemicals, such as fertilizers, herbicides, and insecticides, Nordin and Scott generally view the technological developments of the twentieth century as beneficial (p. 139). Despite considerable work by scholars from Donald Worster to John Opie to Marc

Reisner detailing the problems of America's wasteful approach to water, *From Prairie Farmer to Entrepreneur* consistently portrays advances in agricultural irrigation as a benefit. Likewise, despite many hard-earned lessons on the dangers of draining wetlands, the most recent being the effects of Hurricane Katrina on reclaimed parts of the city of New Orleans, they write, "The draining of wetlands across the Midwest was a major contributor to increased production on prairie-state farms," with no qualifying remarks (p. 136).

The progressive, capitalistic bent of this book's thesis is a problem for me. Although I agree with the authors that the twentieth century saw dramatic changes in agriculture as some farmers and corporations expanded and embraced capital-intensive developments to increase productivity while others were forced from the land, I do not accept these developments as inevitable, or even as ultimately beneficial. The human and environmental costs involved in what Scott and Nordin describe as "the Midwest agricultural miracle" were perhaps not worth the increase in production (p. 205). And, in a nation of dangerously obese people, does "abundant food at low prices" (p. 205) really represent such a blessing?

*Claire Strom is assistant professor of history at North Dakota State University. Author of Profiting from the Plains: The Great Northern Railway and Corporate Development of the American West, she is at present writing a history of cattle-tick eradication. She is also editor of the international journal Agricultural History.*