

Young America: Land, Labor, and the Republican Community. By Mark A. Lause. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2005. viii + 240 pp. Appendix, illustrations, notes, index. Cloth, \$42.00; paper, \$20.00. ISBN: cloth, 0-252-02980-1; paper, 0-252-07230-8.

Reviewed by Michael Green

The middle of the nineteenth century was an age of reform throughout the world. While Great Britain enacted voting and land reforms that ultimately reduced the aristocracy's relevance, and revolutions swept through Europe in the late 1840s, the United States went through a series of important, if more sedate, changes. The Second Great Awakening inspired some economic, political, and religious reform movements; others, like abolitionism, gained new impetus but had deeper roots. Into this latter category fell land reform, which was especially critical during the nineteenth century, with the enactment of the Homestead Act and the agrarian revolt of the 1880s and 1890s.

But how important was land reform in the antebellum period? It was very important, controversial, and vastly underrated as an issue, according to Mark A. Lause in his new book. *Young America: Land, Labor, and the Republican Community* is a major contribution to our historical understanding of a variety of nineteenth-century issues, and not just land reform or the National Reform Association (NRA), the group advocating it. Lause analyzes topics like trade unionism, the role of the press, insider politics, and the origins of already intensively studied subjects, such as the Republican Party and Populism.

At the outset, Lause makes it clear that he is staking out new ground. In his introduction and footnotes, he explains that previous historians have neglected the NRA or, when they have not, their coverage has been "thin, superficial, and, simply, wrong" (p. 2). Whether or not Lause's argument gains adherents, he treats the NRA neither thinly nor superficially. He identifies as the Association's founders the urban artisans and craftsmen who are at the heart of such works as Sean Wilentz's *Chants Democratic*, yet he also explains both their connections to and their distance from other reforms and reformers of their time: utopian socialism, especially as advocated by Charles Fourier, and abolitionism. He delves into the backgrounds and personalities of NRA leaders, exploring their efforts to build alliances with other reformers and examining especially how socialists ultimately worked with and influenced them.

Yet abolitionism also played a crucial role in the land-reform movement. “Ideas of class identity and interests defined National Reform,” Lause writes. “The NRA believed the ideals of independence, liberty, and republicanism so widely professed in America were incompatible with the unlimited ‘right’ to accumulate unlimited wealth. The concerns of the rich and well born had built Old World hierarchies in the New. Here, too, a coercive state protected and served the ruling elite while subjugating the workers” (pp. 49–50). Thus, the National Reformers fit the Jacksonian model of opposing a strong, centralized government, because they feared it ultimately would limit individual freedom. Yet they recoiled from Democratic support for states’ rights and slavery and, in some cases, later diverged toward “a spectrum that included the most revolutionary anarchist and socialist currents in American life” (p. 71). But slavery and its implications—the absence of free soil and free labor, both crucial to the land reformers’ world view—drove the NRA toward the Free Soil Party in the late 1840s and toward the Republican Party in the 1850s. Indeed, Lause even begins his study by pointing out that the meeting that led to the naming of the Republican Party was at a former socialist colony in Wisconsin, and that the presiding officer, Alvin Earl Bovay, had been the NRA’s secretary. The connections ran deeper: many Republicans adopted the Homestead Act as a central policy, and old NRA reformers participated in or contributed to the fight for freedom during the Civil War and Reconstruction and joined in the subsequent urban and agrarian reform efforts of the late nineteenth century.

Lause’s book does a great deal in very limited space—and, indeed, the main problem with the book is the sense of reading it while on horseback. The text is 137 pages, complemented by extensive appendices and endnotes that could inspire even the most indolent researcher. But the combination of a shorter text and lengthy notes leaves the reader pining for more. For example, what did the opponents of National Reform say, do, or think, and how did its proponents respond? A paragraph beginning, “Bohemianism framed the rise of the American literati,” suggests the value of examining the interplay of politics, reform, and literature, but Lause takes the theme no further (p. 117). He does a fine job of illuminating how the NRA tried to navigate national elections and some local politics, but more background might have helped to better explain his important historiographic point, consigned to his introduction and a footnote, that earlier writers on National Reform have tied the movement too closely to the Democratic Party through the Civil War. While granting that Lause has written a monographic study, not a

full history of nineteenth-century politics and reform, the brevity of this account is understandable, but regrettable.

When a book leaves a reviewer wanting more because the subject was poorly covered, the author has committed a cardinal sin. When a book leaves a reviewer wanting more because the subject is vital and thoroughly researched, the author has done an excellent job. In performing the latter feat, Lause has given historians of all aspects of the American experience a great deal to think about.

*Michael Green is professor of history at the Community College of Southern Nevada. He is the author of Freedom, Union, and Power: Lincoln and His Party during the Civil War (2004) and is writing a history of the politics of the 1850s for Praeger.*