

Reflections on American agricultural history*

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Abstract

This paper reviews the contribution of American agricultural history over the twentieth century. It traces the earliest writings on the topic before the foundation of the Agricultural History Society in 1919. The discipline is reviewed under six heads: land policy including tenancy; slave institutions and post-bellum tenancy in the southern states; agricultural organizations; the development of commercial agriculture; government policy towards farming; and the recent concern with rural social history. A final section considers whether the lack of any definition of agricultural history has been a strength or a weakness for the discipline.

The history of American agriculture as a recognized field of study dates from the early twentieth century. In 1914, Louis B. Schmidt apparently taught the first agricultural history course in the United States at Iowa State College. Schmidt urged scholars to study the history of agriculture to help government officials provide solutions to problems that were becoming increasingly economic rather than political. He believed historians had given too much attention to political, military and religious history, and Schmidt considered the economic history of agriculture a new and exciting subject for historical inquiry. Schmidt recognized the limitless topical nature of such work, because so little had been done. He urged historians to investigate land, immigration, tariff, currency, and banking policy, as well as organized labour, corporate regulation, slavery, and the influences of agriculture, broadly conceived, on the development of national life.¹

Schmidt called on the first generation of professionally trained historians, who intended to make history more useful and relevant and whose interests often involved economic causation, to interpret the present 'in light of economic and social evolution'. Schmidt wrote: 'Viewed in one way the history of the United States from the beginning has been in a very large measure the story of rural communities advancing westward by the conquest of the soil, developing from a state of primitive self-sufficiency to a capitalistic and highly complex agricultural organization'. Clearly, he was influenced by the frontier thesis of Frederick Jackson Turner, who saw the American experience continually remade as settlers moved west across the continent. In the

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¹ The literature on American agricultural history is voluminous. The sources cited here are provided as examples for the various topics under consideration and to introduce the reader to these areas for further research and learning. Wayne D. Rasmussen, 'The growth of agricultural history', in William B. Hasseltine and Donald R. McNeil (eds), *Support of Clio. Essays in memory of Herbert A. Keller* (1958), p. 162; Louis B. Schmidt, 'The economic history of American agriculture', *Mississippi Valley Historical Rev.* 3 (June 1916), p. 40.

best tradition of the ancient Greek historian Polybius, Schmidt also expected the economic history of American agriculture to provide useful lessons for the present. Schmidt believed 'Government action involving agricultural interests should be based on a broad knowledge of rural economic history', and that agricultural history was 'indispensable to a correct understanding of much of our political and diplomatic history'. Fundamentally, the study of agricultural history provided lessons on cause and effect in American history. In many respects Schmidt foresaw the emergence of what has been called the new rural history. He contended that agricultural history should be 'viewed not in the strict or narrow sense, but in the broad sense so as to include the whole life of the rural population, the influences which have affected its progress and the influence its progress has in turn had on the course of events'. The result, Schmidt believed would lead to 'a well balanced history of our nation'.²

Schmidt apparently did not realize that scholars and bureaucrats had already embarked on the study of agricultural history in both economic and social contexts. Without reaching far it is not too much to say that William A. Weaver, superintendent of the 1840 census, who had responsibility for collecting agricultural information, ranked among the earliest agricultural historians, followed by Henry David Thoreau, who gave a philosophical context to his bean field in *Walden*, published in 1854. Harriet Beecher Stowe, who wrote about slavery, arguably, can be ranked among the nation's earliest agricultural historians. If not, then early interest in American agricultural history can be found in the annual reports of the US Patent Office and US Department of Agriculture as well as in the annual reports of many state departments of agriculture. Outsiders, as well as employees who believed that historical background enhanced their reports on current conditions, contributed to these documents. Although these reports often were statistical compilations or a glorification of agriculture, they also included useful information about local conditions that provide important knowledge about the past.³

Moreover, by the time Schmidt called for historians to investigate agricultural history to provide perspective and contribute to an integrated story of the national experience, Frederick Jackson Turner had already laid the foundation for the systematic study of the field based on the idea that free land determined the development of American institutions until 1890, when the Bureau of the Census declared that the frontier no longer existed. Turner stimulated the systematic study of agricultural history as a result of his presidential address to the American Historical Association in 1893. In that address, entitled 'The significance of the frontier in American history', Turner contended that the frontier and free land explained the causes and consequences of social and economic change in American life. His paper served as the landmark for the scholarly study of agricultural history because it centered on pioneer farmers and their relationship to the environment. James C. Malin called Turner's frontier hypothesis 'an agricultural interpretation of American history'. Much of the work that followed Turner's

² Schmidt, 'The economic history of American agriculture', pp. 40-1, 43, 48.

³ *Census of the United States, 1840*; Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (1854); Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin or life among the lowly* (1852); Everett E. Edwards, 'Agricultural history and the Department of Agriculture', *Agricultural Hist.* 16 (1942), p. 129;

Benjamin Perley Poore, 'History of agriculture of the United States', *Annual Report of the United States Department of Agriculture*, 1866; Charles L. Flint, 'A hundred years' progress', *Annual Report of the United States Department of Agriculture*, 1872; *Special report on the history and present condition of the sheep industry in the United States* (1892).

address for more than a century involved local and regional studies, usually with an economic focus on topics such as crop and livestock production, credit problems, technological change, and land policy.⁴

Other scholars who pursued agricultural history during the early twentieth century were not historians by training or even academics. The early membership of the Agricultural History Society, founded on 14 February 1919 at the Cosmos Club in Washington DC, included economists, rural sociologists, biologists, librarians, and journalists, many of whom were employed by the United States Department of Agriculture. Rodney H. True, the first president of the Society, was a botanist and Lyman Carrier, the first secretary-treasurer, an agronomist. The Society, whose modest purpose was 'To stimulate interest, promote the study and facilitate the publication of researches in the history of agriculture' – a goal that remains unchanged today – perhaps attracted few historians as members because Article IV provided that application for membership 'shall have been recommended by two members and elected by a majority vote of the Executive Committee'. In any event, economists constituted the largest group in the early Society. They dominated the organization until 1945, after which historians constituted the largest disciplinary group.⁵

As a result of the social science specialization of the Agricultural History Society's membership, much of the early work in the field reflected a narrow perspective and a policy orientation. Or, their work served as descriptive, factual narratives. Those who published in the early issues of *Agricultural History*, inaugurated in 1927, reflected the interdisciplinary interest in the subject. L. C. Gray, an economist in the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, wrote the first original article published in that journal. He titled it 'The market surplus problems of colonial tobacco'. This, and similar work, usually reflected the historical interests of government employees in relation to specific research problems or their vocational interests rather than a focused, long-term, systematic research programme in agricultural history. So far as gender is concerned, in 1932 Kathleen Bruce became the first woman to publish in *Agricultural History* with an article entitled 'Virginia agricultural decline to 1860'.⁶

In 1942, Everett E. Edwards reflected the past concerns and purposes of those who pursued agricultural history. In his presidential address to the Agricultural History Society, Edwards contended, 'Although the conditions of today may be somewhat different from those of

⁴ Wayne D. Rasmussen, 'Forty years of agricultural history', *Agricultural Hist.* 33 (1959), p. 179; Frederick Jackson Turner, 'The significance of the frontier in American history', *Annual Report of the American Historical Association*, 1893 (1894), pp. 199–227.

⁵ Arthur G. Peterson, 'The Agricultural History Society's first quarter century', *Agricultural Hist.* 19 (1945), pp. 193–5; Rasmussen, 'Forty years of agricultural history', p. 177; Lyman Carrier, *The beginnings of agriculture in America* (1923); Harold D. Woodman, 'The state of agricultural history', in Herbert J. Bass (ed.), *The state of American history* (1970), pp. 220–4.

⁶ Woodman, 'The state of agricultural history', p. 222; Edwards, 'Agricultural history and the development of agriculture', pp. 130, 132–3. See, for example,

Alfred Charles True, *A history of agricultural experimentation and research in the United States, 1607–1925, including a history of the United States Department of Agriculture* (1937); Percy Wells Bidwell and J. I. Falconer, *History of agriculture in the northern United States, 1620–1860* (1925); Lewis Cecil Gray, *History of agriculture in the southern United States to 1860* (1933); Everett E. Edwards, 'American agriculture: the first three hundred years', *United States Department of Agriculture Yearbook*, 1940; L. C. Gray, 'The market surplus problems of colonial agriculture', *Agricultural Hist.* 2 (1928); Kathleen Bruce, 'Virginia agricultural decline to 1860', *Agricultural Hist.* 6 (1932), pp. 3–13. In 1975, Mary Hargreaves became the first woman president of the Agricultural History Society.

yesterday, they have been definitely shaped by forces operating in the past'. Edwards believed those who studied agricultural history would be better able to understand the present. He wrote:

For an understanding of agricultural problems, historical research affords valuable and necessary perspective. It delineates the more permanent forces from the temporary factors and provides the basis for widening the sympathies, steadying the judgment, and enlarging the experience of those who are charged with the task and opportunity of securing for agriculture an adequate place in the life of the nation.

The result would be a 'demonstrably utilitarian' agricultural history. Thus, Edwards, too, advocated the study of agricultural history for improving public policy.⁷

Despite perceptions about its origins and purpose, agricultural history as a field developed from the study of local history because it is impossible to write the broad story of American history without knowing the details that permit generalization. The multidisciplinary and later interdisciplinary interests of those engaged in the pursuit of American agricultural history, however, have kept the field amorphous and unstructured, although much of the published work has emphasized economic and political affairs. Indeed, American agricultural history remains a field where the definition has been vague and its boundaries limitless, particularly with the emergence of the new rural social history as a subfield during the 1970s. Even so, agricultural historiography has made its greatest contributions to our understanding of the American experience in six major areas, each of which will be considered in turn: land policy, including tenancy; the South, slavery and tenancy; agricultural organizations, particularly the People's Party; the development of commercial agriculture; government policy; and rural history. This is not to say that important contributions have not been made concerning various economic, scientific and technological developments, particularly regarding production agriculture or for understanding the changing nature of gender roles in agriculture. In many respects, these matters always must be considered when discussing the broader categories above. Nevertheless, agricultural historians have created subfields in these subject areas that have challenged scholars to ask new questions, develop new methodologies, and offer insightful and sometimes challenging interpretations of American history.⁸

I

Anyone who studies American agricultural historiography cannot ignore the importance of land policy, and the works of Paul Wallace Gates remain the starting point for anyone studying this topic. Gates saw federal land policy as detrimental to the small-scale, family farmer and a calculated effort by Congress to aid wealthy speculators, which, in turn, hindered western settlement from the Land Act of 1785 to the Taylor Grazing Act of 1934. Gates drew a congregation of graduate students who followed his interest in land policy but not necessarily his interpretation. Many of those scholars have emphasized the significance of tenancy as a product

⁷ Edwards, 'Agricultural history and the Department of Agriculture', pp. 134–36.

⁸ Woodman, 'The state of agricultural history',

p. 220; John L. Shover, *First majority-last minority. The transformation of rural life in America* (1976), pp. 506, 511.

of land policy. The study of land policy has also provoked considerable disagreement among scholars, and the historiography has gone through three phases. Some scholars argued that tenancy was a natural, but unfortunate, result of the disappearance of the relatively cheap frontier lands in the public domain as well as the decline in unoccupied arable land. Gates, however, contended that tenancy resulted from misguided federal land policies, largely due to the influence of speculators on Congress, which, in turn, permitted the moneyed interests to exploit small-scale farmers and earn handsome returns from rents while preventing their tenants from advancing into the property owning class. Others have considered tenancy a rational and socially acceptable economic position, which farm men and women accepted while they accumulated capital to purchase their own land. No matter their interpretations, scholars primarily have directed their attention toward tenancy in the South and Midwest.⁹

Agricultural economists first turned scholarly attention to tenancy during the early twentieth century. They were interested in the causes of tenancy in the Midwest, which they primarily attributed to the disappearance of free land under the Homestead Act, the end of the frontier, and the rise in land values. They believed that tenancy was inefficient and worried that it violated the Jeffersonian ideal of a society and government based on a class of independent, landowning farmers. But, they were interested in tenancy only as a matter of policy, that is, to determine how tenancy could be reversed, if not eliminated, from American agriculture. They did not levy blame, but they recommended long-term government credit policies to help tenants purchase land, such as the creation of the federal Land Bank in 1916 and various agricultural credit programmes in the 1920s.¹⁰

During the 1930s, Gates challenged this interpretation by arguing that tenancy was an early and common feature of agriculture across the Midwest long before the end of the public domain. He argued that tenancy was a product of an 'incongruous land system' that permitted speculators, land companies, and large-scale landholders to purchase great blocks of public domain and wait for settlement to drive up land prices. Then, they divided their large holdings into small farms for rent to individuals who could neither purchase a large tract of public domain or a smaller acreage of more expensive private land. As a result, tenancy prevented the creation of an independent, landowning class of small-scale, family farmers. Gates contended that tenancy became established in the prairie states because of the activities of land speculators and moneylenders. He wrote:

The loan sharks and speculators who were forced to rent their possessions to tenants in order to meet taxes and other costs, the persons seeking to establish great landed estates for themselves and their families, and the large-scale farmers all had a share in introducing a system ... condemned as both un-American and undemocratic.

As land values rose, farmers who purchased acreage, usually at usurious interest rates, often lost

⁹ Paul W. Gates, *History of public land law development* (1968; repr. 1979); id., *Landlords and tenants on the Prairie frontier* (1973); Donald Winters, 'Agricultural tenancy in the nineteenth-century Middle West: the historiographical debate', *Indiana Magazine of History* 78 (1982), p. 128. Other historians made careers studying

land policy see, for example, the works of George L. Anderson, Vernon Carstensen, David Ellis, William Greever, Thomas Leduc, Arthur C. Reynolds, and Benjamin Hibbard.

¹⁰ Winters, 'Agricultural tenancy', pp. 128–29, 147.

those lands when agricultural prices fell. As a result, land speculators and moneylenders combined 'to depress many farm owners into a tenant class'. Little wonder, then, that he argued the federal government bore 'responsibility for this early appearance and rapid growth of tenancy'. Thus, tenancy was not unavoidable as the agricultural economists had contended but rather the result of a poorly planned public land policy that favoured the rich rather than the establishment of a democratic system of landownership. Indeed, Gates wrote that federal land policy 'had not established democratic farm ownership but had produced a system at variance with American democratic ideals', thereby preventing the creation of a class of independent, landowning farmers. He extended his interpretation of American land law to California, where he concluded that it created a 'land of the corporate-agribusiness farm'.¹¹

Gates, of course, interpreted the problem of American land policy and tenancy from the perspective of the 1930s when farm foreclosures during the Great Depression plagued the countryside. Historians quickly placed the blame on the moneyed interests – speculators and creditors – for many of the farm problems during that decade as well as for placing American agriculture on the road to ruin, especially through forced tenancy. These scholars also wanted to use history to influence public policy, particularly to right the wrongs of the past by checking the power of the moneyed interests. Ideology rather than economic theory became the basis for their explanations of cause and effect.¹²

Gates's interpretation of American land policy and the rise of tenancy carried considerable influence until the 1950s when it came under attack. The challenge to his interpretation came most forcefully and convincingly from Margaret Beattie Bogue and Allan G. Bogue. In 1959, Margaret Bogue argued in *Patterns from the Sod* that land policy was not the reason for agricultural tenancy in central Illinois. Rather than oppress farmers, tenancy enabled young men and women who had little capital to begin farming. By the twentieth century, 'tenancy had assumed a permanent and useful function for many landholders and would-be farmers'. Allan Bogue agreed, writing that tenancy was one of the 'vital parts of the midwestern agricultural system'. Farmers rented land 'because they did not have the funds with which to purchase a farm for themselves, or in some cases the means to develop their own small holdings rapidly enough to insure an income in their first years' residence in a new community'. Allan Bogue employed statistical methodology to argue that tenancy did not keep farmers from moving up the agricultural ladder. He contended that tenancy was a 'step up the tenure ladder,

¹¹ Paul W. Gates, 'The homestead law in an incongruous land system', *American Historical Rev.* 41 (1936), pp. 652–81; Gates, *Landlords and tenants*, pp. 139, 166, 300–1; Winters, 'Agricultural tenancy', pp. 130–2, 147–8; Allan G. Bogue, 'The heirs of James C. Malin: a grasslands historiography', *Great Plains Q.* 1 (1981), p. 114; Paul W. Gates, 'Public land disposal in California', *Agricultural Hist.* 49 (1975), p. 159; Jeremy Atack, 'Tenants and yeomen in the nineteenth century', in Morton Rothstein and Daniel Field (eds), *Quantitative studies in agrarian history* (1993), p. 3. For a discussion of

Spanish land grants in California and New Mexico see W. W. Robinson, *Land in California. The story of mission lands, ranchos, squatters, mining claims, railroad grants, land scrip, and homestead* (1948; repr. 1979); Victor Westphall, *The public domain in New Mexico, 1844–1891* (1965). See also Jim B. Pearson, *The Maxwell land grant* (1961); Victor Westphall, *Mercades Reales. Hispanic land grants of the Upper Rio Grande region* (1983) and Charles L. Briggs and John R. Van Ness, *Land, water, and culture. New perspectives on Hispanic land grants* (1987).

¹² Winters, 'Agricultural tenancy', p. 133.

which carried them from their original status as hired men to positions where they not only owned their farm homes but often owned rental property as well'.¹³

Still, a major challenge to Gates's thesis did not come until 1968 when Robert P. Swierenga, using Iowa as a case study, argued that little evidence existed to prove that large-scale speculators, who had purchased public domain, sought only to rent their lands to farmers. Instead, Swierenga argued that speculators preferred to sell their lands rather than encumber their acreages with tenant leases that might hinder sales. Using economic theory and quantitative methodology, he showed that speculators sold their lands as quickly as possible. By providing credit to tenants for the purchase of their lands, the large-scale owners sped, rather than delayed, the movement of tenants to the landowning class.¹⁴

During the late 1970s, Donald Winters also argued that while speculators increased in Iowa during the late nineteenth century, they were not the cause of tenancy. Winters found no relationship between tenancy and land speculation. He contended that farmers became tenants because they wanted to investigate the area before they purchased land and because land values rose to high levels based on expectations and improvements rather than actual productivity. He also held that new farmers did not want to pay those high prices, and they had little investment capital. Moreover, Winters maintained that tenancy enabled many farmers to ascend the agricultural ladder to land-ownership. Simply put, tenancy served a 'critical function' in agricultural development when farmers placed an emphasis on profits from cash grains rather than land-ownership. In this respect, speculators enhanced the creation and settlement of farms. They encouraged immigration and paid taxes that supported schools and local government. Winters also held that farmers used tenancy to acquire the capital needed to purchase land. In addition, he argued that rental agreements 'expressed objectives and interests of tenants and landlords alike and reflected the adaptation of both groups to the economic circumstances of a particular place at a particular time'. For Winters, tenancy did not mean exploitation but rather a means to help farmers gain land. He called tenancy in Iowa 'a viable and necessary institution'.¹⁵

As early as the 1960s, however, Gates had begun to recast his view of speculation, tenancy, and the federal land-disposal system. In 1964, he wrote that homesteaders were the 'beneficiaries of a liberal, generous and enlightened land system whatever its weakness', and he later held that 'the public domain had been so disposed of as to increase the class of small landowners, as Jefferson had desired'. In the late 1970s, he praised American land policy for providing 'flexibility', particularly for farmers who sought to develop farms larger than permitted by the Homestead Act alone.¹⁶

¹³ Ibid., pp. 133, 135; Margaret Beattie Bogue, *Patterns from the sod. The land use and tenure in the Grand Prairie, 1850–1900* (Collections of the Illinois State Historical Library, 34, 1959); Allan G. Bogue, *From prairie to corn belt. Farming on the Illinois and Iowa Prairies in the nineteenth century* (1963; repr. 1994), p. 56; id., 'Farming in the Prairie Peninsula, 1830–1890', *JECH* 23 (1963), p. 26.

¹⁴ Winters, 'Agricultural tenancy', p. 136; Robert P. Swierenga, *Pioneers and profits. Land speculation on the Iowa frontier* (1968).

¹⁵ Donald L. Winters, *Farmers without farms. Agricultural tenancy in nineteenth-century Iowa* (1978), p. 108; id., 'Agricultural tenancy', pp. 137–38, 142, 144; id., 'Tenancy as an economic institution. The growth and distribution of agricultural tenancy in Iowa', *JECH* 37 (1977), pp. 382–408.

¹⁶ Paul W. Gates, 'The homestead law in Iowa', *Agricultural Hist.* 37 (1964), p. 78; id., *History of public land law development*, p. 771; id., 'Homesteading in the High Plains', *Agricultural Hist.* 51 (1977), p. 109.

In the early 1990s, the economist Jeremy Attack, provided a slightly different interpretation of government land policy and tenancy. Attack argued that rising tenancy in the northern United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was part of an evolutionary process of landholding. He attributed the problem of tenancy after 1860 to lack of capital and rising land values. Federal land policy in the form of the Homestead Act and other essentially free land acts 'minimized entry costs [and] reduced the increase of tenancy'. Government land policy, then, promoted land-ownership, not farm tenancy.¹⁷

II

The South has been another major area of interest for agricultural historians, primarily for the study of slavery and tenancy. Slavery has been a persisting concern of historians and no matter the emphasis, it all relates to agriculture. The most important and controversial studies that have contributed to the field of agricultural history are the institutional studies of Eugene Genovese, whose path breaking work *The political economy of slavery* (1965) began an intensive debate about slavery in relation to capitalism and profitability. Genovese argued that slaveholders formed an anti-bourgeoisie class in a capitalist, market-driven world. He considered slavery a social rather than an economic system. He contended that 'the Old South ... must be understood as a historically discrete slave society the basic tendencies of which were antibourgeois despite being embodied in a capitalist and world market'. Slaveholders constituted a 'premodern' class whose ideology and morals precluded the sharing of national and state power with the northern bourgeoisie. For Genovese, the central issue of agricultural slavery concerned the political power of the master class, not economic returns, that is, profits. The slaveholders constituted a 'distinct ruling class'. Slavery, then, was 'anti-industrial, patriarchal, anti-urban, inward looking, and socially retrogressive'. Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman joined this debate with *Time on the Cross* (1974). They contended, primarily using statistical analysis, that slavery persisted because it was highly profitable as well as an efficient agricultural labour system.¹⁸

Kenneth M. Stamp and Stephen Oakes have also published important institutional histories that spawned a host of studies that continue to give new perspectives on the slave family and daily life. Indeed, the best study of agricultural slavery, broadly conceived, remains Stamp's *The Peculiar Institution* because it covers both economic affairs, including the slave trade, and daily social life. Stamp considered slavery profitable, if not efficient. Many historians, however, argue that slavery prevented the development of the southern economy in terms of manufacturing, transportation, and trade. Yet, few scholars admit that planters traded equitably and by choice with the North. Indeed, the planters made a calculated decision to invest in slaves instead of any alternative economic infrastructure for the South. Slavery and the agriculture on which it was based gave the planters the economic option that they preferred. Certainly, the

¹⁷ Attack, 'Tenants and yeomen in the nineteenth century', p. 29.

¹⁸ Eugene Genovese, *The political economy of slavery. Studies in the economy and society of the slave South*

(1965), pp. xvii, xix, 319, 320; Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time on the cross. The economics of American Negro slavery* (1974), pp. 4–5.

absence of an adequate and affordable free labour supply and mechanization of the cotton crop limited their choices, but they had choices nonetheless, and they chose a dependable and amply rewarding system and institution that provided profit.¹⁹

Stephen Oakes ranks among recent historians who have interpreted agricultural slavery and the plantation system as capitalist ventures, although he modified his interpretation by contending that slavery was always more than an economic system because planters considered it essential for their status and class. As a result, they often made decisions based on social and class needs, rather than good economics and financial analysis. Essentially, then, slavery was more of a political than an economic category because it involved the 'distribution of power in society'.²⁰

By the late twentieth century, scholars had begun to make important contributions about slavery and the law as well as the geographical changes in plantation agriculture since the Civil War. They were also studying the social, economic, and political changes in the South that affected the relationship of African Americans to the agriculture between the First and Second Reconstructions, that is, from 1865 to approximately 1970. Peter Wood, Daniel Littlefield, and Judith A. Carney have shown the African contributions to American agriculture, particularly for rice cultivation, through slavery, while Edmund S. Morgan addressed the ambivalence of planters to the institution. Joyce Chaplin and Allan Kulikoff have explored slavery in relation to commercial agriculture in the South Carolina Low Country and the Chesapeake.²¹

Agricultural historians have also spent considerable time analyzing sharecropping and tenancy regarding labour contracts, lien laws, and productivity. Although economic in context, the best of these studies recognize the omnipresent matter of racism and its role in preventing a truly free-market economy from developing in the post-Civil War South. These historians have been quick to note the non-economic forces that affected the agricultural economy, such as Jim Crow laws, coercion, and racial violence, all of which were legacies of slavery and contributed to the creation of inefficient agricultural production and monopolistic credit systems. As a result, post-Civil War southern agriculture fostered overproduction, low prices, and poverty, which ensured an agricultural system that resisted reform and perpetuated economic stagnation. Cliometricians have conducted much of this research, although other historians have used behavioural analysis that enabled the discussion of southern tenancy beyond the significance of form or theory filling data. Collectively, their work has shown the transformation of the plantation and agricultural labour system based on new economic and social relationships from the antebellum period to the post-war years.²²

¹⁹ Kenneth M. Stampp, *The peculiar institution. Slavery in the ante-bellum South* (1965).

²⁰ Stephen Oakes, *The ruling race. A history of American slaveholders* (1982); id., *Slavery and freedom. An interpretation of the slave South* (1990), p. xvi.

²¹ Peter H. Wood, *Black majority. Negroes in South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (1974); Daniel Littlefield, *Rice and slaves. Ethnicity and the slave trade in colonial South Carolina* (1981); Judith A. Carney, *Black rice. The African origins of rice cultivation in the Americas* (2001); Philip D. Morgan, *Slave counterpoint. Black culture in the eighteenth-century Chesapeake and*

Lowcountry (1998); Joyce E. Chaplin, *An anxious pursuit. Agricultural innovation and modernity in the lower South, 1730–1815* (1993); Allan Kulikoff, *Tobacco and slaves. The development of southern cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680–1800* (1986). See also Thomas D. Morris, *Southern slavery and the law, 1619–1860* (1996) and Ira Berlin, *Generations of captivity. A history of african-american slaves* (2003).

²² Roger L. Ransom and Richard Sutch, *One kind of freedom. The economic consequences of Emancipation* (1977), p. xiii; Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South. Revolutions in the southern economy since the Civil War* (1986).

Harold Woodman succinctly summarized the transformation from slavery to tenancy and sharecropping when he wrote:

Thus the new South might best be seen as an evolving bourgeoisie society in which a capitalistic social structure was arising on the ruins of a pre-modern slave society. It was going through the process of social change, of modernization that the rest of the nation had gone through a half century or earlier. But where the rest of the nation had made the change with a social and political structure and an ideology that generally supported such changes, the postwar South was going through the change with the remnants of a social and political structure and an ideology that had been antagonistic to such changes. While slavery, the institution that had been at the core of that non-modern ideology and social structure, had been forcibly extinguished, this culture and ideology lingered and gave the new society that emerged a peculiar, southern form.

Put simply, tenancy in the South nourished and perpetuated the exploitation of labour, social control, and rural poverty rather than provided a means to land ownership and economic mobility.²³

III

Populism also has been a major area of study, and no other topic in American agricultural historiography has generated such a multiplicity of interpretations and perspectives. Populism did not attract major attention until 1931 when John D. Hicks provided an economic and political history of the movement that set the interpretive standard and consensus about the Populists for nearly a generation. Following Hicks, many historians of midwestern agriculture tended to see farmers as well meaning patriarchs, who struggled to overcome economic forces beyond their control.²⁴

In 1955, however, Richard Hofstadter argued that farmers looked backward to a past where they had greater control of their lives, and their conservatism often proved reactionary. Hofstadter challenged the interpretations of historians who considered the Populists a progressive economic, social, and political force. He contended they were reactionaries who longed to return to a bygone age when their lives were untouched by both government and corporate America, much in contrast to Hick's interpretation that the Populists were left-of-center on the political spectrum and a progressive force in late nineteenth-century America.²⁵

In 1962, however, Norman Pollack provided the best challenge to Hofstadter by arguing that the Populists were a progressive social force that offered the last, best hope for radical, political change in a socialist direction that would protect the general welfare and democracy in the United States. He later moderated that interpretation by calling Populism 'a movement of reform, not radicalism'. Overall, the Populists sought 'a more humane political and social

²³ Harold D. Woodman, 'Sequel to slavery. The new history views the postbellum South', *J. Southern Hist.* 43 (1977), pp. 535–6, 554; Gilbert C. Fite, *Cotton fields no more. Southern agriculture, 1865–1980* (1984); Pete Daniel, *Breaking the land. The transformation of cotton, tobacco,*

and rice cultures since 1880 (1985); Edward L. Ayers, *The promise of the new South. Life after reconstruction* (1992).

²⁴ John D. Hicks, *The populist revolt* (1931).

²⁵ Richard Hofstadter, *The age of reform. From Bryan to FDR* (1955).

order', guaranteed by a national government that privileged the rights of the individual and general welfare over monopolistic capitalism and the political power that it generated.²⁶

Earlier, during the 1950s, Victor Ferkiss caused a stir by likening the Populists to Fascists because of their anti-Semitism and hatred of British bankers and eastern creditors. After considerable debate, Walter Nugent put this view to rest by convincingly arguing that the Populists were not anti-Semitic, xenophobic, or bigots. Nugent contended that Populism was 'a political response to economic distress', and many Populists were first- or second-generation immigrants. Simply put, the Populists 'were people who were seeking the solution of concrete economic distress through the instrumentality of a political party ... This involved profoundly the political cooperation of the foreign-born, and it involved a deep respect and receptivity for new American institutions and ideas'. Nevertheless, much remained to be said about the Populists.²⁷

During the 1960s, some historians, such as Stanley Parsons, used statistical methods to identify, quantify, and determine whether the Populists were farmers or merchants as well as whether they lived in the country or towns. He concluded that the Populists were 'outmaneuvered, outfought, and outwitted by more sophisticated village and urban groups who were more in tune with the growing industrial and commercial economy'. Parsons argued, 'the vaunted yeoman was usually content to follow the policies and leadership of the village and urban business and professional classes. It was these men, not farmers, who wielded the power in late nineteenth-century politics'.²⁸

In 1976, Lawrence Goodwyn, a journalist working in academia, renewed the interest in the People's Party when he argued that the real Populists emerged from the cooperative movement of the Southern Farmers' Alliance. By ignoring Nebraska, or at least calling the agrarian revolt in that state a 'shadow movement' because it lacked a cooperative tradition, he challenged a host of scholars to look anew at Populism in the West. They did, and they largely disagreed with his interpretation.²⁹

Robert C. McMath challenged Goodwyn's work by arguing that while the cooperative movement was important for the radicalization of the Populists, the movement had greater social and cultural roots and significance than Goodwyn admitted. McMath wrote

the picnics, rallies, and camp meetings had more than recreational value. Except for the encampments, they were traditional focal points of political expression, and they provided the Alliance with a means of mobilizing political sentiment without appearing to violate its nonpartisan position. In 1889 and 1890, the order used such gatherings to measure candidates by the Alliance yardstick, and in 1891 and 1892, they provided a base from which to organize the People's Party.³⁰

Gene Clanton has provided the best study of Populists in Congress. He found them to be

²⁶ Norman Pollack, *The populist response to industrial America. Midwestern populist thought* (1962). See also id., *The just polity. Populism, law, and human welfare* (1987) and *The humane economy. Populism, capitalism and democracy* (1990).

²⁷ Victor Ferkiss, 'Populist influences on American Fascism', *Western Political Q.* 10 (1957), pp. 350-73; Walter Nugent, *The tolerant populists. Kansas populism*

and nativism (1963), pp. 233, 243.

²⁸ Stanley B. Parsons, *The populist context. Rural versus urban power on the Great Plains frontier* (1973), pp. 145-6.

²⁹ Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise. The populist moment in America* (1976).

³⁰ Robert C. McMath, *American Populism. A social history, 1877-1898* (1993), pp. 145-6.

articulate exponents of the party's platform. Clanton also argued that Populists sought important economic, social, and political changes that would have substantially benefited the general welfare. Other scholars, such as Stephen Hahn, have investigated the social rather than the economic origins of Populism. They have stressed the importance of race and class in relation to the penetration of the market economy in the Georgia backcountry and the resulting conflict between town and country and merchants and planters with small-scale landowners and tenants, white and black. They also have been interested in the conflict of the market economy with cooperative labour and production by small-scale 'petty producers'. Hahn also argued that the destruction of slavery led to the creation of a new class of landowning farmers who insisted on agricultural production for the market. For Hahn, market agriculture resulted from political conflict to regulate class struggle rather than economic forces.³¹

IV

The development of commercial agriculture and the market economy is another major topic and interpretive area that has attracted considerable interest, particularly in relation to when farmers actually forsook self-sufficiency and began producing for profit. Essentially, it centers on the definition of capitalism and whether scholars interpret American agricultural history in the light of neoclassical economics, or social history and anthropology, a division that Allan Kulikoff has made between 'market historians' and 'social historians'. During the late 1970s, historians began giving substantive thought to this problem when James A. Henretta took issue with James T. Lemon about the significance of the market to eighteenth-century farmers. Lemon argued that ordinary farmers intentionally produced enough grain, vegetables, eggs, milk, butter, and other commodities to meet the food needs of their families and sold the surplus to buy necessities. Henretta argued that the sale of surplus products did not constitute evidence that farmers were committed to a market economy. He contended that market sales were a secondary rather than a primary consideration: the 'surplus was what was left over after the yearly subsistence requirements of the farm household had been met'. Rather, farmers who did not have access to markets produced for local exchange, that is, barter with other farm men and women, merchants, and artisans. In these cases, the value of the product exchanged depended on what it was worth to a particular individual. Henretta further argued that farm families invariably chose the security of diversified production rather than to hire labour, produce a surplus, or specialize. He wrote: 'Economic gain was important to these men and women, but it was not their major concern. It was subordinated to (or encompassed by) two other goals: the yearly subsistence and the long-run financial security of the family unit'. Indeed, he wrote, 'The maximizing of profit was less important to these producers than the meeting of household needs and the maintaining of established social relationships within the community'. The extended farm family, not the market, served as the most important socioeconomic unit in early American agriculture. This focus on the farm family replicated the

³¹ Gene Clanton, *Congressional populism and the crisis of the 1890s* (1998); Steven Hahn, *The roots of southern populism. Yeoman farmers and the transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850–1890* (1983). See also Barton C. Shaw, *The Wool-Hat Boys. Georgia's populist party* (1984).

Annales tradition, and it emphasized the significance of patriarchy and patrimony in American agriculture.³²

Allan Kulikoff has given similar voice to Henretta's thesis, and he has even projected it into the twentieth century. Kulikoff particularly argued that farmers in eighteenth-century America avoided the market economy by producing only enough to pay taxes and provide necessities while relying on family labour, domestic production, and family and kin networks for trade to remain free from debt and retain their independence. Kulikoff bases his interpretation on Marxist theory to explain the social and economic actions of farmers. For him, social, as opposed to economic historians who rest their interpretation on the forces of neoclassical economics, 'all seek to uncover patterns of economic and social behavior of ordinary rural people and to relate their behavior to the social relations of production and to social and political consciousness'. Kulikoff further contends that Marxian theory

gives the agrarian critics of capitalism a new voice, capturing their noncapitalist familial relations and intense non-market gift exchanges of goods and labour with neighbors. It suggests violence preceded the victory of capitalists and thereby provides a powerful explanation for intermittent agrarian uprisings of independent landholding farmers (or those seeking that status) as diverse as New England-born New York tenants in the mid-eighteenth century and late nineteenth-century Populists of the cotton South and northern plains. And it points to cooperation and internal struggles with households over the sexual division of labour and exchanges between households.³³

Kulikoff, however, recognized that 'A judicious synthesis of these two visions of economic exchange better describes American reality than either of the two alone'. He has contended, 'American farmers clearly lived within a dynamically growing capitalist world that encompassed the entire North Atlantic rim. Nearly all of them participated more or less in commodity markets to procure money to pay taxes and buy imported manufactured goods'. Yet, they did so only to protect their traditional farming activities that were not market driven. In other words, they participated in the market economy to protect themselves from capitalism. Kulikoff and others like him, then, rely on the social historians' interpretation of capitalist development, which emphasizes class struggle and the transition from a precapitalist and noncommercial economic order with conflict between non-commercial farmers and capitalist entrepreneurs, such as land speculators and moneylenders.³⁴

In a study of the Connecticut Valley between 1780 and 1860, Christopher Clark similarly contended that household production and the local exchange economy rather than the market economy gave social order to agriculture in New England during the early nineteenth century. Farm families, he argued, sought household independence rather than profit. Similarly, Steven Hahn has applied the same interpretative framework to the South by arguing that the market

³² James A. Henretta, 'Families and farms: *mentalité* in pre-industrial America', *William and Mary Q.* 35 (1978), pp. 16, 19; James T. Lemon, *The Best Poor Man's Country. A geographical study of early southeastern Pennsylvania* (1972); Allan Kulikoff, 'The transition to capitalism in America', *William and Mary Q.* 46 (1989), pp. 122, 126.

³³ *ibid.*, pp. 122, 126–28; Christopher Clark, *The roots of rural capitalism. Western Massachusetts, 1780–1860* (1990). See also Allan Kulikoff, *The agrarian origins of American capitalism* (1992).

³⁴ Kulikoff, 'Transition to capitalism in America', p. 128.

economy for cotton diminished the independence of farmers in the Georgia upcountry, and during the post-Civil War period they fought government regulations and commercial agriculture in a failing effort to preserve their traditional life style based on the exchange economy.³⁵ By the early twenty-first century, these Marxist historians had begun to fade from scholarly fashion.

Other scholars, such as economist Winifred Rothenberg, have disputed the contentions of the 'social historians' as Kulikoff calls them, that is, those scholars who see agricultural production for kinship and local exchange as the 'moral economy' of the countryside and one that best provided for a farmer's family. Rothenberg has used statistical methodology to push back the date for the emergence of a market economy into the mid-eighteenth century. This debate is important not only for what the research informs us about the past, but also because it shows how ideology can influence historical interpretation. Rothenberg forcefully offered a neoclassical economic analysis of the market economy in Massachusetts. She contended that farmers actively and willingly sought markets and, by the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, they had fully committed to commercial agriculture. 'Massachusetts,' she wrote, 'did not begin as an experiment in self-sufficiency. The people who settled this land came from a tradition of Market Crosses, Market Days, Corn Markets, cattle, wool, cheese, silk and produce markets, stalls, shops, fairs, itinerant peddlers, and cattle drovers'. For Rothenberg, agriculture based on a social *mentalité* was difficult if not impossible to prove. It was merely wishful thinking by those who recreated a past based on their own ideological beliefs, not on factual evidence. Rothenberg's interpretation of the growth and transformation of American market agriculture has not been influenced by Marx. She has given little attention to class struggle in the development of markets, and Rothenberg has argued that farmers willingly sought markets for profit which, in turn, improved their standard of living.³⁶

Projecting this debate into the twentieth century, Mary Neth has contended that family and community ties were more important than the market economy to farmers in the Midwest prior to 1940. She also argues that women primarily emphasized the 'mutuality of kin and community', ties that were more important than the market economy for farmers. By so doing 'they increased the communal resources available to farm men as well. In times of crisis, farm people relied on these informal local relations for security'. She has written,

Farm people did not simply sell products for cash; they also produced goods that could be used directly on the farm or by the family or could be exchanged to meet the needs of entire neighborhoods. Profits from cash markets were unpredictable because prices and weather were beyond the control of farm people; profits and production for home use and neighborhood exchange were stable and helped assure survival.

Neth has also argued that women primarily emphasized the 'mutuality of kin and community'.³⁷

³⁵ Steven Hahn, 'The 'unmaking' of the southern yeomanry of the Georgia Upcountry, 1860–1890', in Steven Hahn and Jonathan Prude (eds), *The countryside in the age of capitalist transformation. Essays in the social history of rural America* (1985), p. 186.

³⁶ Winifred B. Rothenberg, 'The market and Massachusetts farmers, 1750–1855', *JECH* 41 (1981), p. 312. See also id., *From market-place to a market economy. The*

transformation of rural Massachusetts, 1750–1850 (1992); Paul G. E. Clemens, *The Atlantic economy and colonial Maryland's eastern shore. From tobacco to grain* (1980) and Gloria Main, *Tobacco colony. Life in early Maryland, 1650–1720* (1982).

³⁷ Mary Neth, *Preserving the family farm. Women, community, and the foundations of agribusiness in the Midwest, 1900–1940* (1995), pp. 2–3.

V

Another major area for inquiry and disagreement involves the formulation of agricultural policy. No other subject has had so many scholarly disciplines represented – political scientists, economists, rural sociologists, and historians. Their work primarily has dealt with specific policy issues, such as the McNary-Haugen Act, New Deal programmes, and the congressional machinations of enactment. However, they have given some attention to the policy-making roles of associations, such as the American Farm Bureau Federation, Farmers Union, and National Farmers Organization. Here, too, we find considerable interpretive differences based on ideological premises. Usually these disagreements center on whether the federal government should be an active regulator of the farm economy or merely helpful in terms of marketing and research to improve production. Historians have taken a more descriptive and narrative approach to policy history, while the economists, political scientists, and, to an extent the rural sociologists, have been more critical advocates, especially when evaluating New Deal-based policies. The works of Donald and Robert Paarlberg, economist and political scientist respectively, and Neil Harl, an agricultural economist, provide an example of the sharpest division of scholarly opinion about price support, marketing, and acreage reduction policies. My own work emphasizes the dependency of farmers on the federal government and their reliance on federal farm policy to maintain viable operations.³⁸

VI

The last and relatively new area for historical research in American agricultural history involves rural social history. During the 1970s this subfield became popular, when scholars began looking at farmers in terms of social and cultural relationships, that is, communities and institutions, instead of emphasizing economics and politics, such as production, monetary policy, technology, agricultural organizations, and government policies. The new rural historians have stressed the importance of social structures, processes, institutions, and behaviour, and they focused on ordinary people not elites. Peter Argersinger argued that agricultural historians had become too narrow in their research and that they remained ‘hampered by the older shortcomings of frontier and agricultural history: the concentration upon the West as an area and the reduction to agricultural economics, with the resulting loss of either conceptual clout or general interest’. The new rural historians asserted the importance of community, neighbourhood, and daily life. Writing in the early ’80s, Robert Swierenga led the challenge for historians to use quantitative, that is, statistical methodology to research land, tax, and probate records in the county courthouses as well as manuscript census schedules and to apply behavioural theories borrowed from sociologists, demographers, and ethnologists to understand the lives of country people, some of whom he called the ‘bottom half’ of society. Accordingly, Swierenga

³⁸ David Hamilton, *From new day to New Deal. American farm policy from Hoover to Roosevelt, 1928–1933* (1991); Robert A. Paarlberg and Don Paarlberg, ‘Agricultural policy in the twentieth century’, *Agricultural Hist.* 74 (2000), pp. 136–61; Neil Harl, *The farm crisis of the 1980s* (1990); John Mark Hansen, *Gaining access. Congress and the farm lobby, 1919–1981* (1991); William P. Browne, *The failure of national rural policy. Institutions and interests* (2001); R. Douglas Hurt, *Problems of plenty. The American farmer in the twentieth century* (2002).

urged the systematic study of the past using social science theory, that is, 'hypothesis testing', to investigate the actual lived experience of rural people over time in rural communities.³⁹

Swierenga cast a broad net for capturing the rural historical experience. He has written how 'Rural history centers on the life-style and activities of farmers and villagers, their family patterns, farming practices, social structures, and community institutions'. He contended that scholars of agricultural history and the westward movement remained overly influenced by Frederick Jackson Turner and continued to stress the influence of the environment while neglecting the important story of rural communities. As a result, rural historians 'suffered from a distorted perspective of the meaning of rural life'. Swierenga has maintained that 'rural' does not merely denote an area or a form of society. Rather,

Rural life, as distinct from urban living, involves physical if not social isolation, large family networks, family work patterns, seasonal labour requirements, and other features. Historians of rural life must study these distinguishing marks of rurality, because rural America is characterized by social processes as much as by geographical place.

Simply put, Swierenga has argued for 'the holistic study of diverse rural communities' in which scholars focused on the 'continuity and discontinuity in human behavior, both individually and collectively'. Thus, rural history should be interdisciplinary. Perhaps more important for Swierenga agricultural history was an 'orphan' of rural history.⁴⁰

Swierenga knew that he was not the first to think about agricultural history this way or to broaden it. In 1938, Harry J. Carman and Rexford G. Tugwell called on scholars to study rural social history. They urged historians to turn from their studies of great men and events to 'follow men and women in their everyday routines, to observe their work, their leisure, their happiness and sorrow; to see them plow and mow, chisel and hammer, bake and sow; to see their schools, their churches, and, above all, their homes'. Put simply, they urged historians to deal with the 'elusive stuff' of social life in the countryside. Architecture, religion, customs, leisure, and health in rural areas merited as much scholarly attention as agricultural technology and politics.⁴¹

During the late 1940s, James C. Malin also urged historians to study history as a whole within its cultural context. In fact, Malin may have been the first American agricultural historian to suggest that history should be written from the 'bottom up'. Malin stressed cultural factors that influenced human behaviour similar to the *mentalité* approach to rural history of the *Annales* scholars. Allan Bogue also had studied everyday farm life in a behavioural rather than economic context in *From Prairie to Cornbelt*. Bogue wrote that he focused on 'the man with dirt on his

³⁹ David Danbom, 'The professors and the plowmen in American history today', *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 69 (Winter, 1985–86), pp. 11–12; Peter H. Argeringer, 'The people's past. Teaching American rural history', *History Teacher* 10 (May 1977), p. 411; Robert P. Swierenga, 'The New Rural History. Defining the parameters', *Great Plains Q.* 1 (1981), p. 212; Robert P. Swierenga, 'Theoretical perspectives on the New Rural History. From environmentalism to modernization', *Agricultural Hist.* 56 (1982), pp. 495–6; See also Hal

S. Barron, 'Rediscovering the majority. The New Rural History of the nineteenth-century North', *Historical Stud.* 19 (1986), pp. 141–52.

⁴⁰ Swierenga, 'The New Rural History', pp. 212–13; id., 'Theoretical perspectives', pp. 496, 502; id., 'Towards the "New Rural History": a review essay', *Historical Methods Newsletter* 6 (June 1973), pp. 111–12.

⁴¹ Harry J. Carman and Rexford G. Tugwell, 'The significance of American agricultural history', *Agricultural Hist.* 12 (1938), pp. 99, 100.

hands and dung on his boots – and the problems and developments that forced him to make decisions about his farm business'.⁴²

Other scholars who did not see themselves as agricultural historians soon began focusing on everyday life at the family and local level, particularly in relation to rural life in the Midwest. Most notable were historian Hal Baron and economists Jeremy Atack and Fred Bateman, the latter of whom have used statistical analysis to provide perspective on daily agricultural life in the northern United States during the antebellum period. Some of these rural community studies have criticized government policy and the emphasis on the market economy for the loss of all that was good about rural life, although they are less precise about the alternatives.⁴³

VII

Today, the field of agricultural history remains as diffuse in its practitioners and topics of investigation as at the formal founding of the field in 1919 with the establishment of the Agricultural History Society. Historians, geographers, economists, sociologists, political scientists, anthropologists, and others write agricultural history today. By so doing, they help provide interdisciplinary perspectives to explain the past. Yet, the interdisciplinary diversity of the field remains both a strength and a weakness. It is beneficial to the field because a variety of scholarly disciplines have provided important perspectives about the past from many vantage points for nearly a century. The result has been an important multi- and interdisciplinary consideration of a host of topics – science, technology, production, marketing, government policy, religion, race, class, gender, and the family – in relation to American agricultural history. The weakness has been that these scholars often do not see themselves as part of a coherent whole, that is, as agricultural historians. Their work often remains isolated in their own disciplines. Historians who, in fact, have made important contributions to American agricultural history usually consider themselves labour, social, economic, or political scholars, rather than as agricultural historians. This phenomenon is due in part to the urban nature of American society and training of most historians, but it also reflects the fragmentation and specialization of interests within the profession. Moreover, agricultural history is not fashionable today. Few colleges and universities offer courses on American agricultural history, which has lost its importance just as farmers lost their prestige during the twentieth century.

Indeed, the study of agricultural history in the United States remains incredibly undervalued. Moreover, many scholars who work under the umbrella of rural history do not see agricultural history as one of the spines that help give their work shape and meaning. Essentially, they practice agricultural history without admitting or realizing it, probably because they see the field as pejoratively narrow for their self-definition and professional advancement and too far beyond

⁴² Bogue, 'Heirs of James C. Malin', p. 109; Swierenga, 'Theoretical Perspectives', p. 500; Bogue, *From Prairie to Corn Belt*, p. 1. For an introduction to Malin's work see Robert P. Swierenga, 'James Malin', in *Historians of the American frontier. A bio-bibliographical sourcebook* (1988), pp. 384–407.

⁴³ Hal S. Barron, *Mixed harvest. The second great*

transformation of the rural North, 1870–1930 (1997); Jeremy Atack and Fred Bateman, *To their own soil. Agriculture in the antebellum North* (1983); Jane Adams, *The transformation of rural life. Southern Illinois, 1890–1990* (1994). David Danbom also provided a survey of American rural history in *Born in the county. A history of rural America* (1995).

the mainstream concerns of scholars working in American history to wilfully accept such self-identification. But, this is a problem of training, location, residence, and periodic change of emphasis in their field of historical research not because agricultural history lacks scholarly legitimacy. However the parts are defined, agricultural history remains an important subfield in American historical inquiry.

The problem of field recognition has been no more fully appreciated and recognized than by James H. Shideler, who served as editor of *Agricultural History* from 1965 to 1984. Shideler did not consider agricultural history a field of study, primarily because scholars pursued it beyond the investigation of production agriculture. He wrote: 'Agricultural history, broadly defined, is diffuse, discursive, and incoherent; it has no discipline, no unique methodology. It is not even a sub discipline'. Shideler affirmed the opinion of Edwards who earlier contended that the Agricultural History Society intended the study of agricultural history to be interdisciplinary and 'to promote the field as a contribution to the better understanding of history in general rather than to set it apart as a separate discipline'.⁴⁴

Shideler, however, was not the first historian to lament the amorphousness of American agricultural history as a field. In 1948, Rodney Loehr also went so far as to say that 'the history of agriculture merges insensibly into the totality of human experience'. Moreover, in 1973, Clarence Danhof, as president of the Agricultural History Society, worried that the goals of the organization as stated in the constitution were 'so inclusive as to provide no restraints upon the use of the very few resources available and little guidance to the selection of research objectives'. He argued for a tighter, more restrictive definition of agricultural history. 'Should not our small guild be able to make a greater contribution if we could agree on a set of boundaries less inclusive in character and more sharply defining the end products we seek for our efforts?' Fortunately, scholars ignored this call for restricting the field by imposing artificial parameters that limited the subjects that could be legitimately considered agricultural history. In fact, scholars expanded rather than restricted their interests in the field by broadening it to include rural social history in its many manifestations.⁴⁵

If, then, one asks: 'What is American agricultural history? Where has it been? Where is it going?' the answers must necessarily be as complex as the questions. Beginning as an interdisciplinary policy and lesson-providing area for historical inquiry, it has ranged across the economic, social, political, and cultural landscape of the nation. Largely centered on economic inquiry in the past, by the early twenty-first century rural social history that emphasized community, culture, and gender, based on interdisciplinary research, had become a compelling and important component. Micro studies of township and county affairs remained popular in the journal and monograph literature, and economists who wrote agricultural history continued enamored with quantitative studies about labour, thresholds for technological change, and land values. State agricultural histories, however, have fallen from favour, because book publishers wanted greater breadth and popular appeal. Yet, any definition of American agricultural history

⁴⁴ James H. Shideler, 'Agricultural history studies: a retrospective view', in Frederick V. Carstensen, Morton Rothstein, and Joseph A. Swanson (eds), *Outstanding in his field. Perspectives on American agriculture in honor of*

Wayne D. Rasmussen (1993), pp. 3–4.

⁴⁵ Rodney C. Loehr, 'Agricultural history', *J. Farm Economics* 30 (1948), p. 537; Clarence H. Danhof, 'Wither agricultural history', *Agricultural Hist.* 47 (1973), p. 2.

as a field will be as diverse as the varied individuals asked to provide one. Essentially, then, while many scholars work in the field of agricultural history, but do not consider themselves agricultural historians, it is best to remember the words of Alfred Lord Tennyson who wrote in 'Ulysses', – 'that which we are we are'.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Alfred Lord Tennyson, 'Ulysses', in *Complete Poetical Works* (1963), p. 89.