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**Countrysides Transformed**

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Mixed Harvest: The Second Great Transformation in the Rural North, 1870-1930 by Hal S. Barron; The Fruits of Natural Advantage: Making the Industrial Countryside in California by Steven Stoll
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COUNTRYSIDES TRANSFORMED
Pamela Riney-Kehrberg


Rural and agricultural history provide their readers different perspectives on the ways in which the countryside has changed over the course of American history. Rural history approaches the question of change from the perspective of communities and families, while agricultural history generally eschews the social perspective for issues of crop production. Such is the case of two recent and important books in rural and agricultural history, Hal Barron’s Mixed Harvest: The Second Great Transformation in the Rural North, 1870-1930 and Steven Stoll’s The Fruits of Natural Advantage: The Making of the Industrial Countryside in California. While both authors are intimately concerned with the transformation of the countryside, Barron and Stoll approach their subjects from radically different perspectives. The books also offer widely divergent geographic foci, with Barron surveying his subject from the vantage point of the northeast and midwest, while Stoll writes of California. Both offer readers new ways of understanding the transformation of rural America caused by the vast social, economic, and technological changes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In Mixed Harvest, Hal Barron grapples with questions common to much of the new rural history: how did rural Americans deal with economic and social change, and make that change their own? How did they perceive their place, and try to maintain that place, in an increasingly urban and industrial world? In this way, Mixed Harvest has much in common with other recent works in rural history, such as Katherine Jellison’s Entitled to Power: Farm Women and Technology, 1913-1963, and Mary Neth’s Preserving the Family Farm: Women, Community, and the Foundations of Agribusiness in the Midwest, 1900-1940. Mixed
Harvest is also a logical successor to Barron’s earlier work, Those Who Stayed Behind: Rural Society in Nineteenth-Century New England, which describes in great detail the dynamics of a staid, mature agricultural community in a world that prized growth and development over “staying behind.”

Using the northeast and midwest as the locations for his study, Barron tackles the question of how farming communities adapted to the rapid changes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the years during which the United States made its transition from a rural to an urban nation. Although most historians of this era have wrestled with the issue of populism, Barron chooses not to address that thorny subject. Instead, he looks at rural Americans as “Citizens,” “Producers,” and “Consumers,” and charts the give-and-take relationship that they maintained with industrialization and urbanization. Rather than arguing that rural Americans had a singular response to these revolutions, Barron argues that they attempted to find a middle road that allowed them to experience “change as well as continuity” (p. 16).

Because of the enormity of his topic, Barron has carefully selected a few issues around which to develop his thesis. Under the rubric of citizenship, he examines road and school reform. Dairy organizations and grain elevators provide the context within which to study rural people as producers. Finally, as consumers, he discusses rural northerners’ experiences with mail-order buying and consumer culture. In each of these areas, Barron finds farmers both embracing and rejecting change, based upon their needs and desires as members of a rural society. In the beginning, rural dwellers resisted most of these forces in response to concerns about local control and containment of cost. Over time, however, they often chose to embrace change, but on their own terms, when those changes made economic sense in their communities.

The case in which rural dwellers seem to have opposed change with the greatest vigor was school reform. In response to economic stress, as well as progressive reformers’ assertions that when it came to education, bigger was better, farm communities came under heavy pressure to consolidate their schools. A fervent desire to maintain local control over education meant that the battle over school consolidation extended well into the twentieth century, and well past the chronological limits of this study. As Barron comments, “the definition of a good school or a good education was less a matter of science, regardless of the pretensions of professional educators. It remained more in the realm of metaphysics than physics, or at least, of culture and ideology” (p. 77). As such, it was a particularly important battleground for the maintenance of local values and local control over the interests of the urban professionals.

Barron is particularly effective in his discussion of consumer culture in the countryside. Although rural people came to embrace many aspects of that culture, they did so selectively and deliberately, and probably with more
considered more thought than middle-class, urban Americans. Farmers vigorously adopted the automobile, but only after it became clear that it was a useful tool, rather than a rich man or woman’s toy. The same was true of the radio, which often came to be a farm family’s most important daily link to the world beyond the farm. Although many companies attempted to sell their products to the rural market, those that were most successful tailored their advertising to the concerns of that market. Listerine, in particular, knew their consumers, and custom fit their advertising to a farm-based market. Barron’s carefully selected figures beautifully illustrate the way in which this company sought out and captured farm families’ dollars.

By 1930, rural people had achieved a “mixed harvest” of resistance and accommodation. Although America was moving inexorably toward the urban and industrial, rural America retained a culture that was, at least in part, distinctive and based upon their own values: localism, cooperation, and thrift. Barron leaves the ultimate question, the degree to which these values could be sustained over the longer haul, or even the next decade, “for another season” (p. 245).

Barron’s book is ambitious and masterful, an exceptional addition to the new rural history. It is a welcome reminder that there was not a monolithic, urban American culture at the turn-of-the-century, but a multiplicity of cultures, including one that was rural and unsure of the value of the era’s startling levels of change. One minor concern with the book is Barron’s choice of a regional focus. The counties under study extend from Franklin County, Massachusetts in the east, to Adams County, Nebraska, and Reno County, Kansas in the west. Barron argues that he is exploring similarities across regions, rather than differences. This, however, presents certain problems. Barron’s study encompasses an enormous amount of territory, the residents of which faced considerably different stresses and strains. While by 1870 Franklin County was a mature and established community, Reno and Adams counties would have been at a very early stage in their development. Surely issues such as time of settlement, not to mention variable levels of environmental and economic strain, would have affected residents’ perceptions of their place, not to mention their resources, as citizens, producers, and consumers. While a more careful geographic analysis would have been helpful, its absence does not detract significantly from what is otherwise an exemplary study.

Steven Stoll’s *The Fruits of Natural Advantage: Making the Industrial Countryside in California* is the story of the development of California’s fruit industry. It is the story of a single state, as opposed to Barron’s rather loose, regional focus. Also unlike the previous work, it is not a social history, telling readers little or nothing about “the day to day passages of rural life” (p. xv). Instead,
it is agricultural, business, and environmental history. It is also quite clearly a part of the new western history, with strong intellectual links to William Cronon’s *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (1991) and Donald Worster’s *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (1985).

Stoll begins his tale with a discussion of the various strands of agricultural thought in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Stoll places at either end of the spectrum agricultural economist Edwin Nourse and Country Life reformer Liberty Hyde Bailey. Although the story is rather more complicated than this book suggests, the two provide a useful framework for Stoll, with Nourse representing agriculture as a business, and Bailey promoting farming as a way of life. In Stoll’s analysis, Nourse’s perspective drove California’s development, leading to great wealth for growers, but less fortunate results for California’s land and laborers.

Stoll provides a richly detailed description of California’s natural advantages and the ways in which growers used those natural advantages to build an empire based upon fruit. California’s climate and soil were perfectly suited to fruit growing. Fruit growers, however, given their distance from eastern markets and the perishability of their product, were not perfectly situated to reap the benefits of their natural advantages. Instead, agriculture, marketing, and consumer tastes had to be remade in order to meet growers’ ambitions.

Stoll tells his readers how growers organized to promote their interests and advertised their product to eastern consumers. What is particularly interesting is Stoll’s discussion of the ways in which marketing controlled the variety (or lack thereof) of fruit offered to the American public. While nineteenth-century Americans knew sixty different varieties of pears, most twentieth-century Americans often knew only one, the Bartlett, a result of standardization in the industry. Just as important to growers as organization and advertising was the development of pesticides and fungicides. Pests could easily devastate orchards, and particularly those in a single crop. Although ladybugs from Australia were quite successful in controlling cottony cushion scale, an insect that sticks to and damages the branches and leaves of fruit trees, growers were impatient to eradicate pests quickly. California’s fruit growers led the way in adopting chemical pesticides and fungicides for their crops. Finally, growers improved their chances of profit by isolating sources of cheap labor, and manipulating the labor market. In a remarkably short amount of time, California had a highly capitalized, highly profitable agricultural industry.

Inherent in Stoll’s discussion is the assumption that this development could have been handled more judiciously and more humanely. In their haste to reap the fruits of natural advantage, California’s growers did untold
environmental and human damage. There is the assumption that someplace, and somehow, agricultural development proceeded at a more reasonable and less painful and potentially damaging pace. Stoll asserts this particularly in regard to questions of labor, where he argues that the family farming practiced in the midwest was less damaging to workers than was California’s fruit harvesting. While it is undoubtedly true that California’s orchards were often extremely unpleasant working environments, many nineteenth-and early-twentieth-century youths considered agriculture in any form a dead-end occupation and sought to escape its clutches as quickly as possible. It would be interesting to know if the children of growers, freed from stoop labor by poorly paid, poorly treated migrants, were more likely to remain in their families’ enterprises than the children of midwestern farming families. There is an interesting thread of romantic attachment to midwestern family farming woven through this work, although often unstated, under the surface, and almost out of sight.

Stoll’s book is engaging and intelligent, useful to rural and agricultural historians, business historians, and scholars in western and environmental history. The book, however, does leave room for the further explorations of future scholars. The growers, who clearly drove the development of this particular countryside, are peculiarly absent from the tale. Readers are left wondering who the “orchard capitalists” really were. While Stoll provides a few quick biographical sketches of growers, this is a place where more careful analysis of census schedules would help greatly. If the reader knew more about the growers as a group, it would be easier to understand their encounter with the California landscape and their wholehearted embrace of California’s version of industrial agriculture. It is difficult both to understand and to contextualize their approach to the land without understanding more about who they were, and their origins. This is a place where the book, in spite of Stoll’s stated intention not to write social history, would benefit from a social history approach.

Even more importantly, The Fruits of Natural Advantage would benefit from a more thorough understanding of American agricultural history as a whole. In Stoll’s analysis, California stands alone, unconnected to the larger history of an agricultural nation. Stoll claims that his story is about a “revolution in farming that began in California” (p. 173). Most agricultural historians would probably place the origins of industrial agriculture in other locations and at different times. Surely southern rice, cotton, and sugar cultivation, vertically integrated dairy operations, and bonanza wheat farms bore some relationship to the beginnings of industrial agriculture. Equally, Stoll assumes that the model fruit growers developed in California greatly influenced the further development of agriculture throughout the United States; this, however,
remains an unproven assertion. Given the highly specialized nature of fruit production, California remains an exception in American agriculture, rather than the rule. Rather than making these connections and bringing his work to a solid conclusion, Stoll makes a rather vague plea for a reformed, reclaimed agriculture, without telling the reader just exactly what he means by these suggestions. The conclusion is rather unsatisfying, after the tightly controlled and careful analysis of the proceeding chapters, and as a result, is far less useful. The book’s lack of a larger context should not pose too much of a problem for the well-read agricultural historian, but may cause some confusion for beginners who have no framework in which to place this otherwise interesting study.

Although Barron’s and Stoll’s books represent diverse strands of rural and agricultural history, there is a unity to them. They are both books about how rural peoples accepted and adapted to change. Barron’s farmers embraced change slowly and deliberately, and sometimes not at all. Their goal was to maintain the traditions of an older America that they saw slipping from their grasp. Stoll’s growers thoroughly, and perhaps too quickly, sought out change, and propelled California down the road to a highly profitable, but ultimately precarious, industrial agriculture. Given that these books describe the same era, and the pursuit of what is, at least on the surface, the same calling, it remains to rural and agricultural historians to explain how and why ideology, crop mix, geography, social milieu, and related factors influenced practitioners in different locations to pursue such different visions of the rural ideal.

Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, currently associate professor of history at Illinois State University, will join the history department at Iowa State University in the fall of 2000. She is the editor of Waiting on the Bounty: The Dust Bowl Diary of Mary Knackstedt Dyck (1999), and is currently researching rural childhood in the American Midwest, 1870-1920.