

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

May 2002

Book Review: *Dust Bowl USA: Depression America and the Ecological Imagination, 1929-1941* By Brad D. Lookingbill

Diane Quantic
Wichita State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Quantic, Diane, "Book Review: *Dust Bowl USA: Depression America and the Ecological Imagination, 1929-1941* By Brad D. Lookingbill" (2002). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 42.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/42>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Published in *Great Plains Quarterly*, vol. 22, no. 2 (Spring 2002).

Published by the Center for Great Plains Studies, University of Nebraska–Lincoln.

Copyright © 2000 Center for Great Plains Studies. Used by permission.

of the changes in our understanding of Great Plains ecology.

The book is divided into chapters with such titles as "Survivor" and "Legacy" that focus on the persistent attitudes each label reflects. In the chapter "Fall," for example, the author cites religious and secular sources that equate dust and the Depression with tales of disobedience to God or the ruin of civilization. Other chapters focus on emerging theories of soil and crop management and the results of the federal government's efforts to use these ideas to regulate agricultural production.

Lookingbill's account adds to our understanding of the complex development of our "ecological imagination." His survey encompasses scientific theories and governmental policies concerning irrigation, soil conservation, crop reduction, and continuing population decline, and literary accounts of the familiar themes of struggle and disaster. Omissions and a lack of clarity in Lookingbill's text regrettably detract from his otherwise valuable account. Aside from a small map in the front of the book, there is no discussion of the region's geographical boundaries and no clear identification of the area affected most dramatically by the drought. There is little analysis or synthesis to indicate the complex relations among or relative merits of the various attitudes and theories he surveys. The author's choices of material to emphasize are often puzzling. For example, Willa Cather is conflated in one sentence with Badger Clark as a writer of "romance," but William Allen White's forgettable study *The Changing West* gets a page of discussion. Lookingbill labels John Ise's account of his family's homestead, *Sod and Stubble*, a "semi-biography," evidently unaware of Von Rothenberg's documentation in the second edition or of Ise's career as an agricultural economist, a field at the heart of Lookingbill's study. An awkward attempt to superimpose a confusing critical context on the material further reduces the book's value.

These drawbacks notwithstanding, *Dust Bowl USA* adds to our grasp of the "story" of the Great Plains during the Dust Bowl decade.

Dust Bowl USA: Depression America and the Ecological Imagination, 1929-1941. By Brad D. Lookingbill. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2001. Map, photographs, notes, selected bibliography, index. x + 190 pp. \$44.95 cloth, \$16.95 paper.

In his introduction to *Dust Bowl USA*, Brad Lookingbill states that a historian "makes an archeological expedition into the ecological imagination, ending with stories about stories quite different from where each actually began." Lookingbill's book catalogs these stories about stories; accounts of the Dust Bowl and Depression in newspapers, popular magazines, novels, personal accounts, art, photography, and government documents create a history

For this reason, it is a welcome addition to the short shelf of books that focus on the lasting legacy of this time in the region's history.

DIANE QUANTIC
Department of English
Wichita State University