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**Book Review of *A Green and Permanent Land: Ecology and
Agriculture in the Twentieth Century* by Randal S. Beeman and
James A. Pritchard**

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A Green and Permanent Land: Ecology and Agriculture in the Twentieth Century. Randal S. Beeman and James A. Pritchard. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001. 232 pp. Notes, selected bibliography, index. \$29.95 cloth.

Concentrating on the ideological underpinnings of American agriculture, Beeman and Prichard illuminate the 20th-century debate over defining and implementing suitable agricultural practices and policies. Against the backdrop of the Great Depression and World War II, farmers, environmentalists, federal officials,

and academics found agriculture influenced by a growing ecological movement. Techniques purporting a better urban-rural balance, soil conservation, and organic fertilization were favored by individuals seeking an alternative to the economic and social despair experienced by Americans during the 1930s and 1940s. The agricultural establishment troika of agribusiness, land-grant universities, and the United States Department of Agriculture eschewed such ideas until the mid 1960s when larger cultural changes made it expedient to co-opt ecological precepts. Unorthodox ideas soon became commonplace on the American landscape of the 1970s and 1980s.

The dust bowl conditions of the Great Plains foreshadowed the intersection of agriculture and ecology. Linking the sustainability of civilization to the soil, Roosevelt administration officials such as Rexford Tugwell pressed for a form of planned “agricultural interdependence” which lessened human dominance over nature. Requiring a more scientific basis for interdependence, supporters of the “permanent agriculture” movement embraced ecological prescriptions propagated within Midwestern university biology departments. Proponents viewed the farmer as only one component of a larger system. Preserving the system required a more sophisticated understanding and application of less destructive cultivation methods. As a result, the American farmer needed to be conversant in various scientific theories and bear the responsibility for preserving the American “system.”

Despite numerous attempts to apprise Americans of permanent agriculture’s benefits, its practical application faded during the 1950s. The USDA and land-grant universities disdained the use of organic pest control methods and emphasis on no-till farming. The temper of the mid 1960s, however, allowed these ideas to re-emerge under the rubric of sustainable agriculture. Global famine, the Vietnam War, and a rising world population prompted ecologically astute Americans to blame the crisis on technological dependence and cultural imperialism. The environmentalism of the late 20th century appealed to many disheartened by the climate of “corporations, consumption, and suburban living.” Ecology, with its emphasis on systems and communities, provided the panacea for societal ills in the guise of organic farming, permaculture, and solar energy. “Environmentalism,” though, had become so ingrained in the public dialogue by the 1980s that chemical corporations took to describing themselves as “stewards of the earth.”

Beeman and Pritchard capably trace the ideological antecedents of the latter-day environmental movement. An intriguing point alluded to is that the criticisms of the permanent agriculture school (centering on excessive individualism, technological misuse, and ecological destruction of the Great Plains) presaged those the New Western historians asserted decades later. Overall, the authors succeed in intertwining agriculture and ecology, topics often portrayed as antagonists. **Kristin L. Ahlberg**, *Department of History, University of Nebraska-Lincoln*.