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THE DUST BOWL

AN INTRODUCTION

In March 1985 the Center for Great Plains Studies of the University of Nebraska–Lincoln held its ninth annual symposium “Social Adaptation to Semiarid Environments.” The relevance of that topic was evident alike to specialists and to the reader of daily newspaper stories about drought and accompanying starvation in Africa, recurring crop failures in Russia, China’s struggle to feed its teeming population, out-of-control grassland fires in Australia, and depletion of ground water supplies and continued soil erosion in the North American Great Plains.

Specialists in a broad range of disciplines explored the ways in which different societies have adjusted in the past, are currently responding, and can adapt more effectively in the future to the problems of a semiarid environment. A number of the sessions focused upon the American Dust Bowl of the 1930s, a fitting concentration, as the term had first been used almost exactly fifty years before. More important, however, the Dust Bowl has become the paradigmatic example of ecological failure in mankind’s struggle to adapt to a semiarid environment. In the process, the term *Dust Bowl* has taken on two distinct meanings. In a strict sense, it refers to a particular locale, northeastern New Mexico, southeastern Colorado, western Kansas, and the Oklahoma and

Texas Panhandles. More broadly, *Dust Bowl* has become a shorthand label for the complex of difficulties—drought, low farm prices, and human distress—afflicting the Great Plains as a whole during the depression decade. The following papers explore some of the concerns suggested by the phrase *Dust Bowl*.

If geography and climate constituted one set of limiting variables in shaping the development of the Great Plains, the cultural baggage carried by the settlers of the area constituted a second. John C. Hudson reexamines the adaptation of people accustomed to living in woodlands to the semiarid grasslands of the Plains by looking at the backgrounds of those who made the move. He distinguishes three major streams of migrants: Yankees whose roots lay in New England; Midlanders tracing their ancestry back to the area stretching from southeastern Pennsylvania down the Great Valley into Maryland and Virginia; and the descendants of settlers from coastal and piedmont Virginia. The different cultural heritage of each group strongly influenced the type of agricultural practices adopted in the areas of the Plains where its members settled. But Hudson warns against a too easy assumption that the Dust Bowl was simply the product of a cultural lag involving failure to adapt past behaviors to new circumstances.

The population of the most severely distressed parts of the Plains in the 1930s was predominantly made up of persons born and raised in semiarid areas. The victim of the Dust Bowl "was not forest man but rather his prairie-born children and grandchildren."

Was then the Dust Bowl—at least in its narrowly defined sense—the result of natural forces beyond human control? Or were the dust storms a human-induced ecological disaster? In a 1936 report issued by the inter-agency Great Plains Drought Area Committee under the title *The Future of the Great Plains*, New Deal planners summed up the prevailing expert opinion about the causes of and remedies for the region's plight. One of the drafters of that report, Gilbert F. White, presents an insider's account of the premises underlying the response of New Deal land-use planners. Their basic assumption was that the periodic deficits in rainfall to which the area was subject could not be overcome by large-scale technological fixes. The solution lay rather in the adoption of proper soil and water conservation practices at the farm level. Their implementation would require in turn major changes in values and attitudes.

R. Douglas Hurt looks in depth at an important New Deal attempt at halting wind erosion and restoring the land within the Dust Bowl. The plan was for the federal government to purchase submarginal land, shift that land from crops back to grass for grazing, and resettle the surplus population on land more suitable for farming. Although the program did produce long-term benefits, insufficient funding frustrated the more ambitious hopes of its sponsors. At the same time, the project came to face growing local resistance. Disputes over land purchase prices, bureaucratic delays in making the payments, and disagreements over grazing fees contributed to this resistance. More important, the return of near normal precipitation reawakened the entrepreneurial aspirations that had led to plowing up the grasslands in the first place.

Donald Worster sees such entrepreneurial aspirations as the decisive cause of the Dust

Bowl. He argues that the area's farmers were neither atypically benighted nor short-sighted. Their tragedy lay in applying the same commercial, exploitative ethos found among American farmers generally to an ecosystem too fragile to withstand the strain. They were, in short, good capitalists on the make—and the resulting ecological disaster was simply a forewarning of the dire results that awaited temporarily more favored agricultural areas.

On the other hand, Harry C. McDean takes issue with the thesis that the source of the trouble lay in the prevailing capitalist ethos of American culture. In his survey of the historiography on the topic, he emphasizes that the Dust Bowl was a unique phenomenon—the product of the existence of a specific complex of soil and weather conditions in a well-defined locale coupled with the presence of "a particular farm culture—likewise specific to the area—in the 1920s and the 1930s."

In the concluding paper, William E. Riebsame examines how the term *Dust Bowl* acquired a symbolic meaning and importance divorced from the particulars of what took place in the 1930s, becoming "an 'ecological taboo' used to prescribe how people should behave in the Plains environment." As a consequence, the public has tended to view the minor droughts that periodically afflict the Plains through the lens of the events of the thirties. This distortion has proved a powerful weapon local agricultural interests can use to extract financial assistance from the government. But Riebsame warns that the result has been to distract attention from the less dramatic but more important long-term dangers involved in modern farming practices on the Plains.

This set of papers makes an important contribution to illuminating the dual aspect of what was a major watershed in the Great Plains experience—the Dust Bowl as reality and the Dust Bowl as metaphor. We hope their publication will stimulate further study.

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