

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

1996

Review of *Dry Farming in the Northern Great Plains: Years of Readjustment, 1920-1990* By Mary W. M. Hargreaves

David C. Jones
University of Calgary

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



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

Jones, David C., "Review of *Dry Farming in the Northern Great Plains: Years of Readjustment, 1920-1990* By Mary W. M. Hargreaves" (1996). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1139.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/1139>

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.

Dry Farming in the Northern Great Plains: Years of Readjustment, 1920-1990. By Mary W. M. Hargreaves. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993. Maps, tables, preface, introduction, notes, bibliographical note, index. xiii + 386 pp. \$45.00.

Dry Farming is a work of half a lifetime of prodigious scholarship. It begins in the agricultural drought and depression of the twenties and ends in the drought and depression of the eighties. All the great challenges and changes of the time are here, in detail—the

trauma of the 1930s; the liquidation of Depression debts in the 1940s; the shifts and innovations after World War II (larger and larger holdings, herbicides, insecticides, fungicides, and fertilizers); the five-fold increase in U.S. exports of wheat and flour in the next five decades; the long road to irrigation; the healthy yields and prices from 1969 to 1982; and the massive adjustments of the 1980s.

Some of the general trends are bewildering, particularly those concerning acreage reduction. In the early 1930s there were 360 million acres cropped in the U.S., and over the next forty years 60 million acres were taken out of production before a remarkable about-face in the 1970s when almost 60 million acres were added, followed again by reductions in the 1980s. Yet despite debt and discontent in the eighties, the number of farm operators in the northern Great Plains has stabilized, notwithstanding the horrendous drop from 106,000 in 1925 to 41,000 in 1987.

The experience is part of the total experience of the Plains, the southern and the Canadian included. The disaster that befell the Canadian dry belt in the 1920s is part of this tale. From the Montana border all the way north to where the Red Deer River turns east, and all the way east into Saskatchewan, this massive block had over five times more farm abandonments in 1926 than in 1936. The remedies devised there, especially for the large periphery (the core is abandoned to this day), were part of the vast adjustment agriculture underwent in this century.

There can be few quibbles with this masterwork. Perhaps the maps might be crisper; perhaps a few pictures might enhance the presentation, and a few more graphs might lay out complex and often serpentine trends. Possibly a few more farmers might speak so that in the end one knows that certainly behind the statistics dwell real people with real dreams. Generally, the more pleasing the presentation, the wider the audience—and this scholarship deserves a wide audience.

Dry Farming is a superlative history of farm policy on the northern Plains by one of the

most meticulous students of the phenomenon in the past half century.

DAVID C. JONES

Department of Educational Policy and
Administrative Studies
University of Calgary