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Review of *The Dust Bowl* By Paul Bonnifield & *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* By Donald Worster

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The Dust Bowl. By Paul Bonnifield. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1979. Maps, illustrations, bibliography, and index. xii + 232 pp. \$12.50

Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s. By Donald Worster. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979. Illustrations, maps, tables, notes, and index. x + 277 pp. \$14.95.

The Dust Bowl of the 1930s provides an excellent case study of American reactions to a major ecological crisis. By examining carefully how the nation and the region responded to this phenomenon, we could learn valuable lessons to aid in understanding current and future ecological crises. Thus it is of more than antiquarian interest to evaluate these two recent books on the Dust Bowl and the associated events now almost half a century behind us.

Although both authors examine the same area, events, and personalities, their treatment and conclusions are decidedly different. Both focus on the southern plains and devote chapters to description of the landforms, weather, and climate. Both agree that the hardest-hit areas, the heart of the Dust Bowl, included

such places as Baca County, Colorado, Morton County, Kansas, and Cimarron County in the Oklahoma Panhandle. Both discuss the early settlement of the southern plains and the droughts there in the 1890s and 1930s; the Great Depression and the planning and programs of the New Deal; major dust storms; dust pneumonia; how the Dust Bowl got its name; and Black Sunday, April 14, 1934, which anyone living in the area at that time remembers, as later generations remember what they were doing at the time of the New York Blackout or the John F. Kennedy assassination. Both mention personalities indelibly associated with the place and times, such as Woody Guthrie, FDR, Harry Hopkins, Rexford Tugwell, Hugh Hammond Bennett, and Howard H. Finnell. Both attest to the steadfast endurance of the people of the plains. The two books are about the same size and length and both contain many fine photographs of dramatic dust storms, drought effects, and dry-farming practices. That is about as far as the similarities go.

Paul Bonnifield, in his forward, asserts that "ultimately the story of the heartland of the dust bowl is the chronicle of hardworking, stouthearted folks who withstood the onslaught of nature at its worst, while living through a devastating depression and facing government idealism." He regards the outcome as a victory for the plains people, "a victory that helps to feed a hungry world and heat our homes."

Donald Worster, in contrast, argues that both the Depression and the Dust Bowl were products of fundamental weaknesses in the traditional culture of America. The Depression was due to a crisis in capitalism and the Dust Bowl was part of the same crisis, brought about "because the expansionary energy of the United States had finally encountered a volatile, marginal land, destroying the delicate ecological balance that had evolved there." Worster does not regard the outcome as a victory. Despite its high standard of living and great productivity in good years, the plains still retain the old economic uncertainties of business farming and, in recent dust storms, the familiar

evidence of ecological maladaptation. Worster sums up the agriculture that America offers the world as "producing an incredible bounty in good seasons, using staggering quantities of machines and fossil fuels to do so, exuding confidence in man's technological mastery over the earth, running along the thin edge of disaster." While it would be nice to believe that Bonnifield is correct and Worster wrong, there is no doubt that Worster does a superior job of marshalling his evidence.

Bonnifield's book is based on information gathered in the southern plains, mainly from local newspapers, museums, and libraries, and from interviews with local residents. He recounts a bewildering array of individual dust storms, floods, tornadoes, hailstorms, and invasions by grasshoppers and worms as he skips from place to place, but there is little sense of broader weather patterns or a synthesis of the whole. His tables are not systematic. Wheat yields by counties in southeastern Kansas, 1933-39, annual postal receipts at Spearman, Texas, in 1929 and '30, bank assets at Texhoma, 1930-39, and land prices in Morton County, Kansas, 1936-39, provide the type of evidence used to generalize for the entire region. Bonnifield does not assess the response to the droughts of the 1950s and 1970s.

Worster's thorough, thoughtful, and literary account evokes the atmosphere of the area, personalities, and events, and places them all in perspective. His book skillfully integrates the best information available from local, state, and national sources that run the gamut from congressional reports, census migration data, scholarly monographs, and scores of articles from dozens of reputable journals, to Dust Bowl songs, poetry, novels, biographies, films, and photography. Worster focuses on two counties for detailed local studies—Cimarron County, Oklahoma, in the heart of the Dust Bowl, and Haskell County, Kansas, in the second tier of counties away from its center. These cameo community studies provide vivid portraits of how individuals, ethnic, class, and occupational groups, and communities first settled the area and then responded to the

weather, economic conditions, and government programs of the Dust Bowl and to events of the subsequent decades. In this way, Worster demonstrates a continuity between the economic forces and attitudes that led to the Dust Bowl and those that persist today, which may be seen in such adaptations as center-pivot irrigation and the heavy use of artificial fertilizer. He is dubious about the long-run value of these practices on the plains and thinks it would be unconscionable to export such Western technology abroad. He suggests that the recent drought disaster in the Sahel may be largely a result of Western agricultural development undermining the historically evolved, ecologically adapted local systems.

The basic difference between the two books rests in the perspectives of the authors. Bonni-field arrived in the area as a new faculty member at Panhandle State University in Goodwell, Oklahoma, and became deeply fascinated by the Dust Bowl. He faithfully recorded what he found, but he should have looked further and deeper, for his uncritical acceptance of largely local sources provided him with a chauvinistic plainsman's perspective. Worster, in contrast, grew up in the southern plains, and returned to look at it, not only with the affection and insights of a native son, but with the broader perspectives of a larger world. He is aware that the argument of the book will not be acceptable to many plainsmen but believes that critical self-appraisal is necessary. His book is one that can be read for enjoyment and intellectual stimulation, not only by Great Plains buffs and historians, but by anyone curious about whether human beings can ever live in harmony with the possibilities and limitations of our planet.

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