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August 1993

Review of *The Land That Feeds Us* by John Fraser Hart

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Bays, Brad, "Review of *The Land That Feeds Us* by John Fraser Hart" (1993). *Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences*. 141.

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The Land That Feeds Us. John Fraser Hart. New York, NY: W. W. Norton and Company, 1991. 398 pp. Maps, graphs, tables, index. \$25.00 cloth.

John Fraser Hart knows farming. His near half-century of scholarship on U.S. agricultural regions is extended to the general reader in *The Land That Feeds Us*, an uncompromisingly direct geographical exposé on the challenges and dilemmas facing American agriculture.

Hart is concerned with major questions of the future of American agriculture: from over-specialization and the reality of foreign competition to

convoluted farm policies that regulate production and encourage dependency on federal subsidies. Without a long term plan, he argues that to be competitive, U.S. farmers have little choice but to cut expenses and increase production by expanding their farm size.

The lessons of overexpansion come hard, as southern Plains wheat farmers found in the 1930s. But how are we to protect ourselves in a global economy where space continues to be annihilated? Hart points out that answering this question requires that we first admit the existence of a problem. Shrewdly, and perhaps so as not to scare the reader away, he reserves the final two chapters for his solution. The body of the book is a collection of essays on the agricultural regions of the eastern United States.

The book does not include footnotes or references, and jargon is absent from the often witty narrative. Plenty of regional and large scale maps support the narrative, and a few tables and graphs are included. Each chapter assesses spatial and temporal change within each production area from both the regional and individual level. Interviews with farmers in the late 1950s serve as the baseline for comparison with return visits in the early 1980s.

The reader's journey begins with an elegant narrative of agricultural diffusion through migration and settlement. American farming was its most diverse when it blossomed in southeastern Pennsylvania and moved into the Great Valley. Soon after, however, specialization commenced as new resources were encountered, urban markets grew, and distances increased. Ensuing chapters lay out the historical development of each agricultural region before furnishing the account of a real farmer in a real place. Beginning in the limestone areas of southern Appalachia, Hart embarks on a clockwise chronological circuit.

Arriving in the early heartland of southern Ohio, he traces the corn and livestock feeding system westward, at first skipping the wet prairies of Illinois before returning to that "Heart of the Heartland" (chapter 8). Next he moves into the "Milky Way" of the Wisconsin dairyland and then to the truck farming areas around Megalopolis. Turning south, Hart spends more time on the rise and fall of the Cotton Belt, brilliantly using this as a case to illuminate the dangers of uncontrolled overexpansion.

From the Cotton Belt, Hart brings the narrative fully into the present, moving progressively to more specialized regions where production is spatially concentrated. These regions produce poultry, lumber, tobacco, peanuts, rice, sugar, vegetables, and citrus. Each region has its dilemma, whether economic, political, or environmental, and their destinies seem to be headed for that of the Cotton Belt.

Hart is more successful at describing the landscape and pointing to problems than he is at offering solutions. He says that “the United States needs a bold, innovative, and massive land-retirement program that will remove from agricultural production some of our best farmland and all of our good, marginal, and environmentally fragile land” (p. 367). Although he states that “the market will do the job for us if we do not” (p. 368), he is, at best, pessimistic that such a policy will ever be implemented in time. **Brad Bays**, *Department of Geography, University of Nebraska-Lincoln*.