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## Review of *American Agriculture: A Brief History* by R. Douglas Hurt

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**American Agriculture: A Brief History.** R. Douglas Hurt. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1994. xii+412 pp. \$34.95 cloth (ISBN 0-8138-2376-5).

This book is a history of American agriculture by an academic agriculturalist who is interested in farm programs, policies, organizations, institutions, and bureaucracies, but cares little about real farms. Although he occasionally itemizes the products of farms, he largely ignores cropping systems, livestock feeding operations, and the ways farmers integrate them to produce these products.

The book has eight chronological chapters, which break around the years 1492, 1780, 1860, 1900, 1914, 1933, and 1955, plus a surprisingly sour epilogue. Subheadings in individual chapters identify themes that attempt to give continuity from chapter to chapter. The book has sidebars on

agrarianism, the Civil War, and veterinary medicine, and brief biographies of such worthies as Eli Whitney, John Deere, Mary Elizabeth Lease, George Washington Carver, and Henry A. Wallace.

I would consider this book as a possible textbook if ever I had to teach an introductory course on the history of American agricultural institutions, but I would have to beef it up heavily in many ways. I would want to balance its heavy emphasis on machinery with greater attention to barns, corn cribs, fences, and other structures on the rural landscape.

The book ignores geographical variations in topography, climate, soil and their impact on agricultural practices and systems. Its populist anti-corporate bias needs to be toned down a bit, its treatment of New England is too starry-eyed, and its treatment of the South is so unsympathetic that it is tantamount to misunderstanding.

It is surprising that the book says nothing about the way that dairy farming followed the wheat frontier westward, and far more surprising that it devotes more space to Alaska than to the nation's agricultural heartland in the Midwest. Surely something must be said about the shift from corn-hog to cash-grain farming, the importance of the self-propelled combine, and the role of part-ownership in farm enlargement.

In the book many things seem to have just sort of happened, and I would rather imagine that students would want some kind of explanation about why, how, where, and who made them happen.

Finally, I would discourage students from emulating the author's writing style, because in places he trips over his own syntax, especially when placing modifiers. As but one example, the statement (p. 49) about South Carolina, "where primarily large-scale landowners or gentry raised cattle rather than small-scale or yeoman farmers," clearly is a prime candidate for submission to the *New Yorker*. **John Fraser Hart**, *Department of Geography, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis*.