REVIEW ESSAY

In Search of a Dust Bowl Narrative for the Twenty-First Century

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Dust Bowls of Empire: Imperialism, Environmental Politics, and the Injustice of "Green" Capitalism. By Hannah Holleman. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018. xvii + 231 pp. Notes, index. $35.00, cloth.

Legacies of Dust: Land Use and Labor on the Colorado Plains. By Douglas Sheflin. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019. xiv + 406 pp. Map, photographs, notes, bibliography, index. $55.00, cloth.

Documents of the Dust Bowl. Edited by R. Douglas Hurt. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2019. xxvii + 240 pp. Bibliography, index. $94.00, cloth.

For everyone studying the Dust Bowl, the first order of business should be to realize how odd it is that we keep returning to this topic. With so many issues waiting to be explored at the intersection of agricultural and environmental history, scholars should have a good reason to look at one and the same event again and again. Do they have one? Elbow room is tight in the field, and every new book needs to squeeze in. The competition includes a book that won a Bancroft Prize (Donald Worster's *Dust Bowl* in 1980) and the winner of the 2006 National Book Award for Nonfiction (Timothy Egan for *The Worst Hard Time*). Scholars also need to cope with the combined cultural thrust of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, Dorothea Lange's photographs, and the music of Woody Guthrie. Is this a case akin to the wall full of graffiti that magically attracts artists (and those who see themselves as such) for yet another layer of paint? Or should we think in terms of the broken records of the shellac days that kept skipping back? The latter metaphor might lose readers below age fifty, though.

Of course, the Dust Bowl had dramatic pictures. It is safe to assume that the plight of the Southern Plains would have received different coverage, if any, in the absence of spectacular photographs. The Dust Bowl offered the perfect images for the United States of the Depression years: in the words of David Danbom, Caucasians could watch "someone white with whom they could identify and who was worse off than they were."[1] Dramatic photographs no longer stand out in an age awash with visuals, but something else has emerged that draws

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writers to the issue. The Dust Bowl has shown itself to be a powerful and remarkably versatile template. If you have a cause that needs a little boost, just link it to the Dust Bowl.

Needless to say, there is nothing illegitimate on principle about writing history in light of the concerns of one's time. In fact, some people say that this is why we engage with history. Residents of the Great Plains might object that templates are often imported from somewhere else and have shallow roots in the land; narratives of the Dust Bowl are also about the cultural occupation of a peripheral region. It may provide a quantum of solace that marginalization is a common experience in rural areas worldwide. In industrialized societies, farmers are hopelessly outnumbered and cannot compete with the monetary and cultural capital that resides in the big cities. In any case, the present reviewer is not in a position to speak for the region. He has never lived in the Great Plains—a month at Iowa State University was the closest approximation—and if you write about the Dust Bowl in the urban wilderness of the English Midlands, it takes a particularly strenuous intellectual effort to understand that a few days without rain might be a problem. However, there is also an intellectual argument for a word of caution. Invoking the drama and the extent of human misery can turn into a surrogate for theoretical and empirical sophistication. Disputing an argument based on the Dust Bowl feels like leaving people dying in the dirt: no matter whether you have a reason, everyone will talk about your heart of stone. It is the environmentalist equivalent of the argumentum ad Hitlerem. Nobody will challenge you if you have the Dust Bowl on your side.

We can see the approach at work in Hannah Holleman's *Dust Bowls of Empire*. It is, if anything, a passionate book. The concluding chapter argues for "a deeper ecological solidarity," criticizes capitalism, imperialism, and racism, and takes a swipe at "the anti-immigrant, anti-refugee, anti-Muslim, pro-police and -imprisonment, and pro-military platforms of political parties throughout the recent decades of austerity, growing inequality, globalization, and financial crises" (150). The chapter also features land grabbers, the Syrian refugee crisis, and the Rohingya in supporting roles. In the classic style of the American prosecutor (Mafia division), Holleman concludes with a call for the "fundamental four: restitution (of lands and sovereignty, of power to the people), reparations (for slavery, stolen labor, genocide, and other past injustices), restoration (of earth systems), and revolution (moving away from capitalism)" (162). Let no one tell you that academics no longer think about changing the world.

Such a book is obviously more than a historical treatise. The footnotes show no trace of archival research, and the author does not claim empirical findings that are fundamentally new. Her ambition is to put the event into a wider context. In her reading, the Dust Bowl of the 1930s is a mere prelude to the predicaments of our time: both have the same roots, and both are equally deadly. It is an informed and multifaceted discussion, though not one without a sense of haste. Holleman seeks to cover a lot of ground, and she is not averse to detours. For instance, the book also looks at BP's greenwashing as "Beyond Petroleum." If you really hate capitalism, imperialism, and all sorts of injustices, lashing out at Big Oil arguably qualifies as a natural urge.

The great advantage of Holleman's approach is that it connects the US Dust Bowl to contemporary debates over soil erosion in other countries and to later events. The US-centrism of much of the literature looks dubious in this book. Soil conservation was not something invented by the New Deal. It was a transnational concern and, as Holleman shows, the Dust Bowl was read accordingly. Against the backdrop of agricultural historians who really like their case studies, and sometimes seem to be on first-name terms with every farmer in their regions of study, this is a refreshing wake-up call. The big-picture approach has its merits but entails some serious risks, and Holleman's book does not seem terribly alert to the problems of a bird's-eye view.

A recurring theme of her book is that people knew enough. It is a point that environmental historians have made for numerous issues; a general sense of concern was usually the least of all problems. But a basic knowledge that soil erosion exists is different from knowledge about specific places, which is different from knowledge about new places and new agricultural technologies, which is again different from knowledge of how soil conservation relates to the rest of an agricultural enterprise. It also makes a difference whether the gospel is contained in a handful of books or spread by a 10,000-strong army. Furthermore, knowledge is different from making a decision, which is again different from making policies that incentivize the right action. Every major decision is about risk, and farmers deal with risks in more than one dimension. Farmers need to assess the chances of erosion in conjunction with the choice of crops, an assessment of available implements and the labor supply, and they need to pay their bills. When it came to soils in peril, preaching the urgency of conservation was always the easy part.

Seen from the ground, farming is about dealing with conflicting goals, and not just in capitalist societies. Unfortunately, Holleman never looks at farming on the ground. The farmers remain faceless in this book, mere puppets of a capitalist system that condemns them to misery—a somewhat paradoxical outcome for an author who obviously cares deeply about humans. There are no real characters in this book: villains get mentioned, and so do the authors that Holleman draws upon, but they just play their respective roles with no trace of ambiguities or afterthoughts. Holleman does not look at agriculture beyond the capitalist sphere either. The Soviet Union does not come up in her book, nor do autarky regimes in Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. We do not even get a clear idea how agriculture will be different after the revolution. What we do get throughout the text are reminders of the evils of capitalism, racism, and imperialism. Holleman is probably too young to know about skipping on a shellac record. It really gets on your nerves, no matter how much you like the music.

While the southern Great Plains do not really experience much of a transformation over time in Holleman's book, Douglas Sheflin describes a region that has come a long way. He takes a close look at Baca County and Prowers County in the southeastern corner of Colorado from 1929 to 1962, which makes for a helpful adjustment of the timeframe. By bringing in the 1950s, he covers a second period of drought, except that farmers and authorities were better prepared, not least by turning to irrigation. In between lies the Second World War, which others have taken as merely a well-timed period of wet weather that helped the region to feed the Allies fighting for victory. Sheflin shows how the labor system changed in the wake of the Dust Bowl. Farmers covered the war years with guest workers from Mexico and Jamaica, German prisoners of war, and detained Japanese Americans from a camp in one of the counties. After 1945, they relied on migrant labor, and the state eventually built an infrastructure for their health, education, and employment needs. Farms also got bigger, helped by federal authorities who thought bigger was better. Sheflin speaks of "a series of 'anti-Homestead Act' policies" (6).

Sheflin closes with remarks on the two counties in our time, finding that "much has changed since the New Deal years" (318). The Comanche National Grassland protects almost 444,000 acres of land that was retired with federal funding. Windmills dot the landscape, some producing renewable energy and others bringing up water from the Ogallala Aquifer. Federal officials have come to stay and help with subsidies and advice on environmental sustainability, the latter being the province of the Natural Resources Conservation Service that grew out of the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) of the New Deal. But droughts continue to hit the region, and people are still struggling. "Many residents seem stuck in a perpetually marginal existence, unable to make a lot of money but secure enough to stay on their land" (326). The outlook isn't rosy either: "It is unclear whether the region will ever truly reach a point of stability" (323).

Unfortunately, Sheflin does not reflect on what stability might mean in the semiarid environment of the Great Plains, which points to a general reluctance among Dust Bowl historians: what would be good farming in a notoriously unstable setting? Agriculture has always been a gamble with the weather, but the stakes are particularly high on the Southern Plains. In a good year, farmers may bring in bumper crops. In less fortunate times, nothing may grow at all. In other words, it may be a hallmark of good farming to have a good harvest in five out of ten years. Or would that be reckless farming because erosion and other side effects during the bad years are beyond the pale? How do we define good stewardship of the land if any hope for stability is undercut by the elements?

A search for answers should look beyond the environmental conditions of the region. Our inability to specify good farming practices may be due to the inadequacies of our collective imagination. Memories of rural life are fading in the urban societies of the West, and decades of industrial-style farming methods have transformed our understanding of environmental risks. The controlled environments in greenhouses and factory farms are only the most extreme examples of a general trend to reduce the vagaries of nature into a residual category that is presumed to be unlikely to produce unpleasant surprises. One might call it environmental hubris, but that critique is moral rather than analytical, and it leaves us speechless as to those who prefer to work with the system as it is. As Sheflin shows, the agricultural history of the Plains is often about muddling through, about working on multiple fronts in the absence of hope for a permanent solution, and it would be a worthy challenge for future Dust Bowl scholars to turn this finding into a full-fledged, theoretically grounded narrative. It would matter far beyond the region.

Sheflin's study is based on government records, and specifically the Colorado Cooperative Extension Service. The footnotes show extensive use of archival material, but the author's glowing comments on the government's efforts raise concerns about independent judgment. Sheflin writes that "fortunately, most agents kept meticulous notes and tallies" (106), but officials do not produce these notes for the benefit of historical research. Among other things, they served to impress superiors and all those skeptics of New Deal agencies. Furthermore, government programs tend to be more stable than agricultural conditions, which can make things look more settled than they were. Finally, extension files inevitably speak more about farmers who were in touch with county agents, and, as Sheflin points out himself, much of soil conservation work was (and is) voluntary. Sheflin is not the first agricultural historian who struggles to give a voice to farmers who were reluctant to talk with government officials, and the issue deserves some reflection. It might seem stupid to shun county agents, but it's a free country. Farmers are not dumb. But dumb farmers exist.

But for all these caveats, Sheflin has delivered an exemplary study that looks at the Dust Bowl and its aftermath on the ground. It's not a total history—the main focus is always on production—but by looking at farmers and officials, irrigation technology, and labor regimes, the book provides a deep understanding of what it meant to farm in the Great Plains. It demonstrates that the Plains were not a uniform region, and Sheflin offers some surprising insights. Who would have guessed that sugar beets brought the first Latino workers to southeastern Colorado (180)? All in all, Sheflin maintains a good balance between local specifics and the environmental challenges that the entire region was wrestling with, which qualifies as a hallmark of good Dust Bowl historiography; Holleman's view of a uniform disaster region is not so much wrong as terribly incomplete. The chief drawback of Sheflin's book is that his narrative shows little interest in the capitalist world beyond his counties. Commodities leave the farm, and technologies come in (often with strings attached), but these connections are poorly explored, and the counties look more self-contained than they were as a result. As it stands, readers seem condemned to choose between books that are reluctant to use the word "capitalism" and books that use it with glee.

R. Douglas Hurt is not fond of the word, and he does not show an interest in trouble on other fronts either. His *Documents of the Dust Bowl*, published in ABC-CLIO's "Eyewitness to History" series, has a chronology that runs from 1909 to 1962, but in picking documents, Hurt stuck to the conventional timeframe: most of the sources are dated between 1933 and 1939. Three chapters look at the storms, the causes, and life in the Dust Bowl; three more chapters look at the government programs in conservation and restoration, land utilization, and forestry. The "historical introduction" starts with Black Sunday (April 14, 1935), a date that also features on the first page of the introduction in Sheflin and Holleman. (Is there a law?) The following seventy-three documents have concise and helpful introductions, and for all their diversity, they are all textual. It's a bit of a relief if you suffer from Dorothea Lange or Arthur Rothstein overload, but Hurt does not seem to view this as more than an editorial choice. The Dust Bowl is still waiting for a reincarnation of Susan Sontag to get scholars off the visual dope.

Hurt acknowledges crucial assistance from Douglas Helms, the recently deceased chief historian of the Natural Resources Conservation Service, but the volume shows the expertise of an author whose books are mandatory reading for historians of US agriculture. Some documents might have benefited from an in-depth commentary on how contemporary recommendations look from the perspective of twenty-first-century soil conservation, but that is probably more than one can legitimately expect from a source collection. If it were not for the obscene price of the volume (which seems to be a general feature of the "Eyewitness to History" series), one could be confident that scholars will use this source collection extensively.

Hurt offers a broad range of perspectives. Officials of various stripes hand down their assessments of the causes of the dust storms and sketch their activities. Documents speak of economic stress and migration. The Kansas State Board of Health recommended wearing light gauze masks during dust storms while the American Red Cross conducted a study of dustproofing through the use of glass cloth or caulking (67). We also learn about "humor in the Dust Bowl" (69)—it's the type of joke that goes well with sand between your teeth. A document records how an invasive species, the Russian thistle, helped to stabilize the soil (98). We also note how contemporary experts, contra Holleman, did recognize the social implications of soil conservation: "formal changes in land use which do not take into account the social needs of the population are of no particular avail as measures of long-time relief or reconstruction," a 1938 essay in *Land Policy Review* declared (89). Government officials become a bit overwhelming in the second half, but all in all the volume is a worthy successor to Hurt's "agricultural and social history" of 1981, which stands out as a middle-of-the-road monograph in a scholarly field that seems to attract those with an axe to grind.[2] More precisely, it would be a worthy successor if it were not for the fact that 1981 really feels like a long time ago nowadays. To put it simply, middle-of-the-road historiography fares no better in our time than middle-of-the-road politics. It just does not capture hearts and minds anymore.

The big question is what that means, and what to do about it. One possible path is to write glowing accounts of government at work, hoping that people will understand how government, while arguably not sexy, is actually pretty useful. That seems to be the approach underlying Hurt's source book, which speaks about a government that cared; in the words of the preface, the book "gives voice and integrity to those who dedicated much of their careers to improving agricultural conditions in the southern Great Plains" (iv). What remains unspoken is that the government cared more about some than others: the natural focus of these sources are white male farmers. Women and children do not get much attention in Hurt's book, nor do Native Americans, and the prisoners of war and the migrants that helpfully feature in Sheflin's story remain out of the picture due to the rigidities of chronological framing. The volume is also oblivious of the power structures, capitalist and other, that underpinned the government's effort—though, admittedly, those are hard to capture with sources.

A second option might be the muckraking critique. A naive reader of Hurt's sourcebook might think that there were no tensions in the New Deal rescue effort, and certainly no blunders. One of the documents records a controversy over a land utilization project in Mills County, New Mexico (183), and another, opposition to a project in Kansas (192), but the overall impression is that everything went pretty smoothly and that most government employees worked to the best of their abilities. Even the shelterbelt project—the ultimate punching bag for scholars in search of a federal folly—looks pretty benign in Hurt's book. We know that SCS projects had a difficult start in other places. For example, a report on an SCS demonstration project in northern Georgia noted with unusual candor that "in the early days of the project much of the work . . . was 'hit and miss.'"[3] Should we really assume that it was different in the semiarid lands of the Southern Plains?

Once upon a time, muckraking was a progressive thing. But once more, we have come a long way since the days where government-led reform was the future (though the recent enthusiasm for a “Green New Deal” might suggest otherwise). We know that bureaucrats make mistakes, that they have their own vested interests, and that accountability in large administrations is a perennial work-in-progress. At the same time, few scholars seem willing to abandon all hope for reformist governance. Almost four decades ago, Mathew Paul Bonnifield’s *The Dust Bowl* lambasted New Deal policies as a federal intrusion into regional affairs, and while it failed to convince many scholars—whatever you say about the Southern Plains since the 1930s, things would almost certainly be worse without an active federal government—it showed how the muckraking critique can cut in more than one direction. In short, muckraking has had its day. Today’s narratives will need more nuance and a sensitivity for context: bureaucratic blunders exist, but they are not what bureaucracies are all about. I suspect that even Holleman, for all her criticism of the SCS’s work, would rehire a lot of its staff after the revolution.

A third approach might be to allow for more than one narrative. The Dust Bowl involves different groups with different perspectives, and it plays out on different levels from the dusty towns in the middle of nowhere to the capitalist world-system. There is more than one history of the Dust Bowl, but they are all connected on more than one level: we cannot tell the farmers’ story without New Deal politicians, government officials, the climate, the soil, the aquifer, and the amazing resilience of global capitalism in the twentieth century. Letting everyone sing according to his or her own preferences rarely makes for a good choir, and the Southern Plains may be a good place to rediscover the pitfalls of a postmodern cacophony. “Anything goes” is not a convincing rationale in the face of environmental constraints.

So maybe it is time for an entangled history that highlights how the Dust Bowl shaped a multidimensional legacy that has imposed limits to the range of options (and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future). The 1930s have left us with eyewitness accounts of life in a disaster region. They brought officials and government programs that are unlikely to disappear from the scene anytime soon. They also left people with a world of capitalism that has proven remarkably resilient, and certainly not for lack of moral failings. They also left us with a place where farming is still the defining business and a legacy that is highly dynamic. Even the environment is changing—from an aquifer that will not last forever to a changing weather. Farmers in the Great Plains need to cope with future weather conditions that God alone knows (assuming, of course, that you believe in a God that is good at weather forecasting). All that calls for a narrative that looks beyond the hope for an elusive stability and “lessons learned” and speaks about what it means to live and work in a region with a perennial need for adjustments in order to make a living.

All three books make contributions to such a new history. They also show that the most important ingredient for such a history is still lacking: a culture of self-observation. Dust Bowl historiography will stay below its potential if it continues to ignore that scholars inevitably leave their mark on a canvas with plenty of scribblings. Sheflin and Hurt do not engage much with other readings: they are busy adding their own sketch and do not really care about all that other paint. Holleman does look at other scholars, but mostly to highlight their failings: her suggestion for the canvas is to have it all painted over in black. Her criticism of other readings is consistent and uncompromising, down to the charge of "Dust Bowl denial" (41)—an exclusive world if we can trust Google Books.

If Holleman volunteers for a censorship department after the revolution, I will oppose her candidacy. As it stands, I plead for leniency, not least because I am mindful of my own sins in the past: in the age of Greta and Malala, academics should meet an argumentative first book with a measure of respect. Maybe Holleman's monograph captures the sound of a new age. Or maybe she will revisit her youthful idealism someday, and perhaps write about it. There is nothing wrong with writing apologetic reflective essays in mid-age. (I know what I am talking about. You are currently reading my own apology.)

At the very least, Holleman deserves credit for writing a bold first book. Her book forces us to engage with big questions that classic case studies are inclined to overlook, and she shows that we will need a place for passion in twenty-first-century academia. Holleman provides us with fresh perspectives on existing interpretations, and that should get readers into the right mood—if not for revolution, then for a full look at the entire graffiti wall that historians of the Dust Bowl have proliferated over the years. It is an asset, if not a cultural treasure, and yet one that scholars seem strangely uninterested in. As shown in these books, they either focus on doing their thing or treat previous narratives as a bunch of erroneous readings that need to be expunged. But why? We can learn a lot when we can get ourselves to make that crucial step back. We can also write more exciting histories that speak about the predicaments of our times.

Aesthetes may scoff at a painting with multiple layers of paint and a motley crew of artists. We should shrug them off. If there is anything you can learn from studying the soil, it is that beauty is overrated. The picture of the post–Dust Bowl Plains has its imperfections and inconsistencies, plenty of gaps, some screaming colors, and it's a tableau vivant—but it offers plenty of insights about making a living in a marginal environment. And if the last few years are any guide, the twenty-first century will need stories about survival in marginal environments. The day is fast approaching when we will not have any other.

Notes

1. David B. Danbom, *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 226.

2. R. Douglas Hurt, *The Dust Bowl: An Agricultural and Social History* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1981).

3. National Archives of the United States, Atlanta Branch, RG 114, No. 6107056, Soil Conservation Service, Southeastern Region, Tifton Area Office, Reports and Correspondence, 1938–1941, Box 1, Project Monograph, Agate GA-3, Rome, Georgia, Southeastern Region, p. 123.