Book Reviews

North America


Stanley Trimble’s new book is a welcome addition to the literature on soil conservation in the United States. Trimble, an emeritus professor of geography at the University of California–Los Angeles, is well known among students of historical land use for his previous studies of soil erosion in the Southern Piedmont and the Upper Mississippi River Valley. This most recent volume represents the culmination of thirty-nine years of research and reflection on human-induced environmental change in a part of the latter region known as the “Driftless Area,” a locale so-named for the lack of glacial drift found there. The area encompasses portions of four states—Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Illinois—where they adjoin the Mississippi River.

The subject of the book is the dramatic transformation of this landscape wrought by agricultural settlement from the middle of the nineteenth century up to the present. To tell this story Trimble draws on a broad range of historical sources, from the travelogues of the first European visitors and narratives of early settlers to government reports and interviews with present-day residents. He skillfully combines these historical records with the results of his own painstaking surveys of the hill country, performed with the assistance of his students and family over the course of many seasons in the field, to construct a portrait of landscape change spanning almost two centuries.

With individual chapters devoted to each phase of the environmental transformation he describes, Trimble shows in great physical detail how agriculture, particularly the cultivation of row crops like corn and the grazing of livestock on steep slopes, resulted in the degradation of the hill country landscape. In its natural state, the Upper Mississippi River Valley was a region of fertile soils, clear-running streams, thick forests, and abundant wildlife. By the early part of the twentieth century, however, plowing and overgrazing on upland slopes had contributed to a cascading series of environmental changes. The chief consequence was a reduction in the capacity of the soil to absorb water.
Rainfall that previously would have infiltrated into the ground instead flowed downstream over the surface of the land, carrying away topsoil and carving rills and gullies into hillsides. As water carried sediment from upland areas to the streams and river valleys below, it buried low-lying areas, aggraded stream channels, and contributed to more frequent severe flood events. The net consequence of these changes was a positive feedback cycle of environmental devastation that made the hill country an exemplar of the soil erosion crisis faced by the nation in the 1930s.

*Historical Agriculture and Soil Erosion* is not simply a declension narrative. Trimble also takes great care to show how soil conservation initiatives, spear-headed by state and federal agencies in cooperation with private landowners, have largely succeeded at arresting erosion and reversing the damage. The moral of the story is that environmental degradation need not be permanent. Just as humans can be agents of destruction, they are also capable of restoring the natural world we inhabit.

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Forty acres and a mule became an unfulfilled dream, forcing most blacks following emancipation to remain on the land as tenants and croppers earning scarcely enough to keep alive. The agricultural and labor reforms of the New Deal provided no help for African American farm workers because southern Democrats in Congress were able to exclude them from wage and hours laws, keeping their income low and blocking the road to landownership. Nevertheless, the desire to own their own farms persisted and, against what would seem to be impossible odds, some blacks managed to get and hold on to land, and black tenants and croppers still hoped to become owners. With the growing success of the Civil Rights Movement in the mid-twentieth century, we could expect that African American farmers would receive the government protection and support they had been systematically denied in the century following emancipation, especially after the creation in the USDA of the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service, the Federal Extension Service, and the Farmers Home Administration, agencies presumably designed to aid the