Agricultural History

Winter


Maury Klein’s 775-page opus, *A Call to Arms*, has received rave reviews and abundant praise, including from four Pulitzer Prize winners whose puffs appear on the back cover. Many of the plaudits are warranted. Klein has mastered a stunning number of difficult issues, from the mechanisms of the rationing system to the making of the atomic bomb. His lively prose helps the readers move through the extended sections on the war inside the beltway, with its interminable bureaucratic struggles and political intrigue. And his descriptions of figures he deems important—mainly bureaucrats and industrialists—are insightful and sometimes delightful.

That said, there are disturbing qualities to this book. Because it covers mobilization chronologically, it becomes repetitive. We understand that price controls were frustrated by a black market. You do not have to tell us again every hundred pages. Then there are the puzzling omissions. How can one write a 775-page book on World War II without once mentioning A. Philip Randolph, the Fair Employment Practices Commission, or the Double-V campaign? And how can one write a book in 2013 that refers to African-American farmworkers as “black folk” (581)?

This brings me to the subject of greatest interest to readers of this journal—agriculture. Some topics, such as price controls on food and the agricultural labor squeeze, are dealt with several times in Klein’s “Groundhog Day” fashion, but he devotes only one of his thirty-three chapters exclusively to agriculture. This despite the fact that 23 percent of Americans lived on farms in 1940 and agriculture contributed about 10 percent of the gross national product.

When he does address agriculture, he misses much of importance. The production revolution that was spurred by the war eludes him. So does the economic restructuring of farming, involving marginal producers leaving the land for better opportunities in town. Klein details political struggles in this or that Washington, DC, office, but the politics of agriculture, resulting in the emasculation or destruction of several agencies devoted to small farmers, go unremarked. His discussions of farm labor are replete with families pitching in and townsfolk working the fields to save the harvest, but the Bracero program is never mentioned nor are the strenuous and heavy-handed efforts by the Extension Service to keep African American laborers working for low wages.

These omissions can be traced to the sources Klein uses. His bibliography
includes only four books on agriculture, the most recent one published in 1968. The scholar most cited in his agriculture chapter is Walter Wilcox, whose *The Farmer in the Second World War* was published in 1947! Klein relies mainly on contemporary journalism from *Time, Newsweek, the Saturday Evening Post,* and other popular periodicals. These journalists pandered to their urban readers by portraying farming anecdotally and rural people as folksy rustics, ignoring the sometimes grim realities of wartime farming. Klein’s tone and focus mimics that of his sources. And that makes this book frustrating to serious students of agriculture.

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The creatively titled book *The Blue, the Gray, and the Green* is one of the most exciting collections of scholarship I have read in quite some time. Promising to improve our understanding of the Civil War with insights from environmental history, the authors break new ground and offer tantalizing suggestions for future scholarship. The twelve scholars have succeeded in crafting a work that should be required reading for graduate students and all those interested in expanding the boundaries of Civil War historiography.

Rather than unifying around a single theme, each author presents new ideas for how to explore the interaction between humans and environment during the war. Kenneth Noe calls for the importance of considering weather in the outcome of Civil War battles, providing a list of campaigns influenced by bad weather. In a highly illustrative essay, Megan Kate Nelson explores the role of the harsh desert environment in early Union defeats in New Mexico. Nelson explains, “What looked to [Union] military personnel in the East . . . like surrender to ‘an inferior force of insurgents’ was actually a moment in which environmental conditions favored” the Confederacy (48). Timothy Silver notes that many southern landscapes changed in the wake of young farmers leaving the army. The farmers themselves, growing up in rural isolation, suffered grievously from disease in the army.

Kathryn Shively Meier follows up on her already impressive scholarship—the prize-winning book *Nature’s Civil War*—with an essay on “straggling.”