Briefly leaving the army, Meier asserts, “became not only a form of self-care used to avoid environmental exposure, but it also enabled other self-care techniques” (68). John Inscoe provides some fertile ideas for new scholarship in an essay entitled “The Strength of the Hills.” Inscoe suggests that Northerners associated the Appalachian environment with Unionism, a feeling that carried well beyond the war. Lisa M. Brady shows what military historians can learn from their environmental counterparts in a short piece on “friction”—Carl Von Clausewitz’s idea that chance can lay havoc to the best laid strategies. Brady argues that the environment can cause such “friction,” playing its own role in the outcome of events. Drew Swanson shows that in some cases the war did not change agricultural patterns but only accelerated existing trends, as in the case of bright tobacco production in Danville, Virginia.

There needs to be an environmental history of Reconstruction. Timothy Johnson suggests one such model is his essay on fertilizers in the postwar South. Johnson maintains that imported fertilizer was a “major new source of debt that emerged during Reconstruction” for sharecroppers (192). Mart A. Stewart ends the essay collection with a plea to consider how soldiers experienced the natural environment through walking, running, and marching. Overall, The Blue, the Gray, and the Green is a thoroughly engaging read with clear prose and path-breaking examples of new scholarship at the intersection of Civil War and environmental history.

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For the past twenty years, sociologist Jess Gilbert has been preparing a grand revision of the agricultural New Deal. He has kept his many readers on a slow drip, publishing his research in occasional articles and conference papers over the years. Now, happily and finally, we have the full story.

And what a story it is. Typically, when we talk about New Deal agricultural policy, we speak of large-scale government interventions undertaken early on and not always effectively: the Agricultural Adjustment Act or the establishment of the Tennessee Valley Authority. Many of the best-known names, such as Rexford Tugwell or David Lilienthal, were top-down reformers—“high mod-
ernists,” in the language of James C. Scott. But what Gilbert shows is that there was a countervailing tendency, “low modernism,” which created “decentralized programs” that sought to involve “local citizens in substantive, meaningful ways” (8). This effort, which Gilbert designates the “third and intended New Deal in agriculture” came later and through different agencies (113).

Gilbert’s low modernists sought to devolve power to farmers in numerous ways. They jettisoned the normal processes of social scientific research in favor of more participatory approaches involving the input of local farmers. They placed those farmers on planning committees. And they ran a set of remarkable educational initiatives designed not just to promulgate technical information, but also to encourage wide-ranging political deliberation among the men and women responsible for raising the nation’s crops. These multifarious projects all fed into the 1938 Mount Weather Agreement (“the Magna Carta of the Third agrarian New Deal”), which reorganized the USDA around grassroots planning (116). Under its auspices, some two hundred thousand farmers served on planning committees, and about three million participated in study and discussion groups.

But did this democratic planning work? It is not easy to say. The planning program’s history was brief, lasting only from mid-1938 to 1942, with many of the programs never fully taking off (239). The most detailed reporting comes from the model program in Greene County, Georgia, whose residents experienced “an almost unbelievable gain in living standards” (212–13). Yet Gilbert concedes that Greene was “exemplary, not typical” (209). Gilbert lists other achievements of other areas, but it is hard to discern what the average community’s experience was like, and it is hard to parse out how many of the gains he lists should be credited to grassroots planning and how many were due simply to the influx of federal funds. One especially wonders, given the marked tendency of the citizen-planners to be well-off white landowners, how many of the benefits made their way to sharecroppers and farmworkers.

Whatever the impact of grassroots planning, though, its extent was astonishing. Within the expanding Roosevelt-era federal bureaucracy, low modernists managed to momentarily orient the agricultural state around citizen planning. Gilbert’s readers have already begun to wrestle with that startling fact. Now that the whole story is here, I have little doubt that they will be grappling with it for years to come.

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