Roundtable: Why Does Agricultural History Matter?

Introduction

This roundtable is the final entry in a centennial year series in *Agricultural History*. (For previous entries, see essays by Claire Strom [93.1], James C. Giesen [93.2], and Shane Hamilton [93.3]). The roundtable had its genesis as a session at the 2019 annual conference of the AHS in Washington, DC, which featured Peter A. Coclanis, Greta de Jong, Dolly Jørgensen, Alan I Marcus, Amrys O. Williams (represented by Kellen Backer), and Catharine Anne Wilson (represented by Jodey Nurse-Gupta), and lively audience discussion. The original prompt asked participants to consider the question, “Why does agricultural history matter?” from a variety of angles. While some scholars might consider the distinguished and/or tedious past of the subfield, others might point to its bright and/or unnecessary future. Some might reflect on a single moment of insight in agricultural history for their own scholarship; others on the fruitful points of intersection with other fields; others the political uses of agricultural history; still others agricultural history’s institutional infrastructure: the annual conference, the journals, the online scholarly networks, the graduate programs, and so on.

In what follows, we’ve attempted to recapture the cacophony of a roundtable session with audience comments. In addition to the panelists’ initial responses, therefore, we invited contributions to an “audience response” section of the roundtable, composed of responses to the original question or to the panelists’ contributions: raising overlooked questions and themes, making provocations, offering anecdotes related to the theme of why agricultural history matters, and so on. The result is a chorus of diverse voices speaking to the ways that users and doers of agricultural and rural history think about the field at the end of its first hundred years. Here’s to another hundred.

William Thomas Okie and Albert G. Way
Roundtable: Why Does Agricultural History Matter?

Contributors
The Roundtable Participants

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The Audience

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Food Is the First Thing

Peter A. Coclanis

The excellent prompts for this roundtable included options for us to: contemplate the past and future of the subfield of agricultural history; discuss insights generated by scholarship in agricultural history; comment on points of intersection with other fields; opine on the political uses of agricultural history; and reflect on one or another aspect of the institutional infrastructure related to agricultural history—records, societies, journals, meetings, etc.

“Had we world enough and time”—to use Andrew Marvell’s opening line in his 1684 metaphysical poem “To His Coy Mistress”—I could talk about any and all of these matters, and in fact, have done so on numerous occasions in various venues. Here, though, I’ve decided to pursue another strategy, doubling down, as it were, and making a raw, material case that agricultural history matters because agriculture matters. In other words, it’s the food, stupid.

Or, more eloquently, as Brecht put it at the end of Act Two, Scene Six in The Threepenny Opera:

You gentlemen who think you have a mission  
To purge us of the seven deadly sins  
Should first sort out the basic food position  
Then start your preaching; that’s where it begins.  
You lot, who preach restraint and watch your waist as well  
Should learn for all time how the world is run:  
However much you twist, whatever lies you tell  
Food is the first thing. Morals follow on (Brecht [1928] 2007, 57).

Agricultural history matters, in other words, because food is the first thing,
and, as we’ll see later, the last as well. Food is so fundamental that studying the ways in which it has been secured historically needs minimal rationalization. And with all due respect to early human efforts at food acquisition via hunting and gathering, the big enchilada in the history of food is plant and animal domestication, which begins with what Gordon Childe in the 1930s called the Neolithic Revolution, but what is perhaps better interpreted as either the Neolithic Revolutions or, better yet, the Neolithic Evolution (Childe 1953, 23).

In recent decades bio-archeologists, physical anthropologists, and economic historians have correctly challenged the old linear, rather Whiggish view that the “invention of agriculture” was an unambiguous success that began in various places c. 10,000–12,000 years ago and occurred without any appreciable costs. That said, calling the invention of agriculture “the worst mistake in the history of the human race”—as Jared Diamond did in a famous piece in 1987—is arguably the worst mistake the now famous evolutionary biologist ever made (which is saying something) (Diamond 1987, 64–66). For against the costs of plant and animal domestication—of which there were quite a few—we must weigh the benefits, any short list of which would include, for starters, enhanced labor specialization and greater caloric output per unit of land, which led slowly and unevenly over time to the beginnings of what we would now call the development process.

This process, again, was not without costs, but its socio-cultural concomitants over time included, among other things, such “minor” advances as urbanization and the state, monumental “refinements” in communications—the beginning of writing, most notably—as well as in art, music, literature, mathematics, religion, philosophy, etc. Such concomitants separated those that took the agricultural path from the rather primordial forms associated with hunter-gatherer cultures. How many of us would like to trade places with the Pila Nguru of Western Australia, the Sentinelese on the Andaman Islands, or the Hadza of Tanzania, among the few remaining hunter-gatherer peoples extant today? Not even Jared Diamond, who lives in the posh Bel Air section of Los Angeles, I dare say. And it’s agriculture, more than anything else, that began the process that created the modern, seemingly post-agricultural world we live in today (Coclanis 2009, 2–7).

Agriculture doesn’t make the nightly news all that much anymore in the United States, except about every five years or so when the farm bill is up for renewal or in aberrant situations such as today when a President tweets about our “great, patriotic” farmers on a regular basis. Such relative inattention is
not surprising either, as agriculture in the United States accounts for only a little more than 1 percent of GDP and a little more than 1 percent of the labor force (US Department of Labor 2019; US Department of Agriculture, 2019; Coclanis 2019). That said, the situation is still quite different in the world as a whole. Today about one-third of the world’s male labor force and almost 40 percent of the world’s female workers are still working in agriculture. Indeed, when seen in this light, it’s not surprising that in trying to get a handle on a given economy’s level of development, one proxy measure is to look at the proportion of that economy’s labor force that is still involved in agriculture. For example, I work quite a bit on Burma and, according to the 2019 CIA World Factbook, 70 percent of that impoverished country’s labor force is still involved in agriculture (Coclanis 2018, 45; Central Intelligence Agency 2019).

But even in the modern/postmodern United States, agriculture is still central to our economy, underpinning and supporting, as it does, many other activities and sectors. The distinguished economic historian William Parker—a former president of the Agricultural History Society—noted almost fifty years ago now that agriculture was central to the US economy in four crucial ways, and his points are still relevant today. First, because of the historical efficiency of American agriculture, over time food has constituted an increasingly small proportion of national and personal income (today less than 13 percent—8 percent on food at home, and 5 percent at restaurants/take out). This has “freed” a considerable proportion of income for other uses—other forms of consumption and/or savings/investment of various kinds. Secondly, because many of the efficiency gains in agriculture historically have come from labor-saving mechanical and chemical/biological inputs in agriculture that drastically cut agriculture’s relative labor requirements (per acre or per hectare). This had the effect of freeing or releasing labor for other uses—manufacturing, services, and so on. Thirdly, because agriculture’s need for mechanical and chemical/biological inputs has served as an important source of demand for American industry—whether we mean John Deere, Case, Mahindra, and Caterpillar, or Monsanto, DuPont, and Syngenta. And, fourthly, because many other urban manufacturing concerns are involved in processing food and fiber produced in America’s farm sector (food processing, meatpacking, cotton, textiles and apparel, boots, shoes, leather, ethanol, and so on). By some reckonings, the food and fiber industry, broadly conceived, is still the largest industry in the country (Parker 1972, 372–75; Coclanis 2018, 45; US Department of Agriculture 2019).
For the reasons specified above, food, as Brecht put it, can be considered the first thing. And, as George Orwell suggested in a passage in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, his 1937 study of the coal-mining town of Wigan in northern England, it is in some ways the last thing as well. It is with this passage from that book that I shall end:

A human being is primarily a bag for putting food into; the other functions and faculties may be more godlike, but in point of time they come afterwards. A man dies and is buried, and all his words and actions are forgotten, but the food he has eaten lives after him in the sound or rotten bones of his children (Orwell [1937] 1961, 85).

Hear, hear.

Thus, because food is life and because food still matters greatly after death, and because agriculture for thousands of years has been our major source of food, both agriculture and its history still matter. At least to me.

**Surviving the Zombie Apocalypse with Agricultural History**

*Greta de Jong*

For the past nine years I’ve been watching the AMC television series *The Walking Dead*, a science fiction drama set sometime in the near future, in the aftermath of a disease that has killed millions of people and then brought them back to life as flesh-eating zombies. Small bands of survivors live hand-to-mouth seeking food and shelter, while battling constant threats to their safety and confronting impossible moral choices that gradually chip away at their humanity. As the still-living quickly discover, their biggest problems come not from the zombies, but from each other. Every episode is terrifyingly dark and contains graphic violence. A friend who does not understand how I can stomach this show once asked me why I watch it. I said I was fairly certain that civilization as we know it is going to end in my lifetime, and if I can handle the apocalypse with flesh-eating zombies, I can handle it without them as well.

Like watching *The Walking Dead*, reading agricultural history is preparation for the end of the world. Both examine themes of human ingenuity, technology, adaptation, community, conflict, and survival. And just as *The Walking Dead* is not simply a show about zombies, agricultural history is not solely about agriculture. The decisions we make about how to cultivate and distribute natural resources determine our relationships to each other and to other
Roundtable: Why Does Agricultural History Matter?

Species on the planet, which means that agricultural history is also political history, social history, gender studies, ethnic studies, labor history, economic history, and environmental history (Scott 1976; Cronon 1983; Powell 1980; Daniel 1985; Jellison 1993; Whayne 1996; Foley 1997; Olsson 2017; Vail 2018).

As a member of the Agricultural History Society’s Theodore Saloutos Memorial Award committee this year, I was fortunate to read some of the best work that has recently been published in the field. These books demonstrate how agricultural history intersects with virtually every aspect of human existence, covering topics that range from the erasure of indigenous people’s contributions to Europeans’ scientific knowledge in the colonial era, to the role of capitalist markets and government policy in shaping land use and food production, to interracial organizing against the exploitation of agricultural workers, to the social transformations wrought by particular crops and commodity networks, to environmental limits that constrain human agency in every place and every time period, whether or not we acknowledge those limits (Parsons 2018; Swanson 2018; Ferguson 2018; MacFadyen 2018; Chiang 2018; Maudlin 2018). I learned that rural areas that seem like isolated backwaters to many Americans are in fact intricately connected to the rest of the nation, that rural people who seem like passive victims of forces such as mechanization or suburban development have both challenged and participated in these processes, and that unjust decisions and social structures that are presented as natural or inevitable are not the way things have to be. I read about forgotten varieties of tomatoes, the hundreds of uses of soybeans, and techniques for improving soil without the use of synthetic fertilizers. I learned that cultivating small plots of land could be a bulwark against starvation rather than the cause of it, and that there are viable alternatives to the exploitative, environmentally destructive corporate farming model that is prevalent today (Baker 2018; Hoenig 2018; Roth 2018; Bushman 2018; White 2018).

If you don’t think that agricultural history matters, just imagine if all of the knowledge accumulated by this and previous scholarship were lost. We would be like the characters on The Walking Dead, who spend far too much time trying to kill each other instead of working together to find solutions to their common problems and did not even figure out how to grow their own food until the beginning of Season 4 (Nicotero 2013).

Agricultural history holds important lessons for a planet threatened by climate change and the mass extinction of species (Leahy 2019). If more people understood themselves to be part of a broader story of humanity learning how
to manage and share natural resources, not only among ourselves but for later generations, perhaps the apocalypse, with or without zombies, will not be our future after all.

**Extinction and Agricultural History**

**Dolly Jørgensen**

In May 2019 the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) published its Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, which described the dire state of wild biological life worldwide (IPBES 2019). Through the cooperation of 145 lead scientists plus other contributing scientists over three years, the IPBES took stock of wild animal and plant populations and concluded that approximately one million species are threatened with extinction. The abundance of wild populations is rapidly declining, falling by at least 20 percent in most land-based habitats—an extinction rate magnitudes higher than the background extinction rates biologists would expect under previous Earth conditions. The IPBES identified five drivers of this ongoing sixth mass extinction: land/sea use change, direct exploitation, climate change, pollution, and invasive alien species, each of which implicate agriculture to some degree. Land use change, for instance, is due in large part to conversion of diverse ecosystems into agricultural production land: current estimates are that one half of all habitable land (which excludes glaciers and barren land) is used for agricultural production as crop land or pastureland (Roser and Ritchie 2019). The effect of invasive alien species is also partly attributable to agricultural interests, which have moved species around for pest control (like the cane toads in Australia) and soil erosion control (such as kudzu in the southern United States and lupines in Iceland).

In the midst of this massive die-off, certain kinds of biota are flourishing—the domesticated kind. Domesticated livestock, including cattle, pigs, sheep, and horses, far outnumber wild mammals. A recent study calculated that the total worldwide biomass of domestic mammals, which includes livestock such as sheep, cattle, and horses, is 0.1 gigatons, compared to only 0.007 gigatons of wild mammals—which means the weight of domesticated animals is fourteen times that of wild ones. Domesticated poultry biomass is also three times higher than the biomass of all wild birds (Bar-On, Phillips, and Milo 2018). Similar estimates have not been calculated for domestic versus wild plants, but the extensive pine plantations of the boreal zone, corn and wheat
fields of the world’s breadbaskets, and palm oil plantations in former jungle lands should give us an indication of the shifting vegetative makeup of Earth as well. While there is a growing total amount of domesticates, the number of local varieties and breeds has been sharply reduced through market preference, knowledge loss, and other drivers of managed selection (IPBES 2019).

The decline of wild species and the increase in domesticated ones is fundamentally an agricultural issue, and this is where agricultural history comes into play. If humans are to create futures for threatened species different than those projected by the IPBES report, we need to understand how our present extinction situation is tied to long-term patterns of agricultural production and consumption. Agricultural historians are perfectly positioned to analyze these linkages between food production and biodiversity destruction, especially in light of the ongoing work by agricultural historians to explicitly engage with environmental issues in conjunction with the much younger field of environmental history.

As agricultural historians, then, it is worth considering how environmental historians, and scholars of the environmental humanities, are starting to grapple with the extinction question. Mark Barrow’s *Nature’s Ghosts*, Ryan Tucker Jones’s *Empire of Extinction*, Peter Alagona’s *After the Grizzly* and my own work on extinction have explored both drivers behind historical extinction and how individuals and societies responded to those extinctions (Barrow 2009; Jones 2014; Alagona 2013; Jørgensen 2019). An “extinction studies” subfield has even been proposed as a way of bringing together scholars from various humanities disciplines investigating species loss (Rose, van Dooren, and Chrulew 2017). Agricultural historians have yet to contribute to these discussions, so in this essay I would like to briefly outline three areas where I see an important role for agricultural history in telling extinction histories: predator eradication, pest control, and deforestation.

Intentional animal eradication has been a regular strategy of farmers and ranchers to minimize the untimely loss of livestock to predation. The thylacine (*Thylacinus cynocephalus*), colloquially known as the Tasmanian tiger or wolf, was resident on the Australian island of Tasmania when it was colonized by white settlers in the early 1800s. Those settlers created a community built in large part on sheep farming. By the 1870s 1.226 million sheep were on Tasmania (“Sheep Farmers” 2005). The thylacine was the largest carnivore on the island and quickly became seen as a threat to sheep husbandry. Individual farmers hunted thylacines around their homesteads; the Van Diemen’s Land Company which first operated the colony issued bounties on thylacines
as early as 1830; and the Tasmanian governmental authorities issued official bounties on dead animals between 1888 and 1909, paying £1 per head, literally. Sheep farmers had every intention of causing the extinction of the thylacine—and they succeeded. In 1936, the last known thylacine, a specimen in a private zoo in Hobart on Tasmania, died of neglect.

The thylacine is not an isolated case. Agricultural practice, particularly livestock management, frequently comes into conflict with predator species because of the loss of animal capital. Predators, whether they be wolves, tigers, or bears, have often been targeted by eradication programs in order to protect livestock. For example, as Brett Walker has traced, Hokkaido wolves of Japan shifted from sacred animals to unwanted pests with the rise of scientific agriculture, and then rapidly became extinct (Walker 2005). Likewise the California grizzly bear, which had been previously hunted by white settlers for sport, was deliberately targeted for eradication as California’s sheep ranching took off from the mid-1800s (Alagona 2013, 26).

Livestock management is thus entangled in extinction—and frequently as a conscious choice by historical actors. Extinction of predators has not been an unexpected byproduct of agriculture, but a welcome result of it. Historical analysis of farmer and rancher attitudes toward predators, their ability to influence governmental policymaking on predator eradication, and their understandings of the place of predators in local ecosystems would all be worth further investigation in order to develop agricultural histories of extinction.

The intentional killing of one type of creature can have ripple effects in the ecosystem—a situation we can see in the case of pest control. Farmers have long sought after effective and efficient modes of pest control. Dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane, commonly known as DDT, which became available on the public market after World War II, seemed to be the perfect pesticide. Developed primarily to control disease-bearing insects, the chemical proved highly effective at killing numerous arthropod pests of the agricultural sector (Russell 2001; Kinkela 2011). DDT, however, also proved highly effective at killing things besides insects, especially birds, which suffered from reduced reproductive success because of eggshell thinning (Porter and Wiemeyer 1969). Rachel Carson famously brought the problem of biodiversity loss tied to DDT use into public discourse with her book *Silent Spring*, published originally in 1962.

The California condor (*Gymnogyps californianus*), for example, has been one of the incidental casualties of the war on insects. Although the bird appears to have been in decline because of hunting and predator control before the
invention of DDT, its numbers plummeted after the widespread use of the chemical began because of the effects on the bird’s reproduction. Only twenty-two birds remained in 1982 and all of them were removed from the wild in 1987 and placed into an intensive captive breeding program to avoid species extinction. While the birds’ numbers have gone up to over four hundred, the birds still show the effects of persistent DDT exposure, particularly in coastal areas (Tubbs 2016).

Agricultural producers were at the front line of rural DDT application, which means that they would have also been the people most likely to witness the decline of birds like the condor as it happened. As agricultural historians, we could investigate if and when bird declines were marked in rural communities and how preferences for birds (particularly song birds) entered farming community discussions of and decisions about DDT use. While environmental historians have focused on national and international decisionmaking about DDT regulation and the creation of scientific knowledge about the side effects, agricultural historians would be well-placed to investigate discussions from below of potential bird extinction among farming communities.

Unintentional extinction due to agricultural land modifications is even more common than targeted species eradication in either hunting or pest control. Deforestation, even if it comes with reforestation with other kinds of trees, has immense consequences for biodiversity. One study of Singapore’s tropical deforestation found local extinction rates from 34 percent to a whopping 87 percent of all butterflies, fish, birds, and mammals (Brook, Sochi, and Ng 2003). Agriculture in tropical regions is expected to expand rapidly this century, portending profound effects on the quantity and quality of tropical ecosystems (Laurance and Cassman 2014).

One place currently witnessing radical deforestation is Indonesia, where lowland forests are rapidly being replaced by oil palm (*Elaeis guineensis*) plantations. The growth of plantations is both a response to and a driver of increased demand for palm oil as a food oil and a plant-based fuel. Palm oil is the world’s most-consumed vegetable oil, comprising almost 60 percent of all trade in oils and fats by volume, and thousands of square kilometers of land are converted into oil palm plantations each year to meet the demand (Nantha and Tisdell 2009; Infante-Amate et al. 2019).

Orangutans (three species in *Pongo* genus) are directly imperiled by the oil palm developments. Estimates of orangutan loss are staggering: one study estimated that over 100,000 Bornean orangutans perished between 1999 and 2015 due to loss of habitat as well as increased conflict and hunting of the
orangutans by plantation workers (Voigt et al. 2018). Scientists studying the imminent extinction of orangutans in the wild do not paint a particularly hopeful picture for their survival (Campbell-Smith et al. 2011; Meijaard et al. 2011). However, there are indications that orangutans are resilient and may be able to use plantation habitats if there is still some remnant forest also in the area (Ancrenaz et al. 2015). Coexistence may be possible from the orangutan perspective, although plantation owners, managers, and workers could still reject the ape’s presence and encourage hunting to remove them from the plantations. Unlike predator-related extinctions, the oil palm plantations have not been put in intentionally to cause the extinction of wild orangutans, but it may be the result.

These developments need investigation by agricultural historians. Why has the oil palm industry taken over from other food oils? How has the relationship between farming communities, plantation workers, companies, and orangutans evolved over time? How have orangutan choices to reside in plantations affected farming practices? How does global wildlife conservation intersect with global agricultural commodity production?

Agricultural historians have long recognized that environments are radically reoriented with changes in land use to food production. These agricultural changes likewise affect which nonhuman animals exist on this planet and in what numbers—whether they exist everywhere on the planet like domesticated cattle or do not exist anymore at all like the thylacine. The history of agriculture’s intersection with extinction matters because it can explain a key part of why we’re in the midst of the sixth mass extinction. Agricultural production, whether intentionally or not, deeply modifies Earth’s biodiversity. Agricultural historians have the opportunity—and even the responsibility—to understand how that has happened and to point to potential ways for future coexistence.

Raw Simplicity

ALAN I MARCUS

Why does agricultural history matter? Since the question is posed in the affirmative, it behooves me to attempt to answer it in that fashion. Well, it can’t be because it is about the future, that agricultural history is predictive. That just has not panned out. And it can’t be—or at least ought not to be—because it is about the present. Status-quo-derived answers to status-quo-derived questions only satisfies some sense of pride or victimhood, agency or the lack of
the same, or justifies a platform from which to assert a future.

If agricultural history is to matter it must matter because it is about the past. It seeks to understand why some actions were taken and others were not, in the terms of those persons actively engaged in those decisions. These are the decisions that mattered. They dictated success and failure, sometimes even life and death.

So agricultural history matters because it tells the stories of persons who have gone before. Maybe. But that would be an exceedingly small reward, very weak sauce. Rather than a personal story, agricultural history is significant because it is a collective story; agriculture is one of the very many styles of life. But while significant, it is meaningful to historians only when the activities that constitute it are viewed as they occurred, as locked in time and place. There is a physical reality to agriculture, of course. Things grow, don’t grow, grow poorly, grow well. People eat, starve, are malnourished, are obese. But even explanations for each of those outcomes are circumscribed by time and place.

Let’s back up for a second. Historians overwhelmingly depend on a longitudinal model when practicing their craft. The past gives way to the present and the present foretells the future. In this framework, the past is not the focus but our own personal attachment to being in the picture is. The present is where we live and the future is where we hope to be. It is our intervention, our willful, relentless, and hegemonic insertion into the historical drama, not why, how, and what actually happened in the past, that matters. It provides us agency (or a patina thereof) and enables us to complicate our narratives. Our intervention, our historical imposition, is presumably what gives history currency, utility, even professional and public legitimacy.¹ But that need not be so. What if we examined each style of life—occupation, class, race, activity,

gender, leisure, manufacturing, whatever—within the context in which it in fact operated, as if it were a product of a particular understanding of time and place? It would then make the time and place important in a way in which it is not when we do history the “usual” way. It would replace the universalist, functionalist, social science model with a radically historicist comprehension. And what if we aggregated those time- and place-circumscribed styles of life within the context of a particular time and place? What would be the result?

One possible consequence of this latitudinal constellation/configuration might be an enhanced recognition of how roughly simultaneous activities in a similar place influence one or the other or one another. It could reveal relationships or the depth of relationships previously not understood. But that is not the implication I am suggesting. A more fruitful investigation might be to explore activities not for their impact on one another but explicitly for the parameters that bind them to that time and place, for their essential commonality. This commonality supersedes the various statuses and stations that historians have employed as the identifiers of peoples and social discriminants.

In the alternative context proposed here, agriculturists, agricultural scientists, agricultural manufacturers, and agricultural policy makers, in their words and deeds, provide vital clues to the assumptions that undergird time and place. Time and place define the possible and/or the acceptable. There is plenty of room for disagreement within and between the aforementioned groups, but disagreement occurs within the broad constraints of that particular time and place. In effect, entire populations at a particular time and place were “in conversation” with one another even if they did not address the same questions, hold discourse or even know of each other. This was not some narrowly political intersectionality. These “conversations” transcended those artificial limits to span the social expanse of a specific time and a place.2

Such an approach places the concept of causality into question. If time...

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and place are paramount and decisive, then historical causality is shorn of its longitudinal moorings. Longitudinality is, of course, the essence of historical causality and historical emplotment. Something in the past specifically caused something in the present to happen. But if time and place are axiomatic, causation as historians generally present it cannot readily be dissected. Causation becomes almost irreducibly complex, perhaps even not historicizable.

If agriculture-related activities are unexceptional, then why study them? The key I think lies in the sensibilities of the practitioners of these activities. Intimately engaged in their endeavors, imbued with a sense of nobleness, and passionate about their efforts, those of the agricultural arts by word and deed reveal more rawly what they are thinking and how they are thinking it. There is no self-conscious attempt to mislead or disguise as there might be with historians, philosophers, or litterateurs. And it is that simplicity that assists a historian at any point in gaining an understanding of the common fundamental assumptions of the reality in which the various acts occur. It lays bare the assumptions under which specific historical acts took place.

Science in the Fields

Amrys O. Williams

Agricultural history has wide importance across the discipline of history and is a potentially big and welcoming tent. As the field and scholarly community in which I have felt most at home, it matters a great deal to me personally. This society’s annual meeting is where I gave my first conference paper as a graduate student, and it has continued to support me throughout my meandering career thus far.

But I’m trained as a historian of science, so my inclination here is to pursue a theme I explored at the 2018 annual conference’s plenary session: the relationship between farming and knowledge, between agriculture and science—or, really, agriculture as science, as knowledge-making. There I argued that we need to cast a wider net for where we see and what we call science, one that includes the work of farm people as well as experiment station scientists and USDA researchers, and that recognizes the knowledge that inheres in seeds, crops, livestock, food, and clothing; in barns and fields and kitchens.

and sewing rooms. By recognizing farm people as knowledge-makers as well as adopters and adapters, and their practices as knowledge-making as well as environment- and market-shaping, new lines of inquiry and research open up for us (Williams 2018).

Agricultural history matters to these stories because agriculture has been fundamental to the creation of knowledge about nature—what we call science. Indeed, economics as a discipline grew out of agricultural problems and questions, like farm management and land productivity. It is only more recently, in the mid-twentieth century, that it has uprooted itself from the land. Political economy has always been fundamentally agricultural: one of the earliest works of economics is Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*, a Socratic dialogue on agriculture and household and farm management, and classic debates in political economy go back to questions of the nature of land, whether it can be made more productive, whether soil can be renewed or improved, and whether agricultural yields can be increased (Jonsson 2013, Foster 2000; Morgan 2012, esp. Chpt. 2). But to read many histories you'd hardly know it.

This raises a question related to the one we’re exploring in this roundtable: why has agricultural history not mattered so much to the history of science as a field, when agriculture so clearly does matter and has mattered to science? For the history of science in the United States, agriculture was critical. With a federal government that was notoriously loath to provide any funding for science, Americans still found support for agricultural experimentation of all sorts, from seed distribution and plant exchanges to soil amendments and crop rotations. Aside from the Smithsonian Institution, whose vague mandate for “the increase and diffusion of knowledge” caused as much debate as it did action upon its founding in 1835; the Coast Survey; and the various exploring expeditions to survey the growing public domain (arguably scientific work in support of future agriculture), the Department of Agriculture, established in 1862, was really the first permanent federal agency to support scientific work. The act that established the land-grant colleges also passed that year. A nation that saw itself as agrarian at its root found reason to support agricultural initiatives, even if not unanimously (Bruce 1986; Dupree 1986, esp. Chpt. 4–6, 8).

Despite agriculture’s importance for science, for a long time it received almost no attention from historians of science. A few exceptions in the work of Margaret Rossiter, Charles Rosenberg, Alan I Marcus, and Deborah K. Fitzgerald proved the rule (Rossiter 1975; Rosenberg 1976; Marcus 1985; Fitzgerald 1990; Fitzgerald 2003). What explains agriculture’s marginal sta-
tus? I think part of the reason is that the history of science has tended to organize itself around the academic disciplines whose histories it traced—the history of chemistry, the history of physics, the history of natural history or biology—and, moreover, the disciplinary breakdown to which it has hewed has been that of Harvard and Yale rather than Cornell or Purdue. So we get histories of chemistry that pertain to agriculture but we rarely get histories of agrostology or plant pathology or even agricultural economics. I’ve often wondered what the history of science would look like as a field if it divvied up “science” in the problem- and practice-focused way the land-grant colleges have tended to organize their academic departments: animal husbandry, home economics, farm management. How might the histories of science look when we trace them along these lines? How might the science itself look different?

For one, I think that the stories we might tell about science and agriculture would deal with people and places beyond the lab, the experiment station, the university, the seed or biotech company. They would include many places that agricultural historians are familiar with: barns, fields, grain elevators, feedlots, gardens, kitchens, fairs. They would be about people who are not generally classed as “scientists” but who have had important roles in creating knowledge about nature through work: the men and women and children who have raised crops and animals and gardens, sunk wells and dug irrigation ditches, operated harvesters and driven teams, butchered hogs and cooked meals, selected seeds and bred livestock. They would also be about the people who served as important intermediaries between the places where we have traditionally found science—the colleges and experiment stations and labs—and the people on the land: county extension workers, field agents for farm businesses, home demonstration agents, and others. And they would break down the divisions between these places and people, emphasizing the similarities

4. For example, the Cambridge History of Science separates modern science into volumes on the physical and mathematical sciences, the biological and earth sciences, and the social sciences. In *Isis*, the journal of the History of Science Society, book reviews are similarly separated out by era and discipline. For more on how the history of science has been classified within the field, see Magda Whitrow, ed., *Isis Cumulative Bibliography: A Bibliography of the History of Science*, vol. 1 (London: Mansell, 1971), esp. xvii–xviii. Certainly there have been examples of discipline-crossing treatments and works that break out of the classical disciplinary categories, though they have not always come out of the history of science itself; see, for instance, Sarah Stage and Virginia B. Vincenti, eds., *Rethinking Home Economics: Women and the History of a Profession* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997). Recent works have dealt with the land-grants more directly, e.g. Alan I Marcus, ed., *Service as Mandate: How Land-Grant Universities Shaped the Modern World, 1920–2015* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2015) and *Science as Service: Establishing and Reformulating American Land–grant Universities, 1865–1930* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2015).
in practice that have characterized both the work of the experiment station scientist and the farmer raising a crop (Vetter 2008; Raby 2017; Schneider 2000; Reid 2007; Olsson 2017; Rosenberg 2015).

If we trace not just the science to the farm but the farm to the science, we also grant greater agency to the farm people who have too often been seen as the recipients or reluctant adopters of “scientific” practices. Their cooperation has always been essential to the more powerful interests—public or private—that have sought to shape agriculture, and thus their power has not been entirely negligible. They have had an important role in making and enacting the changes science and technology have wrought in the land, and that role has hardly been a passive one. By bringing them into the story, agricultural history offers us a way of getting beyond the mind/hand, knowing/doing, thinking/making divisions that have long constrained historians of science.

Finally, by pushing for a more agricultural or cultivationist history of science we might stop seeing farms and rural places as inherently unmodern—for they obviously are not. While media coverage often focuses on stories that underline the backwardness of rural places—such as the lack of broadband Internet—or that treat modern technology on the farm as a shocking disconnect on par with (gasp!) third-world peasants using cell phones, it is apparent to anyone who has driven past a corn or soybean field, with its Pioneer or Monsanto signs marking the rows’ bioengineered varieties, or watched a combine harvester devour its way across a field, that farms are some of the most scientifically and technologically advanced and modified places on the planet—and perhaps always have been. Agricultural history is essential to breaking down these divisions that prevent us from seeing the full picture. It is essential to telling the bigger story.

The Power of Everyday
Catharine A. Wilson

Congratulations to the Agricultural History Society on one hundred years of inspiring us to talk, think, and write about rural history from an increasingly broad range of perspectives.

Agricultural historians have made great strides forward in the explanations of historical change—science, technology, politics, education, and the environment. This is admirable and necessary. We can, however, go deeper, go micro, and embrace the everyday (Lüdtke 1995; Mecick 1995; de Certeau 1984). We can do more to probe the dialectical tension that exists between large-scale
explanations of historical change and the everyday (Levi 2001; Magnússon 2006; Lepore 2001; Bell 2002). Much of what we “know” about daily life is actually shaped by top-down sources written by individuals existing outside the farm unit. Land, census, and business records were generated by nonfarm men and reflect what officials thought was worthy of scrutiny—property and marketable goods. Arranged by household, they perpetuate the illusion of household independence. The perspectives of those who existed inside the farm unit have not been as frequently archived or mined for information. Thankfully, many farm men, women, and children wrote diaries capturing what they thought was important, in their own words (Wilson 2018; Loehr 1938; Loewen 1999). I believe in the usefulness of this so-called “useless information.” Their diaries capture the full range of activities, the rich texture of farm life, and the connective tissues that extended beyond the household to kin and neighbors. In making these sources accessible, we have the power to challenge and complicate our understanding, inspire new research, enrich student learning, and engage the public.

A few years ago, I began transcribing my great-great-grandmother’s diaries, a daily account of activities on her 1880s farm. I was walking in her footsteps, typing in her pen-strokes; I have never felt so connected to the past. Her diaries influenced the direction of my current research and inspired me to create the Rural Diary Archive website where over one hundred eighty Ontario diarists are profiled and their diaries can be read, searched, and transcribed online (Middagh 1884–1892).

Working with diaries has its challenges—such as losing sight of larger forces, privileging narrative detail over analysis, and romanticizing ordinary people as a counterforce—but diaries are powerful because they are immediate, personal, and relatively reliable. Concerning agricultural production and improvements, it is only by putting daily life under the microscope that we see how people took meaningful action within the choices available and amid larger historical forces. Good microhistory always moves constantly between the local and the global, or, as Jill Lepore says, the intimate and the distant perspective (Lüdtke 1995, 4–8, 24; Lepore 2001, 129). Engineers might design steam threshers, mechanics build them, and experts promote them, but it was ultimately farmers deciding to use them that completed the transformation. Diaries show how this was not an individual decision but involved coordinating neighborhood labor and sometimes money (Rikoon 1988). We can see people’s agency as they negotiated change on their own terms and within specific contexts.
Diaries complicate the idea of household independence. Production usually involved the family farm and the neighborhood where obligation and self-interest combined in a rich dialectic (Vickers 1990; Bittermann 1993; Welker 2013; Wilson 2001). Diaries take us into the heart of that nexus, its ever-changing dynamics, peoples’ repeated practices, their strategies of getting by, and their tactics of accommodation. Many production activities could not be completed within the family but involved others. To produce a homespun suit, between shearing the sheep and wearing the finished jacket, the wool might pass through various households, mills, and craftsmen (Gareau 2017). We can also capture the story of commodities that families exchanged with their neighbors and local merchants such as eggs, hay, honey, potatoes, hides, and cordwood (McCalla 1993, 271–72; Wood 2000, 88–89). Diaries can often tell a more complete story than the census concerning the extent and nature of productivity. Out of curiosity, I compared Walter Hope’s productivity from 1870 to 1871 as recorded in the census and his diary. The census made no mention of the logs and tallow he sold or his biggest advancement, a new frame barn. Moreover, nearly all the productivity recorded under his name in the agricultural census could not have been brought to fruition without the help of neighbors at threshing, butchering, and sawing bees (Hope 1870–1871). Diaries also show how families shared swamps, ditches, forests, and meadows to forage, hunt, and fish (Sharp 2014; Jones and Gaynor 2019).

In short, diaries remind us of the multiplicity of knowledges. I am not referring to the “how-to” advice disseminated by agricultural experts and the press, but “how it was actually done” by real people in real places. In William Standen’s 1879 diary we observe his experimentation with various concoctions to treat his livestock and his knowledge of which local folk to approach for loans (Standen 1879–1881). In other diaries we can compare expert advice on manuring with actual practice, recipe books with actual feasts, and game laws with actual spoils—as when diarist Frederic Smith pasted the game laws in the back of his diary (Smith 1869–1877).

Diaries show beliefs that were acted out or were otherwise powerful. Neighborliness can be seen in visiting (Macdonald and Hansen 2001; Pederson 1984; Hansen 1994). Religious belief is also sometimes revealed. In July 1831, for example, George Easton, a Presbyterian pioneering poor soil in northern Ontario, believed it was God’s judgment when he wrote: “my wheat not good. Don’t deserve good grain or would get it” (Easton 1831). Other cultural aspects of rural life are begging to be explored. In diaries you can hear their spoken word—“Got me a suit of clothes,” or “there is nothing
a doing”—see their level of literacy, and learn about the specific books and newspapers they actually read (Carpenter 1882; Quinn 1900; Motz 1987).

Relationships are another area awaiting further attention. Scholars of rural women have for some time looked at farming from the inside, exploring how relationships both support and constrain women’s activities (Ulrich 1990; Campbell 2016; Carter 1999). Of growing interest is the relationship between people and their livestock, that interesting juxtaposition of care and killing. Note William Standen’s entry of January 1879: “I carried water to all the beasts in the stable. I am thankful that they are all so snug…. [and with the same dip of ink] I cut up & salted some pigs that I killed” (Standen Jan. 4, 1879). And we really don’t know that much about farm men. The focus on production predominates at the expense of knowing about their work cultures and their masculinities (Campbell, Bell, and Finney 2006; Liepins 2000; Brandth 1995; Danysk 1996; Wilson 2014). Beyond inheritance, we know little about father/son relationships. After several decades of farming and then caring for his father, bachelor John Phenix, wrote on January 14, 1917: “My poor Father died this morning about 8 a.m…. I slept in the bed with him” (Phenix 1917).

It is striking how these so-called ordinary people can be extraordinary. Farmer James Cameron, living on an island in the St. Lawrence River in the 1850s, speared eels, wrote poetry, and invested in New York stocks (Ross 1854–1857). Sarah Hill struggled after her husband stole her dowry and then died, leaving her with six children and no farming skills (Hill 1821–1881). These stories take me to new imaginative plateaus and do more to excite my passion for rural history than knowing—and I draw here from my own work—that one-third of farm tenants attained ownership status (Wilson 2009, 195).

The Rural Diary Archive has shown that putting humans at the center of the story reaches people. Since the website was created in 2015, volunteers have transcribed nearly eight thousand diary pages for five hundred seventy years worth of diary entries available to read between the dates 1790s–1920s—and many more diaries are in the queue. Scholars can now take these transcribed diaries and employ narrative analysis, digital text encoding, and HGIS mapping (Macdonald and Hansen 2001, 535–61; Allen 2016). Students using them are transported and their imaginations ignite as they see themselves in these people’s emotions and see how different life was. Students have dramatized diarists’ stories in radio shows, blogs and magazine articles, thereby disseminating rural history to the public.
In short, studying everyday diaries encourages us to look at our understandings from a different perspective. Find your special way to inspire a new generation of scholars to carry the good work of the Agricultural History Society into the public arena and the future.

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**Audience Response**

**The Value of Traditional Agriculture**

**Mauro Agnoletti**

Agricultural history matters for several reasons, especially in light of the contemporary contrast between traditional agriculture and industrial production.

In economic terms, today the value of high-quality food is no longer due to production processes alone, but to the cultural values embedded in food production especially traditional knowledges and agricultural landscapes, both of which are products of history. These elements represent an added value that cannot be easily replicated, allowing traditional producers to promote local high-quality production, in a market dominated by low-quality mass production.

In environmental terms, history matters in order to get rid of the widespread idea that taking care of the environment and biodiversity means a return to “naturalness” or to replicate natural processes in managing rural lands. Biodiversity is subject to historical processes, a result of the coevolution of a rural community and the environment. The so-called “natural species” we have today represent only a moment of a much longer history of the five mass extinctions. The farmers are the managers of what the Convention of Biological Diversity and the Food and Agriculture Organization call “biocultural diversity,” meaning that culture shapes not only the number of species in a given ecosystem but also the genotypes and genotype of species, and sometimes modifies the natural environment in such a way that biodiversity increases. Thus framed, farmers are managers of this biodiversity. To accuse agriculture of deforesting the earth is tantamount to criticizing human evolution, and human survival. Of course not all agricultures are alike. The use of sustainable and agroecological practices, based on long experience and proven traditions, is the key feature distinguishing resilient agricultures developed over centuries from modern industrial production. This kind of farming may be considered less productive than modern intensive systems, but it has ensured sustainable
yield over time, thanks to time-tested technologies and traditional know-how.

In social and cultural terms, cultural identity and sense of place are embedded in and belong to specific agricultural sites. Social organizations, value systems, and cultural practices associated with resource management and food production may ensure conservation of and promote equity in the use of and access to natural resources. Such social organizations and practices may take the form of customary laws and practices as well as ceremonial, religious and/or spiritual experiences. Local social organizations may play a critical role in balancing environmental and economic objectives, by enhancing resilience and reproducing the elements and processes critical to the functioning of traditional agricultural systems. The creation and maintenance of these agricultural systems are based in farmers’ efforts to overcome disadvantageous environmental and harsh climate conditions and to increase and stabilize crop yields in a sustainable manner. Building on generations of accumulated knowledge and experience by smallholders, family farmers and indigenous communities, these systems have been adapted to ever changing environment and climate conditions which finally have acquired resilience and robustness so as to ensure food and livelihood security in the local communities and reduce risks. Agricultural history matters because in order to conserve, understand, and valorize these agricultural systems, history is not an option but a requirement.

**Deepening the History of Agriculture as Concept and Practice**

**Kathryn M. de Luna**

The insightful arguments of this roundtable demonstrate the vigor of the field of agricultural history. As participants make clear, we have learned a great deal from scholarship that tethers agricultural history to other fields, such as environmental history and science and technology studies. Agricultural history could further extend its relevance by better reckoning with two fields relating to its own history. The first concerns the complex interplay of Enlightenment ideas (and their historical antecedents) about the nature and significance of agriculture, political economy, and scholarly inquiry; the second is the deep history of food production situated in the broader context of the full range of food procurement strategies.

In my own work on the history of subsistence in precolonial central Africa (2016), I have found it helpful to keep firmly in my sights the intellectual and
conceptual history of “agriculture” in European and American contexts. The very concept of “agriculture” is the product of a particular conceptualization of food procurement foregrounding categories of practice and meaning that don’t obtain in all times and places. Nevertheless, this conceptualization has characterized the study of agriculture in other parts of the world and in premodern times precisely because the concept of “agriculture” was integral to foundational theories in the study of politics, society, and economy—theories that linger in scholarly fields from anthropology to history and economics. Indeed, facets of this valorizing conceptualization of agriculture (particularly assumptions about its universally superior productivity in premodern contexts) often substitute for historical thinking as the documentary record thins (when we consider the histories of oral societies, such as those in Africa) or as we move deeper into the past, even into periods referenced with the irritating term “prehistory.”

In this roundtable, we meet zombies who “did not even figure out how to grow their own food until the beginning of Season 4” and read such phrases as “the big enchilada in the history of food is plant and animal domestication” because this process “included” urbanization, statecraft, writing, and a laundry list of “advances” contrasted with “primordial forms associated with hunter-gatherer cultures.” Having called attention to these phrases, I would also note that de Jong’s tease is not central to her argument and Coclanis’ conclusion is given nuance with caveats about the costs of domestication and its purported effects even as it is sustained. Nevertheless, these comments sit uncomfortably with a historian of non-Western, premodern worlds. The familiar body of associations invoked by Coclanis was developed by European political theorists as a way to legitimate forms of resource use that favored white landowning men over women, landless men, and indigenous peoples. We know this to be true, but often forget its implications when we write. Precisely because these political economic theories developed in tandem with modern academic disciplines, they persisted in barely altered form in the Culture History school of archaeology by scholars like V. Gordon Childe, who coined the influential phrase “Neolithic Revolution” and, with it, an argument for the importance of agriculture that practitioners of agricultural history often invoke. But Childe, too, was a product of his moment; he sought to create a shared history for a war-torn Europe and a place at the table of technological innovation for ancient peoples at a moment when the definition and social value of technology was up for debate. In contrast, specialists who have continued to work on these questions in early human history offer many compel-
ling examples of the productivity of food collection and its role in sustaining political and social hierarchy and complexity (consider examples in overviews like Kelly 1995 and Sassaman 2004); of the complex interdigitation of food production and collection (for Africa, see citations in de Luna 2016); and of the ways in which stunning forms of urbanization and heterarchical political complexity followed from such interdigitation (for an African example, see McIntosh 2005). These studies challenge the tidy valorizing agrarian narrative so politically potent in contexts like twenty-first century America, where rural livelihoods and agrarian systems are being lost, misunderstood, or denigrated, as many panelists observe.

Although most historians focus on the last two hundred years (and, most often, Europe and the United States), it is important for practitioners of agricultural history to grapple with the contingent nature of ideas about agriculture, particularly agriculture’s deepest past, by keeping up with cutting edge research on both Neolithic archaeologies and hunter-gatherer studies (a bifurcation that is also a product of the peculiar role of agriculture in “Western” political philosophy). Specialists have reconstructed in eloquent detail the history of the category “hunter-gatherer” (Barnard 2004; Finlayson and Warren 2010; Pluciennik 2002), with insights into the conceptual history of agriculture (Rudebeck 2000) that should be essential reading for our community, too. Engagement with unlikely bedfellows like hunter-gatherer studies will help us to question the persistent values and assumptions that so easily slip into how we think about agricultural history. The stakes are high, indeed: such values and assumptions are particularly ruthless in obscuring the histories of people of color and of the vast majority of the farmers who have lived in the past. Thus, as we nurture agricultural history in the next century, we need to carefully tend to the deep roots of both agriculture-as-concept and agriculture-as-practice.

High Points of New England Agricultural History
Brian Donahue

There is a sign on the Massachusetts Turnpike where it crosses the Berkshires, a few towns east of the New York state line: “Highest Turnpike Elevation 1724 Feet.” It then adds “Next Highest Elevation on I-90 Oacoma, South Dakota 1729 Feet.” The sign’s syntax is nonsensical, and it turns out I-90 doesn’t even reach 1,729 feet in Oacoma—you have to go a few more miles past the Missouri River and onto the High Plains (Vanhoenacker 2014). Still,
Anyone with a sense of American geography gets the point: if you keep west driving through New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Minnesota, you won’t encounter the same elevation until you hit South Dakota, 1,500 miles away.

In other words, you have just crested the Appalachians—and New York didn’t have to.

Every time we pass this sign, I amuse my family by pointing out a couple of its implications, confident that they have forgotten them since last time. First of all, it pretty much explains why New York is the biggest city in the country. It also helps explain why the Berkshire hills are covered with trees instead of grass. Not that geography is destiny, or anything, but let’s face it: New York won the race to the West. Boston was out of the running, and Philadelphia and Baltimore had to slog over the Alleghenies and didn’t make it, not in the era of canals. New York had the flat route and built the Erie Canal (which I-90 now follows) from Albany to Buffalo. And the wheat, wool, and whiskey flowed. The opening of the West conferred an advantage upon New York in particular, but soon enough transformed Eastern agriculture in general.

If you ask any educated New Englander what happened next, they will tell you that with this flood of cheap Midwestern produce our agriculture collapsed, farms went back to forest, and young people moved to either Minnesota or mill towns (Raup 1966). I have been practicing and promoting local farming since the 1970s, but I like to ask my audiences, if the Erie Canal and a couple railroads were enough to croak New England agriculture a century and a half ago, how on earth do we propose to revive it in the age of the Internet? And how far do we want to reverse the return of the forest, which gives us so many good things?

Well, in truth rural New England did not totally collapse in the second half of the nineteenth century. A lot of degraded, marginal pasture was allowed to grow up in pines, as farmers took advantage of that cheap Midwestern grain to increase the flow of milk, while others got into apples or truck farming to supply booming urban markets with what they called “concentrated products.” Overall, the value of agricultural production rose, even as a large part of the landscape reforested (Barron 1984; Bell 1989; Donahue 2007). You could look at that as a win-win. Farming retrenched and stabilized until the middle of the twentieth century, when it suffered a more profound decline with the rise of petroleum-fueled and industrial agriculture.

That is the slightly more encouraging story that we use to frame the “New England Food Vision,” which looks at the potential of sustainable farming
in this region in a post-fossil fuel future that puts a higher premium on social and environmental values than on “efficient” production of commodities, externalities be damned (Donahue et al. 2014). Certain crops seem to make more sense here than others. I’m not foolish enough to predict what the future will bring, but I am happy to look at history to get a better idea of what future we might want to work for.

If nothing else, the dramatic swings between forest and farmland and forest in our past serve to remind us that what appear to be irreversible trends are not. And speaking as a farmer who still has to ache and sweat to keep the forest from taking back my own pastures, but who at the same time has a deep love of trees, my simplest answer would be that agricultural history matters because it makes living and working in this place, and engaging in this ancient contest, more enjoyable. Don’t give up the fight.

Good Agricultural History for Good Agricultural Policy

Anne Effland

One of my favorite aspects of the nearly thirty years I have spent in the US Department of Agriculture is that I have never once had to explain why agriculture matters. On the other hand, I have frequently had to explain why history matters, and being compelled to answer that question has required a healthy reflection on my sense of purpose in choosing this discipline—this way of asking and answering questions about the world.

The questions I ask and want to answer are about policy and government, about how a democratic government can create policies that help our society to prosper justly, with the greatest likelihood of solving identified problems without damaging consequences. And I find that history matters in this quest because of the opportunity it offers to analyze the contours and complexity of policies as they have been created and carried out in the past. We can examine the problems policies were intended to solve, the policy designs that were developed to solve those problems, their successes and failures, their intended and unintended consequences, and the politics, broadly defined, that surrounded them. Most importantly, to echo Alan Marcus’s comments, the study of history offers the opportunity to analyze all of this within the context, as wholly as possible, of particular times and places.

After many years of explaining, even defending, why history matters, I believe I am finally able to articulate the power of this historical understanding of context. It produces a breadth of vision that comes from the opportunity to
practice identifying the full compass of a policy problem—the people who are affected by it, the ways in which people will be affected by proposed solutions, how those consequences may be avoided or mitigated, and the nature of forces driving the proposed solutions. For civil servants, who must make an honest effort to see multiple options and identify broad consequences, the expertise acquired by this practice in historical analysis is essential. In fact, for those with longer tenure, historical analysis occurs almost naturally as the result of experience. While the knowledge gained by such a breadth of vision may not consistently succeed in creating good policies, it certainly contributes to creating informed policies, even when those making the policy decisions choose or are forced to dismiss some of this knowledge.

Yet history has not really secured a place at the table in policy analysis. I believe the reason is that history does not simplify—it offers the power of insight from attention to the particular and, as such, it does not “scale up” easily. It does not offer specific guidance, clear pathways to follow, or policy designs to implement. But as a guide to asking the needed questions that underpin the predictive models and measurable indicators on which policies are ultimately built, or as a template for identifying potential impacts beyond the immediate problem to be solved, historical analysis can play a vital role in making good policy. Incorporating historians in that process can assure that this contextual value is appropriately, and consistently, applied, just as the inclusion of other types of policy expertise contributes to the development of effective policy recommendations.

Note: The findings and conclusions in this article are those of the author and should not be construed to represent any official USDA or U.S. Government determination or policy.

Here’s to the Future ‘Cause We Got through the Past

EDDA L. FIELDS-BLACK

If agricultural history is going to continue to matter, we will need to tell better stories; to tell better stories, we will need to expand and diversify our evidentiary base and broaden and deepen our institutional and personal relationships. A public awaits, but it may not be the one we have been imagining.

To diversify our sources, we must democratize the way we think of knowledge, analyzing the science of farm hands and enslaved laborers as on par with that of agricultural experiment stations. “Top down sources” have defined
agricultural history, and some historians continue to rely on them to write the history of agriculture. As much as I appreciate diaries as sources, a diary is still in many ways a “top down” source, privileging those who were literate and had the time, skills, and means to keep written records and store them in places where they could survive. Rural diaries may enable historians to break through some levels of marginalization to tell the stories of people, particularly rural white women, who don’t appear in many “top down” sources written primarily by privileged white men. But what about billions of marginalized people, people of color, poor people, illiterate people, enslaved, indentured, and otherwise unfree and/or coerced people who did not own their own labor power. They were and are often the food producers whose skills and labor were and are exploited by people who consumed, traded, and sold the food they produced. How can historians tell the stories of all of the food producers, consumers, traders, and sellers and make all of these stories part of the collective story of the history of agriculture? We need new sources and we need to look at traditional historical sources in new ways.

I have been alternately railing against and waxing poetic about the lack of historical sources to tell the transnational story of West African rice farmers and blacks enslaved on Lowcountry South Carolina and Georgia rice plantations for nearly twenty years. I wasn’t all talk; I also took action. I made small interventions in the early part of my career using interdisciplinary methods, historical linguistics, and sources, travelers’ accounts, biological and botanical studies of mangrove ecosystems, and archaeological evidence where it was available (Fields-Black 2015; Fields-Black 2014; Fields-Black 2008). And I wasn’t alone; a community of historians made their own interventions to reconstruct the history of agriculturists and their impact on a large area of Eastern, Central, and Southern Africa in which Bantu-speakers used agriculture to spread and adapt to different microenvironments, leading to their dominance in the sprawling region (de Luna 2016; de Luna, Fleisher, McIntosh 2012). And I continue to make a larger, very different intervention now in my current book project which uses a completely different set of sources: US Civil War pension files. In these files, formerly enslaved people paint a picture of enslaved communities on nine rice plantations along the Combahee River before and after a raid led by a ring of spies, scouts, and pilots, led in turn by Harriet Tubman. The spies, scouts, and pilots led US Army commanders and two regiments of the US Colored Troops to drive three gunboats up South Carolina’s Combahee River and free more than seven hundred thirty people held in bondage—the enslaved laborers were actually in the rice fields
hoeing rice when the steam whistles blew—in June 1863. Though I think the Combahee River Raid is the most exciting “rice story” ever, the impact of the book will most likely be small. Whatever is a historian to do?

At some point, to quote Gang Starr, the 1990’s underground Brooklyn-based hip hop male duo, the time comes to “Put Up or Shut Up.” My “Put Up or Shut Up” moment came in the summer months of 2016 when I accepted an invitation from Nemours Wildlife Foundation, which is located on the Combahee River, to explore their rice fields and slave cemeteries and have lunch with the executive director and a few board members. That afternoon was the beginning of us building of trust, collegial bonds, and collaboration. Nemours, led by its President and CEO, Ernie Wiggers, became part of a grass-roots coalition of scientists, which would eventually include the ACE Basin Task Force, Rob Baldwin, a professor of forestry at Clemson University, and Travis Folk, a biologist with Folk Land Management, Inc., a private company that restores rice fields, Dan Richter, a soil ecologist from Duke University, and Andrew Agha, an archeologist from the University of South Carolina. Together we worked to create a statewide map of all historic rice fields in South Carolina, using LiDAR data, high resolution imagery, and remotely sensed data to detect the ancient historic changes in geomorphology and landforms. Ground-truthing and support from field validation, historical records, and expert review has accompanied remotely sensed data (Leonard et al. 2012; Hanks, Folk, Wiggers, and Fields-Black 2018).

Collaboration between humanists and scientists has the potential to transform the history of agriculture and to finally give historians the tools to tell a more complete story, particularly for time periods and populations for which written sources are not available. The rice human-natural system has largely been studied by humanists and social scientists, specifically historians, anthropologists, archaeologists, geographers, and economists. Humanists and social scientists have largely relied on “top-down” historical sources written by planters, including plantation account books, and various records of travelers and planters. Travel accounts do not typically provide much of a scientific or systematic understanding of the region’s flora and fauna. In their plantation day books and agricultural improvement journals, planters recorded the tasks enslaved laborers undertook, but did not record the agricultural science and technology they employed nor their impacts on the wetlands. In blanket books and on slave lists, planters recorded births and deaths in the enslaved community and sometimes the cause of a particular slave’s death, but not the root cause of the high death and low fertility rates among enslaved popula-
tions on rice plantations (Dusinberre 1996). Historians know even less about these questions for the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries when enslaved laborers undertook much of the heaviest labor of clearing the coastal wetlands. Using plantation records, historians can only speculate. An archival source, such as a plantation ledger, cannot tell you a story it does not know (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991).

Meanwhile, the natural sciences have yet to contribute to our understanding of this important landscape’s transformations through time, which had profound ecological and social meaning. Little is known about the interplay between the conversion of native swamps and tidal wetlands to managed rice wetlands, the devastation of thousands of people, and the subsequent ecological trajectories of the wetlands released after the end of the commercial rice industry. Historians need scientific observations to unravel a fuller story of the dynamic relationship among rice production, the wetlands environment, and the enslaved.

Building on the “The South Carolina ‘Rice Kingdom’” mapping project, our team is investigating the types of wetlands that enslaved laborers converted to rice, the past and present landscape and forest conditions, soil types, and thus the environmental conditions in which enslaved laborers worked and died and that can be observed today, and the sheer magnitude of their massive undertaking of converting the coastal wetlands to construct 274,331 acres of productive rice fields in South Carolina alone. By combining scientific methods and historical sources and using a systems-level approach, we are proposing to reconstruct nearly four hundred years of human-natural transitions affected by rice agriculture with enslaved African labor across the coastal wetlands of the southeastern United States.

I have been contemplating one final question for the past few years: for whom does history matter? Does agricultural history matter only to a small group of historians who subscribe to Agricultural History, who are members of the Agricultural History Society, and who attend the organization’s annual meetings? If agricultural history only matters to them, then agricultural history—not the history itself, but the recording, writing, and dissemination of it by professional historians—is endangered. We have to find new audiences for the histories we write, new platforms for its dissemination, new ways to use technology to achieve these goals—or we all face extinction. Again, it is time to “Put Up or Shut Up.”

Late in Spring 2013, when I was completing my tenure as a Smithsonian Senior Fellow at the Smithsonian Museum of American History and the
National Portrait Gallery, I accepted an invitation from the new Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) to present my book, *Deep Roots*, and have lunch with the curatorial staff. This initial introduction led to follow-up meetings with curators of the museum’s slavery exhibits. We built relationships of trust and mutual admiration and respect, then we decided to work together. From 2013–2016, I advised Paul Gardullo as he curated NMAAHC’s “South Carolina Rice Fields” permanent exhibit in the “Power of Place” Gallery. I was in awe of the prospect that approximately two million people per year would visit the museum (Smithsonian 2019). If a fraction of the museum’s visitors toured the rice exhibit, it would be many times more than the lifetime readerships of all of my books. I shared my research with Paul, then observed and learned while he told the story in a way that would captivate and educate millions of people.

The opportunity to work with the Smithsonian curators motivated me to think about whose history this is, anyway, and about how we get this history to the people. In time, I wanted to write a story that was based in my historical research, but written for a general audience much broader than the audiences that buy my books. Since 2015, I have been engaging in a new kind of collaboration with performing and visual artists to reimagine the transnational history of enslavement through classical music. Our project, *Unburied, Unmourned, Unmarked: Requiem for Rice* ([www.requiemforrice.com](http://www.requiemforrice.com)) is the first full symphonic work written about slavery. Carnegie Mellon’s Center for the Arts in Society selected *Requiem for Rice* as its Performance Initiative for 2015–2017.

In Phase One of the project, I wrote a libretto, the text on which the entire project is based, from primary historical sources, which I analyzed using an artistic voice I did not know I had to bear witness to the humanity, labor, skill, suffering, sacrifices, and contributions of blacks engaged in rice production in the Lowcountry. I also serve as Executive Producer, i.e. fundraiser-in-chief. Three-time EMMY-winner John Wineglass is composing the original contemporary classical score. Jeremy Reynolds, classical music critic for *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* praised the orchestral debut as “a small taste of what promises to be a grand dramatic homage to the darkest chapter of American history” (Reynolds 2019). The orchestral debut was presented by the Colour of Music Festival Orchestra, an all-black orchestra of international musical virtuosos based in Charleston, South Carolina, and rebroadcasted on WQED, Pittsburgh’s public classical music radio station ([www.wqed.org/fm/podcasts/encore/requiem-rice](http://www.wqed.org/fm/podcasts/encore/requiem-rice)).
In Phase Two of the project, director and filmmaker Julie Dash, will direct film installations which will be shown in performance to visually transport the audience to the Lowcountry’s inland and tidal rice fields and slave quarters. Julie Dash is an internationally renowned filmmaker and director whose *Daughters of the Dust* was the first film by an African-American woman to have a major studio release, and to be nominated for the Grand Jury award and to win the Cinematography Award at the Sundance Film Festival (1991). Our long-term goal, through integration of Dash’s immersive film installations, is to engage audience members on a personal and emotional level, fostering reconciliation among people and communities, and creating avenues through which oppressed peoples can tell their own stories about their sacrifices, sufferings, and contributions to the world.

On November 9, 2019, the Nashville Symphony and the Colour of Music Festival Orchestra will co-present the three movements of John Wineglass’ *Unburied, Unmourned, Unmarked: Requiem for Rice*, to be followed in January 2020 with a performance by the San Bernardino Symphony, and in 2020 or 2021, the Pittsburgh Symphony, among many others. In addition, Gardullo and I are working out the details for *Unburied, Unmourned, Unmarked* to be performed as a program for the “Reconstruction” exhibit (2020–2021) of the NMAAHC’s Center for the Study of Global Slavery, and for NMAAHC to co-produce and debut the final multimedia work (featuring Julie Dash’s film installations) as part of its Global Curatorial Project’s international “In Slavery’s Wake” traveling exhibit (2023–2026). My artistic team and I have succeeded beyond my wildest dreams in making something beautiful out of the painful and tragic history of enslavement, taking history off the shelf, putting it on stage, reaching new audiences, finding new ways to teach about enslavement, and hopefully bringing history to life for people all over the world.

I raise my glass to the Agricultural History Society for its centennial anniversary and offer this toast: in the words of the 1990’s New York-based hip hop female group Salt-N-Pepa, “here’s to the future ‘cause we got through the past,” the past of “top-down” histories based on “top-down sources.” As we look forward to the society’s next century, I challenge agricultural historians to work with scientists, artists, museum curators, and web designers and to use all of the platforms and media technology at our disposal to disseminate our research, translating it into forms attractive to general audiences. Let’s put the scientists, artists, museum curators, and historians together in a UTV and let’s all go to the proverbial rice fields together. I can just begin to imagine what
collective stories we will tell through books, music, dance, art, websites, apps, theater, film, and more and the audiences we will reach!

**Agricultural History and Agrarian Studies**

**Prakash Kumar**

I would like to repackage the question in order to make my point: How can we make agricultural history as we practice it under the auspices of the Agricultural History Society relevant to new audiences across the globe? How can we enrich the historiography of American agriculture through borrowings from other agricultural histories?

To a South Asianist like myself, it is striking how far removed the core questions of American agricultural history are from those raised by South Asian agrarian history. To an extent that is to be expected, since the historiographies have taken shape separately over many years. But moving beyond the comfort of familiar paradigms might be fruitful. Notable exceptions aside, the vast majority of American agricultural historians pass by the historiographies of nonwestern agricultural regions. The majority of the populations that are still directly dependent on agriculture live in those places and therefore our methods cannot justifiably evolve in isolation from questions that are globally relevant. We should cultivate a new level of openness to historiographies that are well represented within area studies approaches for South Asia, East Asia, African Studies, Latin America, the Pacific, and Oceana (for a sampling, see the Bibliography). And, truly incorporating lessons from those histories to enrich the American repertoire would require a conscious effort to engage their methodologies, beyond mere facile reference to such works.

That brings me to the second point: the critical prominence of the “Midwestern” model of industrialized farming to agricultural history in American academia. The latter overdetermines a vast part of national agricultural history that “Agricultural History” in the United States seems to have taken it upon itself to represent. This focus on the industrialization of farming stands in contrast to the line of questions that fall more in the realm of the “social” in much of the nonwestern historiographies of agriculture. In my own field of South Asian Studies, for instance, Ranajit Guha’s seminal work on rurality and resistance to colonialism started with a focus on peasant consciousness (Guha 1983). The focus on culture, meanings, and values, aside from political economy, is writ large across these agrarian histories. Embracing questions of rurality, livelihood, food, welfare, justice—in their own right—would expand
the canvas of United States agricultural histories. That would also be a history that is more relatable to the agricultural histories of most of the world. I am not making a call for abdicating the responsibility to rightfully attend to relevant and legitimate national and foreign policy questions. I am inviting US agricultural historians to increase the number of arrows in their quivers to ask new questions about power and social relations in agricultural histories that they write. These questions have been asked with considerable finesse in the academic traditions of the global South and are a valuable resource.

Rethinking Chinese History through the History of Agriculture

Peter Lavelle

Agricultural history matters because it has been used time and again to shed light on how relationships between different parts of the world have shifted over time. Without agriculture, for example, it would be difficult to comprehend why China’s place in the world order changed so dramatically over the course of the nineteenth century. This is not just because one of the most consequential military conflicts of the century, the Opium War (1839–1842), arose from a dispute over trade in a lucrative agricultural commodity. It is also because historians have long turned to studies of agriculture, especially using the methods and frameworks of economic history and historical sociology, to explore the underlying reasons why countries from Europe and North America grew to overshadow the Qing Empire (1644–1911) in terms of technological prowess and economic productivity by the end of the nineteenth century. Such studies have identified a host of phenomena that may explain this outcome, from the rise of agrarian capitalism in Europe (Wallerstein 1974) and the expansion of the plantation complex in the Atlantic world (Pomeranz 2000) to the continued use of traditional technologies (Elvin 1973) and the persistent prevalence of smallholder farming in China (Zhang 2017). Often woven together by metanarratives that revolve around capitalism, colonialism, science, or culture, such histories have tended to reinforce the notion that Qing China and its imperial adversaries were diverging in the nineteenth century, charting different pathways of agricultural and industrial development and leading them toward distinct positions in the world economy.

But such narratives are hardly set in stone, and so agricultural history also matters because it remains a valuable tool for revising them. Future research
may show, for instance, that the divergence between China and other countries in the late nineteenth century has been overstated in certain respects. Historians have already explored how imperial officials and Western missionaries launched initiatives to spread foreign knowledge and promote the use of foreign technology in China (Elman 2005), suggesting that the era witnessed certain patterns of global convergence in regard to science. But scholars have not given the same type of attention to Chinese agriculture. The relative disregard for studying agriculture as a realm of science and technology in this pivotal era may stem as much from the predominance of economic approaches to agricultural history as from the disciplinary and institutional biases of conventional histories of Chinese science—perhaps not unlike the reasons for the relative neglect of agriculture by historians of science in the United States, as Amry O. Williams has explained in this roundtable.

Regardless of the reasons, the fuller story of Chinese agriculture remains to be told. There is evidence that agriculture as a field of knowledge was undergoing important changes in the final decades of Qing rule. By the end of the nineteenth century, political and intellectual elites were beginning to adopt new tools of agrarian science and technology from Japan, the United States, and other countries, translating texts about soil chemistry, establishing agricultural experiment stations and farming schools throughout the provinces, and obtaining seeds and crop specimens from distant continents. Collectively, these trends seem to indicate that, despite the very real differences between Qing China and its adversaries, Chinese leaders were becoming engaged in trying to foster scientific agriculture in ways that were strikingly similar to their counterparts in other countries. This, in turn, suggests that historians of agriculture still have much collaborative work to do to create a composite understanding of the global history of agricultural science in the critical decades between the Opium War and World War I.

**Centering Agrarian Identity in Modern History**

James Lin

This roundtable presents a diverse range of thoughts on why agricultural history matters. These include the insights agricultural history has provided into understanding environmental change such as species extinctions; elaborating everyday lived experiences; illuminating societal acquisition of food; and expanding understandings of farm-science interactions and knowledge production more broadly. Many of these perspectives mirror how I approach
agricultural and rural history in my own research and teaching, engaging with its intersections with the history of science, the history of often-overlooked farmers and technicians, environmental and nonhuman history, gender history, and the history of food and consumption.

One thread running throughout the roundtable papers with which I particularly identify is the importance of agrarian and rural identity to much of human history. As hinted by Coclanis, de Jong, Marcus, and others, agricultural history is more or less *the* history of human society. Until the past several centuries, most of human society by population was concerned with a basic problem of keeping itself sustained, and systems of capital, knowledge, environment, gender, race, and so on, arose through interactions with the enterprise of agriculture. One of the consequences of this centrality of agriculture was how farmers and entire societies conceived of themselves as being agrarian and rural.

In the United States, the transition out of a primarily agricultural mode began over a century ago. But in many parts of the global South, being rural and agrarian is a much more recent memory and remains an ongoing identity. This “rurality” and “agrarianness” has had significant political, economic, and cultural consequences. Grappling with “modernity” or “modernization” in the twentieth century was formulated as transforming the rural, either through making it modern, or trying to push society from rural to urban and industrial as quickly as possible (Merkel-Hess 2016; Rostow 1965). (As Williams rightfully points out, this does not mean that farmers or agricultural societies were “unmodern.”)

In my own work, I examine how Taiwanese policymakers and intellectuals constructed and co-opted an agrarian and rural identity as a form of solidarity-making with the developing world. Against a backdrop of Cold War geopolitics, Taiwanese foreign policy seized upon the ruralness of its society and its recent colonial history as an agrarian exporter to its own benefit. In popular, scientific, and diplomatic portrayals in the 1960s and 1970s, the Taiwanese were a hardworking people owing to their farming background, a trait that was then deployed as a commonality shared with the other agrarian peoples of Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America. This imagined, globally shared rurality became a cornerstone of Taiwanese politics, deployed abroad and at home to reconstruct what being from Taiwan meant. As a consequence, Taiwanese modern history was retold, sometimes romanticized, as a rural and agrarian story as much as one of nationalism, anticommunism, or development, among other mid- to late-twentieth-century themes.
As someone who came to agricultural history relatively late in my academic training, the centrality of rurality and agrarianness seems almost lost elsewhere in historical fields, and I am thankful for the roundtable as a reminder of the contrary. The diversity of scholarly interests in agricultural history demonstrates the vitality of agricultural history, and its utility in furthering basic questions that drive historical inquiry: understanding our past, our present, and the basic human condition.

The Cosmopolitan Countryside

Ben Nobbs-Thiessen

The invitation to offer a reflection on “why agricultural history matters” arrived in my inbox at an opportune moment in a new research project. That morning I found myself caught in a rush hour of sorts while driving a gravel road in rural Ontario two hours southwest of Toronto. Not wishing to kick up too much dust from the roadbed, I had slowed to a crawl while passing an Old Order Mennonite horse and buggy. But this Pennsylvania-German speaking community, which had emigrated from the United States in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was not what had brought me to Aylmer, Ontario, that morning. As a Latin American historian, I was drawn to Elgin County, because, like Essex to the west, it possessed one of the highest concentrations of Mexican-born individuals in all of Canada.

This distinction was the product of a different branch of the Mennonite faith, low-German speaking “Old Colony” Mennonites who emigrated from Canada to form colonies in remote frontier regions of Mexico, Paraguay, Bolivia, and Belize throughout the twentieth century. In a surprising twist, some Old Colony Mennonites with access to Canadian citizenship began to “return” to Canada as seasonal migrant laborers at midcentury. Driven by drought in northern Mexico in the 1950s and, more substantially, because their agrarian practices were weakened by the structural shocks of the 1980s and the introduction of NAFTA, Latin American Mennonites and their descendants had come to compose a population of over sixty thousand in Canada. In the past year alone, an additional two hundred Mennonite families arrived in Aylmer from several Latin American countries.

This unlikely transnationalism hardly matched that of cosmopolitan Toronto, one of the most ethnically diverse cities in the world. Yet it seemed nearly ubiquitous during my time in southern Ontario. Stopping for tacos a couple hours west of Aylmer, I discovered that the owner of “Tortillas Leam-
had lived in Mennonite farming communities in Mexico and Bolivia (and Mexico again) in the 1970s and 1980s before arriving in southern Ontario to pick cucumbers and tomatoes in the 1990s. Many of his customers were in turn Latin Americans from Mexico and Central America recruited through Canada’s seasonal agricultural worker program (SAWP). The heart of the business, a hulking tortilla machine crammed into a back room of the restaurant, had been imported from Mexico on one of his many return trips to visit family in Chihuahua.

The Mennonite connection, linking farming communities in southern Ontario, northern Mexico and beyond is, of course, a highly particular narrative. But I hope this future project, along with my forthcoming work on Bolivia’s lowland frontier, builds on one of the more rewarding tendencies in agricultural history: to insist on the global production of local landscapes (Nobbs-Thiessen 2020). The field has long been telling such stories. Classic works drew together African slavery, Caribbean sugar, and northern Europe’s Industrial Revolution (Mintz 1985). Others followed migrating peoples and agricultural practices to explore land use, settler colonialism, and indigenous displacement (Cronon 1983). We continue to see excellent studies of migrants making sense of—and misreading—unfamiliar landscapes and farming the land as migrant diasporas (MacLennan 2014; Armiero and Tucker 2017).

We also read narratives of different kinds of agrarian “migrants.” Some of the most provocative of these works center on the nature—and limits—of mobile expertise (Olsson 2017) that accompanies the proliferation of agricultural commodities, such as Chilean grapes or Brazilian soybeans, into new locales (Tinsman 2014; Oliveira and Hecht 2018). Other global exchanges are tied to the spread of plant diseases that have often proved equally adept at jumping between disparate locales—much to the peril of agro-industry (Soluri 2013; McCook 2019).

What do these disparate works have in common? They may narrate the spread of zebu cattle, palm oil, migrant laborers, or globe-trotting agronomists. Some of these writers might also describe themselves as diplomatic, environmental, spatial, labor, or food historians, or historians of science. But in addition to charting global waters, agricultural history has always been one to welcome such interlopers. Whether it involves writing about transplanted bodies, crops, diseases, or knowledge, their shared commitment to tracing the complex evolution of the strikingly cosmopolitan countryside is, for me, one of the many things that makes agricultural history matter.
It’s My Job! Making Agricultural History Matter

Debra A. Reid

Why does agricultural history matter? Amrys Williams explains that agricultural history warrants multi-disciplinary exploration and that the process can help us see the full picture and tell the bigger story. Peter Coclanis relates it to food, Greta de Jong addresses human survival, and Dolly Jørgensen reminds us to recognize agriculture’s destructive consequences. Catharine Wilson stresses that personal stories help us grasp human endeavor. Alan Marcus affirms the same, arguing that the sensibilities of farmers appear loud and clear and unvarnished in the historical record.

These explanations justify our work as agricultural historians, but they also raise the follow-up question: How do we move the history that matters beyond the agricultural history choir? Marcus touches on this within disciplinary contexts when he explains that a deep time-place study could “replace the universalist, functionalist social science model with a radically historicist comprehension.” In fact, all respondents addressed topics and evidence that support deep time-place history. The objects I curate, and the archival collections I reference, support that approach, too, even though collectors disassociated them from their place and time decades ago. Yet, multi-disciplinary approaches, as Williams explains, help us see the bigger picture. I try to put puzzle pieces together on a daily basis, to tell a bigger picture story that engages with a public increasingly interested in food, biosystems, renewable resources, resource exploitation, environmental sustainability, and planetary survival. Within our subfield we need to debate, and outside our subfield we need to engage, if we hope to address this consumer demand.

My position as curator at The Henry Ford provides opportunities to wear both the disciplinary hat and the public historian hat. The collections I curate stand in for written records. Henry Ford collected objects that told “the history of our people as written into the things their hands made and used” (de Roulhac Hamilton 1931, 773). Within Ford’s Edison Institute, agriculture led the list of object classifications (not otherwise arranged in alphabetical order) and farm machinery was one of five “particularly impressive” divisions. “Everything is here” (Ibid., 775). The other four included, in order, transportation, lighting, household and kitchen furniture, and domestic utensils (Ibid., 774).

The Henry Ford began in the context of Ford’s wrestling with the meaning of his own claim that “history is more or less bunk.” He pledged to “build a museum . . . to show industrial history, and it won’t be bunk” in 1919 (Butter-
field 1965, 57–58). He dedicated The Edison Institute in 1928 and opened it in 1929. He believed, as do Catharine Wilson and Alan Marcus, that objects (and archival materials) reveal not just what farmers (and industrialists who had been farmers, and who worked for farmers) did, but what they thought. The cumulative effect (around one million artifacts and five miles in linear feet of archival material) documents agriculture and the environment from Connecticut to California between the 1700s and the present. I describe the whole as the largest 3-D US history textbook, period. The exhibits, historic structures, landscapes, recreated vignettes, and public programming amount to chapters and require visual literacy to fully comprehend. What a resource to use to convey why agricultural history matters beyond the agricultural history choir! Can it help convince the naysayers?

The Henry Ford agricultural collections document the industrial underpinnings of an agricultural system that ensures inexpensive food and clothing for Americans, but also comes with chemical dependencies that threaten ecosystems. We agricultural historians have our finger on the pulse of historical and technical knowledge relevant to issues of huge consequence: food security, commodity transformation into by-products and bioproducts, and environmental sustainability. We have only to figure out how to make this agricultural history matter. In other words, how do we convey this in a timely, captivating, memorable way? Contributions to this roundtable on “Why Agricultural History Matters” address the reasons why we need to do so. Collectively, we can apply penetrating imaginations, as de Roulhac Hamilton urged Ford Museum professionals to do (775), to ensure that agricultural history has a use in this world, a history that “enriches the collective specious present” as Carl Becker argued (Becker 1932, 234). I take this all into account daily as I collect material culture and archival documents for future edification.

The View from Brazil

THOMAS D. ROGERS

Agricultural history matters and so does the position from which one asks why. It is one thing to ask from the perspective of the United States, with a professional association, a dynamic journal, and an active conversation. I write as the national association of historians in Brazil convenes its biennial meeting, with more than five thousand participants. A tiny percentage of the program addresses agricultural history and one roundtable’s title sums up the subfield’s place: “The Misfortunes of Agrarian History in Brazil: Tragedies
and Forgetting.” It also points toward my argument that without understanding agricultural history one will struggle to understand Brazil.

A planter addressing Brazil’s National Society of Agriculture in 1918 neatly combined two persistent discourses of Brazilian identity: a conviction that the nation’s destiny was agricultural and an anxiety about backwardness. He complained that farmers’ poor customs had made Brazilians “indigent pariahs in the midst of the greatest natural treasures.” The country’s agricultural practices, he said, “were given to us by our grandparents from the eighteenth century” and he called for better agronomic research (de Arruda Beltrão 1918). Those “grandparents,” statesmen and the educated elite, had themselves bemoaned the then-colony’s backward agriculture (Pádua 2002, Chpt. 3 and 5). And throughout the nineteenth century newspaper editors and essayists called for improvements (Cribelli 2016, 170–77). A sense of agricultural destiny fueled exhortations like these, summed up by an influential intellectual named Alberto Torres in 1938: “Brazil’s clear destiny is to be an agricultural country: every action seeking to divert it from this destiny is a crime against its nature” (de Mendonca 2000, 1–3; Torres 1938, 214).

Recent scholarship on Brazil’s agricultural prowess suggests that its impressive development across the second half of the twentieth century fulfilled this destiny (Klein and Luna 2018). Most markedly but not exclusively during the military regime (1964–1985), it followed a self-consciously commodity-oriented development strategy at the expense of an egalitarian structure of land ownership—and often at the expense of satisfactorily feeding its population. In his 1974 National Development Plan, the general then leading the dictatorship highlighted the need for a decisive contribution from agriculture, declaring that it was “called to play a new role in Brazilian development . . . [to demonstrate] Brazil’s capacity to realize its vocation as a global supplier of food and agricultural raw materials” (República Federativa do Brasil 1974, 4). Far from new, the role he envisioned marked a continuity across the colonial, imperial, and republican periods.

The persistent national discourses of destiny and backwardness might be particular to Brazil, but agriculture’s powerful impact on development clearly is not. In so many cases, the sector served to generate foreign exchange receipts but not to feed people domestically, create employment, or provide a path toward social mobility. To use Brazil’s sugarcane ethanol industry as an example, the largest biofuel program in the world in the 1970s and 1980s displaced food crops, helped create a mass of mobile, seasonal laborers, and concentrated wealth among a small group of highly capitalized producers.
Agricultural history helps us understand Brazil’s patterns of inequality, social and spatial organization, regional differentiation, and economic history. The same can be said for the field’s utility in many other countries, especially during the decades of swift change following the Green Revolution. Agricultural history matters, as do the mechanisms of its incorporation into professional practice.

Black Lives and Agricultural History

Bobby J. Smith II

In reading through the responses of the panelists in the roundtable on the question, “Why does agricultural history matter?” I couldn’t help but notice the overwhelming absence of discussions about race relations and power, especially as it relates to the agricultural livelihoods of blacks in America and around the world. For me, as a sociologist who has studied and used agricultural history to examine how blacks navigate oppressive and emancipatory forms of power in agri-food contexts, race is at the center of many—if not all—discussions about agricultural history in the United States. As prominent black historian Manning Marable wrote in his 1979 article “The Politics of Black Land Tenure, 1877–1915” in Agricultural History: “A central chapter in the history of black America involves the evolution of black agriculture and land tenure in the Black Belt South” (142). Drawing our attention to the post–Reconstruction black experience in American agricultural development, Marable shed a critical light on some of the reasons for the decline of blacks as landowners. Among reasons at the intersection of race relations, social conditions, and the physical environment, Marable attributed black agricultural decline to the maneuverings of white elites who “held a tight monopoly over the monetary supply, credit sources and rates, and the entire agricultural production of the region” (152). Marable cautioned, however, that these reasons should not be read in isolation but as part of a larger history of black self-determination as a way to survive unequal conditions perpetuated by American capitalism. “History thus illustrates clearly that,” Marable concluded, the “collapse” or “destruction of an authentic, black landowning class” was “not a failure of black people, but a direct result of the denial of equal economic opportunity for all members of the society” (Ibid.).

Within the four decades since Marable’s paper, there has been an explosion in scholarly and public conversations about blacks in agriculture, particularly black farmers. Agricultural historians and scholars that contribute to the
subfield, including Pete Daniel, Debra A. Reid, Valerie Grim, Adrienne Petty, Jess Gilbert, among others, have expanded on Marable’s historical emphasis on the systems and structures that exacerbate conditions that impact the relationship between blacks and agriculture. This group of scholars has shown that the years between the creation of the Agricultural History Society in 1919 and the black farmer led class-action suit known as *Pigford v. Glickman* in 1999, the number of black farmers decreased from 926,000 owning 16 million acres of land in 1920 to less than 20,000 owning less than 2 million acres in 1997 (Wood and Gilbert 2000). These years also revealed a growing resurgence of black agrarian resistance movements that have not been fully recognized in discussions around agricultural history. These resistance movements provide the necessary context for understanding sociopolitical movements under the banners of “food justice” and “food sovereignty” in rural and urban black communities today. Black women activists like Dara Cooper and farmers Karen Washington and Leah Penniman use these movements as a way to navigate the legacy of blacks in agricultural history. Even the Movement for Black Lives’ “#VisionForBlackLives Policy Demands Booklet,” in a remarkable echo of Marable’s conclusions, argue for reparations for what they define as “food apartheid,” a confluence of conditions that contribute to “the systematic destruction of Black self-determination” to control land and food. This idea of food apartheid in black communities—and other communities of color—has deep roots in agricultural history.

In closing, I decided to pay attention to what is not in the responses of the panelists as a way to point out a void in how we discuss agricultural history and to also illuminate an opportunity for agricultural historians and contributors to the subfield. There is space for scholars to expand on themes of power, gender, and the environment which has been a strength of agricultural history. I propose that we not forget to include race and, by extension, the lives of black people, in our analysis of these themes. We must also examine how race is central to these analyses. To answer the question and prompt: agricultural history matters because Black Lives Matter. And for agricultural history, black lives have *always* been a critical space and place for myriad discussions, whether explicit or implicit.

**Making Our Presence Known**

**Steven Stoll**

I had never heard of agricultural history or thought about it before I arrived
at Yale for graduate school in 1989. There I read a roundtable discussion, like this one, in the *Journal of American History* in which Donald Worster wrote the lead essay (Worster 1990). It was an epiphany for me. Worster argued for agriculture as the essential ecological relationship within a society. It isn't too much to say that I took up his call and have been making this very argument ever since.

I wish to aim my comments on the importance of agricultural history and its place in the profession, with one caution. I am only talking about my limited view of the profession and my experience. I have not undertaken a study. Nothing could be more important than agricultural history, but I see it as having a number of difficulties, especially in light of the declining numbers of undergraduate majors in history.

Back in graduate school, once I made my interest known, a few professors and fellow students questioned me. Many talented scholars published in *Agricultural History*, they said, but the subfield did not occupy a prominent place in the profession, lacking the kinds of questions and controversies that were igniting the history of capitalism and slavery. I defined myself as an environmental historian and thought that would take care of the problem. All I needed to do was to argue the obvious—that agriculture is inseparable from the environment. It inhabited almost every region, transforming more land, and engaging more people than any other environmental practice. I decided to weld agricultural history to the up and coming field of environmental history, like Worster had done. What could go wrong?

It did go wrong, at least at Yale. Not that I was wrong or that agricultural history was anything less than I said it was, but certain people with power over me (most of them scientists, not historians) expressed an unmistakable prejudice against it. They spoke with absurd confidence that agriculture was not a proper subject of environmental history and therefore I had made a career-ending mistake. One revealing irony is that the Agrarian Studies Program at Yale was booming at the same time, with talented fellows and a very popular public seminar. Looked at another way, agricultural subjects are everywhere in anthropology and history, though they are often not “packaged” that way.

My experience is not grand enough for a cautionary tale, but I believe based on it that our dedication is not widely appreciated by those who see the subject as intellectually marginal. Few if any positions in agricultural history exist today and none will be created at any but a few universities. It will be taught as an addendum to other fields, like slavery and the Civil War or
economic development and capitalism. The doubters might be right about one thing: our favored subject has not generated a well-defined set of controversies or questions. It’s a scholarly location, a big tent, where all sorts of interests hang out. This is not such a bad thing. The big tent is one reason agrarian studies at Yale has had such vitality—even though almost no one is a professor of agrarian studies.

So how might we turn disadvantage to advantage?

One thing we need to think about is readership. How can we reach people who might have an interest in farming, food, and rural life? What subjects would help us to argue what we all know to be true—that what happens in the countryside tells us all sorts of things about decisions at the center of empire, of a republic, and within banks and corporations? It’s not enough that our subjects interest us or our colleagues; they need to attract editors and readers. I also suggest that *Agricultural History* disappear from print and go online. It should take advantage of the generalized place of agriculture in so many subjects, including predictions and policies regarding climate change. The journal should continue to host the best academic articles along with essays and bloggers, memoirists and even fiction. It can do what it has always done and bring in a wider community of intellectuals. It needs an attitude. It needs to tweet on the Farm Bill.

What could be more important than food and the environment in the global countryside? Nothing. But that’s not obvious to others. Attention to a larger audience of participants would get us involved in controversies and questions that would burnish the study, making it attractive to young scholars who might then assert themselves proudly and confidently as agricultural historians.

*Agricultural History and the American State: Recovering Contested Foundations*

**Mary Summers**

The study of agricultural history matters to me, as a citizen and political scientist with an interest in American politics, because of the dual challenge it presents, not only to nostalgia for the limited state of the early republic, but also to narratives of American state development as driven by corporate capitalism and narrowly defined bureaucratic hierarchies (Kolko 1963; McConnell 1953; Lowi 1979; Skowronek 1982; Sklar 1988; Carpenter 2001). Whether from
the right or the left, such accounts offer little in the way of hope or strategies for addressing the key issues of our own day, from climate change to poverty and inequality. The study of agricultural history, however, provides both a longer lens and a more dialectical view of the work of state-building than much of the political science literature. Our agricultural institutions were born in the struggle against slavery and expanded in the context of ongoing debates over whom the nation’s agricultural production should serve and how: “the people” vs. “the trusts”; cooperatives vs. monopolies; planning vs. “the free market”; conservation vs. all-out production; diversification vs. monoculture. Their history reveals fundamental conflicts over issues of human equality and political, social, economic, and environmental relationships beyond what most of us think of as the foundations of the bureaucratic state.

For example, the early Republican party activists, who led the organizing efforts in support of the Morrill Act’s land-grant funding for state colleges and universities in states like Michigan, Illinois, Iowa, and New York in the 1850’s, fought to put their free soil/free labor principles into practice by urging the establishment of public institutions necessary to the development of a modern civilization that would flourish not by exploiting the South’s mudsill of degraded land and labor, but by cultivating the intelligence and skills of all citizens (Kuhn 1955; Carriel 2015; Ross 1942; Greeley 1868, 1850). After the Civil War, farmers’ organizations and their allies upheld and built on many of the antebellum Republicans’ commitments to using science, education, and research to enhance the productivity and well-being of farming households, while also conducting a wide range of campaigns against the increasing power of the trusts and monopolies (Summers 1996).

With the South back in the Union, however, most of the leaders of these campaigns saw uniting white farm families across class and region as the key to building the political power necessary to win their demands. Thus the organizations and institutions they built became deeply entangled with the disenfranchisement of African Americans and the exploitation of their labor: an issue that remains a fundamental problem in human and economic rights, labor relations, and living conditions today (Postel 2019). Analyzing the sources and impacts of these entanglements may be even more difficult than the recovery of the Reconstruction commitments to the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments. Nonetheless, I would argue that such work can provide useful legal, political, and ideological grounds for thinking through strategies to define and build on the best—as well as to take on the worst—of our nation’s agricultural policies and programs. It may even be possible that
just as the builders of our agricultural institutions inspired a wide range of efforts to address such issues as child welfare, education, conservation, public health, public power, and full employment in the past, greater attention to their achievements, opposition, constraints, and limitations can do so again in the future.

**Agricultural History and Brexit**

Nicola Verdon

Agriculture accounts for around 1 percent of the labor force in the UK and contributes less than 1 percent of the nation's GDP. Seemingly the industry is now marginal to the economy of the UK. And yet the place of agriculture—both practically and ideologically—and its future, has often been at the center of political debate since the UK voted to leave the EU in June 2016.

As I write, we are no closer to knowing the date of departure, or the form that Brexit will take, although the current rhetoric insists it will happen this year, at any cost. The National Farmers’ Union has been vociferous in defending the agricultural industry. An organization founded in 1908, its significance and political clout grew exponentially during World War I as the relationship between agriculture and the state became closely intertwined due to national fears over food production and security. By the end of the 1920s its membership had grown to 100,000, and it was well established as a national pressure group able to influence agricultural policy, a position it has maintained in the present day. Minette Batters, its first female president, has argued that a no-deal Brexit would be socially and economically disastrous for the UK farming sector, threatening trade agreements, animal welfare and food production standards, and flows of labor.

Agriculture is now part of the largest manufacturing sector, food and drink, and although the number of full-time paid workers it employs (as opposed to family members) is now very small, it still relies on tens of thousands of seasonal migrant workers to pick, sort, and pack a variety of fruit and vegetables. This is not a new phenomenon. In the nineteenth century the seasonal workforce was traditionally made up of local residents, notably women and children, many of whom were employed in a system of gang labor, which was widespread across the Fenlands of eastern England. In 1867 the government attempted to stamp out the worse abuses of this form of hiring. The re-emergence of the gang system of employment, and government intervention in this area of work, has been a conspicuous feature of modern-day agriculture.
Since the turn of the twentieth century the vast majority of seasonal workers have been migrants recruited from the EU. Fears about securing an adequate supply of seasonal labor in a post-Brexit UK are now acute.

Understanding the place of agriculture in these Brexit debates, the relationship between the state and agriculture, the power of the NFU, the dependence on migrant labor, means understanding agricultural history. We also have to consider the historical and cultural significance of the landscape and farming communities in the UK’s psyche. As industrialization and urbanization transformed the nation, and agriculture’s importance to the economy declined, debates over the uses of the countryside ensued. These have placed the rural at the heart of English, if not British, national identity, and farmers as the custodians of the landscape. What will be the impact of Brexit on the cultural pastimes and physical landscapes of rural communities? Agricultural history helps us to understand these questions and that is why it still matters.

How Big is Our Tent?
NICOLE WELK-JOERGER

When answering, “Why does agricultural history matter?” it is important to clarify the audience of this query. If we ask, “why does agricultural history matter to us academics?” we get very different answers than if we consider why it may or may not matter to other kinds of experts. I agree that agricultural history acts as what Amrys Williams called a “potentially big and welcoming tent” for academics. But as Peter Coclanis points out, agricultural history matters because it is essentially about what keeps us humans alive: food. Many people have a stake in these narratives, but not everyone gets to take part in their development. As we reflect on the goals of our big and welcoming tent, we may want to consider inviting more non-academics into it.

Academically speaking, I have seen firsthand the importance of the potentially big tent. At this year’s meeting, the “Future Directions in Agricultural History” session demonstrated the diversity of voices that can meet under it. The session included scholars of indigenous history, postcolonialism, animal studies, and the history of science, technology, and medicine. The multidisciplinary nature of agricultural history demonstrates its relevance across fields. But what comes after these connections? What are the ultimate goals of agricultural history, and are we reaching them?

Do we want agricultural history to inform future policy? Meeting transcripts I use in my work show blatant disregard for agricultural history in pol-
icymaking, even when selections are read aloud during committee meetings (see US Food and Drug Administration 1993, 79).

Do we hope agricultural history ignites appreciation and curiosity? I have seen scientists use it to help invigorate excitement for a field. Nutrition experts at Pennsylvania State University take students to the Armsby Respiration Calorimeter to demonstrate the beginnings of animal nutrition science, and act as important leaders in the historical preservation of the device.

Does agricultural history help connect current practices with past decisions? Of course. But for the US farmers I know, agricultural history translates into a celebrated legacy. I have been told that my academic interest in collecting an oral history, rummaging through old files, or scanning photographs validates present-day farming experiences. As Catharine A. Wilson notes, personal connections to history reach people. However, the narratives we spin using these materials are not always celebratory or validating.

As a historical anthropologist committed to reflexive scholarship, I often ask myself how the farmers, scientists, and government employees I work with may react to my writing (see Brettell 1993). Would they feel comfortable in the audience of one of my agricultural history presentations? Should they feel comfortable? Should they be part of the larger conversations as members, readers, and contributors? These concerns anchored a discussion during the 2019 meeting’s “Encountering Agribusiness” session. Outside reactions to agricultural history, particularly corporate ones, can prove messy, even hostile. However, they may be necessary for achieving public-facing goals.

Agricultural historians write crucial narratives, but we cannot control how they are read, used, or ignored by the communities we study. Depending on the public impact we seek, we may need to expand our tent to more practitioners to make better sense of agricultural history’s importance or obsolescence.
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