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Steven Stoll. *The Fruits of Natural Advantage: Making the Industrial Countryside in California.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998. xix + 273 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-21172-8.

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The Fruits of Natural Advantage is the story of how highly specialized fruit growers, using intensive methods in limited geographic areas in which "natural advantages" could be obtained, brought forth what Steven Stoll calls "industrial" agriculture in California. By industrial, Stoll means an agricultural system that was highly capitalized, scientifically sophisticated, entrepreneurially astute, dependent upon cooperation among growers and between growers and government, sensitive to consumers' desires, and dramatically divided along functional, class, and racial lines between employers and workers.

Stoll begins his tale with an impressively informed discussion of the agricultural regions of California and the numerous variations of climate and soil among them, variations that could spell doom for the careless–such as the wheat farmers who initially sought to actualize the state's agricultural potential–but that offered the opportunity for great wealth to those who made the industrial countryside. The orchardists who followed the wheat farmers learned the land and they learned their crops, but that was not enough. They also had to learn the business of fruit, beginning with the packinghouse and concluding with the consumer. This involved them in understanding transportation, jobbing, distribution, canning, the shelf life of fresh fruits, promotion, brand names, advertising, and much else besides.

In the process of grappling with these business challenges, California fruit growers became much more sophisticated entrepreneurs than were other American farmers. Stoll poses agricultural economist Edwin Nourse against Country Lifer and horticulturist Liberty Hyde Bailey on the subject of California fruit culture. For the former, who saw farming as a business to which business methods should be applied, California was a utopia. For the latter, who understood farming as a way of life, it was a dystopia.

While they do serve Stoll's didactic purposes, Nourse and Bailey were not the polar opposites he suggests. Nor did California represent the future of American agriculture, as Nourse suggested, simply because specialty crops and commodities work under entirely different sets of rules. Nor were non-California farmers all backward folk playing catch-up in the entrepreneurial game, as observers such as Nourse and Aaron Sapiro believed during the 1920s, and as Stoll implies. There were plenty of astute entrepreneurs growing wheat and cotton, but setting up a co-op and slapping a brand name on such crops doesn't change the reality that these are commodities trading on a world market, not perishable specialty crops protected by high bars to entry.

Stoll can be faulted for not knowing enough about other places, but his knowledge of California fruit culture is most impressive. He has the rare ability to understand such difficult concepts as soil types and marketing systems and the rarer ability to explain those clearly to the reader. His explanation of the post-harvest life cycle of the pear, to cite just one example, is engrossing. Now I know why the yellow Bartletts I bought Saturday are turning into another life form as I pen these words. With apologies to Stephen Ambrose, just about anyone can make Lewis and Clark interesting, but it takes a special writer to make pears compelling.

Stoll counts on his ability to explain clearly and to write with simple elegance to carry him beyond the creation of the industrial agriculture of the fruit orchards and into the continuing challenges the growers faced. Creation of a monocropped landscape presented them with potentially devastating insect infestations which they countered–with a major assist from the California Agricultural Experiment Station–mainly with chemicals. Their need for abundant, cheap, usually non-white, and socially immobile (but physically mobile) labor was a continuous challenge, as was securing water at cheap

rates. All of these problems compelled them to organize themselves politically and to mobilize government for their purposes. Much of this will be familiar to subscribers to H-Rural, some of whom will wish at times that Stoll would go a bit deeper and tell us something we don't know, as he does with the pears. But a familiar story–even one that is likely to be challenged by David Vaught's book, due out this summer from Johns Hopkins–is worth reading if it is well-told, and this one is.

One other thing I would like to mention about this significant book is the debt it owes to William Cronon. *Nature's Metropolis* appears in the bibliography (and Cronon is mentioned in the acknowledgements), but its shadow falls over the entire book. In Cronon's terms, *The Fruits of Natural Advantage* is about how human beings applied physical and entrepreneurial energy to "first nature" and brought forth "second nature." As such, it is a tribute to the author, but also to Cronon, who has given us a whole new perspective on the past and has moved historical discourse to a higher level. All praise to both.

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