H-Net Reviews in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Cheri Register. *The Big Marsh: The Story of a Lost Landscape.* St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2016. Illustrations. 288 pp. $17.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-87351-995-3.

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Cheri Register's creative nonfiction history of southern Minnesota's prairie wetlands makes an important contribution to environmental and regional history, telling the story of the arrival of settler colonials and the advent of industrial agriculture. The book joins such studies as Hugh Prince's *Wetlands of the American Midwest: A Historical Geography of Changing Attitudes* (1997) and Shannon Stunden Bower's *Wet Prairie: People, Land, and Water in Agricultural Manitoba* (2011) that shift scholarly attention from the problem of aridity for grasslands agriculture to the equally difficult issue of too much water for settler agriculture on eastern grasslands. Register anchors the narrative judiciously in family history: her great-great grandparents were among the first to take up land for agriculture in "oak savanna" Minnesota (p. 18). Little professional historiography enters directly into the analysis and unhelpfully, the book lacks an index, but Register engages and advances thought on the relationship of daily environmental encounters to the commodification of land.

In part 1, using federal mapping and survey expedition reports and her own motor reconnaissance, Register describes the land before her Dutch and New "Yorker" relatives arrived, a place still largely shaped by glaciation and today, dressed in corn and soybean fields. From the 1890s to the 1920s, local farmers and absentee investors drained some 98.5 percent of the wetlands. Fire-tended oaks once formed a canopy over eight-foot-tall grass and egrets, herons, and pelicans. By the 1920s, newly drained peat soil grew luscious market vegetables.

Part 2 describes the place settler society shaped before the advent of industrial dredging. While Register does not tell a tale of conflict among settler colonials and Indigenous peoples, the ways settler colonial memory has worked to erase Indigenous presence (Wahpekute and Mdewakanton Dakotas, Sac and Fox bands, and Winnebago peoples) forms a pointed thread. The adversary is agribusiness. Register sees early subsistence or small "family farm" settlers as people who left softer footprints on the land. They cut "age-old roots of bluestem" grasses, but importantly, "left the Big Marsh in place" (p. 48). Even when the early subsistence farming shifted to commercial dairying and livestock, as families began to use "basic ditching," Register argues, "livestock farming didn't require the extensive drainage that crop farming did" (p. 132). The state of Minnesota meanwhile developed "ditch law" (reinforced by federal Swamp Land Acts of 1850 and 1860), which eventually redefined the local wetlands settlers thought of as "community property" to mean agricultural wasteland (p. 69).

The largest section of the book examines how the "Big Marsh" became the "Big Ditch." Public bonds paid by local taxes for private needs emerge as the key social and environmental justice issue. The all-to-familiar weight of legal, political, and economic power wielded by outside investors overwhelmed local, on-the-ground protest voices. From 1907 to 1909 a dredge dubbed the "Swamp Angle" dug an unnaturally straight ditch sixty-five-feet wide and twelve-feet deep.

The "Big Ditch" is best seen as "an aid" to a larger process of agricultural industrialization (p. 201). Register notes that East Coast investors would have filled any capital gaps left by regional investors and may not have invested back into Minnesota as later generations of original ditch speculators did. As an example, she discusses one descendant, a career employee of General Mills, who willed his collection of Fauvist and Expressionist art to the Minneapolis Institute of Art. Indeed, the sympathetically if candidly portrayed Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Chicago investors suggest an important regional component to industrial agricultural investing in the first half of the twentieth century.

Register implicitly questions the inevitability of the shift from settler colonial family farms to agribusiness and brings to mind Mary Neth's ***Preserving the Family Farm*** (1995), which argues that agricultural government institutions and corporations overwhelmed family farm friendly "alternative voices" in shaping modern policy.[1] Register's research here suggests that sense of place and environmental attitudes in part fuel the cultural reach for such alternatives. Yet alternatives, frustrated further, she acknowledges, by the 1920s rural recession and 1930s Depression, remain vague.

Register's argument that one person's "familiar home landscape" is not necessarily another's is an important insight, especially true over time and generations as landscapes "are transformed over and over by changing human needs and attitudes" (p. 16). Geographic, emotional, and physical distance from land put under the yoke of industrial management is what "troubled" her about non-resident actors (p. 210). Although she "mourns" the loss of wetlands habitat, Register notes her reasons are not the same as those she lauds who resisted the ditch (p. 58). All save one protested on grounds of tax and private property appropriation, rather than the loss of the valuable marsh environment (an attitude that emerged locally only in the 1970s). These protestors had little concern with preserving landscapes shaped by Indigenous peoples. They wanted to maintain a settler society, an owner-occupied farm, a sense of place.

Note

[1]. Mary Neth, P*reserving the Family Farm: Women, Community, and the Foundations of Agribusiness in the Midwest, 1900-1940* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 13.

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