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James McCann. *People of the Plow: An Agricultural History of Ethiopia, 1800-1990.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995. xiii + 298 pp. $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-299-14614-6; $54.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-299-14610-8.

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In *People of the Plow*, James McCann looks into the long-term processes of change in Ethiopia's highland agriculture that culminated in the crisis of the 1980s. The book centers on the expansion in Ethiopia of ox-plow technology and annual crop regimes over a period of two centuries. The first part of the book describes the physical and demographic landscape and appraises macro-level changes in crop repertoire, land use, and population settlement patterns. The second provides micro-level analyses of three distinct farming areas–Ankober, Gera, and Ada–wherein McCann examines farmers' decisions concerning land, labor, and capital (oxen and seeds) within a framework of changing physical and social environments. The author has exploited an impressive array of sources, ranging from the reminiscences of farmers, expressed in interviews and life histories, to travel narratives, agricultural surveys, photographs and engravings, and modern farming systems research.

The conceptual framework of the book was previously formulated in two articles published in the *Journal of African History* (31:1990, 32:1991), in which McCann argued that African agricultural history has not been treated as an independent field of historical inquiry but rather as a subset of broader themes in political economy and peasant studies. Recent African famines have generated considerable interest in examining the roots of agricultural crises, but the accounts thus far produced have been synchronic, lop-sided, and uninformed by historical evidence on agriculture. Even professional historians have failed to practice the fundamental principle of their trade–that is, the reconstruction of historical events, processes, and patterns from past signs. McCann's corrective approach to agriculture and its history is simple: agriculture is what the farmer does–the selection of crops, soil management, harvesting, and storage–and its history is the reconstruction of the ecological past that structured and shaped the farmer's interaction with the physical environment.

The book's greatest value lies in its innovative methodology. Scholars have long sought a sharper theoretical focus on agricultural affairs, greater attention to multidisciplinary approaches, and empirically verifiable sources. They will reap great intellectual reward from McCann's "environmentalist" approach, which draws eclectically on works on New World agriculture, the *Annales* school, and farming systems research. Ethiopianists, who have long called for the integration of Ethiopian history into mainstream African history, will be grateful to McCann for demonstrating that Ethiopian history is more meaningful and historiographically relevant within the framework of a broader African history than in its supposedly unique context.

As for substantive contribution, McCann offers refreshing interpretations regarding such issues as the origins of the 1974 revolution and the relationship between politics and agricultural decline, and he puts in perspective assumptions about deforestation, specialized agriculture, and the use of manure as fertilizer. Of particular interest is McCann's rejection of the long-standing argument that the northern land tenure system, the Amharic language, and the Ethiopian Orthodox church were the primary instruments by which northern hegemony was extended over the southern territories. McCann proposes that these factors were secondary to the social transformation brought on by the spread of ox-plow agriculture and the consequent "ecological revolution" that gradually transformed the physical landscape and the social organization of the subjugated peoples. Put another way, northern ox-plow technology and the accompanying annual crop regime played a crucial role in effectively integrating the southern peoples into the northern mode of production and way of life.

This is clearly an intriguing approach to the issue of Abyssinian cultural hegemony. Nevertheless, the argument rests on the assumption that agricultural technology and cultivation were diffused in a north-south direction by a powerful expansionist state. It must be remembered that the Oromo had knowledge of cereal cultiva-

tion long before they came into contact with the northerners and that the pre-Oromo Sidama inhabitants of the Gibe region had developed their own plow independently of its northern counterpart. Obviously, the subject of the dispersal of Ethiopia's characteristic agriculture needs much more research and perhaps reinterpretation of data.

In regard to sources, the author's intentions perhaps outrun his achievements. While McCann admits that travelers' accounts are necessarily snapshots of conditions prevailing at a particular time, he nevertheless frames his main questions on the basis of commentaries by foreign observers, whose visits are a century or two apart (Alvarez [1520], Lobo [1626], Salt [1814], and Hancock [198]; pp. 3-4). Within Ethiopia's physical landscape even seasonal fluctuations are dramatic, let alone change over several decades; so observations about climate that are generations apart may tend to be inaccurate and, ultimately, unreliable. Curiously, McCann has premised the fundamental problem of his book on sources that are essentially biased, idiosyncratic, impressionistic, and, at times, contradictory (p. 33).

For McCann, as for William Cronon, an effective narrative of environmental history is one that "hides discontinuities, ellipses and contradictory experiences" (p. 19). Doubtless, this is an ingenious methodology for dealing with lacunae; it also points to difficulties inherent in experimental historiography in which conjecture and speculation sometimes threaten to substitute for empirical evidence.

McCann's account is best when he follows his primary sources closely and is less convincing when he moves beyond his data. His analysis of the relationship between population growth and limited resources relies heavily on circumstantial evidence. For instance, while recognizing the role of ambilineal inheritance systems, labor availability, and physical landscapes in northern Ethiopia, McCann identifies migration as the primary cause of demographic pressure and subsequent land subdivision, fragmentation, and scarcity.

The connection between population pressure and population movement, however, seems weak and obscure. In Ankober, the migration of the highland population into the Denki valley does not seem to have eased population pressures in the highlands. In Ada, we observe parallel but contradictory processes of in-migration and widespread eviction. Migration appears to serve no explicit purpose. One gets an overall impression of ubiquitous population movement, but no definitive examples of its prevalence. Perhaps, McCann's "qualitative" sources have overstated the whole issue of migration.

Concerning analytical categories, McCann favors paying more attention to those factors that directly affect agricultural productivity and plays down the roles of state and class (landowners). He contends that the state did not have the desire to intervene in decisions at the farm level, and that farmers therefore concerned themselves less with politics than with such factors as demographic changes, climate, technology, and social property relations. It is inarguable that farmers consider these factors vital, but it is unlikely that they made any decision without considering their obligations to the state or the landlord. In the nineteenth century, the royal court atop a hill in Ankober was a constant reminder for Argobba farmers of their obligations to the state. One hundred years later, the evidence shows that landowners in Ada did intervene in farm-level decisions when, for instance, they forbade the cultivation of the local staple sorghum in favor of more marketable teff.

On a theoretical plane, McCann argues that the process of Ethiopia's ox-plow complex more closely resembles Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie's "great agrarian cycle" than Boserup's model of population pressure followed by intensification. He rightly compares the slow evolution of Ethiopia's historic agricultural technology and cropping system with the sluggish process of technological change characteristic of Europe's preindustrial agriculture. However, none of McCann's three case studies exhibits the cyclical relationship between demography and productivity that was central to LeRoy Ladurie's model.

In preindustrial Europe, a fundamental transformation in rural *mentalite* resulted in a break in the cycle of agrarian population growth and consequent subsistence crises and and led to new technology and agronomy. The changes, in turn, ensured the continuous growth that led to the capitalist economy. Ethiopia's modern agriculture is thus comparable only to preindustrial European agriculture, and its deepening crisis does not seem to portend a European-type transformation. It is not clear to me how this attempt at comparison helps to explain the failure of Ethiopia's modern agriculture.

It is equally unclear whether or not the three case studies provide sufficient material to validate McCann's main thesis that the story of Ethiopian agriculture is the conversion of horticultural societies, pastoralists, and agrarian systems based on perennial crops to the ox-plow complex dependent on annual crops and integrated livestock management. In the first place, McCann does not quite explain why his chosen regions were selected for analysis. Because all three areas are located on the north-

western highlands lying west of the Rift Valley, they cannot be projected as representative of the entire Ethiopia region.

Except for some passing remarks on agriculture in Chercher, McCann does not present the condition of agricultural change in the southeastern highlands. An analysis of the Harerge region, which includes Chercher, not only would have expanded the geographical scope but also the historical dimension of McCann's study. Furthermore, as a region with a long history of commercial contact with the outside world, study of Harerge would have provided an opportunity to examine the effects of the world economy on Ethiopia's agriculture, a subject that McCann seems to have entirely neglected in all his case studies. (I should also point out that the current trend in agricultural practice in Harerge runs contrary to McCann's thesis. Unlike the three micro-agronomic regions, where the long-term trend is the gradual shift from perennials to annual cereal cultivation, the evidence from Harerge highlands shows the gradual replacement of fruit, vegetable, coffee, and cereal fields by khat orchards.)

It is therefore to be regretted that the geographical scope of a study about Ethiopia's agricultural history did not include an important half of the country. Neverthelss, McCann has written a rich, interesting, and imaginative book that will likely fuel debate and set research agendas. The author's creative methodology will be utilized extensively by historians and spur a flurry of similar historical studies about agriculture in Africa. The book is precedent-setting and demands the attention of Africanists and other scholars.

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