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David B. Danbom. *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America.* Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995. xii + 306 pp. $25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8018-5040-0; $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-5039-4.

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David Danbom has spent most of his career teaching, writing, and thinking about rural America. As a historian of ideas he has explored how farmers resisted industrialization early in this century, how romantic agrarianism remained a potent force until our own day, how from the 1950 through the 1960s, rural America was slighted by an urban professoriat who sneered at rural values, and how the experiment station served farming. *Born in the Country* emphasizes these themes and many more. It bears the imprint of a historian whose grasp of his subject is impressive, who possesses an assured analytic style, and whose years of teaching have enabled him to think through problems so that he presents fairly arcane concepts in a readable and interesting fashion.

In a revealing preface Danbom draws on his "professors and the ploughman" critique–the title of his article, which analyzed the anti-rural bias of recent history textbook writing–to point out not only the neglect of rural history in the historiographical record, but also to assert the importance of a "usable past" for rural readers. As the first interpretive history of rural America, the book tries to connect the old, rather tired field of agricultural history (which deals with the growing of food and fiber, and the changes in the structure of agriculture over time) with the fresher, more robust "new rural history," which charts change in the structure of rural society. An important disclaimer in the preface, however, alerts the reader that the book has a more modest goal than a fully fledged history of rural America: it is "mainly a study of farm people." Thus Danbom begs off from the difficult challenge of integrating farm and non-farm material–of connecting the social history of farming and farmers with smalltown life, rural industry, and the rural poor. Although the book goes a long way toward defining the field of agricultural history in a fresh and appealing fashion, it would be wrong to suggest–as the book's blurb does–that *Born in the Country* will define the field of rural history for years to come.

Danbom is wise to avoid large, ill-definable concepts in order to pull his narrative together. For example, some have employed the clash between agrarianism and modernization to interpret the broad sweep of agricultural history. Willard Cochrane emphasized the importance of abundant land, the building of social and physical infrastructure, mechanization, and government policy to explain the development of American agriculture. More recently economic historians have utilized world system theory to chart capitalism's intrusion on the American continent. Danbom builds on a structure of twelve chapters that trace American rural society from its origins in Europe around the time of Columbus to the present. The chapters are chronological and thematic in content, and although some are more compelling than others, they are all marked with a skillful synthesizer's use of analytic constructs to make telling points.

One of the most valuable deals with the impact of industrialization on rural society in the late nineteenth century. To illustrate the problems faced by farmers during this period, Danbom introduces the concept of the 3Ms (Money, Markets, and Middlemen) as a means of illustrating the forces that manipulated farm settlement during the period of "incorporation" on the Great Plains. In the early national period the influence of agrarianism on economic growth and national development is measured. Another chapter effectively delineates the institutional and structural makeup of rural society before the Civil War. The significance and importance of patriarchy, the difference between "women's sphere" in a rural as opposed to an urban community, rural clothing, health and diet, and the status of religion and education are all tackled with considerable flair. As a specialist on the Progressive period, Danbom reanalyzes the importance of the Country Life Movement; why the "golden age of agriculture" was golden; and why the relative prosperity of rural America pulled urban dwellers into a back-to-the-land movement in the East and the West. His discussion of the "dirty thirties" is as fresh as in any textbook. Especially noteworthy is the material on the postwar production revolution in agriculture: not only did it modernize

farming, but it also pushed millions off the land to seek work in cities. While chapters and sections dealing with colonial society, with slavery, and with the postbellum South are less original and more pedestrian (Danbom's analysis of sharecropping tries too hard to be balanced), as a history of agriculture and farm people the book–though somewhat biased toward the Upper Midwest in the twentieth century–succeeds admirably. It provides the audience with a readable, sophisticated text, and a comprehensive annotated bibliography.

Given his analytical talents and broad grasp of the subject matter, it is unfortunate that Danbom decided not to tackle the history of rural America from the perspective of the non-farm population. Although most rural Americans lived on farms in the nineteenth century, enough research has been done to generalize about proto-industrialization, commercial fishing, farm-town relations, the impact of what geographers call "agro-industry," the importance of a large white mobile laboring underclass in the antebellum South, and the dynamics of the small town and village. Twentieth-century patterns have been covered less thoroughly by historians, although social scientists have much to say on the post-World War II scene.

Probably the most important point to make about non-farm rural America in the twentiethth century is that it has received less attention than has the steadily declining farm population. Farming has always been a favored industry. In the twentieth century this was apparent in extension assistance, tax breaks, and–most important–farm programs that spent billions on farmers with little to spare for rural development. Thus, increasingly after 1950, pockets of poverty festered in rural America, where those left behind by the modernization of agriculture and redundancy in extractive industries received little assistance. Traditionally smalltown and villages "serviced" farmers. After 1945, with the loss of the farm population, some towns fared better than others. In the midwestern heartland, communities with ethnic populations often proved successful in arresting decline as neighboring hamlets withered away. With the loss of farms, towns also looked to manufacturing to pick up the slack. Slowly industrial plants came to small towns, for companies were attracted by low wages, a good work ethic, and a local hostility to unions. Over the years fierce battles were played out in rural America with tax breaks to attract foot-loose industry from urban areas. Sadly a decade or two later the companies that had been recruited so solicitously often moved on to Asia or Mexico.

A second generalization worth noting is that although production agriculture and traditional farm areas like the Cornbelt suffered economically at various times since World War II, other rural areas that possessed attractive scenery or were near large cities often prospered. Affluence drove many to seek recreation in rural areas. Second homes, winter sports, and retirement complexes steered millions toward the country. Areas that had been severely depressed in the 1930s–eastern West Virginia, or the cut-over of Wisconsin and Minnesota or the Osarks–reestablished themselves.

Finally, it is worth noting how time has dealt with the reputation of rural America in this century. After the onslaught of the village rebels around 1920, rural America went on the defensive. In the 1930s it recouped its luster to some extent through the flowering of regionalism. On the other hand, in the 1940s, in the 1950s, and during most of the 1960s, rural America found itself in the doldrums–something reflected in the historiography of the period. However, a rural renaissance (spurred by environmentalism, the counterculture) and the loss of stature of cities and old suburbs began to revive the fortunes of rural America. By the 1980s polls showed that the most desirable place for most Americans to live was on acreage in the country, just out of sight from their neighbors. Obviously an ersatz popular culture embraced things rural too. In a perverse way the country got its own back from the city.

Born in the Country serves as an excellent guide to where the social history movement has taken the old field of agricultural history. However, because Danbom avoided the passage across the messy line dividing farmers and other residents in the countryside, rural history still remains to be defined by an academic historian.

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