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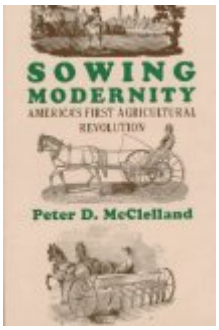


**Peter D. McClelland.** *Sowing Modernity: America's First Agricultural Revolution.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997. xii + 348 pp. $45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8014-3326-9.

**Reviewed by** Mary Eschelbach Hansen

**Published on** EH.Net (February, 2000)

*Sowing Modernity: America's First Agricultural Revolution* argues that modern economic growth required discontinuities. The discontinuity that Peter McClelland seeks is to be found in everyday life: when did farmers begin to ask routinely, "Is there a better way?" Professor McClelland finds the discontinuity, or revolution, in attitudes in the years immediately following the War of 1812.

Not since Leo Rogin wrote his classic *The Introduction of Farm Machinery* (University of California Press, 1931) has an author packed so much information about farm equipment into such a small space. Professor McClelland gives us a reference work that should sit atop the desk of any serious scholar of agriculture. The work goes well beyond tracing the time trend in the number of new patents issued on farm equipment. McClelland traces the development of farm equipment from antiquity through the Jacksonian era in order to demonstrate the rapid rate of innovation after 1812, which indicates to him that the search for a better way began in earnest about that time.

The descriptive detail in *Sowing Modernity* is astounding. Of the literature on Jethro Tull's wheat drill, McClelland says: "Although every history of the British agricultural revolution is sure to include a reference to Tull's machine, almost never does that literature make clear how it worked." (p. 70) A full page of text and two full-page illustrations do the job. (Special congratulations are due to McClelland for convincing his publisher that the purpose of the book could not be met without the many and detailed illustrations.) Other innovations in equipment to plow, sow, cultivate, and thresh receive equally detailed treatment. The work is so thoroughly researched and uses such a wide variety of sources that the 235 pages of text require 100 pages of notes and bibliography.

McClelland adopts the economist's stance that farmers were rational, that is, that farmers only deemed a new way "better" if benefits were greater than costs. For some innovations an estimate of costs and benefits is made with respect to initial outlay for equipment and change in labor and animal requirements. Trends in prices of out-

put are rarely mentioned (excepting the discussion of reapers). This omission does not distract from the descriptions of the innovations, but it does lead the reader to wonder if there are regional stories to be told when Professor McClelland extends the work, adding the "where" and "why" questions to this volume's answer to "when."

The reader would benefit from additional discussion of the sources used, their merits and demerits, their limitations and biases. For example, might the very existence of the agricultural papers be a lagged indicator of the revolution in attitudes of farmers? That is, would there be a market for information on innovation without the revolution in attitudes? If the agricultural papers lag the revolution, Professor McClelland's use of them to date the revolution in attitudes might lead him to be a few years too late.

But these criticisms are minor compared to the contribution of the work. *Sowing Modernity* gives economic historians an interface with the disciplines of material culture and cultural history. The work should lead other agricultural and economic historians to consider the 1812-1830 period with greater interest.





**Citation:** Mary Eschelbach Hansen. Review of McClelland, Peter D. *Sowing Modernity: America's First Agricultural Revolution.* EH.Net, H-Net Reviews. February, 2000.

**URL:** https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3862