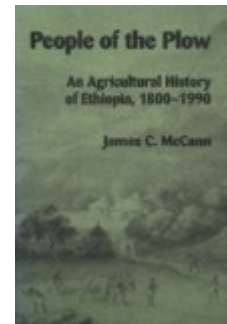


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

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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The image of famine has permeated the popular Western view of Africa's husbandry since 1973-74, when the hunger that visited Africa's Sahel reached worldwide audiences. The even wider media exposure received by Ethiopia's 1984 famine fostered an impression of African farmers supine before a capricious nature. These images, as well as the solutions posed to alleviate the food shortages, clearly lacked historical context and depth [1]. Jim McCann's *People of the Plow* successfully recasts the picture of Ethiopian agriculture by offering a deeply nuanced history of three Ethiopian farming regions linked by the primacy of plow technology in their respective production systems.

By focusing on the social and environmental implications of the spread of ox-plow technology in Ethiopia during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, McCann posits a consequent ecological revolution in the country's highlands. Moreover, McCann analyzes the changes within the context of much longer-term trends in Ethiopia's human/environmental relations and political economy. *People of the Plow* thus explains how demography, technology, society, the state, and the environment interact in ways that lead both to innovation and to vulnerability.

The book treats three distinct regions: Ankober, a former highland capital; Gera, a humid forested highland zone to the southwest; and Ada, a productive farming area south of Addis Ababa. McCann does not so much compare these regions as present three effectively different scenarios of change, which constitute variations on the ox-plow theme. The subtle differences in soil, vegetation, climate, elevation, and social relations all play key roles in the description of changing human envi-

ronmental relations in the case study regions. In fact, environmental historians could learn much from McCann's sophisticated methodology, which successfully incorporates the complex interactions so often invoked, but rarely effectively demonstrated, in works of Environmental History.

People of the Plow incorporates evidence from personal narratives and family histories of local farmers and the writings of various European travelers, as well as the more systematic and "scientific" observations of agronomists trained in the Western land grant university tradition. The book's inclusion of a variety of narratives provides the reader with different vantage points from which to view Ethiopia's changing landscapes.

McCann uses farmers' testimony to create what he terms the "View from the Farm." Although, as the author claims, there is no coherent historical narrative of local agricultural history, he clearly shows that a skilled interviewer can elicit responses, both from individuals and from communities, about the technologies and biota that formed past agricultural landscapes. Both the text and the footnotes reveal McCann's careful conversations with knowledgeable informants, and the Ethiopian voices add vitality and currency to the study.

However, since the farmers' perspective is local, McCann uses the "view from the road," or travel literature, to develop his ideas. The author understands the limitation of the travelers' idiosyncratic and synchronic views, but argues for their careful use along with other, more scientific, observations. McCann therefore asks the reader to consider a third vantage point, "The Lens of Empiricism."

Acknowledging the subjectivity and the social de-

tachment of postwar scientific agricultural studies, McCann nonetheless argues for their value when incorporated into the larger narrative. For example, the statistical bent of farm systems research supplements the farmers' narratives with information about seasonal nutritional needs of livestock and farming families. It also reveals the subtleties of farmers' cash crop choices. Finally, the agronomic evidence shows the post-World War II transition in Ethiopian government thinking to conform to Western-style "modernization" production imperatives.

People of the Plow is divided into two parts, the first of which sets up the case studies by laying out an environmental base line for the ox-plow revolution and by explaining how ox-plow agriculture spread across it. In chapter 1, McCann details the region's natural history with special reference to the interactions of geology, pedology, climate, and vegetation. Most compelling here is McCann's description of climate because, as he argues, the subtle and long-term relationship between farmers and rainfall (monthly, seasonal, and yearly) and vegetation is consequential in the development of rural society and economy.

In his chapter on technology, McCann explains the political economy of ox-plow production by dividing the discussion into micro and macro agronomic economies. On the micro level, farmers' adoption of the plow and ox traction permitted an intensification of production and enhanced economic power. On a broader scale, McCann discusses the system's antiquity (7,000 years) and the variety of adaptations that accompanied its spread.

His conclusions dovetail nicely with similar discussions in the history of African agriculture, most notably those in the special *Azania* volume entitled "The History of African Agricultural Technology and Field Systems."^[2] As did John Sutton in that volume, McCann argues against the scholarly preoccupation with landscapes dominated by sophisticated irrigation technologies. Rather, understanding African and Ethiopian agricultural transitions requires, according to McCann, an understanding of the mixing of intensive and extensive production systems.

In the Ethiopian case, the processes involved the successive recession of an older horticultural tradition, dominated by perennials, and its gradual replacement by fields of plow-produced annual cereals, still supplemented, however, by the knowledge and products of the older tradition. In the Ethiopian case, this transition culminated in what McCann terms an "ecological revolu-

tion" in which the complete triumph of annual grain crop cultivation involved not only a transformed landscape, but "a fundamental alteration in the use of and consciousness about nature, involving new social institutions of property, gender...." Moreover, because the grain surpluses produced under the ox-plow regime actually underwrote the expanding seigneurial class and eventually the state itself, the ecological revolution becomes even more important than the Amhara/Tigrayan cultural revolution that expanded across highlands Ethiopia.

McCann concludes Part I with a final chapter devoted to the interaction of demography, resources, and agriculture. In terms of demography, McCann argues for a stable population in the highlands during the nineteenth century and a growing population after 1916. Spurred by state expansion into what is today southern Ethiopia, peasant farmers penetrated and employed new technology successfully to exploit newly opened pastoral lands. Therefore migration proved to be the primary mode of localized population growth where the ox-plow revolution occurred.

One of the most curious aspects of the demographic trends is the anti-Boserupian movement away from intensified agriculture. Such a model of increasing population and agricultural extensification suggests that environmental desiccation should follow. However, McCann shows that the transition to the ox-plow system did not necessarily destroy the environment, although he points out the signals of stress, most notably the incorporation of maize into crop regimes.

Having explained his approach, McCann moves to his case studies. The first makes an argument for general agroecological decline in Ankober, a Shewan agricultural region, whose capital (also called Ankober) was a nineteenth-century administrative center for the royal court. Ankober's fortunes declined precipitously in the 1880s, when the Amhara state shifted its capital southward to Addis Ababa. The loss of the royal court altered the context of local agriculture, which had been highly specialized in various niches across the elevation gradient and geared to the production of a variety of cash and food crops for trade and consumption. What had been a surplus-producing agricultural system based on intensive practices became, in the twentieth century, a region of vulnerability where subsistence agriculture replaced market-oriented production.

For Gera, an Oromo polity in the heart of the Gibe River basin's forest zone, McCann describes a very different ox-plow revolution in which an ancient horticultural

(ensete) and gathering (wild forest coffee) tradition supplemented the evolution of the “coffee-maize complex.” In terms of the forest’s history, McCann does an excellent job of charting the process of forest growth, retreat, and regeneration tied into farmers’ changing agricultural imperatives. When surplus labor was available, open cultivated land dominated the landscape; when it was not, a resilient forest cover encroached once again.

This long-term process of ebbs and flows in population densities and forest cover, in turn, supports a more recent one in which population growth, spurred by the immigration of plow users from outside the region, led to forest clearing after 1940. In forest clearings, farmers again transformed agriculture in response to market demand driven by the postwar coffee boom. Coffee production, in turn, required farmers to adjust their calendar and to turn to maize, a crop with greater scheduling flexibility than other more drought-resistant crops. What McCann calls “a tyranny of maize” began in 1971 with the regional decline in coffee production caused by coffee berry disease.

In his final case, McCann turns to Ada, a farming region near Ethiopia’s capital, Addis Ababa. As he does in the other two cases, McCann guides the reader through a sequence of transitions in the agricultural economy and the landscape itself. Using a variety of sources, including ecclesiastical records, he reconstructs a history of settlement patterns and the agricultural imperatives tied to the expanding Shawan state. Ada’s rising land values, and its importance as a breadbasket for Addis Ababa, placed the region’s agricultural ecology under stress during the 1960s and 1970s. “Malthusian scissors” began to close on an increasingly marginalized tenant population who produced, only with increasing difficulty, subsistence for themselves and grain (teff) for absentee landlords to sell in the capital.

By the late 1960s, Ada contained little or no open land, livestock forage, or fallow. McCann then analyzes

the attempts of experts from or trained by land grant universities to rescue Ada’s farming sector. Ironically, the specialists saw Ada as a test for a green revolution package of technology and innovation designed to integrate a rural subsistence sector into the money economy—even though Ada already had a long history of links to the market.

The Ada case leads McCann finally to an enlightening discussion of the rural/urban divide that highlights the modernization imperatives of Ethiopia’s pre- and post-revolutionary governments. Neither administration considered important the need to understand small farmers’ expertise or motivations. Neither the university-trained development specialists nor the reform-minded revolutionaries bothered to read the history of the agricultural landscape as McCann has.

People of the Plow adds considerable weight to the growing scholarship on African agricultural and environmental history. As a well-researched and methodologically sophisticated historical work, it will no doubt appeal to the usual cadre of Africanist historians. Perhaps more important, however, McCann’s work, including his first book, *From Poverty to Famine in Northeast Ethiopia*, and his numerous published essays, should be read carefully by development specialists who seek to prescribe solutions to the problem of Africa’s growing food deficits.

Notes

[1] Bill Rau, *From Feast to Famine, Official Remedies to Africa’s Food Crisis* (London: Zed Books, 1991), p. 1.

[2] John Sutton, ed., *Azania, Special Volume on the History of African Agricultural Technology and Field Systems* 24 (1989). See especially, “Editors Introduction: Fields, Farming and History in Africa,” pp. 1-5.

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