

An Agrarian Republic: Farming, Antislavery Politics, and Nature Parks in the Civil War Era

by Adam Wesley Dean.

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***An Agrarian Republic: Farming, Antislavery Politics, and Nature Parks in the Civil War Era* by Adam Wesley Dean (review)**

Erin Stewart Mauldin

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Reviewed by:

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Erin Stewart Mauldin

An Agrarian Republic: Farming, Antislavery Politics, and Nature Parks in the Civil War Era. By Adam Wesley Dean. *Civil War America*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015. Pp. x, 230. Paper, \$29.95, ISBN 978-1-4696-1991-0.)

The premise of Adam Wesley Dean's book *An Agrarian Republic: Farming, Antislavery Politics, and Nature Parks in the Civil War Era* is simple: because the majority of nineteenth-century northerners were farmers, they possessed a fundamentally agrarian political ideology. Antebellum northerners equated multigenerational farming by small landholders with republican virtues such as civilization, progress, and democracy. By comparison, they believed that slavery fostered barbarism, oligarchy, and wasteful land-use practices. Dean persuasively shows how this popular vision of land use and its relation to the nation's future reframes key moments in nineteenth-century history and serves to connect seemingly disparate events. The result is an important new work that powerfully reorients our thinking about interregional political conflict during the Civil War era.

An Agrarian Republic first surveys antebellum debates over land policy, explaining how and why slavery came to dominate those conversations. Dean argues that U.S. territorial acquisition following the Mexican-American War created a new kind of antislavery politics based on ideas of proper land use. Increasingly, northern politicians saw slavery as a threat to yeoman farmers and, by extension, the ideal society. Conflicts over westward expansion were not just about the balance of political power; they were also about preserving the West for small landowners. Dean discusses how the Republican Party absorbed these beliefs, using the Kansas-Nebraska Act, antislavery literature, and election propaganda to show how critiques of southern land use formed an important component of Republican ideology.

The third chapter demonstrates that ideas "about proper land use were foremost among people's reasons for supporting the Union" during the Civil War (p. 72). This is the first place in the monograph where Dean

examines the opinions of the common man. In other chapters, he makes his case using the words of politicians and public figures, and there are a few occasions where Dean fails to show how the views of these historical actors represent the majority. In chapter 3, however, he incorporates a more sustained discussion of public opinion, examining periodicals and soldiers' letters to tie northerners' support for the Union to their belief that slavery destroyed the land. **[End Page 427]**

One of the strengths of Dean's study is the attention he gives to change over time, particularly in his analysis of debates over Yosemite and Yellowstone parks during the 1860s and 1870s. The same free-soil ideals that animated antebellum Republicans justified the protection of these spaces from industrial development, but the process revealed two competing strains of agrarianism within the party. While some thought the creation of nature parks jeopardized earlier efforts to safeguard smallholders, an increasing number of people believed that the preservation of aesthetically beautiful places promoted civilization better than did small farms.

Dean uses his final chapter to compare Republican land policy in the South and the West during Reconstruction. He argues that despite intraparty conflicts over parks, Republicans' agrarian ideology shaped both land redistribution efforts in the South as well as postwar moves to convert hunter-gatherer Indians to educated yeoman farmers. In short, the Southern Homestead Act and the General Allotment Act of 1887 emerged from the same legacy of land-use ideals. Although his discussion is hurried in this chapter, Dean's use of Republicans' antebellum agrarian vision to recast Reconstruction-era land policy is both fascinating and refreshing.

Dean's insightful study should be of great interest to southern historians. Although his treatment of the South as a monolithic "other" might leave some specialists unsatisfied, it should be noted that *An Agrarian Republic* is not a book about the South. It is a book that examines northern ideas about land use and national development, often in opposition to southern ones. As such, Dean provides an

important new lens for examining the political and legislative maneuvers of the mid-nineteenth century.

*Erin Stewart Mauldin
Samford University*

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Simms played in forging the self-image of the Confederacy through both poetry and prose, a crucial element in the formation of a broader Confederate nationalism. While a superficial reading might tempt one to allege that Rogers is a mere celebrator of all things William Gilmore Simms, his overarching purpose is to reclaim Simms's rightful place in the American literary pantheon. Rogers demonstrates that a closer reading of Simms and his work will reward historians and literary scholars, revealing an emotionally, intellectually, and culturally complex, and therefore inherently more human, portrait of William Gilmore Simms and Civil War-era southern society.

Georgia College

JAMES HILL WELBORN III

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