

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

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Review

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Dean, Adam Wesley *An Agrarian Republic: Farming, Antislavery Politics, and Nature Parks in the Civil War Era*. University of North Carolina Press, \$29.95
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Rooting the Republican Party in the Soil

Northerners in the mid-nineteenth century had a "fundamentally agrarian outlook," Adam Wesley Dean argues, pushing back against the popularly held view that the Civil War era pitted an industrial North against an agricultural South. This understanding frees scholars "to make new connections between seemingly different topics," he maintains (186). Hence the apparent grab bag of themes—agriculture, antislavery politics, national park creation, and Reconstruction—explored in this ambitious volume.

The central focus of *An Agrarian Republic* is the ideology of the early Republican Party, placing the book in dialogue with classics such as Eric Foner's *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*. Where Foner argued that a commitment to free-labor economics and political antislavery helped bind together the motley band of ex-Democrats, Whigs, Know-Nothings, and others who comprised the upstart Republicans, Dean wants to bring things back to the *soil*. The Republican Party, like the society from which it sprang, was essentially agrarian, he contends. From that orientation—which coupled the Jeffersonian ideal of a yeomen-anchored "empire of liberty" with budding interest in scientific farming—grew a worldview deeply antagonistic to the slaveholding South. Equating careful cultivation of the soil with advancing civilization and a thriving Union, party leaders drew sharp contrasts between multigenerational family farming in the North, and slave-based southern agriculture that exhausted the soil and constantly required new lands. Accordingly, Republicans built on Free-Soil precedents and fought to secure the West for enterprising yeomen, while strenuously opposing the introduction of slavery into the region.

Unlike other studies of Republican ideology, which focus on the party's origins, *An Agrarian Republic* spans the nineteenth century, from the Early Republic to the Gilded Age. In the opening chapters, Dean explores how diverging views over national development formed a deep fault line in U.S. politics. Jacksonian Democrats—like their Jeffersonian forebears—favored rapid westward expansion and liberal land policies for settlers, while leading Whigs—echoing Federalist antecedents—sought to curb westward migration and develop strong communities within the nation's existing bounds. Dean astutely argues that until the 1840s, debates over development and expansion largely pivoted on broad issues of political economy rather than slavery—the Missouri Compromise being a notable exception. That changed for good after the U.S. conquered more than 500,000 square miles of territory from Mexico in a war that many northerners perceived as a naked land grab by slaveholding interests. In the conflict's aftermath, Free-Soilers (and, later, Republicans) pressed for a homestead law to fill the West with free farmers, and stepped up critiques of slavery's withering impacts on people and land.

Too often scholars of the Civil War era treat homestead policies primarily as antislavery instruments, without noting their deep agrarian roots, the supreme importance of such measures to the land-holding aspirations of millions, or just how far-reaching their effects were, not just on U.S. society but on the very map and ecosystems of North America. Dean enriches recent historiography by placing homestead advocacy in the context of decades-old debates over land policies and national development. His attention to the agricultural dimensions of these debates complements scholarship by Michael A. Morrison and Jonathan H. Earle, among others, who have shown how clashes over slavery in the West upended the Second Party System and ultimately contributed to the onset of the Civil War. At times, Dean portrays the reconstituted party lines as too clearly drawn. A reader might infer that Democrats simply ceded their pro-yeoman position to Free-Soilers and Republicans after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. This was far from the case as evidenced by Senator William M. Gwin's staunch advocacy for American settlers in California, Robert J. Walker's endorsement of preemption rights in Kansas during his rocky tenure as territorial governor, and Douglas Democrats' support for a homestead law.

Such critiques do not diminish the soundness of Dean's larger argument that ideas relating to farming and civilization formed a core tenet of Republican ideology. The chapter on land-development politics during the Civil War is particularly convincing. With obstructionist southern Democrats out of the

picture, the wartime Congress and Lincoln administration succeeded in enacting landmark agriculture-related measures, including the Morrill Land Grant College Act, the Homestead Act, the Pacific Railroad Act, and the creation of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. While Dean perhaps claims too much when he contends that “notions about proper land use were foremost among people’s reasons for supporting the Union,” he skillfully weaves in statements by Union soldiers to show how deeply they identified as farmers and recoiled at the landscapes of slavery (72).

An Agrarian Republic finds fertile ground in exploring the creation of parks at Yosemite and Yellowstone during and after the war. Crossing borders between political and environmental history, Dean shows how debates over these parks tested the limits of Republican agrarianism, creating fissures among its chief proponents. Park advocates such as landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted and editor Horace Greeley believed that setting aside areas of surpassing beauty elevated American civilization. Other hard-core agrarians, like Congressman George W. Julian of Indiana, fought to keep the government out of the park-making business and to reserve these lands for settlers.

The study concludes with an examination of “the Greater Reconstruction,” a term Dean borrows from the historian Elliott West to draw attention to developments in the West, as well as the South. Dean argues that Republicans’ “environmental view of citizenship” prompted them to apply essentially the same strategy to rebuilding the South and winning the West: namely, converting former slaves and Native Americans into yeomen of a northern cast. “The best citizens, Republicans believed, were small farmers because they used the soil wisely, were loyal to the Union, and advanced quickly to higher levels of civilization,” he writes on page 135. But violent white opposition to land redistribution in the South and fatal flaws in the system of “allotting” western lands to individual Indians doomed these policies. As Reconstruction unraveled, many Radical Republicans, including agrarians like Julian, grew increasingly disaffected, and eventually jumped ship to form the Liberal Republican Party. Which raises a question: If agrarianism was the *sine qua non* of Republican ideology, why did the party’s principal yeomen-boosters no longer feel at home?

Dean effectively demonstrates how Republicans linked yeoman farming with the fate of the Union, and formulated policies to advance this ideological construction. Ultimately, though, he overstates his case. Republicans embraced a range of commercial interests. Farming was a mainstay, but manufacturing and

finance capital increasingly dominated the nation's economic and political life. Failing to gesture more directly at these developments, *An Agrarian Republic* closes with the United States squarely in an industrial age with little explanation of how it got there.

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