

American Organic: A Cultural History of Farming, Gardening, Shopping, and Eating

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ISSN 0003-4827

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Recommended Citation

Dilly, Barbara J. "American Organic: A Cultural History of Farming, Gardening, Shopping, and Eating." *The Annals of Iowa* 75 (2016), 279-281.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.12316>

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Reviewer Matthew J. Margis is a Ph.D. candidate in history at Iowa State University. He is working on a dissertation about the evolution of the National Guard during the Progressive Era.

John H. Taber's edited diary, *A Rainbow Division Lieutenant in France*, recounts his wartime experiences as a reserve officer attached to the 168th Infantry Regiment (Iowa National Guard) of the 42nd Infantry Division, also known as the Rainbow Division. Stephen Taber edited and transcribed his second cousin's wartime diary with few alterations, although he updated some of the antiquated language to appeal to a modern audience. He also chose to eliminate the daily date entries, which creates some confusion, though it does little to hinder the diary's flow. The editor did cross-reference the diary's information to ensure factual accuracy.

Overall, this diary serves as an interesting firsthand account. As a primary source, the book provides valuable insights into the mindset and day-to-day activities of an officer in the French trenches during World War I. Although Taber was not an Iowan, he did serve with an Iowa National Guard regiment, so this account of his experiences will appeal to anyone interested in Iowa's wartime history. In many ways, the book complements Hugh H. Thompson's transcribed diary, *Trench Knives and Mustard Gas: With the 42nd Rainbow Division in France*, edited by Robert H. Ferrell (2004), which also recounts the experiences of an army officer attached to the 168th Regiment. However, because this is a diary, anyone seeking an analytical account of World War I or life in the trenches will need to look elsewhere.

American Organic: A Cultural History of Farming, Gardening, Shopping, and Eating, by Robin O'Sullivan. CultureAmerica Series. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2015. 382 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Barbara J. Dilly is associate professor of anthropology at Creighton University and an Iowa resident. Her research and writing focus on, among other things, rural communities and sustainability.

Through a kaleidoscopic interdisciplinary lens, Robin O'Sullivan examines what is really on our plates when we decide to eat organic. Large, looming, complex, and interconnected issues are embedded in the individual question "what's for dinner" in America. This historical analysis of the American organic movement provides a new critical paradigm to tackle the complexity of what is at stake within organic farming, gardening, shopping, and eating decisions in terms of health, food justice, and environmental sustainability. O'Sullivan examines

how food is grown and why that matters to human and environmental health as well as the health of the rural economy. She questions how food is marketed and whether or not Americans actually have free choice or enough credible information to make healthy and morally responsible consumer choices.

Can consumers improve their health and enact social change by buying organic food? O'Sullivan argues that the history of the movement does not show that consumer health is greatly improved or that mainstream food production practices have significantly changed as a result of consumer activism. Even though organic production can protect soil and water health, conserve energy, and promote sustainable communities, it cannot be shown that organic consumers have enough power to choose and control their food choices in the capitalist marketplace, let alone change the large structures that control the way food is produced in America.

The organic movement began on the periphery of American society and gained credibility with environmentalists and food consumers because it offered individual decision-making alternatives to conventional agriculture. The practical individual economic decision alternatives regarding what and how to grow and market food were, however, historically complicated by policy debates. O'Sullivan makes a major methodological contribution by drawing these issues into one rigorous study that examines subversive challenges to scientific knowledge and reveals conflicted social and moral philosophies. It is a mouthful, and it takes time to digest, but O'Sullivan's impressive scholarship provides an academic gourmet menu for food studies, consumer studies, and environmental studies scholars as well as for the general public.

O'Sullivan reveals that organics are still part of larger unanswered questions centered on quests for a better life for the environment, for farmers, and for consumers. What started out as a moral alternative individual decision movement led by J. I. Rodale in 1947 took on broad reform and even revolutionary dimensions as it evolved. But those dimensions remained fragmented; the movement did not centralize leadership to transform agricultural production and marketing. In fact, the movement went mainstream only when the discourses on healthy eating were coopted by the capitalist market's emphasis on consumer choice. Why has the movement not moved past individual decisions? What fragments it? O'Sullivan places the complexity of these questions within the context of the capitalist food production infrastructure, where she exposes the imbalances in power relations that shape individual decisions about what to eat and how to produce it.

The questions of what to eat need to be broadened, O'Sullivan argues, to include "what kind of agriculture can best reduce carbon

emissions, increase biodiversity, improve human health and still ‘feed the world’” (6). While there are strong, culturally resilient ideas associated with respect for nature’s wholeness and simplicity, independence and freedom to engage in meaningful and sustainable relationships to land, abundant harvests and health, respect for honest hard work, and higher purposes in life (12), there are powerful capitalist infrastructure forces that enable concentrated economic, political, and cultural authority to sustain the hegemony of conventional chemically based agriculture.

O’Sullivan argues that while the organic movement convinced many people that they can formulate policy through consumer power, it failed to coalesce an organized movement to influence systemic reform. This study reveals that placing the burden of social and environmental damage to human and environmental health on the shoulders of consumers draws attention away from the crucial players in organizations and government who should be accountable for making agriculture sustainable and food safe and nutritious. This rigorous study shows how the viability of organic farming and its broader implications for health and sustainability depend on policy change and not consumer appeal. The challenges to consumption, she argues, should be focused on a challenge to the frameworks that sustain over-consumption (259).

This book should be of interest to Iowans because it challenges us to think about our food production systems in terms broader than just our daily bread. O’Sullivan argues that “the entire organic movement has remained oriented toward praising acts of individual salvation, not mobilizing for social revolution (194).” A broader moral vision is important, she argues, because organics may provide solutions to the rising costs of health care, global warming, and world hunger, but not without more integrated scientific studies, central organizational vision, and charismatic leadership. Much more is needed than just individual ethical decision making.

Iowa’s Record Setting Governor: The Terry Branstad Story, by Mike Chapman. Des Moines: Business Publications Corp., 2015. xxii, 234 pp. Illustrations, notes, appendixes, index. \$14.95 paperback.

Reviewer Timothy Walch is director emeritus of the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library and a volunteer at the State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City.

You should never judge a book by its cover, but it is fair to judge this biography by its title: *Iowa’s Record Setting Governor*. That Terry Branstad has served as governor of Iowa for a long time is a given. Several