

# Sweet Tyranny: Migrant Labor, Industrial Agriculture, and Imperial Politics

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*Sweet Tyranny: Migrant Labor, Industrial Agriculture, and Imperial Politics*, by Kathleen Mapes. The Working Class in American History Series. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009. xi, 336 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$80.00 cloth, \$30.00 paper.

Reviewer Jim Norris is professor of history at North Dakota State University. He is the author of *North for the Harvest: Mexican Workers, Growers, and the Sugar Beet Industry* (2009).

*Sweet Tyranny* represents the best work that is being done in history today. Using the development of the sugar beet industry in Michigan starting in the 1890s as a focal point, Kathleen Mapes offers a broad analysis of the growth of the sugar industry in the United States and how international events influenced that commodity's production through the Great Depression. Thus, this is a multifaceted book spanning numerous history subfields, including business, agricultural and rural, political, local, international, immigration, and labor history. Mapes has arranged the work topically, although the story unfolds chronologically with considerable overlap. In essence, this is a study of the industrial revolution in the United States: how it shaped the rural population of Michigan and their response to the new order of industrial farming; how America's empire in the Caribbean and Pacific influenced the growth of the sugar industry; and the evolution of the migrant work force that did most of the work to feed Americans' incessantly expanding demand for sweetness.

Mapes begins her study with the ironic convergence of the growing importance of sugar beet production in the United States at the same time the nation was obtaining colonies — Puerto Rico and the Philippines — and a protectorate (Cuba) that produced sugar, too. The sugar beet interests were able to mold to a degree how those foreign territories fit into the economic structure of the United States. Mapes next turns her attention to the nature of the sugar beet industry and its relationship to farmers. Based on contractual ties, farmers and the industry clashed over exactly how those ties would bind. She finds that early on the farmers and their organizations had considerable influence on the growth of the sugar beet industry.

Sugar beets required a considerable labor force, however, one that the local communities were unable or unwilling to provide. The answer was the same throughout the Midwest: migrant workers, especially German Russians. Mapes explains the difficulties of their toil and the complexities of their migratory patterns. World War I and its immediate aftermath represented a watershed, according to Mapes, for both the nation and the sugar beet industry. As the companies and, to a lesser degree, the farmers made enormous profits during that period,

a conflict arose between big business and “progressive and radical farmers” (121). The vision of the latter group lost and was replaced by a more conservative one. In addition, World War I provided the opportunity for German Russians to escape the sugar beet fields as the industry turned to a new migrant work force from Mexico.

Mapes then shifts her attention to the history of Mexican migrant workers and the sugar beet industry during the 1920s, relating along the way the changing shape of immigration law in the United States, the forms of Mexican migration, and how Mexicans established their enclaves throughout the region. Finally, Mapes examines the era of the Great Depression. She finds that the sugar beet industry significantly influenced the move away from having an empire. At the same time, the New Deal created a permanent bond between the federal government and the sugar industry, one that the sugar interests would exploit throughout the remainder of the century. On the other hand, federal legislation that helped the sugar beet industry enormously also provided some oversight of abuses within the labor system, especially child labor, and provided a minimum wage structure for migrant sugar beet workers. More than anything, Mapes concludes, the sugar beet industry emerged from the 1930s as “a powerful and potent force” (246).

Mapes offers a very nuanced yet powerful examination of the triumph of industrialism over agricultural America, as well as corporate America’s ability to shape domestic and international politics. The text is very well researched and written. Indeed, this is one of the most lucid histories I have read in recent years. If the book has a problem, it is only in the title. “Tyranny” is a bit of a stretch. Indeed, the author makes clear that farmers had important influence on the industry from time to time, and migrant workers, whether German Russians or Mexicans, were never at the complete mercy of the companies. The latter point notwithstanding, this is an important and compelling history. Considering Iowa’s very similar experiment with sugar beets during the same time period, there is much to compare between the experiences of the two states, and Mapes’s book will provide an important context for Iowa’s sugar beet past.

*North for the Harvest: Mexican Workers, Growers, and the Sugar Beet Industry*, by Jim Norris. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2009. ix, 223 pp. Illustrations, map, notes, bibliography, index. \$22.95 paper.

Reviewer Kathleen Mapes is assistant professor of history at SUNY College at Geneseo. She is the author of *Sweet Tyranny: Migrant Labor, Industrial Agriculture, and Imperial Politics* (2009).