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

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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 govern-
ment 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 pro-
vided 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 tri-
umph 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 his-
tory. 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 im-
portant context for Iowa’s sugar beet past.

North for the Harvest: Mexican Workers, Growers, and the Sugar Beet Indus-
ix, 223 pp. Illustrations, map, notes, bibliography, index. $22.95 paper.

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ture, and Imperial Politics (2009).