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The White  Horse Press

The Meaning of Moving Sand. Towards a Dust Bowl Mythology

Frank Uekötter

W

hat would twenty-first century American television make of the Dust Bowl? It would depend on whether someone supplied a major news station with some really good pictures. In the absence of visuals, the event would not stand a chance. But even if a camera captured a spectacular

shot of the moving wall of sand, the dust storms probably would not figure prominently. Editors would be inclined to place them at the end of the evening news. They are a meteorological event after all, and thus make for a great prelude to the weather forecast. The news team would make some light-hearted remarks about some really great pictures coming up. A few replays in slow motion would give them a chance to thank the affiliate station for the footage. With a bit of luck, they would even say a few things about the place. After the lights go out, the editor would probably instruct his crew to mark the calendar for a follow-up report a few weeks down the road. Some pictures might go viral on Twitter. Nobody would talk about a new federal agency.

The thought experiment may be tongue-in-cheek, but it speaks about more than the inherent cynicism of twenty-first century television news. Imagining the Dust Bowl in a different frame of reference shatters the cognitive certainty that has traditionally surrounded the event. A number of powerful narratives seek to define the Dust Bowl as a showcase for more general points: about the need for soil conservation, about the legitimacy of federal agencies (or lack thereof), about the fragility of the American Dream, about the destructiveness of agricultural capitalism or simply as an example for some really tough years. Whatever you say about the event, there is no denying its versatility for starkly divergent readings. Tell me what you think about the Dust Bowl, and I will tell you what you think about America.

The Dust Bowl begat a veritable bonanza of storytelling, and we can see the consequences down to the choice of words. Even using the term ‘Dust Bowl’ implies decisions over narratives, as it highlights the dust storms at the expense of the preceding drought. Yet, as Bill Cronon reminded environmental historians, ‘The stories we tell about the past do not exist in a vacuum.’¹ Among the instruments that historians have employed for dissecting stories, none is more pertinent for the present endeavor than the importance of so-

¹ William Cronon, ‘A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative’, *Journal of American History* **78** (1992): 1347–76; 1372. See also William Cronon, ‘Storytelling’, *American Historical Review* **118** (2013): 1–19.

cial groups, a topic of memory research ever since Maurice Halbwachs' pioneering essay on collective memory.² Narratives of the Dust Bowl mirror the interests and worldviews of specific groups, and we cannot understand the power of these narratives if we fail to reflect on the place of these groups in society.³

We can see the importance of groups in the remarkable absence of learning experiences. A wide array of narratives has evolved since the 1930s, and they usually display benign neglect towards other readings: narratives have developed autonomously, with little positive reference to preceding interpretations. What might look like a recurring act of amnesia was really a social necessity. Groups and generations have invented their own Dust Bowls according to their own distinct inclinations and interests, and other readings are competing interpretations rather than intellectual challenges. Disagreements over the Dust Bowl mirrored, and to some extent moulded, the powers in play in society far beyond agricultural matters.

Cronon and others have discussed narratives in the form of books, but a Dust Bowl mythology needs to move beyond the written word. Pictures played a key role in the cultural construction of the Dust Bowl, and their career provided a showcase for the ambiguities of photographic documentation that Susan Sontag described as follows: 'while an event known through photographs certainly becomes more real than it would have been had one never seen the photographs, after repeated exposure it also becomes less real'.⁴ Fur-

² Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*. Edited, Translated, and with an Introduction by Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

³ Failure to identify groups and interests involved encourages a dubious lack of specificity. For example, a recent handbook article summarised scholarship on the Dust Bowl by identifying three interpretations: 'declensionist, progressive, and the 'middle ground', with the declensionist reading as 'the dominant one since the 1930s'. (David Moon, 'The Grasslands of North America and Russia', in John R. McNeill and Erin Stewart Mauldin (eds), *A Companion to Global Environmental History* (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), pp. 247–62; pp. 256, 252.) However, declensionist interpretations can take a multitude of forms, seize on different targets and empower different groups.

⁴ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 94.

thermore, this article makes an effort to bring the actual work of soil conservation into a discussion of narratives. Scholars have long recognised that one cannot understand the practice of soil conservation without a discussion of narratives, but the reverse is no less true: we cannot understand narratives without an understanding of social practice. Remembering is as much a matter of looking at pictures and reading books as working to conserve the land.

Bringing in first-hand experience makes narratives less clear-cut; but we should probably see that as an advantage. It offers an escape from the simple morals that often characterise discussions of this kind. Mythologies tend to invite either celebrations or exorcisms and, as we will see, there is no lack of Dust Bowl narratives that convey a sense of moral clarity. However, these readings usually took shape at a distance. It was always easier to make sense of the Dust Bowl from afar, and the Southern Plains – the area primarily affected by the Dust Bowl – effectively became a canvas for different readings. The history of the Dust Bowl is also about the cultural occupation of a peripheral region, and yet that region was really more than a passive backdrop. It was a vast space filled with people, plants, machines and soils, and it is high time that we give them a place in our narratives. In short, this Dust Bowl mythology is more than a critical discussion of cultural memories. It is a necessary precondition for Dust Bowl narratives that are rooted in the ground.

The Setting

If there were a competition for the US region least likely to make world history, the Southern Plains would be a promising contender. It was an inhospitable place that figured on nineteenth-century maps as the ‘Great American Desert’.⁵ It lacked strategic significance until Cold War generals found the sparsely populated region the right place for intercontinental missiles. It did not have a large commodity hub or a commercial center, let alone a place with a vibrant cul-

⁵ Timothy Egan, *The Worst Hard Time: The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), p. 22.

tural scene. The region did not even possess a distinctive landscape. Its original vegetation was grass, a ground cover that rarely generates excitement, and that grassland was shrinking tremendously in the wake of frontier expansion – so much so that people who grew up in the region sometimes failed to recognise that grass *was* the original vegetation.⁶ The region's prime commodities were wheat and petroleum, two products that modern societies consume en masse. In a nineteenth-century context, the region's most distinctive feature was delayed frontier development; the government called it 'the last frontier of agriculture' in 1923.⁷ Land-hungry settlers tried to avoid the 'Great American Desert' as long as they could.

The region thrived in the wake of increasing commodity prices during and after World War One. Tractors allowed ploughing up land more easily, with wheat emerging as the boom crop par excellence. Between 1925 and 1931 alone, wheat acreage in the Southern Plains region grew by 200 per cent. However, agricultural development retained an air of speculation, with 'suitcase farming' as the most glaring manifestation. Investors from outside the region bought farmland, put some seed into the ground and then left fields to themselves until the time of the harvest, when they would come back and bring to market whatever had grown.⁸

Suitcase farming was a gamble, but that arguably held true for wheat production on the Southern Plains more generally. Wheat was sown in the fall and harvested in the summer, leaving the ground without vegetation cover for a long period of time. Furthermore, the Southern Plains knew harsh weather, with temperature and rainfall varying tremendously. The region enjoyed warm and humid winds from the Gulf of Mexico as well as cold air from the North. It was also a prime tornado region, as if to underscore the inherent violence of the regional climate. One of the most frightening things about

⁶ Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*. Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 244.

⁷ Egan, *Worst Hard Time*, p. 57.

⁸ R. Douglas Hurt, *The Dust Bowl: An Agricultural and Social History* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1981), pp. 24, 27.

the dust storms of the 1930s was that they seemingly came out of nowhere. ‘When the storms hit, they usually came without warning’, Timothy Egan wrote.⁹

It was as if the region had been set up as a wind erosion experiment. It had powerful winds, it was arid and agriculture removed the grass that had traditionally held the soil in its place. It was really more a matter of when dust storms would come and how bad they would be, rather whether they would come at all. The region’s susceptibility to dust storms before the 1930s has been a matter of historical debate ever since James Malin’s pioneering work on history and ecology in the trans-Mississippi West.¹⁰ The region has also experienced further events after the 1930s, though none achieved a similar notoriety. The shock of the Dust Bowl said as much about nature as about the state of mind of the region’s inhabitants.

As settlement was a recent phenomenon, few locals had much experience with the region’s climate. Weather conditions during the 1920s were favourable, and it was tempting to assume that they would stay that way, an act of wishful thinking underscored by popular notions such as the rain following the plough. Few settlers had experience with farming in arid environments. And, needless to say, none of the region’s farmers could know that the drought would stay until 1940. All that most farmers had was the experience of a few good harvests. As Pamela Riney-Kehrberg has noted, ‘Farmers expected to have a crop failure once every five years and moderate to overwhelming success in the intervening years. But nothing had prepared them for a bumper crop followed by eight years of total or near crop failure.’¹¹

⁹ Egan, *Worst Hard Time*, p. 7.

¹⁰ James C. Malin, ‘The Adaptation of the Agricultural System to Sub-Humid Environment’, *Agricultural History* 10 / 3 (1936): 118–41; James C. Malin, *The Grasslands of North America. Prolegomena to its History with Addenda and Postscript* (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1967 [originally 1947]). For a critical discussion, see Donald Worster, *Under Western Skies: Nature and History in the American West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 94–8.

¹¹ Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, *Rooted in Dust: Surviving Drought and Depression in Southwestern Kansas* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994), p. 117.

Resorting to expert advice did not offer much help either. The region's most important farming authority of the early twentieth century was Hardy Webster Campbell, who advocated a dry farming method for the preservation of moisture in the soil. Campbell promoted his method as the magic recipe for agriculture under Great Plains conditions and traveled the region with support from railroads, banks, real estate and other commercial interests. Campbell stood outside the evolving network of academic, state-sponsored research and extension work, and his methods were neither approved nor encouraged by the government's farming experts.¹² Understanding the peculiarities of the region was a challenge not only for farmers but also for scientists and advisors.

The cumulative result was that as soon as drought set in, a strange speechlessness fell upon the region. What could one say, after all? Farmers could not pore over long-term meteorological information, for no one had any. They could not consult experts, for they were just as clueless. The only thing left to do was to plough and sow nonetheless, watch the cloudless sky, and somehow keep up hope. If optimism finally collapsed, they could pack up and try their luck elsewhere. Migration was a significant part of the Dust Bowl experience and became immortalised in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, a Pulitzer Prize-winning novel that followed the Joad family on its exodus from the Dust Bowl region to California.¹³

Hundreds of thousands left the region westward during the Great Depression, with drought being one of several grievances in the agricultural regions of Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, and Missouri. Migrants usually had a hard time making a living, experienced marginalisation from older California residents – they became known as 'Okies' in reference to the state of Oklahoma – often worked as poorly paid farm workers and formed a distinct subculture that

¹² Mary W.M. Hargreaves, *Dry Farming in the Northern Great Plains: Years of Readjustment, 1920–1990* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993), p. 3; Id., 'The Dry-Farming Movement in Retrospect', *Agricultural History* 51 (1997): 149–65; 152–6.

¹³ John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York: Viking Press, 1939).

survived far into the post-war years.¹⁴ Scholars have studied the fate of these migrants closely, which had an unfortunate side effect in that it drew attention away from the Dust Bowl region. ‘When the story of the Dust Bowl is told, it is most often the story of those who left’, Riney-Kehrberg wrote.¹⁵ In these narratives of what we would nowadays call climate migration, the Southern Plains inevitably figured as a disaster region, a mere backdrop to the real drama of migration and discrimination. Furthermore, these studies nourished the impression that the dismal conditions basically left the hapless residents no choice but to leave. It would add insult to injury to inquire whether migrants would have fared better back home. However, Dust Bowl migrants were a minority both among the migrants to California – most of them came from areas farther east – and among the locals. Even severely affected regions like southwestern Kansas did not lose more than a quarter of their population.¹⁶

The Pictures

The Great Depression reached the Southern Plains with some delay. In January 1930, *Nation's Business* published a map that showed Kansas as one of the few American regions with good business conditions, an assessment that became front-page news in the region. But when farmers brought in a bumper crop in 1931, depressed wheat prices meant that they could only sell it at a loss. The drought set in just after the harvest and stayed until the 1939 growing season.¹⁷ With that, the region found itself where most of the United States was since October 1929: in a dismal economic situation with no easy remedy. The rest of the country had plenty of problems of its own and, even in normal times, trouble in a peripheral region was not the kind of stuff that generates excitement. But the Southern

¹⁴ James N. Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

¹⁵ Riney-Kehrberg, *Rooted in Dust*, p. 2.

¹⁶ Gregory, *American Exodus*, p. 11; Riney-Kehrberg, *Rooted in Dust*, p. 2.

¹⁷ Riney-Kehrberg, *Rooted in Dust*, pp. 15, 21.

Plains had one thing that set its troubles apart from the rest of the nation: it offered dramatic pictures with iconic potential.

Due to its limited mobility, the soil is a transcultural synonym for stability and permanence. Seeing this soil airborne was the perfect symbol for disturbing times: the huge clouds of dust, captured in a number of spectacular photographs, were the perfect metaphor for a world in which all certainties were evaporating. The dramatic stories from survivors complemented that reading nicely. Getting caught in a dust storm was a traumatic experience: people were struggling to breathe while witnessing the destruction of their property. It was frightening. It was disturbing. It was unprecedented in living memory. And it matched the sense of undeserved victimisation that spread as the Great Depression held US society in its grip. The dust storms were for the Southern Plains what the stock market crash of 1929 was for the national economy – an anonymous threat, mysterious and beyond control, sweeping aside everyone and everything in its path.

The outmigration from the region fitted perfectly into the tapestry of doom. It suggested, in the words of James Gregory, ‘a pathetic failure of the American Dream’.¹⁸ People lost their land, rather than gaining some. The prevailing sentiment was despair rather than hope. And in the end, migrants found that they had traded one set of hardships for another one: California offered them seasonal jobs with meagre pay and the experience of ethnic discrimination. The promise of a better life, if not for oneself then for one’s children, seemed to vanish in the searing sun of California. *The Grapes of Wrath* ends with a stillborn baby and the flooding of the Joad family home.

The dust storms were real, and they were dangerous; but they were only one facet of the overall problem. The underlying challenge was the drought and its effect on farm production. In fact, Dust Bowl pictures depict only the most dramatic events where people were completely helpless in the face of huge walls of moving sand. The disaster also comprised countless smaller, local episodes where fields dried up and caused trouble for neighbors; the locals said that these fields were ‘blowing’. Faced with these conditions, humans

¹⁸ Gregory, *American Exodus*, p. xiv.

were not quite as defenceless: it was possible to stop a blowing field by cultivating the land, and that was what many people did to save their belongings from the destructive effect of blowing sand. It is quite revealing that these acts of self-defence received far less attention than the spectacular pictures of doom: the iconography of the Dust Bowl favoured overpowered humans over alert and active ones. Or so it was outside the regions, as the people of the Southern Plains were more interested in self-defence than in metaphors of American decline. A district court in Haskell County, Kansas even suspended property rights for blowing fields when it gave farmers the right to enter and work neighbouring land in order to stop wind erosion.¹⁹

Pictures made the Dust Bowl, but the supply was limited. It was difficult to take good pictures of a dust storm, particularly in the age of black-and-white photography. Timing was crucial: the camera moment was when a big storm was just about to hit. Once inside the storm, the sand made for a dizzy haze that brought unspectacular pictures. For an innocent observer, it was hard to tell the difference from pictures in a run-of-the-mill fog. Blowing fields were even harder to capture in photographs. That opened a niche for the arts, and one of the people who filled this void was the painter Alexandre Hogue. Having long lived in the region, Hogue painted a number of hyperrealistic pictures of the disaster, which prompted *Life* to label him (to his chagrin) ‘artist of the Dust Bowl’.²⁰ His 1936 oil painting *Drought Survivors* – featuring two dead cows, a tractor drowning in sand dunes, and a rattlesnake – found its way into Joachim Radkau’s schoolbook on environmental history, with Radkau noting that the picture captures the essence of the Dust Bowl better than many contemporary photographs (‘*eindrucksvoller als viele Fotos*’).²¹

Life knew a few things about good pictures, but the underlying assumption that visuals would enhance understanding of the world

¹⁹ Riney-Kehrberg, *Rooted in Dust*, p. 122.

²⁰ Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 32.

²¹ Joachim Radkau, *Mensch und Natur in der Geschichte: Kursmaterialien Geschichte Sekundarstufe II/Kollegstufe* (Leipzig: Ernst Klett Schulbuchverlag, 2002), p. 172.

looked rather ambiguous beyond the confines of New York editorial offices. Dust Bowl pictures were essentially a surrogate for engagement with local opinion – a kind of visual long-distance philanthropy that gracefully glossed over what commiseration meant on the ground. Many residents of the region hated being portrayed as living in a disaster region, and that was not just a matter of discourse ethics but also one of action. When Hogue's *Drought Survivors* was on display at the Pan-American Exposition in Dallas, the Dalhart Chamber of Commerce voted to send a representative in order to buy it and bring it back to town. The Chamber wanted to make a statement, and it was not just about the arts: it planned a demonstration in the streets of Dalhart with the burning of Hogue's picture as the climactic event. It was the Chamber's thriftiness that saved the picture for posterity. It budgeted fifty dollars for the purchase, but the market price for the picture was in a range of 2,000 dollars.²² It was an orthodox Marxist's dream come true, a perfect congruence of cultural and monetary capital, and it was a fitting mirror of the prevailing balance of power. A depression-plagued nation found that the Dust Bowl provided the perfect template for its woes, and it cared little about divergent local sentiments. What were the chances of locals to challenge hegemonic interpretations if they could not even buy a picture?

Defenders of the Soil

When drought befell the Southern Plains, the United States had no agency for the protection of agricultural soils. When rain returned in 1940, the federal government entertained the largest soil conservation agency in the world, the US Soil Conservation Service. The chronological overlap suggests a causal link, if not a founding myth: having seen the effect of soil erosion in dramatic pictures, the nation rose to the challenge and set up a well-funded agency to fight back. As the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the institutional heir of the Soil Conservation Service, declares in its online *Brief History of*

²² Worster, *Dust Bowl*, pp. 32–3.

NRCS, ‘Perhaps no event did more to emphasize the severity of the erosion crisis in the popular imagination than the Dust Bowl.’²³

However, the Southern Plains were not the only US region with a serious erosion problem. Soil erosion was a typical problem in frontier regions, as new patterns of land use changed vegetation cover and the dynamics of nature. In places such as the Palouse in the states of Washington and Idaho, agriculture was virtually impossible without erosion.²⁴ In the interwar years, the spread of tractors brought new challenges because of concerns about soil compaction and new ploughing techniques. In the American South, concerns about the soil went back to debates in the early nineteenth century.²⁵ The region even had a proto-environmental history that focused on soil depletion before drought settled on the Great Plains. In 1926, Avery Craven published his famous and controversial book *Soil Exhaustion as a Factor in the Agricultural History of Virginia and Maryland, 1606–1860*.²⁶ As seen from the South, the creation of the US Soil Conservation Service was not so much an innovation as the conclusion of a search for institutional forms that had been going on for a generation.²⁷

The American South carried far more political weight than the Southern Plains, and it was by all means characteristic that the rise of American soil conservation is intimately intertwined with a South-

²³ *75 Years Helping People Help the Land: A Brief History of NRCS*, available online at http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/about/history/?cid=nrcs143_021392 (accessed 16 Dec. 2014).

²⁴ Andrew P. Duffin, *Plowed Under: Agriculture and Environment in the Palouse* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007).

²⁵ Steven Stoll, *Larding the Lean Earth: Soil and Society in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2002); Benjamin R. Cohen, *Notes from the Ground: Science, Soil and Society in the American Countryside* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

²⁶ Avery Craven, *Soil Exhaustion as a Factor in the Agricultural History of Virginia and Maryland, 1606–1860* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006).

²⁷ Paul S. Sutter, ‘What Gullies Mean: Georgia’s “Little Grand Canyon” and Southern Environmental History’, *Journal of Southern History* 76 (2010): 579–616.

erner. Hugh Hammond Bennett led the Soil Conservation Service from its foundation until his retirement in 1952, and his roots in the South – he was born in Wadesboro, North Carolina – shaped his view of soil conservation. He published a lengthy monograph on *The Soils and Agriculture of the Southern States* in 1921.²⁸ Even his travel patterns as chief of the Soil Conservation Service reflected his personal background. Bennett frequently visited Southern states and gave numerous presentations in the region while showing scant interest in anything west of the Mississippi River: the Hugh Hammond Bennett Papers at Iowa State University do not record a single speech in the Dust Bowl region during the 1930s.²⁹ Douglas Helms, the National Historian at the Natural Resources Conservation Service, has noted that the Dust Bowl region was missing in a 1933 regional erosion map that Bennett prepared and that none of the Service's original demonstration projects served the region.³⁰

Bennett's personal predilections matter, as it is hard to overstate his significance for soil conservation. He ran the defining US agency for almost two decades, and he wrote numerous articles and published two authoritative volumes on the topic, *Soil Conservation* in 1939 and *Elements of Soil Conservation* in 1947.³¹ He also had a towering personality: a 1951 biography celebrates 'Big Hugh' as 'the father of soil conservation'.³² Bennett is one of the few remaining 'great white men' in American history still waiting for a critical biographer.

While wind was the prime cause of erosion in the Southern Plains, water was the crucial factor in the American South. As a

²⁸ Hugh Hammond Bennett, *The Soils and Agriculture of the Southern States* (New York: Macmillan, 1921).

²⁹ Iowa State University Library, Special Collections Department, Ames, Iowa, MS-164 (Hugh Hammond Bennett Papers) Box 10.

³⁰ Douglas Helms, 'Hugh Hammond Bennett and the Creation of the Soil Conservation Service', *Journal of Soil and Water Conservation* **65** / 2 (2010): 37A–47A; 41A.

³¹ Hugh Hammond Bennett, *Soil Conservation* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1939), and id., *Elements of Soil Conservation* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1947).

³² Wellington Brink, *Big Hugh: The Father of Soil Conservation* (New York: Macmillan, 1951).

result, Bennett was ill equipped to tackle the Dust Bowl. In fact, he did not realise the political potential of what would become the quintessential American soil erosion disaster until others urged him to look westwards. In February 1934, the Secretary of the Interior, Harold Ickes, wrote a memorandum that pointed Bennett 'to the condition in the Dakotas and I think in Montana, where the wind is blowing off the top soil' and suggested that Bennett write 'a paragraph on this'.³³ Bennett did as requested, and his response mirrored a sense of bewilderment, both by the peculiarities of the region and by wind erosion more generally: 'It was predicted last year when we discussed the matter of doing something about the evil that it would be twenty-five years before anything of the kind would happen again. But the very same thing is going on again this year.'³⁴ Four months later, Bennett warned in a letter to Ickes that the land in the Southern Plains 'is in optimum condition for the greatest possible destructive effects from heavy rain that may occur any time.'³⁵ Obviously, Bennett did not yet understand that people in the Dust Bowl region were *hoping* for rain, rather than fearing it.

Bennett ran a burgeoning institution. In 1933, his agency was founded as the Soil Erosion Service within the Department of the Interior, which Harold Ickes sought to make into a department of conservation at the time. After some interdepartmental wrangling, the Soil Erosion Service was transferred to the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 1935 and renamed Soil Conservation Service, the name that it would keep until 1995.³⁶ On 30 June 1937, the Soil Conservation Service had 952 employees in its Washington office

³³ National Archives of the United States, College Park, RG 114 (Records of the Natural Resources Conservation Service) Entry 1 Box 1 Folder 'February 1934', Harold L. Ickes, Secretary, Department of the Interior, Memorandum for Mr. Bennett, February 10, 1934.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, attachment to memorandum for the Secretary of the Interior, 10 Feb. 1934.

³⁵ National Archives of the United States RG 114 Entry 1 Box 1 Folder 'June-July 1934', Bennett, memorandum for the Secretary of the Interior, 4 June 1934, p. 2.

³⁶ Robert J. Morgan, *Governing Soil Conservation: Thirty Years of the New Decentralization* (Baltimore: Resources for the Future, 1965), pp. 10, 24.

and 12,379 in the field service.³⁷ Within only four years, staff had grown to five-digit figures and thus reached a level that it would maintain for decades. In light of the turbulent history of other New Deal agencies, it is remarkable that appropriations for the Soil Conservation Service rose in all but one year until 1969, when the Service had 14,872 permanent full-time positions.³⁸

Building a large bureaucracy from scratch was no small achievement, and yet Bennett was no dedicated institution-builder. William Van Dersal, who joined the Service in April 1935 and retired in 1972, said in an oral history interview, 'As an administrator, I think he was lousy.' Van Dersal found him 'a great crusader', but 'sometimes almost childlike in what he would do'.³⁹ One of Bennett's successors, Donald Williams, concurred: 'Bennett was never known to be a good administrator. He was a technical man, a professional man and noted worldwide for his capabilities in that regard'.⁴⁰ In other words, Bennett's legacy lay not just in the creation of an enduring institution. He imbued the Soil Conservation Service with a sense of mission that resonates to this day. Together with his associates, he was not just fighting soil erosion – he was running a moral crusade, and the issue at stake was nothing less than the future of America. As early as April 1934, Bennett declared in a memorandum for the Secretary of the Interior that 'unrestrained soil erosion, if permitted to continue, will result in the virtual elimination of civilization from great areas of the United States'.⁴¹

³⁷ National Archives of the United States RG 114 Entry 1040 Box 1, Report of the Chief of the Soil Conservation Service for the Fiscal Year Ending 30 June 1937, 14 Oct., 1937, p. 49.

³⁸ D. Harper Simms, *The Soil Conservation Service* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), p. 71.

³⁹ Iowa State University Library, Special Collections Department, MS-198 Box 2 Folder 9, Oral History Interview with William R. Van Dersal, 5 Feb. 1981, p. 48n.

⁴⁰ Iowa State University Library, Special Collections Department, MS-198 Box 3 Folder 1, Oral History Interview with Donald A. Williams, 2 June 1981, p. 37.

⁴¹ National Archives of the United States RG 114 Entry 1 Box 1 Folder 'March-April 1934', Bennett, Memorandum to the Secretary of the Interior, 13 Apr. 1934, p. 3.

Bennett shared his vision in numerous speeches. They typically offered a grand narrative about the rise and erosion-induced fall of many a civilisation: 'History has shown time and again that no large nation can long endure the continuous mismanagement of its soil resources. The world is strewn with the ruins of once flourishing civilizations, destroyed by erosion', Bennett told the Southwest Soil and Water Conservation Conference in Tyler, Texas in 1935.⁴² The remainder of his talk offered facts and figures supplied by his burgeoning administrative machinery, along with a notably vague vision of actual policies. According to his manuscript, he concluded with a call for the 'application of practical erosion-control measures on large watersheds in the various agricultural regions of the country, in cooperation with conservancy districts, erosion control associations or similar organizations'.⁴³ Means were obviously negotiable, but the mission was not.

In *The Coming of the New Deal*, Arthur Schlesinger wrote that 'soil conservation was almost a religion' for Bennett and that he preached its gospel 'with Old Testament wrath'.⁴⁴ It was a fitting description: even in the midst of the Great Depression, Bennett and his associates were never shy to declare that soil erosion was the nation's most important problem. In fact, the Old Testament was not simply a given for devout soil conservationists, as the self-declared prophets felt that the time-honoured book might be up for some editing. Walter Lowdermilk, the second man in the Soil Conservation Service until his retirement in 1947, suggested in a 1939 speech in Jerusalem that it was time for an Eleventh Commandment that should read as follows:

Thou shalt inherit the holy earth as a faithful steward, conserving its resources and productivity from generation to generation. Thou shalt protect thy fields

⁴² Iowa State University Library, Special Collections Department, MS-164 Box 10 Folder 8, H. H. Bennett, Program of the Soil Conservation Service. Paper Presented before the 6th Southwest Soil and Water Conservation Conference held at Tyler, Texas, 8 and 9 July 1935, p. 5.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁴⁴ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Coming of the New Deal* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988), p. 342.

from soil erosion and thy hills from overgrazing by thy herds, so that thy descendants may have abundance forever. If any shall fail in this stewardship of the land, his fertile fields shall become sterile stones and gullies, and his descendants shall decrease and live in poverty or vanish from the face of the earth.⁴⁵

It was a bit like the soil conservation version of the Jerusalem Syndrome, but it was no isolated moment of hyperbole. Lowdermilk liked the Eleventh Commandment so much that he made it his default conclusion in speeches.⁴⁶

The tale about soil and civilisation found few enthusiasts among depression-plagued farmers, who were usually more concerned with how to pay the next installment. It fared better as a literary genre, as the narrative gave birth to a distinct tradition of soil erosion history: sweeping overviews that see humans abusing soils throughout human history and henceforth suffering from the consequences. Randal Beeman and James Pritchard have called them 'soil jeremiads'.⁴⁷ It was a kind of 'environmental history before environmental history' that survived far beyond the years of the New Deal. The tradition of 'soil jeremiads' includes Russell Lord's *Behold Our Land* (1938), Edward Hyams' *Soil and Civilization* (1952), Vernon G. Carter's and Tom Dale's *Topsoil and Civilization* (1955) and John Seymour's and Herbert Girardet's *Far from Paradise* (1986). The most recent incarnation is the 2007 book *Dirt: The Erosion of Civilizations* by University of Washington geologist David Montgomery.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ National Archives RG 114 Accession No. NN3-114-03-001 Box 1, Walter C. Lowdermilk, The Eleventh Commandment. Written at Jerusalem, 22 June 1939, p. 1.

⁴⁶ Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library, Hyde Park, New York, Oral History Transcripts, Walter Clay Lowdermilk. Soil, Forest, and Water Conservation and Reclamation in China, Israel, Africa, and the United States. An Interview Conducted by Malca Chall. University of California, Bancroft Library/Berkeley, Regional Oral History Office, Berkeley, 1969, volume 1, p. 184.

⁴⁷ Randal S. Beeman and James A. Pritchard, *A Green and Permanent Land: Ecology and Agriculture in the Twentieth Century* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001).

⁴⁸ Russell Lord, *Behold Our Land* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1938); Edward Hyams, *Soil and Civilization* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1952); Vernon Gill

However, it was one thing to claim the moral high ground with soil narratives and quite another to devise effective policies. One cannot stress too much how Bennett's vision was disconnected from political realities. As created in 1933, the Soil Erosion Service was concerned first and foremost with the creation of demonstration projects that sought to show the feasibility of soil conservation all over the country. As if that was not enough of a challenge, the Soil Conservation Service also suffered from a lack of personnel: soil conservationists were one of the few expert groups that were in short supply during the Great Depression. The early correspondence of the Service includes numerous complaints from other agencies that Bennett was luring away the best people with better pay, with Bennett usually noting apologetically that the lack of qualified staffers gave him no choice. While the Service's sense of purpose was crystal-clear from the outset, its policies were in a state of evolution. In retrospect, Walter Lowdermilk compared it to 'a chess game; we make a move and then see what happens to direct us to make another move. Each step leads to another step.'⁴⁹

Institutional Learning

There are many ways to impress Congress. Quoting a dictator is one of the more unusual ones. Hugh Bennett did exactly that when he spoke before a subcommittee of the House of Representatives Committee on Public Lands on 20 March 1935. He fondly mentioned Italy's Bonifica Integrale programme, an Integrated Land Reclamation programme whose essence, according to Bennett, was summed up nicely by Benito Mussolini: 'Reclaim the land, and with the land the man, and with the man the race.' It was not just the

Carter, Tom Dale, *Topsoil and Civilization* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955); John Seymour and Herbert Girardet, *Far from Paradise: The Story of Man's Impact on the Environment* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1986); David R. Montgomery, *Dirt: The Erosion of Civilizations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

⁴⁹ Walter Clay Lowdermilk Interview, volume 1, p. 151n.

alleged expenditure of \$ 500 million for soil and water conservation or the employment of 80,000 people that caught Bennett's attention. It was the freedom of action, the ability of the Fascist government to act without petty concerns about costs or objections from landowners: 'The Italian Government does not profess to apply an economic yardstick to its program.'⁵⁰

The Mussolini reference revealed more than an underdeveloped political instinct. Bennett's early policy drafts breathe a distinctly authoritarian air. 'It is proposed that legislation be asked of Congress to supply the necessary authority for the formulation and regulation of Conservancy Districts to meet the requirements for coordinated land use', Bennett wrote in a 27 January 1934 memorandum for the Secretary of the Interior. These 'Conservancy Districts' would permit 'regulations of land use in so far as is necessary to safeguard the interests of all concerned'.⁵¹ When asked to justify the expenditure of federal funds for erosion control on private land three months later, Bennett used the occasion to suggest new enforcement powers: 'The expenditure of funds in any state might be made contingent on the state passing zoning laws requiring all property owners to cooperate in erosion control through the proper use of their own land and through financial contributions.'⁵² In short, government planning, and legal coercion if need be, were supposed to be the crucial instruments in the upcoming soil conservation drive.

These visions might seem like a long shot for a young Service that stole its expertise together from competing agencies. But it was the logical outgrowth of its guiding philosophy: if one was out to save human civilisation, the drive for direct action was almost irresistible.

⁵⁰ Iowa State University Library, Special Collections Department, MS-164 Box 10 Folder 6, Statement presented by H.H. Bennett, Director, Soil Erosion Service, Department of the Interior, before Subcommittee of House Committee on Public Lands, 20 Mar. 1935, p. 16.

⁵¹ National Archives of the United States RG 114 Entry 1 Box 1 Folder 'February 1934', H.H. Bennett, Director, Soil Erosion Service, Memorandum for the Secretary of the Interior, 27 Jan. 1934.

⁵² *Ibid.* Folder 'March-April 1934', Bennett, Memorandum to the Secretary of the Interior, 13 Apr. 1934, p. 4.

The real work of the Service was far too modest to satisfy a Messianic spirit. It did not even promise a long-term solution. Even if all demonstration projects had evolved as planned, and if Bennett had been a man of patience, these projects were spread too thin around the country to reach more than a fraction of the farm population. And, in any case, if farmers were unable to stop erosion by themselves, why shouldn't the government intervene and force them to act better? The New Deal encouraged a more assertive role of federal agencies, and Harold Ickes' Department of the Interior was a place for bold visions of environmental stewardship. Furthermore, Bennett's vision fitted squarely into departmental traditions. Since the Progressive Era, the Department of the Interior was aiming for land use regulation in the common interest, and fights with vested interests were simply the price to be paid.⁵³

The outlook for enforcement dimmed when the Soil Conservation Service was placed in the US Department of Agriculture in 1935. Since its creation in 1862, the Department of Agriculture was committed to helping and educating farmers, and it had built an elaborate network of research and extension over the decades. It was more difficult to imagine land use regulation in this context, all the more as the Soil Conservation Service had to prevail in countless turf wars with preexisting institutions. In fact, the Soil Conservation Service gained an intradepartmental competition in its own field of expertise when the Supreme Court annulled the farm subsidies program under the first Agricultural Adjustment Act on 6 January 1936. The Department of Agriculture hastily set up a new programme of direct payments that was destined to reduce the planting of 'soil depleting' crops in an Agricultural Conservation Program.⁵⁴ With that, the federal government had two soil conservation programmes in the same department, with the Agricultural Conservation Program commanding more than four times the financial resources of the

⁵³ Richard N.L. Andrews, *Managing the Environment, Managing Ourselves: A History of American Environmental Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), pp. 141, 147.

⁵⁴ Morgan, *Governing Soil Conservation*, p. 41.

Soil Conservation Service.⁵⁵ Frictions were inevitable, and they went straight down to divergent approaches. The Agricultural Conservation Program focused on single measures where compliance was easy to monitor while the Soil Conservation Service favoured farm plans based on a comprehensive assessment of individual conditions.⁵⁶

It was difficult to imagine comprehensive land use planning under these conditions, and yet the self-appointed stewards of the soil found it hard to abandon the concept. As late as 1947, the Soil Conservation Service published a brochure on *Land Use Regulation in Soil Conservation Districts* that had Bennett gently urging a tougher stance in his foreword: 'Traditionally, whenever and wherever necessary in the public interest, our American way has also provided a method whereby an unwilling few can be required to accede to certain actions taken by the majority.'⁵⁷ More than twenty years later, Lowdermilk was still remorseful about the lack of enforcement powers. 'We have not yet reached the point where we would accept this type of regulation', he noted. The New Deal would have been the perfect moment to claim those powers, but the exigencies of a new federal programme forced the Service to let the moment pass: 'Our time generally was so occupied in cooperating with interested farmers, we left until a later time, attempts to regulate by law the proper use of land by reluctant farmers.'⁵⁸

The Soil Conservation Service eventually came to terms with its educational role, if only for lack of alternatives. Advice and technical assistance became the instruments of choice, making the everyday work of soil conservation akin to 'selling insurance', as a long-time

⁵⁵ This figure is based on total expenditures during fiscal years 1935–1963. (R. Brunell Held and Marion Clawson, *Soil Conservation in Perspective* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1965), p. 87.)

⁵⁶ Simms, *Soil Conservation Service*, p. 133.

⁵⁷ National Archives of the United States RG 114 Entry 1039 Box 8 Folder 'Historical Materl. on SC Districts', U.S. Department of Agriculture, Soil Conservation Service, *Land Use Regulation in Soil Conservation Districts* (SCS MP-29, January, 1947), foreword.

⁵⁸ Walter Clay Lowdermilk Interview, volume 1, p. 255.

employee noted retrospectively.⁵⁹ With that, the daily work of the Soil Conservation Service was far removed from the grand narratives of soil and civilisation: personal cooperation and concrete offers for help were what defined soil conservation in practice. Still, it is interesting that Bennett left it to his successor, Robert M. Salter, to elevate this practice to the status of actual policy, with the Cold War providing a convenient rationalisation. Speaking at the annual meeting of the National Association of Soil Conservation Districts in 1952, Salter declared that soil conservation ‘*must* be done within the framework of our American principles of human freedom and free enterprise. The last thing we want is to resort to compulsion by government edict ... That is the way Mr. Stalin is introducing technology into Soviet agriculture. But, free enterprise has no place in that system.’⁶⁰ Seventeen years after invoking Mussolini, the leadership of the Soil Conservation Service finally acceded to what the rank and file had long learned to live with: it made peace with democracy.

Enter Environmentalism

Salter’s speech also spelled out what cooperation meant in a 1950s context: boosting production. ‘We need to concentrate on increasing yields on grassland and treeland as well as on cultivated land’, Salter told his audience.⁶¹ It brought Salter a public dispute with his predecessor who charged him of ‘wrecking soil conservation’ – another piece of evidence showing that Bennett was largely oblivious of the dynamics that was driving soil conservation practice.⁶² ‘In the postwar years, the SCS program appealed in particular

⁵⁹ Iowa State University Library, Special Collections Department, MS-198 Box 1 Folder 4, Oral History Interview with William B. Davey, p. 8.

⁶⁰ National Archives of the United States RG 114 Entry 1039 Box 2 Folder ‘Speeches – Salter’, The Job Ahead. A Talk by Dr. Robt. M. Salter, Chief, Soil Conservation Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, at the 6th annual meeting of the National Association of Soil Conservation Districts at Cleveland, Ohio, on 28 Feb. 1952, p. 3. Emphasis in the original.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁶² Hugh H. Bennett, ‘They’re Wrecking Soil Conservation’, *Country Gentle-*

to the young, the well-to-do, the educated, and the entrepreneurial farmer – all those in the forefront of American agribusiness’, Donald Worster wrote.⁶³ As part of its emphatic embrace of productivism, the Soil Conservation Service began to promote farm drainage, and that brought it into conflict with wildlife protection, which became a growing source of trouble with the boom of the environmental movement during the 1960s and 1970s.⁶⁴

The Soil Conservation Service saw itself as a legitimate heir of the conservation tradition. Against that background, coming under fire from conservation interests was a traumatic experience. As Mel Davis, chief of the Soil Conservation Service from 1975 to 1979, recalled in an interview, ‘Those environmental groups, and I can take the National Wildlife Federation as a specific example, gave me hell up one side and down the other, yet they never came to my office to sit down and talk to me about these problems. They would leave it up to you to come over there because they thought that they were in the driver’s seat now.’⁶⁵

The quotation shows that the split was as much about policies as about style. The environmentalists showed only scant interest in the cooperation that stood at the centre of soil conservation work since the New Deal.

The gap between environmentalists and the Soil Conservation Service was first and foremost a matter of discourse. The environmentalists had the language of ecology – the Service had a language of cooperation and education, but it aimed for farmers only; for the wider public, the Soil Conservation Service had a powerful narrative about its *goals* and *legitimacy* but not about its *everyday practice*. It was a veri-

man 72 / 12 (1952): 21, 52, 56, and Robert M. Salter, ‘We’re Speeding Up Soil Conservation’, *Country Gentleman* 73 / 1 (1953): 40–2.

⁶³ Donald Worster, *The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Ecological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 77.

⁶⁴ Simms, *Soil Conservation Service*, pp. 140–1.

⁶⁵ Steven E. Phillips and Douglas Helms (eds), *Interviews with Chiefs of the Soil Conservation Service: Williams, Grant, Davis, and Berg* (United States Department of Agriculture, Soil Conservation Service, Economics and Social Sciences Division, NHQ, Historical Notes Number 3, August 1994), p. 99.

table clash of intellectual worlds, perhaps deeper in style and rhetoric than in actual concerns, and it left deep wounds down to the choice of words. When Douglas Helms used the word ‘environmental’ in an oral history interview in 1981, Gordon K. Zimmerman, a Soil Conservation Service employee since 1935, retorted sharply, ‘The word “environment” is a poisonous word with a lot of our people.’⁶⁶

The sense of disorientation did not remain confined to matters of policy. Environmental historians were quick to seize on the Dust Bowl, most prominently Donald Worster, whose third book, *Dust Bowl*, offered a new interpretation of the event. ‘The ultimate meaning of the dust storms in the 1930s was that America as a whole, not just the plains, was badly out of balance with its natural environment’, Worster wrote. From his point of view, the Dust Bowl was akin to an environmental nemesis, the logical result of a nation’s approach to environmental issues: ‘the inevitable outcome of a culture that deliberately, self-consciously, set itself that task of dominating and exploiting the land for all it was worth.’ Worster’s critique of that culture, shaped as it was by ‘capitalism’ as ‘the decisive factor in this nation’s use of nature’, was just to the taste of left-leaning American academics. *Dust Bowl* won the Bancroft Prize in 1980 and is widely hailed as an environmental history classic.⁶⁷ It inspired a tradition that had environmentalists using the event as their nuclear option: if everything else fails, you always have the Dust Bowl. It has happened, it was terrible, and it will happen again if we do not change.⁶⁸

Curiously, Worster’s *Dust Bowl* was not the only book on the topic published in 1979. Paul Bonnifield’s *The Dust Bowl* offered an altogether different narrative. He told the story of the Dust Bowl as a tale of federal intrusions into Midwestern affairs. His goal was to exonerate the farmers of the plains from undeserved criticism: ‘the story of the heartland of the dust bowl is the chronicle of hardworking, stouthearted folks who withstood the onslaught of nature at

⁶⁶ Iowa State University Library, Special Collections Department, MS-198 Box 3 Folder 4, Oral History Interview with Gordon K. Zimmerman, p. 102.

⁶⁷ Worster, *Dust Bowl*, quotations pp. 43, 4, 5.

⁶⁸ For an example, see Christof Mauch, *The Growth of Trees: A Historical Perspective on Sustainability*, Carl-von-Carlowitz Series (Munich: Oekom, 2014), pp. 29–30.

its worst, while living through a devastating depression and facing government idealism', Bonnifield declared.⁶⁹ Students of American environmental policy will recognise the tune: hardworking people, undeserved hardships, arrogant feds and no one around with some common sense. Bonnifield's narrative neatly encapsulates the anti-environmental, 'pro-business' sentiment that has been a fixture of American politics since the 1970s.⁷⁰

Reviewers were less than impressed. *Human Ecology* called Bonnifield's book 'partisan' and 'disappointing', and the *American Historical Review* declared that 'local efforts need to be seen in a broader context'.⁷¹ But from the viewpoint of memory studies, it makes for a fascinating complement to Worster's narrative: here we have, published in the same year, the two themes that have dominated the American environmental discourse ever since. Even more, neither side ever felt the urge to discuss with the opposite faction, obviously sensing that intellectual engagement would elevate the other side unduly. Interestingly, neither book inspired further studies that would have refined the two arguments, let alone explored the middle ground. With Worster and Bonnifield, environmentalists and anti-environmentalists had said what had to be said.

Local Opinion

More than a decade went by until Pamela Riney-Kehrberg published another book on the Dust Bowl. Her *Rooted in Dust* is a social history of those who suffered and stayed. Unlike Bonnifield, she gives due credit to federal assistance programmes: 'Without government aid, very few would have been able to remain farmers throughout the decade.'⁷² She is no more impressed with Worster's book, asserting that it provides 'a highly impressionistic examination of the ecological and

⁶⁹ Paul Bonnifield, *The Dust Bowl: Men, Dirt, and Depression* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1979), p. xii.

⁷⁰ Cronon, 'A Place for Stories', pp. 1362–3.

⁷¹ *Human Ecology*, 8 / 1 (1980): 75; *American Historical Review*, 85 / 1 (1980): 230.

⁷² Riney-Kehrberg, *Rooted in Dust*, p. 4.

social dimensions of the problems of the 1930s.⁷³ She counters both readings with an empirically rich description of everyday life in the region. Together with R. Douglas Hurt's *Dust Bowl* of 1981, it is one of the few books about the topic that does not have an axe to grind.⁷⁴

The story that emerges is largely unheroic. It is about stubborn optimism, poverty, frail communities, and early experiments with irrigation. The book describes a complicated, incoherent set of local responses, and that is all the more interesting as Riney-Kehrberg zoomed in on only sixteen counties in the southwestern part of Kansas. It is a reminder that the Dust Bowl region is large and diverse when looked up close, and that means that archives can provide ample fodder for many divergent readings. There were many paths through the drought of the 1930s, and the absence of hubs and cultural centres prevented the region from distilling some iconic careers out of the chaos of different livelihoods. If the region is largely silent in the quest for cultural hegemony over the Dust Bowl, it is not for lack of things to say but for lack of a consensus about which stories matter most.

The one thing that is clear is that the Dust Bowl did not inspire a reversal that would have matched the moral thrust of the soil jeremiads. The region never emerged as a model of responsible land stewardship, and never strived to be. As a result, erosion remains a critical problem on the Southern Plains to the present day. The most recent overview conducted by the National Resources Conservation Service, the 2007 National Resources Inventory, showed that the Southern Plains are losing 6.2 tons of soil per acre per year due to wind erosion, the highest figure for the major agricultural regions of the United States. Every year, the Southern Plains are losing more than 200 million tons of topsoil. But then, the region performed worst in a large community of sinners. Even the Corn Belt region, by far the region least prone to this type of erosion, is losing 15.9 million tons of soil to the wind every year.⁷⁵ Soil loss continues to

⁷³ Ibid., p. 198.

⁷⁴ Hurt, *Dust Bowl*.

⁷⁵ http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/soils/survey/geo/?cid=nrcs143_013655 (accessed 9 Jan. 2015).

worry agriculturalists globally, particularly in light of concerns about feeding more than ten billion mouths in the twenty-first century world. It is not difficult to imagine that the Dust Bowl will figure prominently in future debates about the land and its fertility. That makes it all the more important to come to terms with the event.

In the News

In 2006, Timothy Egan published yet another book about the Dust Bowl. Following a time-honoured tradition, he did not care about preexisting readings. He did not even care about underlying causes and consequences. Instead, Egan focused on personal stories, many of them recounted through oral history interviews. His book drew on some real characters such as John McCarty, the founder of the Dalhart Last Man Club, where membership required a signed pledge not to abandon the land. McCarty left in 1936. In fact, these ‘untold stories’ were so important to Egan that he mentioned them in his subtitle. Egan is a Pulitzer-prize winning journalist, and thus knows the media fashions of the day: it will feel right if you make it personal. Egan produced a fitting Dust Bowl narrative for a media age that enjoys personal drama, particularly from a distance, and discounts abstract categories such as class, gender and race, not to mention cause and effect.⁷⁶

The book became a rousing success. It received a National Book Award and was named a New York Times Editors’ Choice. It stands a good chance of being the bestselling book about the Dust Bowl, if only in non-fiction (Steinbeck’s *Grapes* are hard to beat in the fiction genre). But as so often, the narrative said as much about contemporary sentiments. Recollections of hard times fell on fertile ground in

⁷⁶ Egan, *Worst Hard Time*. For the McCarty story, see pp. 229, 286. However, Egan did not discover McCarty’s club. (See Worster, *Dust Bowl*, p. 42, and Hurt, *Dust Bowl*, p. 58.) The infatuation with eyewitness accounts is also evident in Dayton Duncan, Ken Burns, *The Dust Bowl. An Illustrated History* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2012). For scholarly critiques of this film, see Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, Geoff Cunfer, R. Douglas Hurt and Julie Courtwright, ‘Historians’ Reaction to the Documentary, *The Dust Bowl*, *Agricultural History* **88** (2014): 262–88.

a struggling American middle class. For those infatuated with the American 'war on terror', the narrative offered a dark, sinister enemy that attacks out of nowhere – a reading underscored by a dust jacket noting that the dust storms 'terrorized' a region. In the year before the book launch, hurricane Katrina brought another disaster at the intersection of man and the natural world. In short, Egan's book was about more than events of the 1930s. The Dust Bowl provided a multipurpose backdrop for the Great American Story of hardship and perseverance.

In other words, Egan is using the Dust Bowl as a ploy for a much bigger story about America; but then, he is only the latest one to do so. Since the 1930s, the Dust Bowl has been a canvas for widely different narratives: about rural poverty and forced migration, about the need to save the soil, about capitalism's environmental hubris, about the folly of federal policies and, most recently, about hard times as such. The Dust Bowl obviously holds an attraction for those who seek moral clarity, or at least the semblance thereof. As one of the largest disasters in American history, it is a coveted prize that people of different stripes have sought to claim, and Egan's book shows that the dust has not settled in the new millennium. The enduring hope is that the sheer force of those huge clouds of sand, a true monster in both material and metaphorical respect, will overwhelm all countervailing arguments. The reality is that Dust Bowl narratives say as much about history as about the authors' political inclinations, or, in Egan's case, the lack thereof.

Curiously, these personal stories can coexist with phrases in the soil jeremiad tradition. Egan starts his book with a plea for 'humility' and ends with glowing remarks about Bennett and his legacy.⁷⁷ Dayton Duncan and Ken Burns, who published a coffee table book that went with an oral history documentary, had no problems with environmental rhetoric either. According to the preface, their book offers 'a morality tale about our relationship to the land that sustains us – a lesson we ignore at our peril'.⁷⁸ Media people know that some sprinkles

⁷⁷ Egan, *Worst Hard Time*, pp. 2, 311.

⁷⁸ Duncan and Burns, *The Dust Bowl*, p. 17.

of green usually come across well, particularly as they will not develop a life of their own if they stay aloft of groups and political agendas.

It is easy to criticise the superficial green rhetoric of media types, but that would be easier if statements from the environmental camp were less flimsy. As this article was going to press, Laurent Fabius, the foreign minister of France and chairman of the upcoming Paris climate summit, published an article that invoked the Dust Bowl in order to underscore that it was high time to get serious about climate change.⁷⁹ In other words, the newsroom vision at the beginning of this article is much closer to reality than one might have expected. In common environmentalist rhetoric, the Dust Bowl is tantamount to a free-floating icon with human drama and nice pictures that we readily consume without much thought until the next thing catches our eye. But then, we do not have to leave it at that.

Soil Stories for the Twenty-first Century, or: What Is The Dust Bowl Really Good For?

For all their differences, Dust Bowl narratives have traditionally been about generalities. Curiously, the practice of soil conservation favours the opposite mindset: it is about close observation, about context and about solutions that suit local peculiarities. Erosion control requires balancing a wide range of factors from rainfall and humidity to market prices, and soils tend to defy universal panaceas through their own intricacies. However, these local decisions are not necessarily made locally: they are framed by policies and institutions, resources and narratives. The link between grand narratives and local practices has been notoriously weak throughout history, and it is here that historians should get to work as the seek Dust Bowl stories for the twenty-first century.

As we have seen, the chasm between grand narratives and everyday practice goes right back to the hasty buildup of a soil conservation bureaucracy during the New Deal. The self-declared defenders of the soil had a great story about soil and civilisation and enormous

⁷⁹ Laurent Fabius, 'Das Klima der Angst', *Die Zeit*, 7 May 2015, 11.

financial resources, but they had no clear idea about how to get farmers into their camp. Authoritarian visions à la Mussolini were the direct result of an approach that was strong on moral conviction and short on understanding for the intricacies of decisions on the farm. The Soil Conservation Service eventually learned how to get the ear of the farmer, with money and technical support emerging as the key instruments, but the cooperation of farmers and soil conservationists never found an expression in iconic stories. The Soil Conservation Service boasted about being good friends with the farmers – mandatory rhetoric in the US Department of Agriculture – but it was reluctant to tell real stories of soil conservation out in the fields, presumably because these stories were usually too ambiguous for a great moral crusade. That is where scholars should start to dig.

Such an endeavour can connect with the latest trend in Dust Bowl historiography: computer use. Scholars such as Geoff Cunfer have compiled huge amounts of data and use them to map regional and local situations in great detail.⁸⁰ These publications give us a better idea of the diversity of local situations and allow us to move closer to experiences on the ground without the vagaries of anecdotal evidence. With that, these publications may open a new window on the daily struggles of people out in the fields. Most Dust Bowl narratives have treated terraces, no-tillage ploughing and other anti-erosion practices as to how they relate to broader mindsets, but it could be rewarding to discuss them more in their own right. The real fight against erosion has usually been about compromises rather than moral absolutes, and we need to know more about how these compromises were forged.

Of course, computer use can also lead to a different result. It is quite possible that the sheer masses of data will drown clear conclu-

⁸⁰ Geoff Cunfer, *On the Great Plains: Agriculture and Environment* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2005); Kenneth Sylvester, Geoff Cunfer, 'An Unremembered Diversity: Mixed Husbandry and the American Grasslands', *Agricultural History* **83** (2009): 352–83; Kenneth M. Sylvester and Eric S.A. Ruple, 'Revising the Dust Bowl: High Above the Kansas Grasslands', *Environmental History* **17** (2012): 603–33. All these publications make a point of contradicting existing Dust Bowl narratives, but they treat them as more homogeneous than they really were.

sions in a cataclysm of complications, an outcome that would befit an age where having superabundant information ranks higher than actually understanding it. Quantitative data has its own unique way to foster tunnel vision and remarks such as 'closer to the ground the story remains more complex' raise a certain suspicion.⁸¹ It seems that we can make more out of data-driven projects if we connect the numbers with the mythology of the Dust Bowl: a better awareness of realities on the ground is also an opportunity to see grand narratives as a part of local and regional histories. We know the great stories of soil conservation expertise, of hardship and endurance, of adaptation and federal aid, but we need to bring these stories into a dialogue with what went on out in the field and see where narratives reinforced practical efforts, where tensions emerged, and where situations on the ground encouraged reinterpretations. Myths are no less part of the reality of agriculture than tractors and mineral fertiliser.

These stories will likely be more complicated and contradictory than existing narratives, but that is precisely the point: in an age where the trade value of clear-cut Dust Bowl tales is undergoing rapid inflation, there is a market for authentic, ambivalent stories. After all, environmentalists of the twenty-first century know a thing or two about ambivalence. The door is wide open for a new generation of Dust Bowl historiography that combines sensitivity to regional specifics with an awareness of wider contexts. But such a history will remain below its potential if it does not incorporate existing narratives, their underlying interests, and their affiliations. We need a mythology of the Dust Bowl as we search for a new environmental history in the twenty-first century. And we need it to understand where we are in the eternal fight for fertile soil.

Acknowledgements

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⁸¹ Sylvester and Cunfer, *Unremembered Diversity*, p. 354.