

CORN, Betty Fussell

America's most astounding crop? Betty Fussell's *Corn: The Myths and History, The Culture and Agriculture, The Art and Science of America's Quintessential Crop* (357pp., Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1992) makes a strong case. Everything in a supermarket has been touched by corn – everything!

Corn grows in more places than any other grain, and produces more energy, quicker. “Anything made from a barrel of petroleum can be made from a bushel of corn.” It hybridizes so easily that there are thousands of varieties, yet it can't reproduce without human help. For geneticists, corn is the fruit fly of plants. As of the 1990's almost half of all fertilizers and pesticides were used on corn. In early Native American households corn plants served for medicines, food, mats, brushes, back scratchers, fuel and glue; more recently for mattress stuffing, toilet paper, smoking pipes, weapons, cleaning agents and fish bait – to name some of the more prominent.

Shortly after Columbus' return from the Americas, corn spread to every continent. By the 1500's it was becoming the staple of the poor all over Europe. By the mid-19th century five times more corn was grown in the U.S. than all other grains and vegetables combined. Now the U.S.'s corn belt is replicated in Brazil, Argentina, Germany, Italy and South Africa; China produces more than anyone but the U.S.

As early as 1911 the Midwest was “corn sick” with excess, and farmers still suffer from “chronic excess capacity” – a “mortal disease.” Nebraska, for instance, has three “crops” – corn, freight rates and interest, in ascending order of value. Profits go to middlemen, not farmers. Three quarters of corn belt farmers must work outside their farms to survive. Agribusiness, the largest U.S. industry, “launders money for a chemical company. “All because our agricultural policy mandates a huge stockpile of cheap corn, and pays farmers to grow more and more.

Betty Fussell's family history intertwines with the history of corn. She comes from a long line of Ulster Scots Presbyterian moonshiners. Her ancestors saw themselves as wheat saints (settlers) confronting corn savages (Native Americans).

And latecomers at that, since for 7,000 years a corn culture thrived from South America to Canada. Even the Plains Indians, whom we think of as buffalo hunters, were corn people as well.

Fussell covers a wide range of corn topics – its biology, attempts to solve its mysterious origin, the many, many ways to prepare it, its shift from infinite variety at the end of the 19th century to monoculture today. She tells

the story of Cornflakes, of the Kellogg brothers (the union of engineer, preacher and ad man), of the many folks worldwide who suffered from pellagra because they didn't know corn was deficient in niacin and so missed the importance of cooking it with ash, lye, lime or alkali.

But of all her topics, the myths of corn most fascinated me -- ancient identification of the corn cycle with all life, as root of language, rituals and calendars. The elemental facts of Pueblo life, for instance, were air, earth, water, fire – and corn. They linked the stars to each kernel of corn, ordering their universe: circles were kernels, the earth navel, wombs, globes. Lines were rainfall, lightning, irrigation. As the Hohokam of the American Southwest say, “the corn is the same as the people.” Especially in Central and South America human and animal blood fertilized corn – washed in the blood of the llama.

Now the sacred planting songs have been drowned in the roar of combines, and Fussell sees “battalions, divisions, armies of corn . . . military-industrial perfection.”

Finally she evokes corn festivals, carnivals and parades, with cornhusking contests, corn queens and kings, corn palaces – “fantasies, deliriums, phantasmagorias of corn.” We are all, ancient and modern, corn people.

Reviewed by Bill Keep