

Against the Grain: How Agriculture Hijacked Civilization

This Book calls for rethinking the farm system

By Bill Keep

"In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground."

God banished Adam from Eden — and farming began.

So says Richard Manning in "Against the Grain: How Agriculture Hijacked Civilization" (232pp, North Point Press, 2004). If Eden was the hunter-gatherer world, expulsion to a life of farming was a curse indeed.

Manning turns the history of agriculture and of human societies on its ear. Throughout our hunter-gatherer millennia (290,000 years) we lived in an eternal Now, without expectation of change. But with agriculture (a mere 10,000 years old) we could create, store and distribute food; thus the few could gain power over the many, and our deepest and most widespread religion, belief in progress, could begin. Among the results, famine — "the mark of a maturing agricultural society," and poverty, "agriculture's chief product." "The goal of agriculture is not feeding people; it is the accumulation of wealth."

Once societies became dependent on nutritionally poor grain and potatoes, several things proliferated — malnutrition, tooth decay, vermin, weeds, crowd-related diseases and (until recently) smaller bodies for humans and domestic animals. Soft foods allowed earlier weaning and more frequent birthing, which created a huge force of stoop labor for building pyramids, mounds, ziggurats and temples, and created population explosions that required migration, disease, war and famine to control.

Ensuing centuries played endless variations on these patterns — famines, regularly repeated up into our own times, forced migrations, imperialism and war (creating new markets, acquiring land for feeding exploding populations); slavery (fueled by sugar), and great gaps between the few controlling rich and the many laboring poor.

When we ran out of new cultivable land, we turned to industrial fertilizers, machines and plant breeding to increase efficiency. By now we had entered an era of permanent surplus of commodities (as opposed to food) — wheat, rice, and corn preeminently, in which prices were kept low and farmers depended on subsidies.

Agriculture feeds the world. True, says Manning, but very badly. Most of the world's poor subsist on grains and are therefore constantly malnourished. Yet tying food to the health and

well-being of humans is heresy within all political systems. The USDA, finding nutrition and the expanding of markets at odds, has consistently promoted markets. And when industrial agriculture demonized nature, processed food became the barrier between us and savagery. "The food processors were not offering nutrition; they were offering the illusion of wealth, stability, and order, and consumers became willing accomplices."

And what of contemporary farmers? The suicide rate among American farmers and ranchers is three times the national average. U.S. grain puts third-world farmers out of business. The number of U.S. farms has shrunk dramatically, our bread basket now a "basket case," a sea of grain controlled by a handful of processors, who take most of the profit — industrial agriculture with the countryside as factory.

There are positive trends such as microbreweries, bakeries, farmers' markets, organic foods, but sustainable agriculture's job is not easy — "to observe, to respond, to evolve, to co-opt the co-ops, to morph, to feed on a decaying system."

In Manning's summary, "we need a system in which a variety of plants grow together permanently, performing fertilization and defense from insects as well as providing food. This requires a reinvention by selection, by breeding, by choice, by patient learning, by re-examining the genetic diversity that remains, by creating feral farming. Not back to the garden, back to the wild."

