In Defense of Loose Translations: An Indian Life in an Academic World
by Elizabeth Cook-Lynn
211 pages, illustrations.
Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018, cloth $29.95.

The author begins by posing the question: “Is this a memoir?” (p. 2). Cook-Lynn, professor emerita at Eastern Washington University, began her career in literary criticism but made a name for herself by taking on established scholars whom she deemed colonial apologists blinded by an entrenched ethnocentrism that ignored not only Native American epistemologies but often the very existence of Indians themselves. Autobiographical in nature, the book is an engaging examination of family experiences, academic disputes, and the perspectives of an esteemed member of the generation who helped bring American Indian studies to life as a discipline. Cook-Lynn ponders its beginnings, growing pains, and potential for new directions, making it clear that she intends to continue to summon withering criticism and will neither rest on her laurels nor suffer fools lightly.

At its heart, this is a book about writing. For Cook-Lynn, “carefully using the power of words makes me, and all of us who try, into better human beings” (p. 55). Sprinkled throughout the text are examples of her poetry, interpolations of traditional Native songs and stories, and the hallmark “acid pen” (p. 47) that she has wielded in criticism of others adjudged to uphold colonial dogma in an often unquestioned American historiography of exceptionalism and justification of land theft and anti-Indian sentiment. Her unbridled honesty and unwillingness to compromise on issues that she sees as paramount to reckoning with our national past have earned her both legions of fans and detractors, and she has both won and lost friends over her commitment to the anticolonial discourse. Thus, the journey has not always been an easy one, but she recognizes both the struggles and empowerment in having “accepted the notion that I am not only a ‘minority’ writer, I am also a ‘political’ writer” (p. 67). Whether praised or vilified for her critiques, she clearly would not trade her life for another, and it has afforded her a rich tableau of experience as student, scholar, activist, firebrand, mother, grandmother, and wife.

Cook-Lynn’s sharp wit, careful deconstruction of U.S. policies, and commentary on the complicity of politicians and the press in propping up a sanitized version of the national history could well be, at this point, a matter of preaching to the converted. Those unfamiliar with her work, however, can find much to admire in her positions and may be drawn to consult her earlier writings. She embodies a remarkable consistency and remains unflinching in her dedication to her truth. The final chapters, hard meditations on the choices she has made as an Indian academic, are especially poignant and contribute much to appreciating the intellectual core of American Indian studies. In asking us to peel away the layers of ugly racism, violence, and economic divisions that have privileged some over others, her essential appeal is less to produce discomfort and guilt than to improve her readers’ understanding of our shared heritage. The difficulty in dislodging a simplistically patriotic narrative of this nation can be witnessed, perhaps surprisingly, even among students at the all-Native institution where I teach, a point that Cook-Lynn addresses in discussing the complicated relationship of American Indians with the U.S. Armed Forces that they have served faithfully for centuries. In the final analysis, the author’s clarion call is for us to take a hard look at ourselves because “to dismantle the authority of a wrongfully told history commits us to a brilliant future rather than a desolate aftermath” (p. 211). Thus, what she presents is a metamemoir, one we will do well to digest and discuss—or dismiss to our detriment.

Reviewed by Eric P. Anderson, professor of history, indigenous and American Indian studies, Haskell Indian Nations University, Lawrence, Kansas.
Farming across Borders: A Transnational History of the North American West
edited by Sterling Evans

xxv + 460 pages, illustrations, notes, index.
College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2017, cloth $35.00.

Farming across Borders: A Transnational History of the North American West, according to its editor, Sterling Evans, is “intended to add to the ever-growing historiography of North American borderlands and transnational history through the lens of agricultural history” (p. xxi). It does so comprehensively with its nineteen chapters organized into six parts that focus on the U.S.-Canadian and U.S.-Mexico borderlands.

The volume’s contributors examine how agricultural practices connect across geopolitical boundaries yet shift away from the state-centered analyses that are prominent in transnational and borderlands studies. They show just how deep and wide those connections are. Boundaries and borders (of all sorts) have tended to be porous and fluid, but closing them at times served certain purposes. The book thus reminds us that borders are constructs whose conceptual and spatial meanings have shifted over time. As a whole, the volume brings a broader scale and new richness to the study of agricultural history, convincing this reader of the value of transnational and borderlands approaches.

Part 1 showcases the authors’ use of different methodologies to explore the wide web of transcontinental agricultural connections. A chapter on twine production deploys the concept of interdependency and treads various pathways connecting regional economic shifts, global policy, and usages of prison labor. Another applies the lens of local history to show the confluences shaping midwestern meat production, demonstrating the need to rethink concepts of borderlands. A particularly intriguing chapter integrates race analysis to show how African Americans who developed land in Mexico rejected the racial oppression that is rife in the United States while following its models of agricultural mobility.

Part 2 focuses on commodity histories. It provides a lesson in how historians can use transnational and borderlands approaches to show that agricultural practice pivoted not only on economic and technological choices but also on social and cultural influences. For example, a chapter on citriculture shows how racial constructs validated Anglo growers’ “colonization” of Texas borderlands. We also see how combinations of social, economic, technological, and environmental factors play out in chapters addressing transprairie flax production, the implications of valuing “scientific” over indigenous methods of chili pepper production in New Mexico, and a transregional environmental history of the tomato industry.

Part 3 considers “sense of place,” a concept that typically figures in local and community history. Here, it helps tease out connections between micro- and macrolevel developments. The first author in this part uses historical geography to reveal how differing national narratives shaped American and Canadian constructs of specific transborder regions; the next uses digital map analysis to interpret local land-use patterns across transborder plains; and the last interrogates how shifting geopolitical boundaries, policy, and technology affected the multicultural contexts of Texas borderlands ranching.

Parts 4 and 5 shed new light on the oft-ignored experiences of migrant laborers, which stretched across urban and rural spaces and from national borders deep into interiors. In several cases, oral histories and interviews help flesh out stories and humanize actors often seen only as victims or powerless. Multiple chapters illuminate the horrific treatment experienced by migrant laborers; for example, workers in the Depression-era pecan industry found little recourse, even in unions, when employers blocked New Deal pay regulations. Several chapters examine how intertwined notions of gender and ethnicity shaped the diverse experiences of female stoop laborers, from Nebraska’s sugar beet fields to Texas’s cotton-growing areas. Questions of agency are prompted by a chapter examining how men in the bracero program spent their leisure time and another examining how aboriginal hop pickers mediated cross-cultural contact in “performing” authenticity. Chapters discussing transnational interest groups and harvesting businesses highlight both familial choices and organizational behavior as important determining factors.

Water issues are addressed in Part 6. The discussions of how diplomatic relations, local forces, and environmental pressures have informed the management of water crossing nation-state boundaries provide a cautionary tale and remind us that unilateral decision-making often only leads to more challenges.

The chapters are all compelling and insightful. I wanted, however, more engagement with the theoretical and conceptual questions that currently inform transnational and borderlands studies. Not all the authors situate their work within or address ongoing conversations in these fields. In addition, I wanted more consideration of how integrating agriculture into borderlands and transnational history might help refresh those fields and help us reset our notions of what even counts as a borderland or transnational. In the end, though, this is a very useful volume indeed.

Reviewed by Nancy K. Berlage, associate professor of history, Texas State University, San Marcos.

Reviews

147
Chemical Lands: Pesticides, Aerial Spraying, and Health in North America’s Grasslands since 1945

by David D. Vail

xi + 135 pages, illustrations, notes, index.
Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2018, cloth $39.95.

In Chemical Lands, David Vail explores a fixture of Great Plains life: the agricultural pilot, or ag pilot. Since the publication of Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring, scholars have portrayed ag pilots as reckless polluters. In this fascinating history of aerial spraying, Vail shows that these pilots have expertise in and intimate knowledge of the landscapes in which they operate. They need to understand the noxious weeds that infest fields, the types of plants and livestock on a particular stretch of land, and wind speeds and temperature to know whether conditions are right for spraying. Ultimately, Vail defends aerial sprayers as agricultural experts who have tested and experimented with herbicides and pesticides on the Great Plains since 1945.

Vail’s primary focus is on aerial spraying, but he also explains the long history of chemicals in the field, beginning with controlled burns. He discusses a late-nineteenth-century device called a “hopperdozzer,” a horse-drawn plow that sprayed pesticides on fields while simultaneously tilling (p. 16). Vail’s narrative demonstrates the caution of many Great Plains landowners when considering the efficacy and safety of aerial spraying. For example, the aircraft used in early spraying were not standardized airplanes. Rather, during the 1920s, former military pilots retrofitted planes with handmade hoppers and hand cranks to disperse herbicide and insecticides quickly and effectively. While these methods produced excellent results, many landowners remained apprehensive about employing them. Consequently, the North Central Weed Control Conference debated how to standardize and protect farmers’ crops from overexposure to chemicals. This discussion led to collaborative efforts among agricultural programs in midwestern states to devise methods of safely spraying crops. Regardless, many farmers still had misgivings about aerial spraying, especially after Carson’s 1962 masterpiece, Silent Spring, vilified ag pilots as careless. Many pilots agreed with her negative assessment of spraying DDT but wanted more recognition from landowners and the general public for their efforts to understand how to spray fields safely. Furthermore, landowners disparaged rogue pilots who sprayed the wrong fields or used adulterated pesticides, thus further contributing to the stereotype of the careless crop duster. Overall, Vail offers a tremendous account of the debates between ag pilots and landowners over this new technology.

While this monograph is uncompromising in its attention to pilots and their expertise, this reviewer cannot help but think of the bandeirantes in Angus Wright’s The Death of Ramón González and contemplate the flaggers and other downwinders who would have been exposed to pesticides. Vail provides evidence that aerial engineers devised precautions for flaggers when pilots were applying chemicals, yet there is no mention of whether laws or legislation on these issues came into force. Chemical Lands is most compelling when examining the tension that brewed over accidents or the misapplication of herbicides and pesticides. While there are a few firsthand accounts, they are sparing. Perhaps this monograph would have benefited from offering a comparative history with the U.S. South or Southwest to explain more explicitly how Great Plains landowners avoided environmental catastrophe while utilizing aerial spraying.

Regardless of these minor quibbles, Vail has produced a terrific monograph. In his words, “To live in these ‘chemical lands’ meant constantly managing environmental changes wrought by pesticides and navigating the social and political responses to them” (p. 134). This quotation nicely summarizes what he has accomplished with his book and demonstrates the nuances and complexity of aerial spraying. Chemical Lands is a fine addition to environmental historiography, and scholars studying agricultural history will find it to be a useful book.

Reviewed by John Buchkoski, PhD candidate, University of Oklahoma, Norman.
All Because of a Mormon Cow: Historical Accounts of the Grattan Massacre, 1854–1855

edited by John D. McDermott, R. Eli Paul, and Sandra Lowry

xvii + 222 pages, illustrations, index. 
Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018, cloth $29.95.

In brief, this book provides an extensive examination of the 1854 Grattan Fight between U.S. Army Lieutenant J. L. Grattan and his soldiers and a small group of Lakota. During the fight, Grattan, all twenty-eight of his men, and a civilian interpreter perished, as did the Lakota leader, Conquering Bear. All Because of a Mormon Cow addresses the origin of the conflict (and, as the title suggests, it did start with the killing of a Mormon pioneer’s cow), the events immediately prior to the conflict, the conflict itself, and the aftermath.

To accomplish their in-depth investigation of the Grattan Fight, the editors utilize eighty firsthand accounts. These accounts come from officers, enlisted men, traders, Native Americans, and others who witnessed the fight itself as well as the events that precipitated the conflict and what transpired in the days, weeks, and months afterward. The editors also include a detailed bibliography of the Grattan Fight that includes correspondence written by witnesses, government reports, newspaper accounts, and books and scholarly articles. The editors also provide brief narratives before the accounts to add historical and social context.

Two issues about this book, however, are worth noting. First, while there is an in-depth focus on written accounts of the Grattan conflict, there is no incorporation of narratives from the Native American oral tradition. Such narratives concerning the fight would have been beneficial, in this reviewer’s opinion, and would have contributed significantly to our understanding of the conflict. I understand, however, that due to cost and logistics, it may not have been possible for the editors to visit Native Americans and communities that have a connection to this conflict to collect oral accounts of the fight.

Second, I question the use of the term “massacre.” The editors refer to the conflict as a “fight” numerous times in the Preface and Introduction; however, the title uses the word “massacre,” and it is used throughout the book. In my opinion, there are practical and ethical concerns regarding the use of this term to describe an event that was instigated by Grattan and the U.S. Army. While it is unfortunate that so many soldiers lost their lives, the U.S. Army acted as the aggressor; the soldiers showed up at the Lakota camp with the intention of fighting and fired the first shots. Many cultural, social, and historical contexts need to be taken into account before employing a word such as “massacre.”

While this book does not focus on Kansas, it is nonetheless relevant to those who study Kansas history. As the editors note, “Considered the first shots in the First Sioux War (1854–56), the Grattan Massacre came to be regarded as a seminal event in the history of the Plains Indian wars” (p. xi). The book also connects with greater issues surrounding the colonization of the American West in which the state of Kansas and its inhabitants played a significant role.

Reviewed by Sean M. Daley, professor of anthropology; director, Center for American Indian Studies; and associate director, American Indian Health Research and Education Alliance, Johnson County Community College, Overland Park, Kansas.
Hemp and the Global Economy: The Rise of Labor, Innovation, and Trade

by Nadra O. Hashim

viii + 194 pages, index.
Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017, cloth $100.00.

Hemp is an ancient crop with origins traceable to Asia and Europe. During the American Revolution, some farmers raised it for the manufacture of clothing because Great Britain had terminated its textile trade with the colonies. During the antebellum period, Kentucky farmers raised hemp for processing into rope and cloth for wrapping cotton bales. Hemp farming, processing, and manufacturing are a labor-intensive process. Few Americans know much about hemp in relation to our nation’s agricultural history, and most do not know the difference between hemp raised for industrial applications and hemp raised for medicinal or recreational purposes. Nadra Hashim attempts to clarify this misunderstanding by noting that hemp raised for industrial purposes is a different subvariety of the same species of hemp raised for medicinal and recreational reasons. The chemical qualities of these different subvarieties are distinctive and make all the difference. Her explanation of the differences is not particularly clear, but federal government classifications did not help her.

Hashim is particularly interested in the decline of hemp production during the nineteenth century. Hemp farming in Kentucky, which she incorrectly calls unique by neglecting the slave-based production in Missouri, failed due to lack of interest, energy, and technological innovation by farmers, planters, and manufacturers. Farmers remained content with the southern cotton market, slave labor, and the production of low-quality dew-rotted hemp instead of the higher-quality water-rotted hemp suitable for sailcloth and maritime rope. However, Hashim does not explain the labor methods and techniques required for the retting of each. The Civil War ended the hemp market in the South, and steam power replaced sails for transatlantic shipping and naval vessels. Government efforts during World War I and World War II to encourage production for various industrial and military uses failed. Low agricultural wages, insufficient technological change to improve processing and manufacturing, and higher-paying crops contributed to the unwillingness of farmers to raise hemp. Moreover, during the 1930s, many Americans became fearful that hemp produced a hallucinogenic substance the consumption of which would lead to drug addiction. Congress soon severely restricted production.

Overall, Hashim considers the production of hemp a lost opportunity for farmers and manufacturers. Other nations, such as China and Russia, produce hemp for food, fiber, and the world market. Manufacturers use hemp for computer chips, sealants, and paper as well as fiber for glass, carpets, and clothing, among other products. The big oil companies, she argues, also foiled hemp production to ensure a petrochemical market for a host of goods, including plastics, instead of hemp-derived products. Without a ready American market, farmers had little financial incentive to raise hemp. Clothing manufacturers prefer cotton and synthetic fibers for comfort and sales. Efforts to revive hemp production in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries for medicinal and recreational purposes, however, have gained increasing public acceptance. Government regulations strictly limit hemp production, primarily owing to its chemical rather than industrial value. No one should expect American farmers to begin raising hemp soon for any purpose.

Hashim has written a useful overview of global hemp production from antiquity to the present, including the current public policy controversies in the United States. Occasionally, her narrative is overwritten in relation to feudalism, slavery, and free labor, and counterfactual diversions sometimes weaken her historical argument, but the research base is good. Readers interested in hemp production as it relates to labor, manufacturing, and marketing worldwide, with an emphasis on the United States, will find this study a good place to begin.

Reviewed by R. Douglas Hurt, professor of history, Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana.