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## Review of *The Dust Bowl: An Agricultural and Social History* By R. Douglas Hurt

Gilbert C. Fite  
*University of Georgia*

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*The Dust Bowl: An Agricultural and Social History.* By R. Douglas Hurt. Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1981. Illustrations, bibliography, notes, index. 156 pp. \$19.95.

This is the third book to appear recently on the Dust Bowl and the 1930s. Some readers may ask whether the subject deserves another study so closely on the heels of Donald Wors-ter's *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*, and Paul Bonnifield's *The Dust Bowl: Men, Dirt, and Depression*, both published in 1979. But the fact is that scholars have been too long in filling this important historical void.

In *The Dust Bowl: An Agricultural and Social History*, R. Douglas Hurt has written a brief, clear, straightforward account of life and times on the southern plains during the difficult 1930s. He begins by showing that dust

storms had been characteristic of the region for many years, and then discusses the causes of the much more serious storms in the 1930s. Hurt explains that severe and extended drought, and high winds blowing over easily moved soils, were mainly responsible for the conditions. Plowing up the sod and failure to use soil conservation practices were also contributing factors. Hurt is much more evenhanded in his assessments of the causes of the Dust Bowl than Worster, who places most of the blame on greedy wheat growers.

In chapter 3 the author describes the dust storms from 1932 to the end of the decade, and then tells what life was like and how people responded to the harsh environment. He presents a courageous people who were tough and determined to stay, even against the worst odds. A chapter on soil conservation shows both how naïve many farmers were about the problems of wind erosion and how, with professional advice, they went about to control their blowing land. Hurt is especially good at detailing the technological means by which farmers sought to hold their soil in place. He believes that farmers, working through their newly organized soil conservation districts, made considerable progress in soil conservation.

Drought, of course, had a disastrous effect on farm production, and Hurt recognizes the important role of government in pulling many Dust Bowl farmers through the drought and depression. Chapters on the emergency cattle-buying program and the shelterbelt project round out the discussion of developments in the period. After surveying drought and dust conditions in the 1950s, Hurt concludes that farmers had learned from their experiences in the 1930s how better to care for their soil.

This book is based on extensive research in both primary and secondary sources. The author has digested a tremendous amount of material and presented the results in a relatively brief space. A number of excellent photographs provide a grim reminder of the "dirty thirties," especially to those of us who lived through the period on the plains. The book offers readers a

quick and yet fairly comprehensive view of the impact of drought and dust on the region.

One final note. None of the writers on the so-called Dust Bowl have given much attention to the northern plains, where severe dust storms also existed. Drifting soil, crop failures, the feeding of Russian thistles to livestock, cattle purchases, shelterbelts, and other developments on the southern plains were also common in the 1930s far to the north. Perhaps the next writer on the Dust Bowl era will take a broader look and study the entire Great Plains region.

GILBERT C. FITE  
Department of History  
University of Georgia