

be found in Thomas Isern's examination of harvesting techniques and technology on the North American plains.<sup>1</sup> As well, no effort seems to have been made to locate and photo-document extant examples of the products of these firms for inclusion in the book. Here again, there certainly is no lack of evidence from which to choose, since public collections on the prairies are rife with this material that, because it was often produced locally, is reasonably well documented.

At times the authors also display a disconcerting lack of understanding of the technology itself. Using a quotation from a 1932 source (by which time nostalgia for steam power had already taken root), reference is made to early self-propelled steam engines as "huge machines" (p. 89). This is inaccurate and does much to perpetuate the myth of "mammoth technology" on the prairies. Although some steam engines were enormous, their size and cost would have limited their use mostly to bonanza farms. Just as all farmers today do not operate John Deere four-wheel-drive tractors, all farmers around 1900 did not use 100 HP Case steam traction engines.

It is also dangerous to refer to the era of steam technology on the prairies as being cohesive when in fact it was made up of at least two quite different sub-periods, involving quite different steam technology. The authors go on to suggest that steam was faster and cheaper than the available alternatives such as "animal treadmills," neglecting the 10- and 12-horse sweeps that for

a time truly did provide an alternative for threshing purposes.

This example illustrates the problems that can occur when one does not engage in original research but rather reworks the existing historiography; the error regarding horse power was copied from Spector. The problem occurs when they misconstrue David Spector's comment (p. 152)<sup>2</sup> regarding internal combustion tractors and water. The point was not that "they did not need water to operate" (p. 90) – as many were water-cooled, they obviously did – but rather that they did not require the quantity of water necessary with a steam boiler. Similarly questionable is the authors' interpretation of the invention of the manure spreader, attributed to a farmer near Stratford, Ontario, who sold out to IHC prior to World War I (p. 198). Were one unfamiliar with the actual chronology of events, one might not be aware upon reading this book that firms on both sides of the international border had been manufacturing manure spreaders before 1900.

Given the richness of the subject matter, one would wish this book to whet the appetite for further in-depth research. Unfortunately, rather than teasing and prompting, it frustrates. In order to gain a better understanding of the prairie implement-manufacturing industry, there must be much more consideration given to the significance of the material culture and the motivation behind its creation. In this presentation it seems bland and colourless, and I am sure that the reality could not be farther from the truth.

#### NOTES

1. Thomas D. Isern, *Bull Threshers and Bindlestiffs: Harvesting and Threshing on the North American Plains* (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 1990).

2. David Spector, *Agriculture on the Prairies 1880–1940* (Ottawa: National Historic Parks and Sites Branch, 1983).

## Laurence F. Gross, *The Course of Industrial Decline: The Boott Cotton Mills of Lowell, Massachusetts, 1835–1955*

ALAN B. MCCULLOUGH

Gross, Laurence F. *The Course of Industrial Decline: The Boott Cotton Mills of Lowell, Massachusetts, 1835–1955*. Baltimore, Maryland:

The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993. 279 pp., 32 illus. Cloth U.S. \$42.00, ISBN 0-8018-4453-3.

*The Course of Industrial Decline* traces the history of the Boott Cotton Mills of Lowell, Massachusetts, from its founding in 1835 to its closure in 1955. It is a long story, and a depressing one. Gross characterizes the typical Lowell cotton company as a corporation which "devoted itself entirely to financial success, denied reciprocal responsibility to its employees, and left their care when unneeded to their families or public agencies" (p. 12). Gross's primary thesis is that the ultimate failure of the Boott Mills, and by implication of the New England cotton industry, was due not to any inherent flaws in the company or its employees but to a decision by the firm's proprietors to use it as a cash cow with all profits to be invested elsewhere. As a result it was, through most of its history, technologically obsolete, and survived only through the dedication of its managers and the exploitation of its work force.

The Boott was the eighth of nine major cotton companies formed at Lowell by a tightly knit group of Boston capitalists between 1825 and 1840. The early history of Lowell as an industrial city is well known and justly regarded as a key stage in the development of industry, industrial labour, and corporate organization in America. The significance of these developments is recognized in Lowell National Historical Park, which commemorates Lowell as a pioneer and symbol in the industrial revolution in America. The surviving Boott mills form a part of the park, and the author has conducted research on the mills under contract with the National Parks Service. The book under review doubtless owes something to this earlier research but it is an independent work, not a product of the National Parks Service.

Gross passes over the early history of Lowell and the Boott quickly; his focus is not on the Golden Age of Lowell but on the century following the Civil War when the processes that started with such promise in Lowell worked themselves out.

During the last three decades of the nineteenth century the Boott paid regular dividends, but apparent prosperity masked growing problems. The New England cotton industry was being pressed by southern cotton companies with lower labour costs and newer, more efficient mills. After the 1870s the owners of the Boott failed completely to re-invest in new buildings and were slow to replace equipment. By 1902 a consultant reported that the buildings

were beyond adaptation and should all be completely replaced. The recommendations, like many similar ones, were ignored. In 1905, following a crisis in the industry, the company was re-organized as Boott Mills. The re-organization changed little. The obsolete buildings remained in use for another 50 years and equipment remained outdated. Profitability was maintained by the "speed up" and the "stretch out," demanding more of workers while keeping wages so low that the mill could not retain its best workers. The company also benefited from a remarkably dedicated and able manager, Frederick Flather, and his two sons, who ran the mill for 50 years. Flather, an admirer of F.W. Taylor's scientific management theories, was not technically expert in the cotton industry but he had executive ability and was adept in exploiting niche markets. Most important, he was dedicated to the survival of the company; there is little doubt that he prolonged the Boott's existence by many years. What he could not do was persuade the mill owners to make the significant investment that the mill needed to be competitive. By 1955 the Boott had reached the end of its course and, faced with a refusal by labour to accept a wage rollback, the owners shut the mill down. The remarkable thing is not that the company failed but that it survived as long as it did. As Flather wrote to a former employee, the closing was "fifty years overdue" (p. 239).

Gross creates a richly textured and sympathetic history of the company, describing the interplay of management, labour and technology. He minimizes the traditional argument that competition with low-wage textile mills in the south doomed the New England mills and argues convincingly that both labour and management at the Boott fought an uphill battle to compensate for the antiquated mill buildings and outdated equipment imposed by the owners. If there is a weakness in his account of the company, it is in his portrait of the proprietors. They remain a largely faceless and nameless group. There is little sense of what led them to follow a policy that, they were advised again and again, would cripple the mill in the long term. Gross would probably argue that the personalities and personal motivations of the owners are not significant, for they were simply following principles which were inherent in the Lowell experiment and in much of modern economics: the absolute mobility of capital, the absence of any responsibility of capital to labour

beyond a daily wage, and the pursuit of comparative advantage.

The work would also be stronger if the author could provide more detail as to how profitable the Boott was and where the profits were re-invested; Gross makes it clear that profits were not plowed back into the mill. It is probable that the figures are simply not available but, if they could be presented, they would make a strong case even more convincing.

In his postscript Gross draws parallels between modern entrepreneurs, who are often criticized for "being devoted to the production

of profits, not of goods" (p. 242), and the owners of the Boott. He argues that the modern "plunderers" are not anomalies but are the legitimate descendants of the financiers who organized Lowell and the Boott. In short, Gross turns a study of a defunct textile corporation into a condemnation of economic practices and theories that are widely accepted today and are inherent in the North American Free Trade Agreement. How his thesis will be received and incorporated into the interpretation of Lowell is an interesting question.

## **Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America***

**PAUL NATHANSON**

Spigel, Lynn. *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992. 236 pp., 20 illus. Cloth U.S. \$42.00, ISBN 0-226-76966. Paper U.S. \$15.95, ISBN 0226-76967.

In *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America*, Lynn Spigel presents a social history of the new medium. Like both film and radio when they originated (and, for that matter, printed books), television did not become culturally integrated without controversy over its possible benefits and dangers. Spigel focusses attention on public debates, both explicit and implicit, over the relation between television and family life at a time when the nuclear family itself was being transformed by rapid social and economic change. The first chapter is about popular notions of both home and entertainment that emerged between the Victorian period and the years following World War II. The rest of the book is about the controversies that arose over specific problems associated with television. On moral, practical and even aesthetic grounds, for example, some people thought television would prove to be a beneficial and unifying force in the home, while others thought it would prove to be a destructive and divisive one. Of interest to Spigel is not so much the merits of arguments on either side but the existence of these arguments.

She refers to the latter as "discourses." I am irritated by her repetitive use of this word. But I would be troubled by her undisciplined and tendentious use of it in any case. Sometimes she refers simply to a debate or discussion. At other times, she refers to the specialized topic of a debate or discussion. At still other times, she refers to the "hidden agenda" of a debate or discussion. By now, it is no secret that discourse, especially when used in the plural and in this third sense, is a code word that identifies deconstruction. The basic premises are that (1) reality is known to us only through language; and (2) language is inherently subjective and biased: ergo (3) all forms of communication are culturally "constructed" (another dreadfully over-used word) to serve the special interests of some class and its "ideology" (a word she uses in the Marxist sense). Scholarship is not properly the study of empirically verifiable and supposedly objective facts, therefore, but the deconstruction, or problematization, of value-laden discourses that purport to be value-free. Scepticism about language is hardly a new idea. What is new, however, is the idea that language is totally incapable of conveying information about the outside world. Taking this to its logical conclusion would not only undermine scholarship, of course, but subject deconstruction itself to the same critique. Advocates resort, therefore, to a kind of selective cynicism: they deconstruct only the