

entities” (p. x). Makley’s stated intention is not to challenge Mackay’s gleaming reputation but to burnish it further; he argues “not only that Mackay is worthy of the status awarded him in Nevada and mining history, but also that he warrants standing as an important business leader fighting the consolidation of power in the Gilded Age” (p. 2).

That decades-long fight is detailed here through exhaustive descriptions of Mackay’s business ventures, from his sometimes volatile Comstock partnerships to his later forays into the telegraph and cable industries. In this effort, Makley benefits, self-professedly and with considerable gratitude, from a trove of research compiled by the late historian Grant H. Smith, author of *The History of the Comstock Lode* (1943), for Smith’s own planned but never written Mackay biography. Throughout, Makley provides useful context on issues ranging from Irish immigration and nineteenth-century mining practices to stock manipulation and emerging communications technology.

Makley makes good use of public records and contemporary media accounts to establish the nearly universal acclaim for Mackay’s character. *John Mackay* is, however, primarily the biography of a businessman, as the absence of nearly any surviving personal records or correspondence belonging to Mackay or any members of his family limits the potential for any deeper insights into the subject’s inner life.

Still, the public record can yield some fascinating tidbits. The social strivings of Louise Mackay, for instance,

offer a striking counterpoint to Mackay’s thrift and illuminate the hypocrisy of a Gilded Age society that both relied upon and disdained the era’s nouveau riche. While Mackay remained in Virginia City and San Francisco to tend to his business enterprises, his wife entertained in opulence in Paris and London. Perhaps nothing in the book so humanizes the emotionally elusive Mackay as the thought of a man who is forced to cross the wide ocean, time and time again, in order to lay eyes on the woman he loves.

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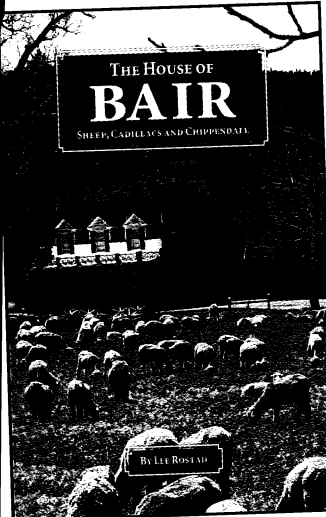
High Plains Horticulture

A HISTORY

John F. Freeman

University Press of Colorado, Boulder, 2008. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. xii + 270 pp. \$34.95 cloth.

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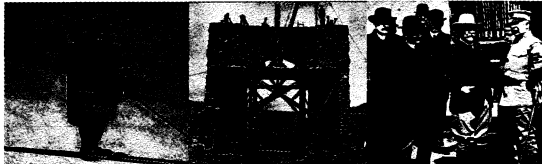
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cash-producing agriculture, was the supreme act of civilization by a Euro-American population bent on claiming the region for their own. While the production of wheat, sugar beets, cattle, and small grains might be important with regard to making a living, making a home and remaining in it across generations required trees for shade, beauty, and protection from the harsh and eroding winds; fruit cultivars and vegetables for life-giving dietary variety; and shrubs, bushes, and flowers for their simple, humanizing beauty.

In a dozen tightly structured chapters, Freeman presents his readers with the utopian Union Colonists of Greeley, Colorado; the labors of botanists Charles Bessey (Nebraska), Aven Nelson (Wyoming), and Niels Hansen (South Dakota); and the work of talented amateurs such as Jules Sandoz in the Sand Hills of Nebraska. Moreover, the U.S. Department of Agriculture makes a long and lasting appearance as do state-structured agriculture experiment stations.

Throughout the volume, Freeman repeatedly reminds readers that success on the High Plains has never been a guaranteed proposition. Those who have faced the challenge of claiming the plains for Euro-American inhabitation have achieved success—and this is still a matter of debate—only with a grudging acceptance of the limitations of a harsh and unforgiving landscape. Additionally, the definition of success has altered with the course of

a century's habitation. While once success was measured by the foodstuffs produced and the winds tamed, it is now measured by an increasingly urban population in terms of beautification: treed boulevards, attractive green parks, and gardening conducted for pleasure rather than survival.

Of particular interest is Freeman's discussion of the changing relationships of the federal and state governments with the residents of the High Plains in this endeavor and, specifically, how this relationship has changed over the last century. While once governments worked with settlers and scientists to produce plains-hardy fruits and vegetables as well as ornamental plantings, the movement of the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century has been toward grass- and cropland improvement. The subtext proposed is that not only has settling the plains come to an end but also that livestock and cash crops have replaced ornamentals and foodstuffs as essential for the maintenance of rural communities in governmental eyes.

Those seeking points to quibble with may question the role of Native American life in "civilization," the persistent confusion of Iowa State University and the University of Iowa, and the lack of maps. However, those seeking a social history of horticulture on the High Plains, as opposed to a scientific one, will find Freeman's volume pleasing.

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