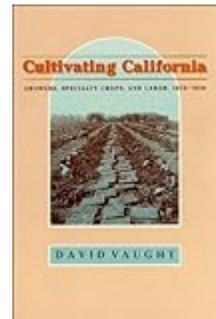




David Vaught. *Cultivating California: Growers, Speciality Crops, and Labor, 1875-1920.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999. x+280 pp. \$38.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-6221-2.



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Oh Lord, Please Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood

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In *Cultivating California*, David Vaught sets out to rebuild the reputation of California horticulturists, which he believes was trashed by Carry McWilliams' *Factories in the Field* in 1939. As Vaught notes, *Factories in the Field* has been tremendously influential, and continues to inform most historical treatments of California agriculture and labor relations therein.

As his title suggested, McWilliams portrayed California growers as rural industrialists, operating large-scale enterprises and motivated mainly by profit. Their industrial outlook and profit motivation showed through with especial clarity in their labor relations, which McWilliams and other like-minded observers, such as John Steinbeck, saw as callous and sometimes brutal.

Vaught believes that McWilliams misunderstood the nature of California horticulture, which was predominantly small in scale rather than large, that he oversimplified the views producers had of themselves and their enterprises, and that he underestimated the labor challenges confronting growers. In order to revise

McWilliams' harsh judgments, Vaught focuses on growers in the Fresno raisin district, the Newcastle soft deciduous fruit district, and the Davis almond district, paying some attention as well to Wheatland hops raisers.

Vaught effectively conveys some of the variety of the California horticultural experience to us. He has learned a great deal about the particular nature of the crops his subjects produced and of the special production, processing, and marketing challenges each presented, and he shares his knowledge with the reader, to the reader's benefit.

But Vaught isn't concerned primarily with the arcane details of raisin packing or almond hulling, he is mainly interested in what growers thought about their enterprise. He sees a strong idealistic streak in growers, expressed both in their publications and in their individual utterances. They believed that they had a special mission to produce and to introduce America to tasty and nutritious food, and that they had the responsibility to build and lead strong communities.

Vaught makes a good case for the idealism of growers,

illustrating the one-dimensionality of the McWilliams school in the process, but his own perspective on this issue is not without its flaws. I would suggest two things about the idealism of people in a capitalist economy that Vaught generally fails to consider. First, I think that most people engaged in an enterprise believe that they are doing something to benefit humanity in general and their communities in particular, and they might even believe that serving others is their reason for doing what they do. Even people who work for Philip Morris, whom many would define as almost literally merchants of death, seem to have their idealistic side, judging from their television commercials. And second, even idealists think at times in terms of self-interest. I would guess that many of the people reading this review think of what they do in idealistic terms, but that doesn't prevent them from being intensely interested in their salaries and benefit packages.

Vaught is mainly interested in the labor arrangements and relationships growers developed, though, and here he effectively illustrates the variety of laborers and labor systems operating in California horticulture, especially prior to World War I, when Mexican labor was not dominant. Vaught notes that many growers preferred Asian laborers, especially Chinese and later Japanese, but they were also sensitive to anti-Oriental biases in their state and in their communities. Eventually, grower preferences and the demands of the crops resulted in the emergence of a variety of labor systems. Many growers in the Newcastle district put their land out to Chinese and Japanese tenants, raisin producers preferred Japanese contract laborers, almond growers made arrangements with Sikh labor contractors, and hops producers employed entire families, with a preference for European Americans.

Vaught demonstrates convincingly that labor relations in California horticultural districts seldom conformed to McWilliams' portrayal of brutal employers and oppressed workers. He notes that labor problems bedev-

iled growers even more than production and marketing problems, and that workers were shrewd enough to recognize when growers were in a bind and were quite willing to take advantage of such situations to advance their own interests. This more nuanced picture provides a welcome relief to the perspective of McWilliams and his followers, but there are times when Vaught overcompensates by identifying too closely with growers. His explanation of the infamous Wheatland Hops Riot at the Durst Brothers Ranch in 1913, for example, sounds as if it was written by Ralph Durst himself.

Vaught concludes with a discussion of the relationship between horticulturists and state government. He notes that producers were generally disinterested in government and disdainful of the University of California and its agricultural programs until the early twentieth century. At that time, an activist, progressive state government under Governor Hiram Johnson, followed by activist and intrusive state and federal governments during World War I, illustrated to growers that government could effect them for good or ill and convinced them to organize and to take an active interest to protect and advance their enterprises. I must say that I found this the least satisfactory portion of the book. The transformation of Vaught's idealists into McWilliams' Associated Farmers of California is too significant to be addressed in the rushed and murky way Vaught addresses it.

Generally, though, Vaught does a good job of rehabilitating the growers and presenting a multi-dimensional view of their enterprises and their labor relations. The reader will learn a great deal from *Cultivating California*, which enriches our knowledge and broadens our understanding of horticulture in the state.

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