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Book Review: A Revolution Down on the Farm: The Transformation of American Agriculture

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Conkin, Paul K. *Revolution Down on the Farm: the Transformation of American Agriculture Since 1929*. Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2008. 978-0-8131-2519-0 \$29.95

In his newest book *A Revolution Down on the Farm*, Paul Conkin sets out to give voice to the technological, political and pragmatic changes that have altered that bastion of American identity, the family farm. At first glance, the text seems to be simply a memoir for a way of life to which the author is obviously tied. Born in east Tennessee in 1929, on a tobacco farm, Paul Conkin is both literally and figuratively a child of the Depression. It should not be surprising then that during his career, which is pushing its sixth decade, Conkin has found nothing that has eclipsed the power of the Great Depression in shaping the American character.

Though best known as a historian of American Religion, Conkin cannot seem to escape the power that the Great Depression wields in shaping his own choice of subject matter. His dissertation, published in 1959 as *Tomorrow a New World*, discussed the efforts of FDR and the new Deal to drag the country out of the Depression. In 1964, he published *Two Paths to Utopia*, tracing the efforts of idealists to create new communities that could avert the catastrophe of the Depression. In *FDR and the Origins of the Welfare State* (1967), he took FDR and the New Deal to task for being inadequate and far too conservative to actually solve the problems they faced. Even in his essays grappling with Southern identity, diminishing autonomy on the local level and governmental paternalism, the Great Depression lurks like the boogey-man under the bed.

Needless to say, the happenings behind *Revolution* are familiar territory for the author. When Conkin claims that the book is based on research as well as memory he is not only speaking in terms of his own personal memory, but also of the memory of a seasoned researcher who knows his topic intimately. It is precisely the previous fifty years of work that helps Conkin take the reader beyond the traditional memoir's narrative and into a more critical look at the play between farm policy and reality. Unfortunately, it is also this reliance on previous work that leads to the one shortcoming of the text. The author has not made those decades of research immediately evident in the Notes. As a new reader coming to Conkin's catalog it would be easy to dismiss the work as not scholarly enough.

Even so, *Revolution* clarifies an immensely complex topic, not only changes in American agricultural practices and technologies, but also the politics of definition and the long term repercussions of what many might simply ignore as banal. The time spent discussing the rhythm of the labor and sharing of work with others in the community hints at how drastic some of the changes in labor and community are. Giving the reader a look at the ideal and the reality of the "family farm" is paramount to the revelation. The Great Depression remains the present pivot point which drove changes in Federal Policy. Without these changes in policy, market prices for crops would not have stabilized and this "revolution" might not have happened. Ultimately readers are left with an understanding that just as the "family farm" is not dead, changes in technology have allowed it to survive in name if not in traditional function, neither is the "revolution". Agricultural legislation, as recently as May 2008, is a complex effort that continues to affect the cost of our food as well as the cost of our fuel.

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