



Works Progress Administration workers aid evacuees in Newport, Kentucky, during the disastrous Ohio-Mississippi flood in 1937.

his influence in staffing the corps as much as through his theories, Humphreys established a de facto national pro-levee policy that endured into the 20th century.

The most important story is political. President Franklin Roosevelt, influenced by theorists such as George Soule, saw the flood as an opportunity to establish a powerful, centralized expert body, based on the scientific regional planning embodied in the Tennessee Valley Authority (established in 1933), to manage the valleys of the Ohio, the Mississippi, and other rivers. He didn't get his wish, but the Flood Control Act did create recreational and wildlife areas and hydroelectric power stations that helped to transform the Ohio valley, making the river for the first time "a friend, an ally, a boon, rather than an enemy."

These efforts, however, also revealed the New Deal's limits. Communities in the region were often highly stratified, divided into elite whites, "white trash," and African Americans, and many—even forward-thinking cities such as Louisville, Kentucky—maintained these divisions when they rebuilt.

We are left with a paradox of memory. A

highly successful response to disaster created a solution so lasting that the public has forgotten its origins. For 75 years, the measures introduced by the Flood Control Act of 1938—which called for the construction of flood walls to protect cities in flood zones, the installation of pumping stations, and the creation of scores of man-made lakes that largely vindicated Ellet's emphasis on flood control reservoirs—have brought security to river communities, though Welky warns that new development on floodplains and overreliance on levees may yet spell disaster in extreme conditions. Vividly written and carefully documented, *The Thousand-Year Flood*

masterfully brings a turning point in American history back to life.

EDWARD TENNER, a contributing editor of *The Wilson Quarterly*, is the author of *Why Things Bite Back: Technology and the Revenge of Unintended Consequences* (1996) and *Our Own Devices: How Technology Remakes Humanity* (2003). He is currently at work on a book about positive unintended consequences.

Land Trust

Reviewed by Ginger Strand

LOCAVORES, URBAN FARMS, BACKYARD chickens. The periodic urge to embrace bucolic self-sufficiency—or at least to dream of doing so—is upon us once more. Is it an outburst of environmental anxiety triggered by the much-bemoaned End of Nature? Maybe. But Dona Brown's *Back to the Land* is a useful

BACK TO THE LAND:
The Enduring Dream of Self-Sufficiency in Modern America.

By Dona Brown.
Univ. of Wisconsin Press. 290 pp. \$24.95

corrective to the idea that the country living movement is strictly an effort to get right with Mother Earth. Tracing the history of the back-to-the-land movement across the 20th century, Brown argues that the waxing and waning impulse to return to



A woman tends a garden at a federally sponsored subsistence homestead community outside Los Angeles in 1936.

rural life tracks economic anxiety more than ecological awareness.

Back-to-the-land movements are often assumed to have taken root with Henry David Thoreau or ideas about nature embodied in Romanticism, but Brown launches her story later, in the early 20th century, when financial instability amplified a growing unease with urbanization. She argues convincingly that proponents of the movement wanted farms of their own as guarantees of financial security—particularly in the face of retirement—rather than as idyllic rural retreats. Not that their motives lacked any kind of ideology, but that too was economic: First-wave back-to-the-landers were intent on becoming self-sufficient producers instead of parasitic consumers. In fact, anti-consumerism is one theme linking the historical iterations of the country life movement.

In the first two decades of the century, however, the nature of that critique of the economic system changed. The back-to-the-land movement began to jettison many of its associations with reform and radicalism. In a surprising chapter, Brown shows how the movement became bound up with real estate

development, irrigation, and the growth of a car-dependent culture. Colonies including William Ellsworth Smythe's Little Lands, founded in San Ysidro, California, in 1908, subscribed to the same ideal—a house with some greenery around it—promoted in protosuburbs such as architect Frank Lloyd Wright's Broadacre City.

There was, Brown writes, “an increasingly intimate interplay between back-to-the-land rhetoric and the emerging Southern California suburban ‘lifestyle.’” In other words, a split was looming between those who wanted actual rural life and those who wanted a sanitized suburban semblance of it. Later, when the suburban lifestyle swept the mainstream, drawing fire as soulless and unsustainable, the split became a chasm.

The country life movement faded in the prosperous, urbane 1920s, then surged back during the Great Depression, due partly to renewed frustration with the economic system. President Franklin Roosevelt added something new: federal sponsorship. He wanted to promote self-sufficiency—but he had to tread carefully in order to appease the farm

lobby, which feared competition from the little guy. Rather than advocate a wide-scale return to small farms, the New Deal promoted “subsistence homesteads” and “greenbelt towns,” where residents could grow fruits and vegetables for themselves, but not for the market. The New Deal thus struck a blow for the suburban version of country life in deference to the farm lobby. The transition from family farms to industrial agribusiness is a lurking subtext in this book, though Brown shies away from discussing it in detail.

The New Deal era, Brown declares, was the last time liberals would advocate government programs to help citizens produce for themselves. After World War II, the country life movement gave birth to a new wing: “decentralists” opposed to bigness, whether of corporations or of governments. They were, not surprisingly, often based in Vermont, one of the few states that sustain a separatist movement. (The author is an associate professor of history at the University of Vermont.)

The most famous of these Vermont back-to-the-landers, Helen and Scott Nearing, were not strictly decentralists, but staunch socialists. Nonetheless, their book *Living the Good Life* (1954) would be the bible for back-to-the-land’s next flowering. In the 1970s, the movement came to represent a countercultural lifestyle and a rejection of the “rat race.” Brown argues that even this iteration was more a reaction to economic instability—triggered by inflation and the oil crisis—than the outburst of hippie nature-worship many people see it for.

Brown’s enthusiasm for sharing the fruits of archival research means that her narrative often gets bogged down, but the book’s main insight is clear. Today’s surge in the popularity of gardening is frequently said to reflect economic insecurity. Brown unearths an alternative history in which going back to the land has always been more about greenbacks than green.

GINGER STRAND is the author of *Inventing Niagara: Beauty, Power, and Lies* (2008). Her book about highway murderers, *Killer on the Road: Violence and the American Highway*, will be published in March.

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

Animals Are Us

Reviewed by Emily Anthes

FOR HUMANS, NATURE HAS never been less threatening. We have conquered many of the diseases that felled our ancestors when they were half as old as the average person lives to be now, and few people die anymore in the jaws of predators. Antibiotics keep bacteria at bay, and the spread of cities and towns has pushed lions and tigers and bears away from our doors. We call this progress. Who would want to go back to, say, a time before penicillin?

But driving other species out of our lives has had some unintended consequences, argues biologist Rob Dunn in his provocative book *The Wild Life of Our Bodies*. For most of human history, we lived in proximity to countless other species. We evolved in concert with these life forms; everything from the tiniest microbes to the most fearsome predators shaped the bodies and brains we’re walking around with today. “What happens,” Dunn asks, “when humans leave behind the species their bodies evolved to interact with, whether they be cheetahs, diseases, honeybees, or giant sucking worms?”

The answers Dunn provides aren’t pretty. Without these other life forms, he argues, many features of our own bodies have “become anachronistic or worse.” The unlikely Exhibit A: Crohn’s disease, a chronic inflammation of the bowel that is on the rise in developed nations. Crohn’s and other autoimmune disorders are most common in exactly those places where public health seems to be most advanced—where, for instance, the intestinal parasites that plagued humans for much of history, such as hookworms and tapeworms, have become staggeringly rare.

THE WILD LIFE OF OUR BODIES:

Predators, Parasites, and Partners That Shape Who We Are Today.

By Rob Dunn. Harper. 290 pp. \$26.99