

might investigate not only how fire policy affected First Nations, but whether they later participated in state fire fighting efforts. Certainly, they have done so in other countries such as the United States, where many Native peoples on reservations have found well-paying seasonal employment fighting fires, both on reservations and elsewhere.

Given Pyne's relative inattention to social relations, readers of *Left History* might think *Anful Splendour* is not worth the trouble. That would be a mistake because while Pyne is relatively uninterested in social history, he shows clearly the pivotal role of fire in shaping the Canadian landscape. Wildland fire reworked thousands of hectares in the span of few days or weeks. Global warming will, in the words of Pyne, "only enhance the habitat for fire" (478). Pyne's monumental book on Canadian fire history has not exhausted the topic. Rather, it has left a clear path for scholars with other proclivities to venture in new directions with different sets of questions about this fundamental element in the Canadian environment.

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**James C. McCann, *Maize and Grace: Africa's Encounter with a New World Crop, 1500-2000* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).**

*Maize and Grace* is an African environmental history of the maize plant itself, of the advantages and dangers to farmers and markets of an early-yielding, low-labour, but drought-vulnerable grain, of the different hardness and starchiness of kernels, of plant and human diseases, seed hybrids and genetic variations. James McCann has a great admiration for the maize plant. He appreciates the plant's history of adaptability and unpredictability. His fascination with maize and his creative structuring of the monograph make *Maize and Grace* one of a rare breed: a successful single commodity history. Though the book sits at the intersection of three literatures—African environmental history, the single commodity history, and the history of food—it succeeds less as a history of food, or even as a chronicle of a single commodity in a particular venue, than it does as an innovative and exciting African environmental history.

The single commodity history seems to hold great promise as a method for doing world history, for revealing world systems and transnational connections. But in the years since Sidney Mintz's groundbreaking *Sweetness and Power*, which McCann lauds in his introduction, and Emmanuel Wallerstein's explication of the commodity chain, the single commodity history has struggled. The literature has tilted toward gift and coffee table books on coffee, tea, oil, gold, salt and bananas. Most of these texts contribute in small ways to the scholarly conversation about world history, but for the most part are episodic, meandering, and at times are often lacking in theoretical rigor and even substantive theses. The diffi-

culty lies with the sort of daunting coverage across great expanses of time and space, along with a consideration of issues as broadly different as production and processing is from marketing and consumption, that this genre of historical writing seems to demand from authors. The single commodity history approach seems to have been most successful when authors have limited themselves, instead, to a particular time and place and to analyses of specific emerging systems such as industrialization or empire.

McCann avoids the pitfalls of the single commodity history by not offering case studies of maize in different locations and periods in Africa, but by forming chapters around aspects of the plant most germane to the history of Africa. Spatially, *Maize and Grace* ranges between western, southern and northeastern Africa but not in a mechanistic attempt at continental coverage, simply as the best way to get at the themes McCann wants to explore. He begins in West Africa with the sixteenth-century introduction and spread of maize to the continent—and the demographic implications of what he calls the “Africanization” of the new food crop as local farmers included it in different ecological niches and intercropping mixes. By way of highlighting issues involved in the process of introducing maize to a new ecology and commercial economy, *Maize and Grace* includes a chapter on the political impact of the introduction of maize in Venice which is contrasted with imperial Ethiopia. Venice is an odd and unexplained detour. It is certainly valuable to keep in mind that maize reached Africa and Eurasia at the same time, and that the nineteenth- and twentieth-century histories of Italy and Ethiopia are closely intertwined. I also applaud the poke this comprises at the idea of the African continent as a legitimate and coherent historical unit of analysis. North Africa was part of a Mediterranean world system, as West Africa was part of the Atlantic World, and East Africa part of the Indian Ocean world system, and a comparative focus including Venice could have made that point eloquently. As it is, the untutored reader would have benefited from a more explicit explanation of the rationale for this comparison.

Later chapters on colonial plant disease control, genetic engineering and standardization, and an impressive argument regarding malaria make for particularly compelling reading. Maize seemingly cured itself in the 1950s of a massive rust outbreak in West Africa with the possible re-emergence of a rust-resistant fossil gene latent for centuries (135). The new hybrid maize seed SR-52, released in 1960, tripled some southern African crop yields as long as industrial fertilizer and tractors were on hand. And in a chapter characterized by some remarkable sleuthing conveyed in the first person, McCann persuasively argues that in northwest Ethiopia in the late 1990s, a fatal combination of climate change and new farming practices that situated maize close to farmers’ homes led to a malaria outbreak. As McCann points out, mosquitoes thrive on maize pollen.

While fine environmental history, *Maize and Grace* is less a history of food. It does not examine the history of cooking, eating and the meaning of

maize. A chapter on the twentieth-century shift in Africa to white corn production (90 percent of Africa's total maize crop is white maize) mentions that this preference is based on a recent aesthetic bent but avoids any cultural analysis of what whiteness might mean to African consumers (112). Maybe it does not mean anything, but apart from any cultural analysis, the reader is left wondering. Little time is spent on the intimacies and economies of household food production and consumption or on how a new grain changed eating in Africa.

The title *Maize and Grace* is resonant with many meanings, among which most importantly is an allusion to the ongoing controversy over whether maize is a blessing or curse to future food security in Africa. McCann addresses the current and future politics of maize directly in a well crafted conclusion. He weighs climate change, African urban growth, nutrition, the volatility of global markets in grain, fertilizer, fuel, and farm equipment, human and plant diseases, and crop yields against each other in a carefully balanced argument against maize as a panacea. Though maize gives historically creative and adaptable African small-scale farmers another option in their bundle of crop-mixing strategies, it is one that comes with nutritional, epidemiological and environmental risks. Its very adaptability as a plant leaves McCann hopeful that scientific breeding programs can prioritize genetic mutations that tolerate drought and low fertility (211). Apart from this hope, prospects for Africans are, as he concludes, gloomy.

McCann's point that Africa has been and still is strongly affected by the global maize market, but has little impact on it, is all the more salient in light of the current explosion in global grain prices resulting in food riots throughout Africa (and elsewhere) in the spring of 2008. The related ever more obvious linkages between maize and fuel markets through growing global ethanol production only heightens this dynamic. As McCann reports, while most sub-Saharan African maize is consumed locally as food, Africa as a whole is a net importer of maize with Egypt alone importing nearly three million tons of maize annually (209).

The enthusiasm and fascination with the maize plant that McCann brings to this project is contagious. His book is the result of careful and thoughtful research built upon a variety of types of evidence and methodologies. *Maize and Grace* is about people's relationships to the biology of the plant itself: maize's relationship to climates, to soils, to human nutrition, malaria, fungus that is toxic to humans, rust, and mutations both engineered and not. In bringing these histories to light, *Maize and Grace* makes a strong case that no matter the science, technology or agricultural adaptability people have brought and continue to bring to bear around maize, the plant has a history of its own.

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