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The Fate of Family Farming: Variations on an American Idea

Ronald Jager

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The Fate of Family Farming employs a hands-on approach, with much local New England detail, in its exploration of the history and future of American family farming as an idea and as an ongoing way of life. Early chapters situate family farming within American history, beginning with Jamestown and Plymouth, continuing with Jefferson, Emerson and others, and including the technological transformations occuring in farming during the twentieth century. An extended chapter deals with the idea of "agrarianism," and considers in detail the work of Louis Bromfield, Victor Hanson, and Wendell Berry. The middle section of the book opens a window on present-day farming with detailed portraits of four farms devoted, respectively, to the production of maple syrup, eggs and corn, milk, and apples. The author takes the reader to the barns and fields of these farms, introduces the farm families, helps the reader taste the syrup and corn and smell the silage and, ultimately, enables others to see the economic and ecological challenges that farmers today face, and to consider their strategies for survival. In the last portion of the book the author provides a very accessible examination of the role of farm technology and global economics, including the many ironies of farming "success," followed by a chapter that balances the threat and promise of biotechnology, and a concluding analysis of the current struggle for "the soul of agriculture."

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