



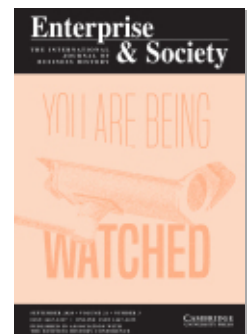
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*The Profit of the Earth: The Global Seeds of American
Agriculture* by Courtney Fullilove (review)

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Reviews

Courtney Fullilove. *The Profit of the Earth: The Global Seeds of American Agriculture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017. 280 pp. ISBN 978-0-226-45486-3 (cloth); 978-0-226-45505-1 (e-book).

In Courtney Fullilove's *The Profit of the Earth: The Global Seeds of American Agriculture*, the author selects several histories of American agriculture that directly contest the individualized and nation-based stories that too often dominate popular understandings of history. Divided into three sections based on stories of collection, circulation, and preservation, Fullilove uses an impressive range of examples to convincingly illustrate the global entanglements and varied forms of contested knowledge that are too often ignored or diluted in the current telling of the nation's agricultural history.

The first section, "Collection," tracks the emergence of American agricultural knowledge through the history of national organizations such as the United States Patent Office and the Smithsonian Institution. From the outset, Fullilove argues, the federal government has aimed to promote agricultural knowledge through the collection and dissemination of seeds and information. The author's examination of Henry Ellsworth, the first commissioner of patents, epitomizes this point. Serving in the role from 1835 to 1845, Ellsworth hoped to gather seeds and information in order to promote more efficient and profitable forms of agriculture across the continent. Fullilove correctly notes that the process of collection was often problematic, readily erasing local knowledge and practices associated with plant material. Rather, Ellsworth's collectors focused their attention on a plant's geography and its potential in the American market. In doing so, Fullilove argues, scientists and agriculturists erased the histories of hybridization and local cultural significance that had defined those plants for millennia. Ellsworth's policy of free seed distribution, often to the chagrin of seed dealers and nurserymen, further illustrates his primary motivation for collecting seeds: to encourage westward expansion and increase market activity.

The Profit of the Earth readily confronts the many myths of American agriculture, including the hagiographic place of the Turkey Red Wheat—an object of considerable focus in the second section,

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“Migration.” Too often portrayed as “the seed that made the United States a breadbasket of the world,” the story of the Turkey Red Wheat is actually one of displacement, communal social organization, and trade networks (123). As the author points out, the success of certain Mennonite communities in the Great Plains was hardly the story of American exceptionalism. Rather, the Mennonites’ commercial and environmental achievements resulted from above-average financial means as immigrants and communal sharing of resources to endure various environmental and economic episodes, as well as trans-Atlantic networks of trade used to gather seeds from the Russian steppes that would support their venture. Working to push against individualistic and nation-based histories, Fullilove demonstrates that this “success story” of American agriculture requires knowledge of the history of the Russian steppes and Mennonite social systems, as well as their the communal—not singular—approach to the nineteenth-century marketplace.

The third section, “Preservation,” offers histories of those who sought to retain indigenous plants and knowledge in the wake of environmental change. Though the triumph of the Mennonites’ land use enabled further settlement and development in the American West, the new land practices supplanted other plant species and forms of environmental knowledge. One example centers on the efforts of an Ohio-based pharmacist, John Uri Lloyd, as he navigated the shifting landscape of commercialized medicine and territorial expansion. Seeking out the native *Echinacea* for medicinal purposes, Lloyd relied on specialized, though low-paid, collectors to gather large amounts of the plant. The pharmacist’s venture proved to be increasingly difficult as farmers considered the plant a noxious weed that acted only as an obstacle in their grain-centric vision of the American West. Fullilove’s inclusion of Lloyd’s story demonstrates how market-oriented agriculture of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reorganized the perceived importance of certain flora and plant knowledge in society.

Though the book sprawls across geography, plant specimens, and themes, Fullilove’s writing always manages to bring the reader back to the three core concepts of the text. The addition of “Field Notes”—narrative interludes that recount Fullilove’s personal travels and experiences—further frame the direction and layout of the book. As a result, *The Profit of the Earth* reads like a series of historical vignettes that successfully reframe nineteenth-century American agricultural history as a product of global forces and diverse groups who all sought to

navigate the trans-Atlantic trade, American empire, and increased influence of a capitalist economy.

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Peter J. Yearwood. *Nigeria and the Death of Liberal England, Palm Nuts and Prime Ministers 1914–1916*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. 302 pp. ISBN 978-3-319-90565-5, €93.59 (cloth).

It is well known to students of early twentieth-century British politics that the House of Commons Nigeria debate in November 1916 led directly to the collapse of Asquith's coalition government and the elevation of Lloyd George, then minister of war, to the premiership. Far less well known is why Sir Edward Carson, leader of the unionist faction of the Conservative Party, should have chosen so obscure a topic, the sale of confiscated German property in Nigeria, with which to attack the government and in particular Andrew Bonar Law, the colonial secretary, who was also leader of his own party. Peter Yearwood's important new book *Nigeria and the Death of Liberal England* gives us invaluable insight into this question but also the significance of Nigeria in World War I imperial political economy.

It is a book that Professor Yearwood is well qualified to write, as he spent nearly a decade in Nigeria teaching African history at the University of Jos. It covers three broad themes: the economic development of Nigeria in the years before 1914; the problem of what to do with extensive German holdings in Nigeria's palm kernel trade, which had been seized as enemy property in World War I; and the role of the Nigerian debate in British politics at the end of 1916. Professor Yearwood also explores a number of subsidiary themes. Among the most significant is the rise of a Lagos-based nationalist movement in Nigeria, in part brought on by the Lugard administration's racially superior attitude toward Africans who had acquired European education, something that had not been the case in the late Victorian period.

Before World War I, the Nigerian economy was heavily dependent on exports of palm oil and kernels. This business was broadly divided into German-owned companies, which exported the palm kernels