

The Waning of the American Agrarian Myth: Garland and the Garden

by Sharon Larkin

There has always been a certain appeal about the life of a farmer. The farmer is independent. He works with the land until he wrings a living from it; in general, he works at "honest" labor and relaxes in solitude. He does not punch a clock. This concept of the American farmer began when the country began and still exists, in part, today. It is currently the vogue to own a cabin or to retreat occasionally to a few acres somewhere away from the city. People may be attracted to the country life today, but it is important to note that they do not live their weekend lives except on weekends. They recognize, if only intuitively, that the agricultural life may be too isolated and demanding. This recognition has been long in coming. Instead of seeing the bad with the good, most people have been swept away by poetic phrases which established the farmer as a hard-working individual who derived all necessary fulfillment from his land. He wronged no one and was wronged by no one. Perhaps this concept proved reasonably true in the very early days of America when land was a man's for the taking and he had no overseer to contend with. However, even when industrialism and war invaded this country, the farmer's image was slow in changing; the Agrarian Myth endured. In literature, the farmer was still portrayed as content, happy, and untouched by the rest of the world when, in reality, he was struggling against unscrupulous businessmen as well as the ever-present foe, Nature. This attitude about the farmer still lingers today. It would be hard to say that the Agrarian Myth is finally dead, for it, like the myth of the American Dream, rests on the idea of personal potential and success, an inherent part of this society. Several factors, though, influenced greatly the decline of belief in the Agrarian Myth as a popular pastime.

THE AGRARIAN MYTH

What the term "Agrarian Myth" refers to is a romanticizing of the life of the American farmer. The farmer can be only virtuous

and satisfied, for there are no gray or black areas in his characterization. Since those who work with the earth have always been considered blessed, farming as a profession was not treated in the same way as other professions. It was set on a pedestal, an icon for the worship of the pastoral. The Agrarian Myth was contributed to by idealists striving to make America worthy of their dreams, and by city dwellers, labeling as romantic and appealing a way of life of which they were ignorant. A weakening of belief in the Agrarian Myth was brought on by the brutality of a Civil War and by the power of an Industrial Revolution. The Agrarian Myth was devastated, finally, by a change of mentality which sought truth and gave rise to realistic writers such as Hamlin Garland. The change in America from the birth to the death of the Agrarian Myth is one of extremes: Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* to Garland's *Main-Travelled Roads*, agricultural America to industrial America, and romanticism to realism.

From the first settlements of the agricultural West to the close of the nineteenth century, the conception of agricultural America was that

every man has a natural right to land; that labor expended in cultivating the earth confers a valid title to it; that the ownership of land, by making the farmer independent, gives him social status and dignity, while constant contact with nature in the course of his labors makes him virtuous and happy; that America offers, a unique example of a society embodying these traits . . .

The Puritans contributed the term "New Eden,"² and thought that if they were equipped with the Bible, they were graced with the means to combat a hostile wilderness. Benjamin Franklin placed his faith in the "natural philosopher"³ who, able to understand nature, could master it by using its own laws. St. Jean de Crèvecoeur was, in *Letters from an American Farmer*, a man engaged in the noblest of all professions. Crèvecoeur gave voice to the rare bond that existed between a man and his land. Not only did the farmer produce food and clothing from his farm, but the land instilled in him a pride unmatched by any other occupation.⁴ It is difficult to argue that this bond between a farmer and his land did not exist. The question is whether the bond was strong enough to sustain a man when other forces became overwhelming. Thomas Jefferson, too, contributed to the reputation of the farmer. His hero was the man whose goal was "sufficiency, not economic growth."⁵ Jefferson was disdainful of

1. Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land* (1950; rpt. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 126

2. Robert J. Gangewere, *The Exploited Eden* (New York: Harper and Row, Inc., 1972), p. 4

3. *Ibid.*, p. 5

4. Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden* (1964; rpt. New York: Oxford University Press, (1972), p. 10.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 127.

establishing industry and trade within the United States, for he anticipated that the admirable values of the farmer would be casualties of the tyranny and dependence brought on by industrialism. He even went so far as to advocate continued shipping of raw materials from the United States to European factories, regardless of expense. It is apparent here that the general concept of agrarian life was that it was a kind of utopian ideal worth sustaining.

Even obvious obstacles such as the Great American Desert were no significant threat to the health of the Agrarian Myth, regardless of stark descriptions such as those that follow. Settlers accustomed to judging land by the amount of timber it contained were firmly convinced that in the three hundred miles east of the Rockies was a desert as ominous as the Sahara. Narratives of the sort of Francis Parkman's described the "level monotony of the plain" which was "unbroken as far as the eye could reach," and, most effectively, where "huge skulls and whitening bones of buffalo were scattered everywhere."⁶ Edwin Bryant, a Kentucky newspaperman who traveled to California in 1846, feared that Nebraska was uninhabitable by civilized man. The only people capable of subsisting in such a climate were migratory, and were, he thought, destined to be uncivilized, since they could not be controlled by the American system of laws.⁷ The momentum of the Agrarian Myth, however, was great enough that it discounted apparent hardships present on the stark plains. It was as if city dwellers and literary people looked the other way when confronted with the suffering which resulted from exposure to the elements on the plains.

The Agrarian Myth weakened eventually, but the length of time that it lasted was remarkable. The Agrarian Myth's basis of agriculture was especially vulnerable to changing world prices and markets. However, since the myth declared the impossibility of disaster within the Garden, it was in a like manner safe from implications of world affairs. Besides, the farmer was cast as "the good shepherd of the old pastoral dressed in American homespun. One of that traditional figure's greatest charms always had been his lack of the usual economic appetities."⁸ Finally, social and economic influences became overwhelming. It has been suggested that the failure of the Agrarian Myth was "at enough to mark the end of the frontier period;⁹ that once the economic stability broke, the myth could no longer sustain farmers who had discovered that farm labor did not produce the predicted prosperity. A dead myth made the

6. Francis Parkman, *The California and Oregon Trail. Being Sketches of Prairie and Rocky Mountain Life* (New York, 1849), pp. 81-82, quoted in Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land* (1950; rpt. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 176.

7. Smith, p. 176.

8. Marx, p. 127.

9. Smith, p. 188.

frontier spirit of enthusiasm and expansion seem much less appealing. Perhaps the misconception of the frontier could have been prevented "if we had been as much concerned with inner experience as with outward act, if we had been psychologists as well as chroniclers."¹⁰

SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS

The climate in which the Agrarian Myth weakened was composed of the Civil War, the Industrial Revolution, the emergence of railroads, a decline in morals, and the failure of the Homestead Act. These factors collided with the idealism of the myth, challenged it scientifically, and demanded change.

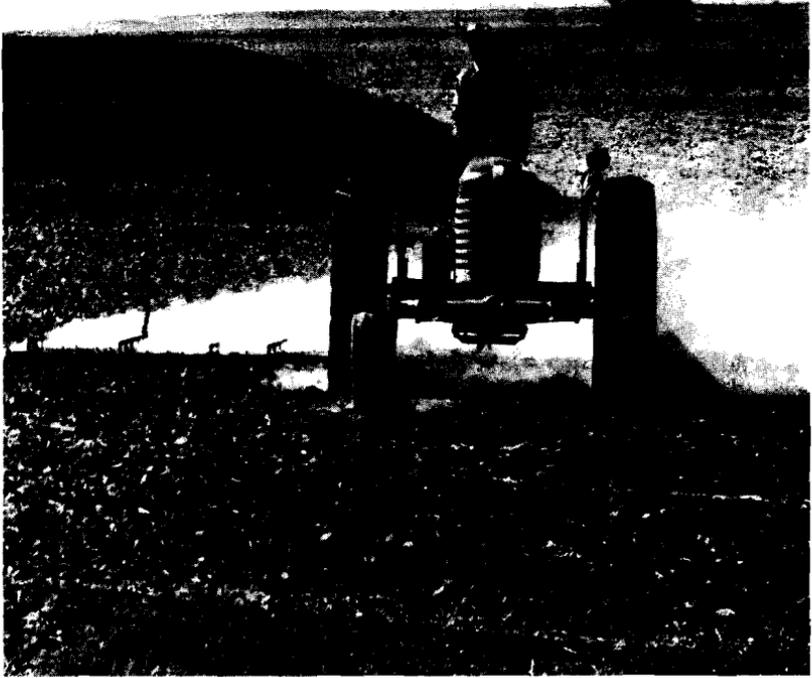
Originally, the coming of industrialism was delayed in the United States because of the lack of an extensive system of transportation. By the turn of the nineteenth century, however, America was industrialized, the Civil War itself having given impetus to a factory system. With the coming of industrialism came a group of financial giants of the "Gilded Age," Cornelius Vanderbilt, Andrew Carnegie, and John D. Rockefeller among them. Materialism became the major concern, and traditional moral precepts such as hard work, honesty, and simplicity gradually collapsed. Big cities became attractive, supposed havens of limitless opportunity, contrasting greatly to the lonely country life. So the major portion of the great number of immigrants went to the cities, accompanied by some weary farmers. In the industrialism of the cities they found "an industrial proletariat made up of individuals who were mere cogs in a machine, insignificant beings subjected to a standardized order."¹¹ The city was a far cry from the serene countryside.

The answer to the poverty and slums which grew up in the cities seemed to be the Homestead Act of 1862, under the provisions of which *bona fide* settlers were to be given a quarter section of free land after a preliminary period of occupation. In the end, the corporations and railroads benefited much more than the settlers: the "agrarian utopia in the garden of the world was destroyed, or rather aborted, by the land speculator and the railroad monopolist."¹² Corporation representatives would buy great amounts of land and sell it for tremendous profit. Railroads were given right-of-way and alternate sections of land on each side of the track. Oftentimes if the farmer could improve his rented land, the landlord would raise the selling price by

10. Vernon L. Parrington, "Introduction" to O. E. Rolvaag, *Giants in the Earth* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1929), p. xi.

11. Lars Ahnebrink, *The Beginnings of Naturalism in American Fiction* (New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1961), p. 2.

12. Smith, p. 191.



an outrageous margin. The large rates charged by the railroads to transport grain were hardly balanced by the small price the farmer was paid for his crops.

The Civil War shattered the strong belief in a benificent God who looked protectively down from heaven, encouraging the farmer in his work. Instead, "man was no longer a free, ethical being, but an individual devoid of free will and helpless in the grip of mechanical causes and effects."¹³ The philosophy of Darwinism seemed especially applicable to this state of affairs. The law of the survival of the fittest was applied to the smothering of small business by big business to the extent that competition and even war became desirable and necessary factors to the elimination of the weaker species.¹⁴ Was the Civil War the work of Emerson's all-loving God? Could the happy yeoman of the Agrarian Myth survive in a mechanized, scientific world? Hardly. The intellectual outlook of America was due to make a more realistic change.

13. Ahnebrink, p. 7

14 *Ibid.*, p. 8

REALISM AND HAMLIN GARLAND

One critic has said that

Realism in America, whatever it owed to contemporary skepticism and the influence of Darwinism, poured sullenly out of agrarian bitterness, the class hatreds of the eighties and nineties, the bleakness of small-town life, the mockery of the nouveaux riches, and the bitterness in the great new proletarian cities.¹⁵

Crevecoeur, the English-educated French aristocrat, had believed that all men, like plants, derive nourishment from the soil. He was delighted with the seeming absence of institutions in America. Through this absence of institutions, the influence of nature upon man was increased and artificial standards were reduced.¹⁶ In the midst of industrialism, this theory lost much credibility. It follows that an industrialized, scientific America could not be portrayed accurately by romantic means. Dreams were pushed to the background in a period which demanded, instead, fact and exactness. As the temper of the times changed, creative writers turned to realistic prose to portray this new America.

William Dean Howells, forerunner of the realistic movement in America, made pointed attacks upon romanticism and, in "Criticism and Fiction," established truthfulness as the main requirement of realism.¹⁷ Henry James placed great importance on "reality" in "The Art of Fiction," stressing that it was the chief virtue of a novel on which its other merits depended.¹⁸ Garland, influenced greatly by Howells, echoed distaste for traditional romanticism. Though he had social and political objectives in mind when he published his fiction, Garland is important for his recognition of the ills of agricultural America, his inclusion of the good as well as the bad, and his role as the representative of a new literary direction in America. His collection of short stories, *Main-Travelled Roads*, is prefaced in this way:

The main-travelled road in the West (as everywhere) is hot and dusty in summer, and desolate and drear with mud in fall and spring, and in winter the winds sweep the snow across it; but it does sometimes cross a rich meadow where the songs of the larks and bobolinks and blackbirds are tangled. Follow it far enough, it may lead past a bend in the river where the water laughs eternally over its shallows.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 15

16. Marx, pp. 109-10.

17. Ahnebrink, p. 132

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 129-30.

Mainly it is long and wearyful, and has a dull little town at one end and a home of toil at the other. Like the main-travelled road of life it is traversed by many classes of people, but the poor and the weary predominate.¹⁹

Garland's sophistication as a literary talent has been questioned, as has been his purpose in writing. It has been suggested that "Garland's determinism and pessimism were fairly superficial, and originated primarily from his social indignation."²⁰ Garland's interpretation in *Main-Travelled Roads* seems to lie somewhere between anticipation of a bright future once the land has been tamed, and near despair over the futility of existence under such harsh conditions.

Garland questions the existence of free will in "Under the Lion's Paw." The Haskins, a down-in-the-mouth young family, chased from Kansas by grasshoppers, are extended many kindnesses by the Councils, a seasoned farm family. Through Council's influence, Haskins is able to lease a run-down farm, payments due after his first crops come in. The fact that Haskins is settled and again able to provide for his family prompts a burst of energy described in this way: "no slave in the Roman galleys could have toiled so frightfully and lived, for this man thought himself a free man, and that he was working for his wife and babes." (p. 140) Unfortunately, Haskins, like so many of his fellow farmers, is to find he is not free. As soon as the land speculator-landlord sees the improvements that have been made on the place, he raises the selling price. At the peak of rage, with a pitchfork poised in mid-air, Haskins decides to yield to the landlord's terms. The title to the land, in the end, is small consolation for Haskins' humiliation and hard work. But it is the only choice offered.

In "Up the Coolly" a successful eastern actor returns to his desolate farm home: "a small drab-colored barn with a sagging ridge-pole; a barnyard full of mud, in which a few cows were standing, fighting the flies and waiting to be milked. An old man was pumping water at the well; the pigs were squealing from a pen near by; a child was crying." (p. 51) Howard, the returning son, must fight not only the pervading gloom of the place, but the animosity of his younger brother, who begrudges Howard's success. Howard finally decides to relieve his guilty conscience by offering money to his family for the purpose of buying another farm. He is shocked by the realization that money cannot repair the damage; that his brother is too old to make a new start, and that the land has taken its toll.

Besides the agrarian situation and the oblivion of the large cities, Garland was concerned with the plight of farm women. In "A Day's

19. Hamlin Garland, *Main-Travelled Roads* (1891; rpt. Harper and Row, n.d.), p. iv. All excerpts from *Main-Travelled Roads* were taken from this edition. Page numbers follow the remaining references in parentheses.

20. Ahnebrink, p. 228.

Pleasure," a timid wife makes the long-anticipated monthly trip to town with her husband. Once there, she becomes painfully aware of her position in life, comparing a rich women's child with her own: "It was bouncing itself up and down on the long slender springs, and laughing and shouting. Its clean round face glowed from its pretty fringed hood. She looked down at the dusty clothes and grimy face of her own little one, and walked on savagely." (p. 166) A wealthy woman takes note of her and brings her into a comfortable home. The key to making the guest comfortable is in keeping the conversation as far from farm affairs as possible. Garland sees this as a rare example of kindness.

It is through fiction such as Garland's that the major sin of supporters of the Agrarian Myth is uncovered. Like believers in any myth, they believed only what was exciting and romantic. Vernon Parrington points to

the emotional side, the final ledger of human values, we have too little considered—the men and women broken by the frontier The cost of it all in human happiness—the loneliness, the disappointments, the renunciations, the severing of old ties and quitting of familiar places²¹

as the prices paid by the victims of the myth. Realism, though perhaps too late to repay those who had already suffered, related just how great a toll was exacted by the frontier. Authors like Garland recognized and uncovered the ugly side of life that had been ignored too long.

The great irony of Hamlin Garland is that, though he had been so committed to the plight of the farmers, he returned, in his later works to the romantic tradition. The Rocky Mountains as subject matter were easier to romanticize than the stark plains. In addition, the market was better for optimistic books than it had been for his earlier pessimistic attempts. This, of course, does not discount what Garland has done to expose the Agrarian Myth. He forced the public to see conditions that made them uncomfortable. After the influence of Garland, the public was less inclined to stereotype the farmer as the happy yeoman, and more willing to grant him the hardships that all people encounter in an industrialized society.

21. Parrington, p. 19.

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