

Book Reviews

A Message to Rekindle an Agriculturalist's Zeal

Toward a Well-Fed World. By Don Paarlberg Ames Iowa State University Press, 270 pages, \$24.95

Reviewed by James Hite

Most of the human beings who have ever lived have been hungry. Perhaps most human beings alive today are hungry a large part of the time. But little by little, hunger is being conquered. This conquest, seen through the work of agricultural scientists, religious leaders, government officials and politicians, is the theme of Don Paarlberg's newest book.

Paarlberg's book at first seems simply a collection of 30 or so vignettes, hardly the sort of serious book one would read systematically cover to cover. Readers who do not know that the author is a distinguished agricultural economist, widely respected in both academics and government, might leaf quickly through the book and miss its significance. But, agriculturalists curious as to what Don Paarlberg might have to say about such diverse personalities as Jethro Tull, Margaret Sanger, Henry Wallace, and Hubert Humphrey will find time invested in reading this book richly rewarding.

Some ancient issues were illuminated by the Watson-Crick discovery. The continuity of life was affirmed. The life material is split with each generation from the beginning to the present and forward for as long as our offspring continue to reproduce. To a reflective person, this gives what Wordsworth called 'intimations of immortality.' (p. 128)

Paarlberg's reputation is that of a conservative agricultural economist who was called to Washington to mold farm policy in Republican administrations. This book will do nothing to change that reputation. He sees the fight against hunger, whether waged by scientists like Watson and Crick, by economists like T. W. Schultz or China's Ma Yen Chu, or by public administrators like Herbert Hoover and Hugh Hammond Bennett, as an epic moral struggle. And, he takes his moral bearings unashamedly from the mainstream.

Hite is alumni professor in the Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology, Clemson University, Clemson, SC

traditions of western Christianity. Yet, unlike some conservatives, Paarlberg is unequivocal in asserting a need for active government involvement in food aid programs. In assessing the successful food relief programs of the Mormons, Paarlberg concludes such strategies will not work nationwide because

The interdependence of individual and group envisioned by Joseph Smith and his followers has shown its merit. But most citizens lack the necessary charitable commitment. Government food aid programs may be second best but when the first best is inadequate the second best must move up (p. 173)

Conservative ideologues will find things to disagree with in what Paarlberg has to say but will approve of his point of view, which is deeply conservative, reaffirming religious conviction as the source of sound moral values.

The history of the fight against hunger will be told in a more systematic and better documented way by someone else in some other book. Paarlberg's book's significance lies in its ability to draw together the major issues facing world hunger. The book contains no new economic theory or new techniques of analysis. Rather, it brings the reader into contact with a first-rate mind reflecting upon the larger significance of science, politics, economics, and religion, and doing so from the perspective of traditional values rooted in fundamentally conservative premises. Paarlberg gives us a very personal book of commentary, full of wisdom and grace, that goes to the heart of the philosophical and social meaning of what those of us who work in agriculture and why we do it. The book is fundamentally a work of philosophy.

If we interfere massively in the processes associated with death we are compelled to interfere also in matters related to birth. (p. 221)

There is a missionary's zeal that comes through in this book, and not all of us will be able to share that zeal. Yet, Paarlberg's is a positive message that can reinspire professional agriculturalists whose enthusiasms may have been eroded by the petty day-to-day battles of life in the bureaucracies or the universities.

Paarlberg never seems to preach, being far too subtle to do that. We know that Paarlberg is a sound, practical agricultural economist, but the discovery that he is also a graceful wordsmith is one of the unexpected delights of this book. Like a good novel, this deceptively beautiful book does more than inform. It moves and changes the reader.

Almost all the agricultural colleges added graduate schools. Several of the original attributes, however, were in large measure kept: their predominantly tax-supported status and their preference for what is relevant over what is merely reputable. By the time these land grant colleges reached the hundredth anniversary of the Morrill Act, they enrolled one-fifth of all the undergraduate students in the nation. Of the thirty-six then-living Nobel Prize winners in the United States, eighteen had earned land grant college degrees. (p. 63)

Paarlberg's book should be high on the reading list of all professional agriculturalists, a book to be purchased for reading not just once, but over and over, whenever internal doubts stir about the value of what we do and when there is the danger that we may let the moral value of our work slip from our conscious mind and surrender ourselves to numbing routine.

Some people believe that life is a zero-sum game, that what one party wins another loses. There are some zero-sum games, and even some negative-sum games, but agricultural science is not one of them. (p. 164)

To one taught to love the appearance of a deep-tilled field with all the crop residue buried, a conservation-tilled field is, for a month or more after planting, an ugly sight indeed. But to one who loves the thought of soil kept in place, such a field is wonderfully pleasing. (p. 156)
