

INTRODUCTION

Agrarianism, Ancient and Modern: The Origin of Western Values and the Price of Their Decline

It becomes ever more difficult for the professional historian to reach across to ordinary intelligent men and women or make his subject a part of human culture. The historical landscape is blurred by the ceaseless activity of its millions of professional ants.

—J. H. Plumb (Andrewes 1971: xiv–xvi)

Everyone now speaks of “Western values.” Both the critics and supporters of Western culture agree that these values originated with the ancient Greeks. But who exactly *are* the Greeks? And which Greeks do we mean? Athenian democrats like Pericles or Demosthenes? Philosophers like Socrates, Plato, or Aristotle? Men of action and great captains of the caliber of Themistocles or Alexander? Spartans holding the pass at Thermopylae? Or are Western values simply the stuffy ideas found in the canon of classical Greek literature, the refined ore from Homer’s *Iliad* to Menander’s late fourth-century B.C. comedies?

We can be vaguer still about the origins of the “West” and we speak grandly of the “city-state,” the culture of the *polis* that sparked the entire

Greek renaissance. The creation of a Greek urban entity, we are usually told, led to constitutional government, egalitarianism, rationalism, individualism, separation between religious and political authority, and civilian control of the military—the values that continue to characterize Western culture as we know it.

Most general surveys of Greek history are thus inevitably urban in origin. The Greeks appear as emerging congregations of bards, poets, and philosophers. They are seen through the rise of new centers of commerce, temple construction, and shipping, the nucleated workshops of craftsmen and artists, the clustered houses and gravestones of the living and the dead. But this traditional emphasis, while perfectly natural given the artifacts, the literature, the intellectual brilliance of the Greek city-state, is misdirected.

All these approaches to the source of Western values will lead us astray, for we owe our cultural legacy to Greeks outside the walls of the *polis*, forgotten men and women of the countryside, the “other” Greeks of this book. Classicists bump into farmers in Greek literature; archaeologists come across ancient rural habitation. But where is the countryside in general surveys of Greek history? To write almost exclusively of ancient Greek city life is to ignore the true source and life-blood of that new wealth and to forget that the new cultural attitudes and systems of social and political discourse were originally not urban, but agrarian. The *polis*, after all, was merely an epiphenomenon, the cumulative expression of a wider rural dynamism. It represented the fruits of the many whose work, uneventful as it seems to us now, created the leisure, wealth, and security for the gifted and intellectual few.

The early Greek *polis* has often been called a nexus for exchange, consumption, or acquisition, but it is better to define it as an “agro-service center.” Surplus food was brought in from the countryside to be consumed or traded in a forum that concurrently advanced the material, political, social, and cultural agenda of its agrarian members. The buildings and circuit walls of a city-state were a testament to the accumulated bounty of generations, its democratic membership a formal acknowledgment of the unique triad of small landowner, infantry soldier, and voting citizen. The “other” Greeks, therefore, were not the dispossessed but the possessors of power and influence. Nor is their story a popular account of slaves, the poor, foreigners, and the numerous other “outsiders” of the ancient Greek

city-state. The real Greeks are the farmers and infantrymen, the men and women outside the city, who were the insiders of Greek life and culture.

The rise of independent farmers who owned and worked without encumbrance their small plots at the end of the Greek Dark Ages was an entirely new phenomenon in history. This roughly homogeneous agrarian class was previously unseen in Greece, or anywhere else in Europe and the surrounding Mediterranean area. Their efforts to create a greater community of agrarian equals resulted, I believe, in the system of independent but interconnected Greek city-states (*poleis*) which characterized Western culture.

Scholars, ancient and modern, have never agreed on what a *polis* was, and the study of that institution has been a constant area of controversy for more than two centuries. We do not know exactly when, why, and how it appeared, or even when and why the city-state ceased to exist.¹ I cannot answer all those questions here. But I do suggest that the proper framework of the entire historical discussion of both the genesis and the decline of the Greek *polis* must lie in the realm of agriculture. The material prosperity that created the network of Greek city-states resulted from small-scale, intensive working of the soil, a complete rethinking of the way Greeks produced food and owned land, and the emergence of a new sort of person for whom work was not merely a means of subsistence or profit but an ennobling way of life, a crucible of moral excellence in which pragmatism, moderation, and a search for proportion were the fundamental values. The wider institutions of ancient Greece—military, social, political—embodied the subsequent efforts of these small farmers to protect their hard-won gains—the results of, not the catalysts for, agrarian change. And the tragic demise of Hellenic society was in large part a result of the very contradictions of the Greeks' own agrarian notions of egalitarianism, which became more and more inflexible in an increasingly complex world. Agrarian man emerges from the Dark Ages to create the *polis*; when he disappears, so too does his city-state.²

The original Greek *polis* is best understood as an exclusive and yet egalitarian community of farmers that was now to produce its own food, fight its own wars and make its own laws, a novel institution that was not parasitic on its countryside but instead protective of it. The history of the *polis*, then, should neither be seen primarily as linked to the rise of overseas trade and commerce, nor as a Malthusian race between population

and food production, nor even as a war between the propertied and the landless, much less a saga of the intellectual brilliance of the urban few. All of that is the Greece of the university and the lecture hall, not the Greece that concerns us today. Rather, the historical background of Greece, especially its democratic background, is best understood as the result of a widespread agrarianism among the rural folk who were the dynamos from which the juice of Hellenic civilization flowed.

To understand the contributions—and limitations—of the Greeks, I seek to reconstruct the experience of the thousands of small agriculturists who emerged out of the Dark Ages (about 1100–800 B.C.). For the next four centuries (700–300 B.C.) these farmers, or *geōrgoi*, revolutionized the economic and cultural life of their fellow Greeks, and left as their legacy the ideas that small, family-centered production on family property was the most efficient and desirable economic system; that the farmers' creed of equality could be successfully superimposed on the entire community, urban and rural; that groups of like-minded people could band together in novel, self-sufficient communities to ensure their personal liberty and equality; and that the civilian could dictate every aspect of defense preparedness, collectively deciding when and when not to make war.

Greek war ("the father of everything, the king of everything," according to Heraclitus) cannot be understood apart from agriculture, "the mother of us all" (cf. Heracl. fr. 53; Stob. *Flor.* 15.18). Nor can Greek farming be understood without knowledge of warfare. And Greek life and thought, the foundation of Western culture, cannot be studied without a grasp of both.

The Greeks envisioned themselves uniquely as farmers and freehold owners of vines, fruit-trees, and cereal land. "The largest class of men," Aristotle wrote, "live from the land and the fruits of its cultivation" (*Pol.* 1.1256a39–41). As late as 403 B.C., we can infer from a passage of Dionysius of Halicarnassus, author of a first-century treatise on oratory, that the great majority of Athenians—perhaps the most urban of all the Greek *poleis*—owned land and were engaged in farming. Thucydides, a contemporary observer of the great rural retreat of 431 B.C. inside the walls of Athens, saw that this migration was particularly difficult for the Athenians, "since most of them had always lived on their farms" (*en tois agrois*; 2.14). Aristophanes in his comedy, *Peace*, says simply that "the farmers (*geōrgoi*) do all the work, no one else" (*Pax* 511). Euripides agrees, and in his

tragedy, *Orestes*, we read that “the yeomen (*autourgoi*) alone preserve the land” (*Orest.* 920). No wonder that the Greeks simply distinguished their entire society as one that farmed in ways far different from their neighbors (e.g., *Hdt.* 4.17–19). Perhaps that is why the *Oeconomica*, a fourth-century treatise wrongly attributed to Aristotle, assumed that agriculture was by far the most important source of revenue for any Greek *polis*, calling it “the most honest of all occupations, inasmuch as wealth is not derived from other men,” as well as a vocation that “contributes to the making of manly character” (*Oec.* 1.1343b3–5). The only economic activity discussed at length in Xenophon’s earlier *Oeconomicus* is farming: “When farming goes well all other arts go well, but when the earth is forced to lie barren, the others almost cease to exist” (*Oec.* 5.17).

Twenty-four centuries ago, Theophrastus, the urban philosopher, portrayed this “other” Greek as an oaf and a clod who “will sit down with his cloak hitched above his knees, exposing his private parts. He is neither surprised nor frightened by anything he sees on the street, but let him catch sight of an ox or a donkey or a billy-goat, and he will stand and gaze at it” (*Char.* 4.8). The typical Greek farmer was a man who cared little for dress, shunned the palestra and gymnasium, was rarely portrayed on Greek pots, and never appeared in a Platonic dialogue. He owned no mounts, better to be seen soiled among pigs and goats, his mongrel hound snapping at his side. But the other Greek also has no boss, stands firm in battle “squarely upon his legs” with “no swagger in his lovelocks,” a man who “does not cleanshave beneath his chin” (*Archil.* 114), who judges the sophist in the assembly by the same yardstick he prunes vines and picks olives, and so cannot be fooled, a man who knows that his land “never plays tricks, but reveals clearly and truthfully what it can and cannot do,” that it “conceals nothing from our knowledge and understanding and so becomes the best tester of good and bad men” (*Oec.* 20.13–14). Aristophanes described this other Greek “covered with dust, fond of garlic pickle, with a facial expression like sour vinegar” (*Ar. Eccl.* 289–92). He has no belly for the prancing aristocrat and even less for the mob on the dole. He idealizes his ten acres—not much more, rarely less—and he wants others like him to have about the same. He walks rarely into town, and then mostly just to vote and go home, disgusted at the noise, the squalor, and the endless race for pelf and power. And because he suffers no master, he speaks his due, fights his own battles, and leaves an imprint

of self-reliance and nonconformity, a legacy of independence that is the backbone of Western society.

Even in academic life, a farmer can remain only a farmer: unsophisticated, inarticulate, irrationally independent, naively, sometimes embarrassingly suspicious of anything novel, ill-at-ease with all consensus opinion, stubborn and wary for no sensible reason, awkward, impatient with even justified subtlety and nuance. He is a searcher, pathetically and all too simplistically seeking those who would live by some consistent ethos, even if it be narrow and outdated. These are all traits crucial for survival on the land, where immediate, unambiguous action is demanded in the face of impending rain, nighttime frost, sudden bank foreclosure. Those crises are times where delay, reflection, nuance, and ambiguity are not wise and reasoned. Certainly they are not “prudent,” but instead dangerous for self and family. Rambunctious, uneasy, and imprudent, a farmer in the university must naturally transfer that innate impatience to academia. He interprets, no doubt as many others would outside the campus, the quality of colleagues’ research, teaching, or scholarly ethics and comportment, quite unintellectually, bluntly and without nuance or sophistication. They are seen in terms of mostly black or white. They are gauged simply as one surveys a head of irrigation water, the weld on a disk blade, the thousands of scions of a grafted orchard, by what works and what falls apart, by what appears as natural, pragmatic, accessible, or explicable and what does not—in short, by what a farmer believes will last and what will wilt, collapse, inevitably erode, and pass away with current fashion. If one looks at Greek life through that particular agrarian eye, it appears to be a very different culture from the one that is presented at the university.

Farming is the world of actuality, *never* potentiality. It is “the clear accuser of a bad soul,” where reputed skill, apparent talent, assumed knowledge, predictable subservience mean little if the crop, that sole and final arbiter of human moral worth, is not brought in. By that benchmark, modern American academic life—the conference circuit, the reduced teaching load, the emphasis on theory, the depersonalization and lack of interest in human agency—is completely at odds with everything we know of the ancient Greeks.

Why then do so many scholars neglect Greek agrarianism in most surveys of Greek history, when nearly all historians, ancient and modern, agree that anywhere from sixty-five to ninety-five percent of the citizens

of most city-states worked the land?³ The idea that their Greece was mostly a community of yeomen, not an enclave of writers, artists, grammarians, and academics—not people more or less like themselves—is difficult to concede. “New” ancient historians of the last decade who seek to destroy standard orthodoxy for good in a variety of quite different contexts are to be commended for pointing out these narrow literary and philological approaches of traditional American classical scholarship. I agree with them that there is a real need for radical reappraisals of Greek culture. They are imaginative and never blinkered by traditional concerns. They and their associates in feminist, race, class, and something now called “gender” studies are correct in blaming past philology and traditional narrative history for the neglect of the ancient “nonelite.” But for all their intellectual daring, even these new classical scholars are more similar than not to the entrenched academic authorities they seek to dislodge. Both are usually urban creatures. Both exist for, and are at home in, the university. Few have left the cloister of academia. Fewer have any desire—or ability—to do so.

In this sense, for a comprehensive understanding of Greek history and the origins of Western values, current scholarly revisionism delivers less than promised in the way of reform.⁴ The “new” ancient world is too often the old ancient world. It is still a story of city-people written by city-people. There is little hope that the present generation of revisionist classicists in the United States will ever come to terms with Greece as an agrarian society of pedestrian hard-working yeomen. Many successful American Ph.D. candidates in Classics can still review the difficult odes of Pindar or the dry poetry even of a Callimachus. Few know when olives, vines, or grain were harvested—the critical events in the lives of the people who created Greek culture and civilization.

All ancient societies were agricultural in nature. But Greece alone, this book will argue, first created “agrarianism,” an ideology in which the production of food and, above all, the actual people who own the land and do the farmwork, are held to be of supreme social importance. The recovery of this ancient ideology has enormous ramifications for our understanding of the Greeks, inasmuch as it explains both the beginning and the end of their greatest achievement, the classical city-state.

I am by birth and trade a farmer. From that angle of vision, I have developed a guarded admiration for those, both now and in the past, who

have tested their wits against the vagaries of nature in an effort to feed their fellow citizens. I think I know these men and women, know how they look at the world and themselves, how they shape and affect society, and the peculiar, harsh code by which they live and judge others.⁵

This other world of American agriculture, for the most part, feeds the United States and is one of its few remaining successful industries. And although the existence of these competent and industrious persons is critical and indeed largely responsible for the comfort of modern American life, they are nevertheless, like their ancient Greek ancestors, essentially an unknown people and an endangered species.

A nation, I believe, can be judged by the way it treats those who produce its food. And herein, I discovered, lies the uniqueness of ancient Greece, a society that, despite the occasional silence of our (largely urban) sources, for nearly four centuries was an *agrotopia*, a community of, by, and for small landowners. The ancient counterparts of the contemporary (and vanishing) small agriculturalist, however great the differences in outlook and technique, were responsible, in both a material and spiritual sense, for all their community's culture—what we know now as classical Greek civilization. Their unremembered contribution deserves both recognition and respect.

Besides an empathetic acquaintance with farmers, pragmatic experience in the fertilization, cultivation, pruning, harvesting, irrigating, and propagation of fruits and vegetables, the planting—and utter destruction—of orchards and vineyards, can also add some sensitivity to the reconstruction of the fragmentary archaeological and literary record of ancient Greek agrarian history. There is value in writing carefully from personal trial and error about ancient agricultural expertise. True, this practical knowledge of agricultural tasks can also be acquired through other means. Scholars do find this knowledge in books, in any good modern treatise on viticulture, agriculture, cereal production. But the vocabulary and thinking of the modern social sciences when applied to ancient agriculture often convey little empathy or understanding of what life must have been like for the ancient Greek farmer, instead creating complicated theoretical models for the basic, instinctual knowledge any farmer knows as second nature. So by pragmatic experience I am also referring to a far vaguer “ideology” of farming that is unattainable even through the pages of a vast technical literature.

But one should not assume that the author's personal intimacy with agriculture must inevitably transform this investigation of the ancient Greeks into some romantic encomium of the glory days on the "south forty," ancient or modern. Much less is this book a tract for current political or agrarian reform, which, in any case, can do little now to save family agriculture in this country. The life of a farmer is increasingly Hobbesian—poor, nasty, and brutish, even if not always short. It has been my own experience that many who still rise to that challenge today are themselves hard-nosed, peculiar, dogmatic, and distasteful characters, better appreciated at a distance, myself perhaps included. My purposes in deviating somewhat from a 'professional' stance are threefold.

First, I wish to reach an audience outside the university, to remind them that agrarianism was once the very center of their own civilization. In the twilight of classical studies in this country, they should know that the Greeks were not distant, unapproachable grandees, the property now of a few thousand well-educated Westerners. Instead, the Hellenes were resourceful farmers who devised their own society intended to protect and to advance their brand of agriculture. Their achievement was the precursor in the West of private ownership, free economic activity, constitutional government, social notions of equality, decisive battle, and civilian control over every facet of the military—practices that affect every one of us right now. In this light, Greek agriculture is not a different approach to the traditional questions of Western civilization but a topic now vital to the existence of our own culture.

A second reason for adopting an unorthodox approach is that I do have some practical knowledge about the cultivation of trees and vines, and more important, about the ideology of those who grow these crops. For all of my life, save a near decade spent in undergraduate and graduate study, I have lived on a farm and have been considered by most a farmer of trees and vines. That angle of vision has always turned out to be disadvantageous in academic life. Pruning, irrigating, and tractor work have about the same stigma as a southern San Joaquin Valley residence. The two together form a lethal combination on most university campuses. Nevertheless, on occasion my farming experience has helped me to make some sense of ancient texts and the evidence of archaeology, epigraphy, and iconography concerning ancient Greek agriculture, and thus of Hellenic life in general.

I hope, therefore, in the manner of Herodotus, to pass that digressive method of personal autopsy and inquiry along to the reader. I also believe, as did both Thucydides and Polybius, that a historian can and should take some part in any history that he writes. Only that way can he avoid an irony that faces most modern scholars: we of comfortable circumstance and suburban physique, we free of filth, unending physical labor, disease, mayhem, and constant military service, we chronicle—and all too often pass judgment on—the brutal and ungente world of the Greeks. The classical scholar who is concerned over this occasional infusion of personal experience in this present history should perhaps see it simply as “social anthropology,” a popular interdisciplinary approach that incorporates the experiences of modern cultures into classical scholarship.

The real story, the historian’s noble calling, the saga of humankind—triumph, courage, defeat, and cowardice—often gives way in scholarly studies of food production to a sterile and peopleless analysis of “carrying capacity” and the equilibrium between food output and population growth. My primary interest is precisely the opposite, to discover in human terms “what it was like” for these other Greeks who surrounded the city proper and created the *polis*: in other words, to reclaim ancient Greek agriculture and agrarianism for history from the social and natural sciences.

For example, the desire to leave an empathetic account of crop diversity among the small farmers of ancient Greece is more an accident of upbringing than formal research. In my own experience “diversification” of crops is *not* merely a strategy. It is not an element of social science investigation, but rather (in our case) a personal and desperate attempt to salvage an existence for four families after the raisin cataclysm of 1983. In that year the price of natural Thompson seedless raisins fell without warning from \$1,420 a ton to \$450. Entire farms in the central San Joaquin Valley, dependent solely on Thompson seedless grapes, were quietly, almost imperceptibly obliterated. Land values at year’s end plummeted from \$15,000 to \$4,000 an acre and lower. A forty-acre vineyard no longer earned, but now lost, \$40,000 for a year’s work, its operator now “paying” hourly for the privilege of working his soil. The market value of his property was suddenly nonexistent. And in strictly economic terms, even \$4,000 an acre was too high, as the banks’ repossession apparatus soon found out.

Real disaster this was, worse even than the rain disasters of the prior

decade that had rotted two entire harvests drying on the ground. The agricultural years of the 1980s created a fantasy-like world, or a nightmarish purgatory where farmers often picked their plums, peaches, and nectarines, sent them to a shipper, but then received a bill, a “red tag” demanding payment greater than the value of the crop for “handling, commission, and expenses.” The wiser and less sentimental farmers sometimes let the fruit drop from the tree, or cut off all the fruit-bearing canes from their vineyards. After personally pruning, thinning, cultivating, watering, and fertilizing a three-acre Santa Rosa plum orchard all year, my brothers, cousin, and I watched its sixty tons of fruit ripen, slowly rot, ferment, and then finally decay into leathery skins. Why pay the consumer to eat your fruit?

“There is something sweet,” as the comic playwright Menander saw, “in the bitterness of farming” (fr. 795 Kock). The system of family-based, small-scale, and diversified production, as the Greeks knew and as I have been forced to learn, provides much work, near constant worry—and, as its prize, veritable independence and immunity from most challenges, natural or human-induced. But that “something sweet” comes at a price. Its adherents must be willing to acknowledge the present “bitterness of farming”: social and regional immobility, alienation from wealth and power, disdain from the urban professional, disregard for fashionable clothing, transportation, leisure, and entertainment—a spiritual disconnection, an isolation, in other words, from modernity itself, affinity more with an ancient past, rather than with present norms of behavior.

Third, I wish to convey some idea of contemporary American agriculture in its own right, quite apart from comparative illustrations of the agrarian Greeks. True, there are hundreds of good books on the joys of growing food. Nearly as much has been written on the science and successful technique of agricultural production. I omit the nauseating agribusiness magazines that pile up on our kitchen table. But there are fewer accounts of the daily life on an American farm in the last two decades. The record of that experience in this, the very last stage of traditional American agrarianism, needs desperately to be augmented, for time is growing short.

Much has been written about the lost life of the American farm in the era before technology, the time of the horse plow, before the appearance of advanced machinery and creeping urbanism. Yet I believe that the American farm today is unique in another way. Fortress-like it stands

battered—and then slowly erodes before the relentless waves of assault from poor commodity prices and rising costs, spreading housing tracts, and ultimately the neglect of mass urban culture. But farmers of today are more similar to their ancestors at the turn of the century than they will be to their successors a mere twenty years hence. And the last adherents are now being plowed under at an alarming rate.

The greatest revolution in American agriculture—genetic and biotechnical engineering, mass application of computerized technology, uniform corporatization, urban residency, crop specialization, and near complete dependence on nonfarm sources of income and capital—is now upon us. The destruction of American agrarianism will soon eliminate in this country the entire equation of farm and farmer from the realm of food production: the man who works the ground he owns is a vanishing species. And so within twenty years the agrarian Greeks are to be even further distanced from American experience, for there will be none who understand the tenets of their rural world.

In my own locale, the San Joaquin Valley, generally recognized as the most productive expanse of irrigated farmland in the world, family farms are vanishing at an astonishing pace. Their owners are dying or, far more ignominiously, slipping silently off into urban apartments and rest homes. Irrigation, the century-old effort of agrarians to harness the waters of the Sierra, is to produce not peaches, plums, or raisins, but the private lakes of new housing developments and the grass lawns of suburban immigrants, home-equity refugees from Los Angeles and San Francisco. Their sprawling quarters now cover vineyards and fig groves, pipelines, wells, alleyways, barns, and sheds; vineyards are nipped out and replanted with gated tracts known as “The Vineyards” or “Orchard Knolls.”

But even more tragic than the environmental—and visual—consequences of precipitous urbanization, whole hosts of new inhabitants now also “cover” farmers. The prior custodians of instant concrete driveways, homes, pools, and backyards have imperceptibly exited, retired, disappeared from our very midst. To grow their fruit now in California is to lose money; to continue farming in 1995 is to pay the consumer to eat your harvests; to rise in the dark morning is to preserve the comfortable livelihood, the ever-rising share of brokers, advertisers, distributors, and marketers, distant but still unpleasant men and women whom the farmer knows only by the anonymous and hurried voice over the phone.

Walk a farm each evening: a horse-shoe turned up here, over there an old half-exposed disk blade, square nails in the alleyway. All are the artifacts of a cadre of men now lost, relics in an island of farmland besieged by growing urbanization. Disturbing now, not comforting at all, are the epic memories of my own grandfather Rees Davis, his lifelong employees and friends—Manuel George and Joe Carey, his blustering neighbor Bill Hazleoffer, and a legion of others. For a small boy of ten they were giants on the earth. But they have left a melancholy legacy, the bitter and incriminating knowledge that they have not been and will not be replaced, that we the clearly inferior successors can no longer match their struggle. Meander through vineyards and orchards of a past agrarian generation. See the residue of their work. To do so is to acknowledge our present impoverishment, to find ourselves sorely wanting, to learn that no farmers among us can match the ancestral ones, in either muscular strength, talent, or ingenuity, optimism in the face of ruin, or simplicity and independence of routine.

Doomed in very short order, of course, are the land itself and the people who would continue to work it for another decade or so, at least as I have known and understood both for my own forty years. But it is too often forgotten in our current fashionable environmentalism, our worry about fading open spaces, that we now are paving over an equally invaluable resource: men and women who can read the weather, who know the cycles and signs of plants and animals, understand the human experience of physical labor, and are about our last bulwarks against uniformity and regimentation.

These people, contrary to our romantic Jeffersonian mythology, are not 'consensus builders' at all. Most instead are plain, outspoken folk who live by their wits in a continual contest with the elements. For the majority, their judgment, word, and entire ethos of conduct were never predicated on flattery, peer-approval, career advancement, and the absence of imagination so characteristic of the modern urban workplace. There, getting along in a social, rather than a natural, environment is crucial; reinventing oneself yearly in harmony with current fad becomes a normative and in-offensive behavior that rarely draws the needed rebuke. But agrarians and their values have been mostly unchanging from the Greeks to the present day and they have therefore provided a necessary antidote to the excesses and fashions of contemporary American life. Yes, people can con-

tinue to grow food. But they may not be the farmers, who, despite their shrinking numbers, still provide us with a needed dose of social sobriety.

Farmers are, as we shall see, *real* producers. Quite chauvinistically they recognize themselves as such. They do not exchange paper. They rarely communicate through electronic gadgetry. They do not merchandize or advertise. But they do grow food and fiber for their fellow citizens, generation after generation. For all that our society now conscientiously seeks to preserve and enhance minority values, it oddly cares little for the agrarian culture that has been with us from the beginning. But agriculturalists are the one irreplaceable link in the great modern chain of acquisition and consumption. So Knut Hamsun summed up Isak, the hero of his novel, *Growth of the Soil*:

Twas rarely he knew the day of the month—what need had he of that? He had no bills to be met on a certain date; the marks on his almanac were to show the time when each of the cows should bear. But he knew St. Olaf's Day in the autumn, that by then his hay must be in, and he knew Candlemas in spring, and that three weeks after then the bears came out of their winter quarters; all seed must be in the earth by then. He knew what was needful.

A tiller of the ground, body and soul; a worker on the land without respite. A ghost risen out of the past to point the future, a man from the earliest days of cultivation, a settler in the wilds, nine hundred years old, and withal, a man of the day. (434)

A man who can produce with his own muscle, talent, and nerve enough raisins to feed a city of half a million now receives less compensation than a local insurance agent, apprentice lawyer—or a beginning Greek professor. We have completely forgotten the warning of the wise Roman agronomist Columella: “Even if the state should become destitute of its professors,” he wrote, “still it would prosper just as in the past. . . . Yet without its farmers mankind can neither subsist nor be fed” (*Rust. Praef.* 1.6).

If less than one percent of the American population are currently family farmers, it is no wonder that the present-day agriculturalist is a walking anachronism, his thought and ideology completely alien to and unsynchronized with nearly everyone he meets. Yet American agrarians are the true adherents of the Western heritage and heirs of the Greek *polis*,

even though mankind is now “subsisting and being fed” without its yeomen farmers.

Our present democratic cargo must be seen in the original (rural) context of its birth, if these concepts of freedom are to retain any value for us, and not—as is now often the case—to be detached as meaningless abstractions and justifications for personal excess, materialism, brutality and mayhem, national chauvinism, and collective irresponsibility. And, again, like Hellenic concepts of pitched battle, it is all too often forgotten that nearly all Western values were ultimately agrarian in their genesis, arising out of the peculiarly rural nature of the ancient Greek city-states. Those interconnected communities of small farmers created these concepts as a means to preserve a way of life unseen elsewhere in the world at the time. I cannot here trace the subsequent and complicated post-Hellenic evolution of the agrarian yeoman, the immemorial odyssey of the independent rural person in Western history through Roman times and the Medieval and Renaissance eras into the Industrial Revolution. But I do intend to chronicle in detail when Western agrarianism first arose in Greece, how it nearly vanished, and why its fundamental creed has endured until now.

Americans today of the (endangered) middle class, who own their own houses, who feel camaraderie with those of roughly like circumstances, who have no affinity with either the idle rich or the shiftless poor, who elect their own representatives, who are not subject to oppressive taxation or religious strictures, who bear their own arms and fight their country's battles, who abhor the human and material costs of war, but are not afraid openly to face down aggression, owe that entire ideology—so often now under attack in this country—not simply to classical Athenian democracy, but indeed to a much earlier agrarian *polis*, the forgotten rural “nursery of steady citizens.” To understand what has all too loosely been called the “Greek legacy,” as well as to retain any useful understanding of the relationship between individual and community, we must study these Western ideas in their proper original context. Small farmers were responsible for the rise of constitutional government in the West, and so this must be a book about farming and the people who farm.

As long as there were family farmers, there were city-states. When the former lost their character, the latter disappeared. We must therefore see

Greek history as an integral whole, not as mere interludes of artistic and literary expression.

Agrarianism began in the middle of the eighth century B.C. when most of the Greek-speaking world was just beginning to display visible signs of material prosperity: roads, bridges, temples, walls, theaters, and growing settled communities.* Political organization was still rudimentary. After all, since the decline of Mycenaean palace culture four hundred years earlier, the Greek countryside had become largely the domain of disconnected clans. Independent of each other and without any larger central organization of agriculture, local strongmen carved out areas of influence among the largely impoverished Greek population.

Although these regional powers probably controlled to some degree the 'economy' of the Greek countryside, they had little interest in, or knowledge of, arboriculture, viticulture, or other methods of intensive cereal production, much less the advantages of small, independent land ownership. All that was antithetical to their social and political culture, which was far removed from small farming. Wealth in early Greece was largely derived from herds of cattle, sheep, pigs, and goats, and the frequent organized raiding party—all understandable in a depopulated landscape, where the efficiency of land use was rarely explored, and the agricultural labor of the farmer-owner himself was less critical. Private property on any wide scale was nonexistent. The very notion of a busy, stubborn, and independent agrarian was itself completely unknown.

This period after the collapse of Mycenaean culture (1100–700 B.C.) is rather unimaginatively, but quite accurately, labeled the "Dark Ages" by ancient historians. That makes sense: it is a time sandwiched between two better known eras of Greek history—the "Mycenaean" (1600–1200 B.C.) and the "Archaic" (700–480 B.C.)—where our archaeological sources are far more plentiful, and where both pictorial art and writing are available to modern scholars. Yet by 700 B.C. at least, the progeny of these same "Dark-Age" Greeks had created well over 1,000 new, small city-states, a thriving trade and commerce, literacy among the ruling elites, Panhellenic festivals and sanctuaries, monumental temple-

* Coldstream 1977: 317–66; Gallant 1982:119–20. Farmers, ancient and modern, manifest success mostly by building things; oddly, some scholars sometimes see intricate and impressive ancient rural infrastructure as a sign that the population therefore must have been doing something else!