



Frances E. Dolan. *Digging the Past: How and Why to Imagine Seventeenth Century Agriculture*.

**Frances E. Dolan. *Digging the Past: How and Why to Imagine Seventeenth Century Agriculture*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020. 280 pages. \$59.95 (hardcover). ISBN: 9780812252330.**

The goal of *Digging the Past* is stated early with the question, “Is it possible to approach the seventeenth century, in its failed proposals and successful ventures, as a resource for imagining future agriculture in fruitful ways?” Frances E. Dolan seeks to answer this question by offering “a fine grained case study that proposes to enrich our understanding of the value of the past (p. 7). The method consists of examining the letters, diaries, notebooks, botanicals, pamphlets, as well as plays, poems and “how to” guides. Among the topics subsequently covered are histories of food and work, literary criticism of the pastoral, histories of elite and vernacular science, of reading and writing practices and so on. This leads to an examination of agricultural topics such as composting and soil amendment, local food, natural wine and hedgerows. Along the way, we also encounter such varied topics from Shakespeare to cannibalism. An extensive and well documented bibliography testifies to the wide-ranging scholarship that supports this book.

Why agriculture? Because agriculture dominated the economy and much of English life, a plethora of agricultural images were employed by the English in the seventeenth century. (Patricia Speed is cited in support of this on p. 175). Dolan highlights certain concepts central to agricultural change, illustrating that despite contemporary views, there was never an orderly and serene agricultural life in the past. This provides a foundation to her critiques of present-day trends around “pure,” organic agriculture. Dolan explicitly builds on the work, *Discordant Harmonies*, by Daniel Botkin and his discussion of the absence of order in the cultivation of the natural world. The multitude of ideas and thoughts present in *Digging the Past*, including the effective critique of modern attempts to recreate native agriculture, are a consequence of the belief that nature itself is so dynamic as to require new interrogation by each generation.

Each individual chapter speaks to this position. Chapter One is as much about the language of agriculture as it is about agriculture itself. It begins with a discussion of soil and makes the important point that hints from the classical, such as Columella, were an important stimulus. In a deep analysis of imagery, Dolan argues that thinking of depleted soils as “ill fed” rather than “dead” naturally stimulated thoughts about proper feed for the soil. Doing so led to increased soil fertility and

appreciation of manures and composting. Terms such as “plow”™ and “compost”™ acquired wider meanings apart from their role in stimulating agricultural production. Dolan then explores varieties of composting whether it be of humans or plants, considering it in book-history terms as akin to commonplacing.

Chapter Two then pivots to the more specific case-study of turnips as a robust and resilient, multi-purpose plant. One such reference to the popularity of turnips is how it extended well into the eighteenth century when one of its strongest advocates, the second Lord Townsend, was popularly called “Turnip Townshend.” Dolan extends the image of mixtures from the previous chapter by looking at soil amendment and transplanting as a parallel to cultural assimilation, especially because such amendments, whether of plants or of people, takes time. The chapter then continues with the study of Titus Andronicus and an extensive section on cannibalism. *Digging the Past*™s association is supported by the the position that “cannibalism in the starving time” is “part of a web of associations with eating one’s own that moved across time and oceans.”

For this reviewer, Chapter Three is the most compelling of *Digging the Past*. It explains the significance of terroir to the growing of wine, with such examples such as the impact of phylloxera epidemic of the 1860s on contemporary wine-making: it effectively established that wines today are grafted on New World root stock. Continuing Dolan’s careful treatment of language, the author observes that one consequence of this change is that it now makes little sense to speak of pure wines. Examining “Winegrowers, Biodynamics and Natural wine,” Dolan considers efforts to revive English vines, including the immigration of French wine-makers, and attempts to establish vineyards in the colonies.

Chapter Four turns to hedges and their agricultural, social and economic importance. Hedges played an important role in dividing the commons into private lands, tended to by the owner, to serve as a source of agricultural productivity. But the loss of commons directly impoverished both individuals and social relations, intertwining hedges and enclosure together. For aesthetic reasons, some hedges were hidden, so to speak, underground: this did not cause a break in the pastoral scenery while providing the desired boundaries of private property. Since a hedged area often required a hedgerow, the hedge meant both a loss of commons for all and a gain of benefits for the poorest within the hedgerow; it was a place where the underclass could gather for bonhomie and even forage for food and medicine. Dolan focuses on the role of hedges in *Henry IV* and *Sleeping Beauty*. The absence of a hedge protecting the Sleeping Beauty, who in the original seventeenth century account is assaulted in her sleep by a king, marks her as one unguarded and thus in the commons.

The epilogue on the Jamestown settlement provides several discussions of agricultural productivity in a short space: the recruitment, or importation, of specialist workers for growing vines; the loss caused by “penny wise pound foolish”™ investment measures; the use of Indigenous corn and maize as rotation crops; the planting of turnips as food; the discussion of colonies as an economic resource for the mother country; and being a stable settlement in itself. Hedges are absent in the epilogue as the plenty of land met the needs of those present; the absence of hedges may have suggested to the colonists that there was no private property to be trespassed upon. Dolan is ultimately critical of modern attempts to romanticize Jamestown for tourism, overlooking some of the more complex history.

My primary critique of *Digging the Past* stems from my methodological vantage as an economist. A productive agriculture provides a surplus of food that enables cities to grow and typically requires fewer agricultural workers, who can then go to cities where they are generally better paid. Those engaging in

productive agriculture typically become richer and provide a stable domestic market for the product of the cities. Dolan demonstrates their awareness of these issues, and *Digging the Past* could have addressed these features, as they feed naturally into her larger story. My second critique is the absence of Christian thought in the narrative. The controlling metaphors of everyday life, which Dolan pays such close attention to, were also faith-based. For example, whether it be the quoted Barnaby Gooch, Water Blight or Gervais Markham, many of the writers in this study are linked to the rise of puritanism in the seventeenth century which would arise from Christianity, and were institutionalized in the Royal Society of England. It is hard to believe that they would not have contributed imagery other than that presented in *Digging the Past* a consideration of which would have provided a more comprehensive understanding.

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