



Up from the Mudsills of Hell: The Farmers' Alliance, Populism, and Progressive Agriculture in Tennessee, 1870-1915

Connie L. Lester

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Up from the Mudsills of Hell analyzes agrarian activism in Tennessee from the 1870s to 1915 within the context of farmers' lives, community institutions, and familial and communal networks. Locating the origins of the agrarian movements in the state's late antebellum and post-Civil War farm economy, Connie Lester traces the development of rural reform from the cooperative efforts of the Grange, the Agricultural Wheel, and the Farmers' Alliance through the insurgency of the People's Party and the emerging rural bureaucracy of the Cooperative Extension Service and the Tennessee Department of Agriculture.

Lester ties together a rich and often contradictory history of cooperativism, prohibition, disfranchisement, labor conflicts, and third-party politics to show that Tennessee agrarianism was more complex and threatening to the established political and economic order than previously recognized. As farmers reached across gender, racial, and political boundaries to create a mass movement, they shifted the ground under the monoliths of southern life. Once the Democratic Party had destroyed the insurgency, farmers responded in both traditional and progressive ways. Some turned inward, focusing on a localism that promoted--sometimes through violence--rigid adherence to established social boundaries. Others, however, organized into the Farmers' Union, whose membership infiltrated the Tennessee Department of Agriculture and the Cooperative Extension Service. Acting through these bureaucracies, Tennessee agrarian leaders exerted an important influence over the development of agricultural legislation for the twentieth century.

Up from the Mudsills of Hell not only provides an important reassessment of agrarian reform and radicalism in Tennessee, but also links this Upper South state into the broader sweep of southern and American farm movements emerging in the late nineteenth century.

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