



Back to the Land: The Enduring Dream of Self-Sufficiency in Modern America (Studies in American Thought and Culture)

Dona Brown

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For many, “going back to the land” brings to mind the 1960s and 1970s—hippie communes and the Summer of Love, The Whole Earth Catalog and Mother Earth News. More recently, the movement has reemerged in a new enthusiasm for locally produced food and more sustainable energy paths. But these latest back-to-the-landers are part of a much larger story. Americans have been dreaming of returning to the land ever since they started to leave it. In *Back to the Land*, Dona Brown explores the history of this recurring impulse. ?

Back-to-the-landers have often been viewed as nostalgic escapists or romantic nature-lovers. But their own words reveal a more complex story. In such projects as Gustav Stickley’s Craftsman Farms, Frank Lloyd Wright’s “Broadacre City,” and Helen and Scott Nearing’s quest for “the good life,” Brown finds that the return to the farm has meant less a going-backwards than a going-forwards, a way to meet the challenges of the modern era. Progressive reformers pushed for homesteading to help impoverished workers get out of unhealthy urban slums. Depression-era back-to-the-landers, wary of the centralizing power of the New Deal, embraced a new “third way” politics of decentralism and regionalism. Later still, the movement merged with environmentalism. To understand Americans’ response to these back-to-the-land ideas, Brown turns to the fan letters of ordinary readers—retired teachers and overworked clerks, recent immigrants and single women. In seeking their rural roots, Brown argues, Americans have striven above all for the independence and self-sufficiency they associate with the agrarian ideal.

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