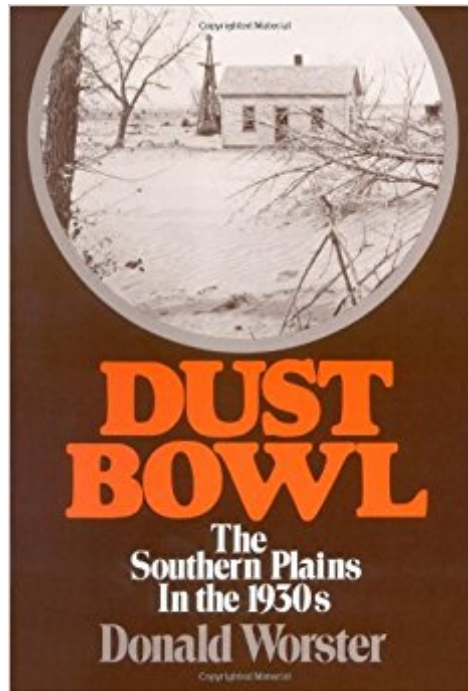




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# Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains In The 1930s (Galaxy Books)



## Synopsis

In the mid-1930s, North America's Great Plains faced one of the worst man-made environmental disasters in world history. Donald Worster's classic chronicle of the devastating years between 1929 and 1939 tells the story of the Dust Bowl in ecological as well as human terms. Twenty-five years after his book helped to define the new field of environmental history, Worster shares his more recent thoughts on the subject of the land and how humans interact with it. In a new afterword, he links the Dust Bowl to current political, economic, and ecological issues-including the American livestock industry's exploitation of the Great Plains, and the ongoing problem of desertification, which has now become a global phenomenon. He reflects on the state of the plains today and the threat of a new dustbowl. He outlines some solutions that have been proposed, such as "the Buffalo Commons," where deer, antelope, bison, and elk would once more roam freely, and suggests that we may yet witness a Great Plains where native flora and fauna flourish while applied ecologists show farmers how to raise food on land modeled after the natural prairies that once existed. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Worster's book is the first to pinpoint the results of the mechanization and defiance of nature, and the sources of such practices. Definitely the best introduction to understanding the cultural sources of modern environmental crises."--A.R. Vasavi, Tufts University"Over ten years old, in a field that is rapidly growing and changing and still the best environmental history of 20th century

agriculture!"--Mart Stuart, Oregon State Univ."An exciting, provocative, and stimulating study....It has much to say to historians, environmentalists, and public policy makers."-- American Historical Review"Superb social history....A gracefully written and fascinating book."--History: Reviews of New Books"Well-written and students respond to it well."--Gilbert W. Gillespie, Cornell University

Donald Worster, Professor of American Studies, University of Kansas.

My farm is in Morton County, Kansas in the center of the Dust Bowl. We are making the same mistakes now as farmers did back in the thirties. "In the thirties....[Planners demanded fresh thinking about traditional property rights of the individual [when] they threatened the community's welfare. Among the goals of this new agricultural conservation were removing excess marginal acreage from crop production, preventing soil erosion through improved agronomic practices, rural zoning and other grassroots regulatory action, solving chronic farm poverty, and bringing the science of ecology into resource management" (Worster 186). My farm has been in the Federal Soil Bank since the late 1990s, and we planted strains of drought-resistant grass on it. The problem is that other farmers in the area have drilled deep wells into the Ogallala aquifer and are pumping it dry even though the aquifer lies under everyone's land. One solution could be to develop the area for wind and solar energy but, even though Morton County gets more wind than anywhere else in the state, and high numbers of sunny days, entrenched interests prevent the development of a modern, new electric grid. They prefer to burn dirty coal and drain the fragile aquifer (it took a million years for nature to form it---at the current rate of depletion it will probably be gone in 50 years). Want to understand more about the Southern Plains culture--read this book.

Donald Worster first wrote this book in 1979 based on his research and interviews about the Dust Bowl era in the Southern Plains. This book is for my research paper on the topic of the Dust Bowl and it gives a very powerful overview presentation of the history, sociology, psychology, and ecology of the region. First, I enjoy the book's presentation which uses black and white photographs such as the one on the cover throughout the book. The photographs are spread out each to prove a powerful point about the power of the soil erosion which led to Dust Bowl condition after being plowed down in previous years. The Dust Bowl was in the making when the farmers plowed millions of acres of land to grow wheat in abundance. The book takes it's time to explain the situation in the pre-Dust Bowl days until recently. The book's presentation makes it easier to read rather than turning to the center of the book where the photographs are combined. In the book, they also offer

several maps to help understand the area. If you are interested in the history of the Dust Bowl, this book would be the first step in understanding the gravity of the man-made conditions, the economy, ecology, and the abuse of land in the first place. The situation is not talked about today because the government have assisted during the Great Depression and through the New Deal to study soil erosion and soil conservation.

Dust Bowl is an undeniable classic of environmental history. Donald Worster's synthesis of ecology and social history set a precedent for the burgeoning field when the book was published in 1979. And as a document of "one of the worst ecological blunders in history" (p. 4), Dust Bowl reads like a necessary cautionary tale from a wise elder. Yet, for all its thorough analysis, vivid imagery, and scholarly importance, Dust Bowl is often distractingly heavy-handed (Mind you this review is coming from as staunch an environmentalist as you will meet.). It is telling that the book's introductory quote comes from Karl Marx, with whom Worster shared a penchant for historical fatalism. Turn-of-the-century capitalism, Worster would argue, was (and in many ways still is) on a collision course with the natural limits of ecology, and this inevitable disaster manifested most clearly in the "Great American Desert" (p. 81) during the 1930s. But the notion of Culture, to which Worster points as the explanatory variable in our downfall variously, a "capitalist ethos" (p. 96), or a set of "bourgeois values" (p. 136) leaves no room for human agency and leaves this reader wondering: Are we looking at the issue critically or just commiserating? At best, Worster's line of reasoning is accurate but extremely depressing. At worst, it is nihilistic and somewhat offensive (Note how often he uses the word "cling" in regards to traditional practices.). Indeed, Worster cautions in his preface that his argument "will not be acceptable to many plainmen" (p. vii). I would take that sentiment further and suggest that it may not be acceptable to really anyone who has hope for the future. Since the publication of Dust Bowl, environmental historians have been engaged in a delicate tap dance with the most pressing issue facing our species: environmental degradation. Worster chose to focus on our most egregious ecological transgression and thus succeeded in demonstrating where we have gone spectacularly wrong. However, if, upon reflection, we are left at a loss for who "we really are" except as an expression of some nebulous, overbearing idea of economics and Culture then we would do well to

reassess or perhaps look elsewhere.

Besides a thorough history of the dustbowl developments in the 1930s, it explains the underlying tragedy of plowing up the grasses in the Great Plains, despite the repeated warnings of many scientists. I learned a great deal from reading this book and recommend it. After the complete disruption of the ecology of the Great Plains, farmers are now over drawing the water resources of the underlying aquifer much faster than it can be replenished.

For a thorough and factual account of the Dust Bowl, what led to it and how people lived and died during that time, this is the book. At times I get bogged down with stats, but that's just me. As a sociology major I have to wonder why this was not required reading, and then I realized it had not been written when I was in college. I am ignorant about this period of history and had been reading a lot about Dorothea Lange. That led me to this book and Ken Burns' documentary. A good combination.

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