“To Improve the Soil and the Mind”: Content and Context of Nineteenth-Century Agricultural Literature

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Abstract

Nineteenth-century agricultural periodicals contain information about horticultural advancements, practices, and educational agendas that can facilitate deeper understandings of American environmental history. Originating in the Northeast in the early nineteenth century, these publications followed expansion into other regions of the country and by century's end, hundreds of publications had appeared throughout America. Most had short runs and strictly regional appeal, but a few enjoyed widespread circulation and national influence. This article discusses the national context and content of nineteenth-century agricultural periodicals, including their origins and editorial agendas. "To Improve the Soil and the Mind" was the motto of The Cultivator (published between 1834 and 1885), considered the best of its kind and one of the most popular and influential agricultural journals in nineteenth-century America. Created and edited by Jesse Buel (1778–1839) of New York, The Cultivator and other such publications were instrumental in shaping policies and advocating practices that advanced plant sciences and environmental awareness in nineteenth-century America. Close inspection of such historical material can lead contemporary historians to a deeper understanding of the environmental heritage of northeast, southeast, and mid-western regions.

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