Document D: Historian, Professor Donald Worster

Professor Donald Worster is a leader in the field of environmental history. He is a professor at the University of Kansas and has written several books on environmental topics. The excerpt below is from his book Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s.

The Dust Bowl took only 50 years to accomplish. . . . It came about because the culture was operating in precisely the way it was supposed to. Americans blazed their way across a richly endowed continent with a ruthless, devastating efficiency unmatched by any people anywhere. Some environmental catastrophes are nature’s work, others are the slowly accumulating effects of ignorance or poverty. The Dust Bowl, in contrast, was the inevitable outcome of a culture that deliberately, self-consciously, set itself that task of dominating and exploiting the land for all it was worth.

The Dust Bowl . . . came about because the expansionary energy of the U.S. had finally encountered a volatile, marginal land, destroying the delicate ecological balance that had evolved there. We speak of farmers and plows on the plains and the damage they did, but the language is inadequate. What brought them to the region was a social system, a set of values, an economic order. . . . Capitalism, it is my contention, had been the decisive factor in this nation’s use of nature.


Vocabulary

| endowed: gifted, resourced | inevitable: unavoidable, necessary |
| ruthless: cruel | expansionary: spreading out |
| efficiency: effectiveness | volatile: unstable, unpredictable |
| catastrophes: disasters, tragedies | marginal: of secondary importance |
Document E: Historian, Professor R. Douglas Hurt

Professor R. Douglas Hurt is the head of the History Department at Purdue University. He has written numerous books on agricultural history. The excerpt below comes from his book The Dust Bowl: An Agricultural and Social History.

Dust storms in the southern Great Plains, and indeed, in the Plains as a whole, were not unique to the 1930s . . . Many factors contributed to the creation of the Dust Bowl – soils subject to wind erosion, drought which killed the soil-holding vegetation, the incessant wind, and technological improvements which facilitated the rapid breaking of the native sod. The nature of southern Plains soils and periodic influence of drought could not be changed, but the technological abuse of the land could have been stopped. This is not to say that mechanized agriculture irreparably damaged the land – it did not. New and improved implements such as tractors, one-way disk plows, grain drills, and combines reduced plowing, planting, and harvesting costs and increased agricultural productivity. Increased productivity caused prices to fall, and farmers compensated by breaking more sod for wheat. At the same time, farmers gave little thought to using their new technology in ways that would conserve the soil.


Vocabulary

incessant: nonstop, constant
irreparably: permanently
implements: equipment, tools
compensated: adjusted, made do
conserve: protect from harm or destruction