

Best Book: Winter 1822.

By Conrad Vispo

The columns of the Parthenon, or some stage-scenery mock-up thereof, support the doorways and roofs of many of our older houses. They frame the clapboard sides of Greek Revival structures, are integrated into front door frames, and hint at ancient, marble inspiration. These classical tendencies were more than just architectural fashion, they were philosophical statements of allegiance to ideals such as democracy, to aspirations such as a classical education (in a 1838 survey, both of Columbia County's academies taught Latin and Greek), and to causes such as the Greek Revolution.

With more than 2/3rds of the county workforce then in agriculture, classical aspirations extended beyond the political and academic. For example, Virgil's *Georgics* – a set of essays which promoted agriculture as a profession and a way of civic life – held immediate relevance for people. Written around 30 BC by the Latin poet and reinvigorated in the 1700s by John Dryden's translation, these provided comments not only on practical farming but also on agrarian society. It is thus not surprising that one of the first and most influential farming manuals published after the Revolution was entitled, in part, the *Georgical Dictionary*. The span of its three editions, 1790 – 1822, covered much of the period of Federal (Romanesque) architecture and the beginning of the Greek Revival wave.

Despite being replete with alphabetical agronomic detail, there is no doubt that the allusion to Virgil's agrarianism was not casual. In the book's first page, the author, Maine pastor and farmer Samuel Deane, states "the degree of estimation in which it [agriculture] has been held has ever, we believe, presented an accurate criterion of the morals, prosperity and civilization of any age or country." How then, did these mostly 'technical' words come together as a commentary not only on agriculture but also on society?

Some of the dictionary's words are antiquated. Livestock ailments such as elfshot, malanders and pavin are not commonly recognized by modern vets. Elfshot apparently originated because stricken cattle were thought to have been shot by elves. There are also antiquated terms for by-gone techniques. A sneade, for example, is not a Dr. Seuss creature but rather another word for snathe (the handle of a scythe). 'Quincunx order' refers not to some Hogwartian secret society, but rather a pattern of tree planting. Finally, a stercorary is an area for storing dung; that definition continues for another 3 ½ pages.

Stercorary is honored with an expanded definition because of the core role that Deane was advocating for manure management. In his diary from the 1790s, county resident Alexander Coventry recounted how farmers used to haul their manure out on the river ice in midwinter. By Coventry and Deane's era, many were warning of depleted soils in the Hudson Valley. The Dutch had already been doing so in the 17th century. It was in this context, Deane and fellow "improvers" were urging farmers to care for the soil.

Such 'neglect' was often understandable. Compared to Europe, the US was land rich and labor poor. As a result, the most appealing farming strategy was sometimes to farm extensively, investing relatively little labor in any one acre but getting an adequate total harvest because of comparatively large acreage. As the soil was worn out, new lands could be opened elsewhere. Writing from New England, where the finite nature of good farmland was already evident, Deane urged a more 'sustainable' approach. As a pastor watching his congregation, he probably saw that if good farmers went west or became impoverished, his society would begin to fall apart. The *Ploughboy* and *Cultivator*, early 19th century Hudson Valley farming newspapers, echo similar concerns.

On first reading, the *Georgical Dictionary* appears coldly technical. Why allude to Virgil's *Georgics* if you're talking sneades, dibbles and stercocaries? But, taken together, the definitions are an earnest plea for a new approach to farming, one which urges care of the soil as a way to care for agrarian society. Many of Deane's ingredients are familiar although perhaps still tinged with novelty: crop rotations, composting, rotational grazing, contour plowing, cover cropping and careful manure management. Although many of these techniques are ancient, for its day Deane's collection of terms was as cutting edge and socially-charged as any modern work on permaculture, biodynamics or agroecology. As he notes, "the writer has been excited to treat on the present subject by a tender concern for the welfare of his country... At the same time, he will not pretend to deny his feeling of an ambition to be one of the first of his nation, who has thus endeavoured to lighten the labours, and promote the happiness of his countrymen."

On the title page of the Dictionary is a quote from Virgil's *Georgics*:

*Frigoribus parto agricolae plerumque fruuntur,
Mutuaque inter se laeti conviva curant:
Invitat genialis hyems, curasque resolvit.*

Being no Latin scholar, I wondered what inspirational slogan or agricultural tip Deane had chosen; but this is neither. Loosely translated, the words mean:

In cold weather, farmers often enjoy the fruits of their labor
And rejoice together around the table.
Genial winter invites them in and loosens their cares...

To me, this is Deane's image of a cultural ideal: farming in which production is sufficient to provide the time and means for hearty rejoicing and, perhaps, even for reviewing your ideals and designing your house.