

Grain Dust Dreams by David W. Tarbet

William J. Brown, Ph.D.

Volume 108, Number 1, Spring 2016

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1050617ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1050617ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Brown, W. J. (2016). Review of [*Grain Dust Dreams* by David W. Tarbet]. *Ontario History*, 108(1), 130–131. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1050617ar>

a recognized figure in British and Canadian clubwomen's circles, crusaded for an international alliance of rural women that would offer even greater mechanisms of support across borders. This organization, the ACWW, would go on to become the largest association of its kind in the world.

In spite of the fact that details about Watt's life are scattered and piecemeal at best, Ambrose utilizes sources such as Watt's own writings, correspondence, and Women's Institute fonds to craft a beautifully-written biography about an educated career woman, widowed mother, and polarizing public figure. Ambrose's careful consideration of Watt's contradictory qualities and prickly disposition are a breath of fresh air when so many biographies, especially of women, tend to glorify success in adverse conditions. Watt was not without her faults, but much like her contemporary

Adelaide Hoodless (founder of the WI in Canada), she used her affluence as a platform to draw attention to conditions in rural Canada, especially issues pertaining to women. Even after her death in 1948, Watt continued to be a provocative figure. Though deemed a person of "national historic significance" by Parks Canada (216), efforts to commemorate her endeavours were marred by factual inconsistencies and re-imaginings of Watt's long list of accomplishments. Regardless, as Ambrose concludes, Madge Watt needs to be remembered for her attempts to unify diverse groups of rural women, for her tireless efforts to bring attention to rural women's issues, and for her ability to connect with audiences of women from all walks of life.

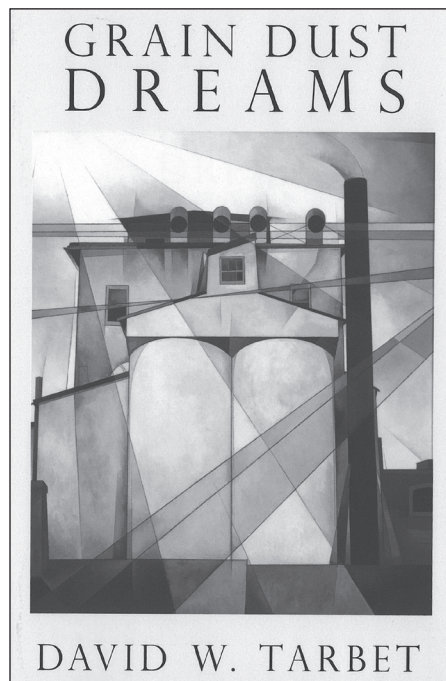
Rebecca Beusaert
University of Guelph

Grain Dust Dreams

by David W. Tarbet

Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2015. 122 pages.
\$16.95 Paperback ISBN13: 978-1-4384-5816-8. \$16.95 Electronic, ISBN13: 978-1-4384-5818-2. (www.sunypress.edu)

In his "Afterword" to *Grain Dust Dreams*, a new book about North American grain elevators published by Excelsior Editions, an imprint of the State University of New York Press, David W. Tarbet makes his case. "There are other books on grain elevators—many others. Most concentrate on how they look. [...] But I have taken a different approach. If I had to analogize elevators to humans and imagine elevators as having bodies and roles, I wouldn't see them as photographic models—attractive as they are. I would see them as workers.



[...] The work of a grain elevator is done by real workers. They are the ones who deserve our admiration, even though they would be surprised by the attention. In spite of the dangers and difficulties, they show up daily to do a hard job and think themselves happy to have it.” (95-97).

He’s absolutely right. Out of the fifteen books on the subject that have been published since 1986, when Reyner Banham’s pioneering *A Concrete Atlantis: U.S. Industrial Building and European Architectural Modernism, 1900-1925* came out, all but two of them—Tarbet’s *Grain Dust Dreams* and my *American Colossus: the Grain Elevator 1943-1942*, which was published by Colossal Books in 2009—have been books of photographs.

Something else distinguishes *Grain Dust Dreams* and *American Colossus* from the others: both are primarily concerned with the gigantic “terminal” elevators that have been constructed in particular cities (Thunder Bay, Ontario, and Buffalo, New York, respectively), while the others have focused on the smaller “country” elevators that have been built in rural areas all through the American and Canadian Prairies.

Tarbet is also right to insist, “The work of a grain elevator is done by real workers” (97), which is something that has often been overlooked, ignored or taken for granted by too many of the other authors. Like *American Colossus*, *Grain Dust Dreams* makes it clear that “grain dust is everywhere in an elevator. It’s a constant and unavoidable companion. [It is] annoying, causing red, itchy spots around the neck and elbows. [...] It’s noisy, dusty, and dangerous to work in [a grain elevator]” (xiv). Furthermore, as Tarbet notes, “grain dust ignites easily. Once ignited, if it is in a confined space it explodes, and even if the fire wasn’t spread through an explosion, the tops of the bins in early elevators were open and fire spread

easily from one bin to another” (19). As a result, grain dust is doubly dangerous to a worker at a grain elevator.

Unfortunately, too little of Tarbet’s book is actually devoted to “real workers,” that is to say, to people currently employed at a grain elevator. They only appear in Chapters 4 and 5, “Managing an Elevator” and “How They Work,” in which a manager, not a rank-and-file worker, named Gerry Heinrichs gives the author a tour of the Richardson Elevator in Thunder Bay; a part of Chapter 6, “Grain Dust Stories,” in which a train engineer named Cody gives him a tour of the Mission Grain Terminal in Thunder Bay; and a part of Chapter 7, “Union Battles,” in which the author meets an elected official from the Lodge 650 of the Thunder Bay grain handlers’ union.

Only one of these fellows (Tom Hamilton, the union rep) used to work in direct contact with the grain itself. Not surprisingly, he’s the only one whose name gets associated with grain dust. “Tom knew what it was like,” Tarbet says, to clean “a bin through dust so thick that you could not see your hand in front of your face” (70). But Tarbet brings Tom onstage, not to talk about grain dust, or the loneliness and alienation of working in a gigantic installation that paradoxically only requires a mere handful of people to run, but to talk about a struggle circa 1991 in which such non-workplace issues as “lowering the retirement age, job security, retraining, and adjusting the pensions of current retirees” (71) were in play.

The remaining chapters of *Grain Dust Dreams*—five out of a total of nine—are devoted to matters that, it seems to me, have already been addressed, and in a more in-depth, imaginative and insightful fashion, by other books on the subject.

William J. Brown, Ph.D.