

Reviews/Comptes rendus

Kill and Chill: Restructuring Canada's Beef Commodity Chain. Ian MacLachlan. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001. 0-8020-0847-X (cloth), \$70.00; 0-8020-7832-X (paper), \$27.95.

Ian MacLachlan has written an excellent economic and historical geography of Canada's beef industry, following the trail from pasture to plate. By framing his study as a commodity chain analysis, he is able to tell a coherent tale that explores fully the nature of linkages that bind together the diverse set of actors whose interests are involved. The no-nonsense title alerts the reader to an account that does not shy away from discussing the "stunning and exsanguination" of cattle, for example (p.138), or the high rates of industrial injuries that have long been a feature of packing plants. But this is not a sensationalist treatment of the beef industry by one of its contemporary detractors. It is, rather, a well-researched industrial geography monograph, albeit one that in format and tone reaches out beyond a narrow academic audience to engage those who can identify with one of the many livelihood settings that are given attention. Among the regional science community, even those not normally interested in agricultural staples will find here a rewarding case study of the outworking of spatial economic principles at a variety of geographical scales.

The book is divided into three sections, focusing respectively on cattle raising, meat packing, and (more briefly) beef marketing and distribution. Separate chapters analyse component processes of each of these aspects. The author's primary purpose is to explain the substantial structural and geographical transformation of Canada's beef industry during the past twenty years – and he does this very well, drawing on primary sources as well as a diverse literature. But he is also keen to situate the recent past in the context of the previous century of evolution of this formerly major industrial sector. Hence his attention to technological change in the beef processing industry, the evolution of labour relations, patterns of corporate ownership and concentration, and the interplay of changes in consumer demand and the structure of the retailing sector. Equally, as market forces affecting the Canadian beef industry have always been continental in scope, MacLachlan provides accounts of selective critical developments in the US beef commodity chain that have impacted the sector in Canada. Across all these varied themes, the author provides a richly conceptualised analysis. The section on "economies of scale in feedlots" (p.60-63) is a particularly clear example of material that is soon likely to find its way into the classroom.

At the macro scale, the story is of the gradual dissolution of an anomalously (given its weight-losing characteristics) market-oriented industry, with most of its activity, apart from the initial rearing of cattle in Alberta, concentrated in southern Ontario; and its replacement by a predominantly raw-material oriented industry, concentrated in southern Alberta. The author traces how a combination of logistical (the economics of livestock shipment and refrigerated transportation) and political (subsidised grain shipment rates) factors encouraged the emergence of metropolitan meat packing plants in central Canada prior to the 1930s; how wartime regulation of an essential industry was instrumental in the rapid unionisation of the workforce in the 1940s; and how the oligopolistic corporate structure allowed a labour aristocracy (financially if not culturally) to emerge from nationwide pattern bargaining.

By the 1980s, the various pieces were falling into place that allowed this mould to be broken, most of them (the demise of Crow rate was the domestic exception) originating in the United States. New corporate actors challenged the mid-continent metropolitan unionised packers with modern high-capacity, non-union plants located in rural areas in the west adjacent to increasingly large feedlots. Economies of scale and increases in the value-added processing of the packing plants were articulated with eastern consumers by a revolution in meat preparation and marketing ("boxed" beef shipped directly to supermarkets replacing the "dressed sides" shipped to butchers).

What in the book could have been improved? The proof-reading, certainly with respect to the proper use of commas. The bibliography, in that a number of sources that deserve mention in this definitive study are missing (e.g., Mitchell 1975; Chiotti 1992). The lack of referencing to the well-annotated set of mainly historical photographs that open the volume. But these are minor blemishes in what is otherwise a commendable advertisement for the insights that an economic geographer can bring to a significant and multifaceted element of Canada's industrial and social evolution.

References

- Mitchell, D. 1975. *The Politics of Food*. Toronto: James Lorimer.
- Chiotti, Q. 1992. "Sectoral adjustments in agriculture: dairy and beef livestock industries in Canada", in I.R. Bowler, C.R. Bryant and M.D. Nellis (eds.). *Contemporary Rural Systems in Transition: Volume 1, Agriculture and the Environment*. Wallingford: CAB International, pp. 43-57.

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Against the Tide. J.D. House. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999. 0-820-4450-6, \$39.95

What might have been a book of guidance and instructions for the next generation who have to tackle the task of influencing government bureaucracy appears instead as one long gripe. This book becomes a book of blame.

Much of the material and most of the people identified in the book have special meaning to me having had my own share of experiences with Newfoundland Government bureaucracy and the 'nouveau' bureaucracy that was the Economic Recovery Commission (ERC).

House unfortunately falls into an age-old pattern of politicians and developers in Newfoundland by portraying himself and 'his' ERC as the latest in a long line of saviours. This has been the self-aggrandising trap that so many of the leaders of Newfoundland have built for themselves. This stems from a basic flaw in our thinking not only about leadership and development in that province but in most of the Western world. Somehow, we have denigrated leadership to an individual, and development to government doing 'for' people, or in some cases doing 'to' people. My view is that leadership has to be shared and include many, while development has to come from people and both are truly about inspiring, encouraging and supporting.

The book itself superficially touches on many of the issues relating to the flaws in our current, less than democratic systems of government (whether in Newfoundland or elsewhere) and our heavily controlling bureaucracies. It touches on some of the core misunderstandings of development and development as a race to embrace the new, the glossy and the grandiose. It does provide some insights, especially through many of the concepts explored and pursued by the ERC, and identifies ways that development could have a different flavour and style. But, mostly it harps on the injustices, perpetrated not on the ideals of one person as portrayed, rather the approaches which he took to further these ideals. These approaches, I would suggest, would make most true community advocates cringe. Imbedded in these approaches are the same thinking that continues to drive much of the bureaucracy today. These approaches suggest "I Know" therefore "I Know How".

One certainly gets the impression that bottom-up, grassroots, and community-led development -- much of the terminology that describes local and people based development -- had a place in the thinking but not in the workings of the ERC. Instead, we are given an impression that what we are witnessing is an age-old battle between two titans, in this case bureaucracy and an academic wrestling for control, power and money -- not a new ideal.

One is amazed at the ease with which the ERC initially gravitated to project, initiatives and management. Instead, one would have contemplated a strategy to build support with the grassroots, business and 'friendly' government members and bureaucrats before taking strides to take on the 'old guard' bureaucrats. As well, one might have expected some plan to influence these people rather than attempting to tame and control them. There appears to be a lack of appreciation that the first step in any 'community focused approach

to development' which apparently was being espoused as the 'nouveau' way of development by the ERC, would be to identify and build appreciation of your resources. In other words, knowing what you have (including positive support) before venturing into action.

My own reflections, after twelve years working in development away from Newfoundland, finding much similarity with bureaucracy and people elsewhere, have led me to the conclusion that simply changing the bureaucracy for a new bureaucracy, even one that is 'nouveau', will not solve our current dilemma. That is little different than changing the stripe of politicians we elect. We should have learnt by now that changing politicians results in little change. A complete change of thinking is necessary to a form of governance that is less top-down and more participatory based. There has to be aware, able and confident people in every community who, through shared leadership, hold their governments in check through politicians who guide the bureaucracy rather than being guided by them.

A new level of hope and inspiration with in people is a pre-requisite. This has to be coupled with education, encouragement and time. More fundamentally, it will necessitate the next generation of young people believing in themselves and the places where they live. Those pursuing development will have to appropriate a philosophy similar to what Schumacher advocated in writing his book 'Small is Beautiful' -- 'development as if people mattered'. The inspiration has to come from true leaders who are more interested in the future of their people than their own desires and egos.

Certainly in reading this book, one is amazed at the arrogance expressed by House and his quest for importance. This was exemplified many times. One statement in particular stands out 'I prided myself in running the best organization in government'. Obviously, very few outside the tight knit circle of the ERC believed this. One can only empathise with House's lack of understanding and appreciation of strategy, process, patience and time as a basis for influencing change. Even flat structures require adequate channels of communication, empathy and respect even for those working in pyramids. One can only ponder how much more instructive this book could have been if the author had spent time reflecting on the true reasons for the demise of the ERC and wrote this book a little further into the future.

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