

REVIEWS

Daniel Samson (ed.), *Contested Countryside: Rural Workers and Modern Society in Atlantic Canada, 1800-1950* (Fredericton: Acadiensis Press 1994)

What was modernity and what is its relation to rural workers? These are two questions that immediately come to mind while reading the excellent *Contested Countryside: Rural Workers and Modern Society in Atlantic Canada, 1800-1950*, edited by Daniel Samson. This collection, by a group of young male scholars of Atlantic Canada, retrieves the rural experience that was part of the proletarianization of Atlantic labour in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In so doing it recasts the industrialization-centred periodization of Atlantic history that has emerged from the new labour and social histories. These authors highlight the non-urban and semi-proletarian workers who were a crucial part of Atlantic society throughout this period.

According to Samson, what unifies the collection is a view that the "two-worlds" approach that has characterized recent Atlantic historiography is too rigid. Rather than a clear division between industry and agriculture, rural and urban, production for use and production for exchange, a more fluid and porous typology is suggested. Historians need to be more sensitive both to the differences and to the interconnect-edness between rural and urban in Atlantic Canada, Samson says. Each of the contributors, in their own way, explores the boundary between these two worlds.

Rusty Bittermann shows how early 19th century farm households relied on a variety of forms of wage labour for part of their subsistence. He thereby challenges the notion that an earlier independence was undermined by the industrialization of the late-nineteenth century. Steven Maynard and Daniel Samson make the same general point as does Bitterman, but from different temporal vantage points. Maynard draws on American rural and feminist historical writing to argue that the productive household persisted in Hopewell, Nova Scotia, in tandem with industrialization, at least until the end of the nineteenth century. Samson, in a similar vein, maintains that the working class in the mining communities of Inverness, Nova Scotia were culturally heterogenous in the early twentieth century. And the rural background of many of these workers created variable social identities, including different masculinities.

Sean Cadigan's contribution to this historical revision is to challenge the notion that merchant capital thwarted industrial development in Newfoundland. Rather than beginning his analysis with what he views as the abstraction of merchant-capital domination, Cadigan points to the many economic, ecological and political factors that influenced fisher/merchant class relations. In so doing, he highlights the dynamic role of productive households in the Newfoundland fishery. Bill Parenteau, meanwhile, in an analysis of the administration of the New Brunswick Labor Act, chronicles the contested class terrain of Crown Lands during the 1920s. He shows how rural workers used the Labor

Act to gain access to timber lands leased to lumber and pulp and paper companies. These workers then used the land, not for settlement as was the purpose of the Act, but for access to timber.

Finally, Erik Kristiansen, in the only essay in the book that deals specifically with ideology and culture, presents the fiction of Charles Bruce and Ernest Buckler as rural meditations on modernity. Both cases are examples of “an anti-modernist, sometimes even anti-capitalist, radical conservatism,” Kristiansen maintains. As Atlantic Canada underwent its transition to “capitalist modernity,” Bruce and Buckler interrogated the process with a critical eye that lamented the social fragmentation and loss of community that was involved. Kristiansen insists that in order to understand fully this historical process, we must be attentive to these fictive representations.

These essays, all well-written and analytically sophisticated, are a welcome challenge to the dominant themes in recent historiography. Each one raises its own set of questions. I would like to highlight an issue that is central to the whole collection. To return to my initial questions, then, what strikes me about this book is the relationship, which is never investigated or made explicit, between its historiographical revisions and the concept of modernity. While not all of the contributors refer to it, the concept does frame the essays. What exactly is modernity, particularly given the authors’ apparent historical-materialist sympathies? On one hand, we have here a sophisticated rural recasting of proletarian, and industrialization, centred interpretations of Atlantic development.

But on the other hand, the central historical process is a vague modernity composed of urbanization, industrialization, proletarianization, and their attendant displacements.

There is an irony here. One of the historical-materialist challenges to received historiography twenty to twenty-five years ago was to reject the “two-worlds” approach of modernization theory (which Samson acknowledges). Granted, this challenge also resulted in a (continued) marginalization of the rural experience. But do we advance our understanding of that experience by returning to the “modern”? No doubt the category has such prominence because of the influence of postmodernism, and, since postmodernism comes to us from cultural and literary theory, it is significant that Kristiansen makes the most use of it. The problem, I think, is that the implications of postmodernism and post-structuralism for social history’s materialist premises must be made explicit and interrogated in order to move forward. And, in the present theoretical climate, a challenge to historical materialism in one area (the rural experience in this case) raises a series of other destabilizing questions.

There is a creative tension at the centre of this collection between a successful attempt to give voice to the Atlantic countryside and a return to a modernist problematic. Although this tension troubles me, it is refreshing to be able to discuss such issues while reviewing a book about rural Canada.

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