

*Creating a Modern Countryside: Liberalism and Land Resettlement in British Columbia.* By James Murton.  
(Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2007. xxix + 280 p., ill., notes, bibl., index. ISBN 978-0-7748-1337-2 hc. 85 \$ 978-0-7748-1338-9 pb. 32.95 \$)

Jason Bennett

Volume 32, numéro 2, 2009

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/038175ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/038175ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

CSTHA/AHSTC

ISSN

0829-2507 (imprimé)

1918-7750 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Bennett, J. (2009). Compte rendu de [*Creating a Modern Countryside: Liberalism and Land Resettlement in British Columbia.* By James Murton. (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2007. xxix + 280 p., ill., notes, bibl., index. ISBN 978-0-7748-1337-2 hc. 85 \$ 978-0-7748-1338-9 pb. 32.95 \$)]. *Scientia Canadensis*, 32(2), 115–118. <https://doi.org/10.7202/038175ar>

transformations géographiques dont la première est le confinement des premières nations dans des espaces de plus en plus réduits. Les cultures d'origine européennes entendent maintenant organiser la terre, dominer le territoire et produire par l'industrie.

Dans le chapitre 5, la politique permet l'organisation du territoire. L'opposition entre Français et Anglais structure de nouvelles pratiques et de nouveaux discours. Dès le milieu du 18<sup>e</sup> siècle, émerge avec force un Empire britannique qui a la main mise sur le continent, pourtant, l'ensemble n'est pas pour autant cohérent et uniforme. C'est d'ailleurs sur ce cadre d'interprétation que le reste de l'ouvrage est basé. L'archipel des cellules de peuplement fonde des espaces géographiques constitués : Terre-Neuve, les Maritimes, le Haut et le Bas Canada, puis, au loin la Colombie-Britannique (chapitres 6 à 11). Le Canada est ainsi fait de poches de peuplements alignées le long de la frontière américaine. La frontière se définit, mais le paysage définit aussi les ensembles régionaux, car on assiste à un mécanisme de création puis de stabilisation des cultures régionales. Certaines barrières physiques, comme les Rocheuses ou encore les grandes forêts, bloquent l'accès à l'ensemble de territoire. L'espace induit une réalité politique. Cette réalité fait d'ailleurs l'objet de débats pendant les années 1860 par les pères de la confédération. Le concept de pays s'accorde alors mal aux disparités régionales divisées en ensembles et dont la réalité du paysage confirme l'éloignement.

Dans un livre précis et bien organisé, Cole Haris arrive à tracer une ligne rouge tout au long de son récit. Il donne un sens à la construction historique de la géographie canadienne qui va au-delà du séquençage régional, celle de l'homme qui impose ses volontés sur une nature réticente. Il s'agit ici d'une œuvre de synthèse majeure qui dépasse le monde universitaire, car dans une langue simple et concise l'auteur va d'un océan à l'autre avec une facilité et un entrain qui amène le lecteur dans le quotidien des populations canadiennes.

LAURENT TURCOT

*Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières*

***Creating a Modern Countryside: Liberalism and Land Resettlement in British Columbia.* By James Murton. (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2007. xxix + 280 p., ill., notes, bibl., index. ISBN 978-0-7748-1337-2 hc. 85 \$ 978-0-7748-1338-9 pb. 32.95 \$)**

The interplay between the country and the city is a persistent yet underappreciated component of British Columbia's history. Within a historiography replete with the rise of resource industries and the growing

influence of Vancouver, James Murton offers a welcome counterpoint in his examination of a modernizing province at the turn of the twentieth century. With careful research and thoughtful insight, Murton pivots the debate surrounding the province's evolution to take into account the convergence of liberalism and environmental change in fostering an "alternative modernity" where the countryside competed with urban life for the mantle of progress. With watered fields and new homesteads, the state sought a new optimistic course in embracing rural development as a key strategy for the province and its people, although by the 1930s such optimism waned after a series of financial exigencies combined with a diminished faith in technology to help fashion the land according to human desire.

Based on the work that comprised his dissertation, Murton begins his monograph by tracing the impact of liberalism as a "totalizing philosophy" and guiding force within the province's political establishment. Inspired by Ian McKay's call for a sustained interrogation of the "liberal order" in the development of Canadian society, Murton documents the emergence of "New Liberalism" in the shadow of the 1914 Royal Commission of Agriculture and its subsequent influence on the refashioning of British Columbia's rural space into agrarian communities. Animated by the growing concern surrounding returning veterans, Murton argues that New Liberalism essentially represented a holistic and programmatic shift towards an interventionist state, exemplified by soldier resettlement projects shepherded by the Agricultural Settlement Commission, and later the Land Settlement Board in areas across the province.

With the return of Great War veterans, politicians and farmers acted to translate their ideas into practice. Teasing apart the numerous elements that comprised what we might call a rural renaissance, Murton correctly rejects previous historical arguments that characterized rural renewal as a cover for fulfilling urban priorities, arguing instead that agricultural science was also wielded by rural inhabitants to meet their wants and needs. Representing the appeal of health, wealth, and order, veteran resettlement projects embodied the hopes of New Liberals in remaking soldiers into "solid citizens" as well as fostering a productive relationship with the natural world.

The rest of Murton's work is devoted to addressing numerous challenges that comprised and ultimately eroded faith in new liberal policies and the viability of the modern countryside as a true alternative to urban-centric development. Vancouver Island's Comox Valley offers Murton his first case study of soldier resettlement. Guided by the ideals of cooperative work and the deliberate formation of community structure,

the creation of Merivale offered new liberals high hopes. However, early optimism among politicians, bureaucrats and veterans was replaced by frustration. Settlement plans failed to take into account local social and environmental conditions, and labour shortages slowed the back-breaking work of clearing the land. In short order, escalating costs led the government to suspend development work. Combined with a devastating fire in 1922, Merivale's decline was sealed by abandoned farms and falling land prices.

Turning his attention to British Columbia's Fraser Valley, Murton interrogates the significance of one of the most spectacular examples of new liberal engineering with the drainage of Sumas Lake to "reclaim" land for soldier resettlement and to control fluctuating water levels. In a telling demonstration of new liberal fault-lines, the province embraced a more classical version of the "liberal individual" and disavowed any responsibility for the project, saddling project costs upon current landowners and future land sales. Gauging success depended on perspective—while the project did indeed drain the lake and create fertile acreages, escalating project costs weighed down upon farmers and depressed land sales, with 90% of land unsold by 1928. Nevertheless, Murton argues that both government and land owners still agreed over the idea of building an alternative modernity although it would seem that farmer-government tension over how to sustain agricultural projects also represents a conflict over the contours of the modern countryside itself—where the individual producer ends, and the collective rural project begins.

Weighed with these relative failures, Murton shifts his gaze to the relative success of the South Okanagan Irrigation Project near Oliver. Of particular interest to historians of technology is Murton's evaluation of how state-financed irrigation impacted social relations among farmers and their relationship to the state and the environment. Critical of Donald Worster's argument that the ideals of agrarian development were mostly a way for the state to justify the creation of large-scale capitalist accumulation such as in the irrigated fields of California, Murton finds a more benign impact in the Okanagan. Buttressed by generous state subsidies that covered massively escalating costs and irrigation engineers who incorporated an appreciation for local ecological conditions, Murton argues that these qualities were instrumental in ensuring that the South Okanagan project succeeded where others failed.

Nevertheless, the hopeful ideal of working with nature embodied in the Okanagan would not survive the Great Depression. Although land settlement occupied briefly the government's agenda, Murton concludes that the 1930s killed new liberalism, and with it, the modern countryside.

Hardened by the failures or limitations of the previous settlements projects, bureaucrats and politicians rallied to the banner of “New Deal” liberalism that embraced large-scale industrial capitalism rather than trying to formulate alternatives as in the past. By the end of British Columbia’s rural experiments, the need to forge a progressive connection between humans and nature also waned.

Notwithstanding the work’s obvious strengths, there are occasions where Murton’s argument yields additional questions. For example, as liberalism changed or evolved in the 1930s, how did rural identity evolve as well? Simply put, the tenets of a modern countryside were not abandoned wholesale so much as necessarily reinterpreted in light of contingencies of the Great Depression and beyond. Farmers’ groups continued to meet out of common cause and agitate for their needs within government; research stations continued their work and dispensed advice; farmers experimented with new methods and techniques; and farmers continued to explore new ways of marketing their produce. Similarly, state support of agriculture persisted in areas of labour procurement, marketing, and the application and use of new technologies, all of which was to ensure agrarian success. Thus, recognition that the modern countryside was also the product of the families that worked the land long after provincial governments turned their attention away from returning veterans would provide a useful corollary to Murton’s valuable analysis.

JASON BENNETT

*Library and Archives Canada*