

## Scientia Canadensis

***Connecting the Dots: Social and Scientific Perspectives on Agriculture and Rural Life in Atlantic Canada.* Edited by Elizabeth Beaton. (Sydney, N.S.: Cape Breton University Press, 2009. 185 p., ill. ISBN: 978-1-8970-0939-0)**

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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years, as the links between society and water became abstract to the point that today all responsibility for maintaining relations with water is left to experts. Water, then, has become de-territorialized and de-materialized, while denying local specific human-environmental relations. Into this current impasse, the author brings the reader full circle at the end of the book, concluding with a chapter on “hydrolectics”. Hydrolectics is presented as a means of fostering society’s relations with water. Through the process of recognizing the complex natural and social nature of water, Linton argues, it may be possible to promote the reorienting of society’s response to water problems by increasing participation in decisions about water so that instead of striving to master the natural attributes of water, society strives to change water’s social nature.

A challenging read, *What is Water?* is well worth the investment in time in order to gain new insights into the natural and social meanings of water and to delve more deeply into the literature surrounding the nature-society binary. To that end, readers will find a perusal of the endnotes and bibliography of this book as instructive and rewarding as any chapter of the book itself.

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***Connecting the Dots: Social and Scientific Perspectives on Agriculture and Rural Life in Atlantic Canada.* Edited by Elizabeth Beaton. (Sydney, N.S.: Cape Breton University Press, 2009. 185 p., ill. ISBN: 978-1-8970-0939-0).**

This small volume presents the proceedings of a conference, “Sharing Knowledge on Agriculture and Rural Life in Atlantic Canada,” that was held in Mabou, Nova Scotia, in July 2006. Contributors include agronomists, cultural geographers, and sociologists from the region’s universities, as well as community organizers and environmental activists. Elizabeth Beaton, the editor and conference organizer, teaches in the Community Studies Department at Cape Breton University. The stirring keynote address (reprinted in the volume) was delivered by Dr. John Ikerd, Professor Emeritus in Agricultural Economics at the University of Missouri, who is a well-known commentator on contemporary issues in agriculture and society. Most of the essays deal with Cape Breton Island in northern Nova Scotia, but agriculture in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia is also addressed. The focus for all is the small farm and the family cultures that sustain them.

All the authors write in full awareness of the problems that face

agriculture today, problems that are only accentuated in the Atlantic region: declining farm incomes, concentration of holdings, abandonment of existing farms, a reluctance among the young to remain on the farm. The tension that runs through the collection is whether present trends auger a revival for small farms and rural communities, or simply more decline. John Ikerd sounds the optimistic note most clearly. We see emerging today, alongside the industrial food system with its focus on economic efficiency and productivity, the “sustainable agriculture movement,” which emphasizes local production and consumption, high-value food products, and networks of trust among producers, distributors, and consumers. The sustainable agriculture movement, he claims, has the potential not only to restore economic viability to a vanishing stratum of small farms, but to revitalize the rural communities that depend on them. “Local,” Ikerd insists, “is becoming the new organic” (p.28).

Elizabeth Beaton sounds the same optimistic theme in her survey of “pluriactivity” among rural residents of Inverness County in western Cape Breton. Farm families in Inverness County have long supplemented (or replaced) their farming-derived income by many other kinds of activities, including waged labor (for which industrial Cape Breton offered early opportunities) and resource extraction (seasonal fishing and logging). Today, she shows, the volume, diversity, and business-complexity of activities providing supplementary income to farm families is expanding dramatically. They include on-farm processing, direct-to-consumer marketing, non-traditional products, agri-tourism, and music and entertainment. Although suspicion and resentment of “hobby-farmers” is still strong among full-time farmers, and non-traditional farms remain an anomaly for government agricultural policy-making, pluriactivity must not be considered just another form of retreat from farming, or another symptom of rural decline. On the contrary, she argues, for many it promises not a “way out of farming,” but a “way into farming,” as well as a mode of rural life more compatible with contemporary expectations. Beaton introduces her readers to a periodization scheme for agricultural history build around “pre-productive, productive, and post-productive” eras. Pluriactivity, she argues, is a key feature of the new “post-productive” era that began in the 1990s, when agriculture was forced to recognize that it must answer to other imperatives than economic efficiency and yield-per-acre. Post-productive agriculture will make new demands on rural families in terms of time-management, marketing-savvy, and business acumen. Nova Scotia, several contributors suggest, might emerge as the unlikely center of a revived post-productive agriculture, given the unusually high proportion of farm operators holding university degrees or college diplomas (52% in 2001, as opposed to 40% in the country overall).

Readers of *Scientia Canadensis* are likely to be most interested in the role of science and technology in the issues faced by Atlantic agriculture, but the essays have little to say on this theme. The volume does include articles on Management Intensive Grazing and the promise of plastic mulch for improving yields of fodder corn, and it reproduces excellent poster-displays on insect and plant biodiversity under various pasture-management schemes. Studies of this kind, however, appear extraneous to the volume's main emphasis on historical, cultural, and economic themes. Natasha Power and David Burton undertake a promising analysis of how climate change may affect agriculture in the region. The results are disappointingly inconclusive, but they do predict that the probable increase in weather variability is likely to offset any potential gains to the region from warming. Interestingly, none of the contributors identify technoscience as a threat to small farmers; in particular, genetic engineering and its products are never mentioned in the collection.

This is a handsome volume, and the studies it contains are consistently informative. The objection might legitimately be raised that the contributors never successfully integrate the three concepts central to their concerns: farming, rurality, and community. In a contemporary rural landscape in which most people may not be "farmers," and in which "farmer" is itself a contested identity, readers would like to know more about the political, social, and religious customs and institutions that link (or increasingly fail to link) the inhabitants of that landscape into a true community. But that may be the challenge that faces rural inhabitants themselves more directly than it faces the scholars and activists who speak for them. It is enough that this volume provides a useful and often moving evocation of rural life and the courage and ingenuity of rural Cape Bretoners determined to preserve and reinvigorate it.

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***Managed Annihilation: An Unnatural History of the Newfoundland Cod Collapse.* By Dean Bavington.** (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010. xxxii + 186 p., ill., maps. ISBN 978-0-7748-17486 \$32.95).

Much has been written about the collapse of Newfoundland's cod stocks, and doubtless more insights will be gleaned from future studies of the decisions that fed this environmental and economic catastrophe. However, Dean Bavington's *Managed Annihilation: An Unnatural History of the Newfoundland Stock Collapse* passes up the chance to generate such