

Canada's Rural Majority, 1870-1940: Household, Environment, Economies by Ruth Sandwell

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knowledge on his part of the Indigenous peoples of northern North America. As he left Quebec he noted a peculiar sadness that filled his heart, passing over the event in silence for “feeling too sacred for expression Even in a journal” overpowered

him (577). Mackenzie ends where he began—plotting the coordinates and tribulations of his transatlantic adventures.

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***Canada's Rural Majority, 1870-1940:
Household, Environment, Economies***

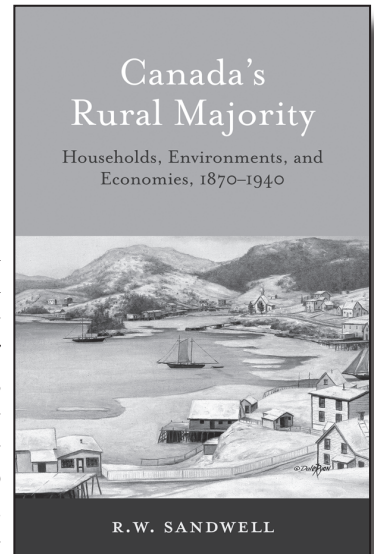
by Ruth Sandwell

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The period marking the late nineteenth century, leading up to 1940, brought much in the way of change to Canada. Ruth Sandwell's *Canada's Rural Majority: Household, Environments and Economies, 1870-1940*, makes a welcome contribution to our understanding of Canadian rural history. The book examines a particular moment in the history of rurality, and indeed, Canadian history, by looking at the period in which most industrializing nations were experiencing a decline in their rural populations as they rapidly transitioned from rural and agricultural, to urban and industrial. As a collection of snapshots of rural agricultural life in disparate parts of Canada at a time of great change, the study is invaluable. Sandwell takes that wonderful, keen sense of detail honed in her earlier micro-historical exploration of the people, policies and practices on Saltspring Island, BC, in the late nineteenth century, and uses it to explore how rural Canadians lived and worked during this seventy-year period. Through this exploration, she argues that we must see a process of change, but not necessarily a complete transformation. The movement to modernity meant wholesale change for some, and creative adjustments for others.

Canadian rural historiography has tra-

ditionally been an exercise in regional analysis, and prior to the 1970s, Canadian historians paid little attention to our rural past. A survey of Canadian rurality in its entirety therefore seems an unwieldy undertaking. A question arising early, is how to speak generally about rurality in a nation so geographically and ethnically diverse, without constantly having to evoke the experiences outside the box, or without addressing absences in the telling. Sandwell moves the definition of rurality beyond that of population density, and develops a definition of rurality based on the “dominance of life lived out-of-doors, the enormous amount of hard labour, and the pervasive presence of the household as the defining social and economic structure” (11). She does a masterful job here, by drawing our attention to an examination of geographically similar regions, and the ways in which rurality, as defined by the physical environment, shaped people's lives and work. To



do this, Sandwell explores five distinct regional environments: the Canadian Shield, the St. Lawrence Valley and Southern Great Lakes Region, the Canadian Central Plain, the Mountains and the Coast. Despite the differences within these regions, they retain common characteristics that define a particular socio-cultural view of the larger world. Within a larger context of social transformation, in addition to providing an examination of regional geography, she provides a close look at how households and communities differed within each of these five contexts.

An examination of Sandwell's treatment of the St. Lawrence Valley and Southern Great Lakes Region provides a clear example of the ways in which experiences of rurality were closely tied to the geographic context, and how that locale related to the rest of the country. During the period between 1871 and 1940, in both Quebec and Ontario, there was evidence of rural population growth because of several socio-economic factors, among them the reality that "rural households in the St. Lawrence Valley and Southern Great Lakes Region occupied some of the best land and experienced some of the best climatic conditions of any Canadian population" (103). Highlighting the reality that not all rural Canadians were rural in the same way, Sandwell discusses the ways in which the optimal soil, climatic conditions, geographic location (including the presence of the St. Lawrence River, a conduit to the rest of the country) worked to create a successful economic base for this region. As perhaps the least rural of the regions discussed throughout the book, it is important to note the ways in which it maintained its rural population throughout this period, and the ways in which the notion of rurality here remained distinct from the encroaching urban and industrial growth. Sandwell outlines the ways in which Ontario and

Quebec rural dwellers, like other rural Canadians, used diverse and creative means of subsistence, even within their "mature rural economy" (68). Similar to her examination of the rest of rural Canada, she looks at the ways rural people within this region supported themselves, through self-provisioning, producing material for sale from the farm (here she highlights the woodlot and sugar-bush as playing vital roles), and finally, through off-farm work, which involved "working for wages off the farm, and some family members participated in reciprocal work bees throughout the year" (100). She also notes that "Many farmers and other rural dwellers worked on other people's farms," (102). Thus, heterogeneous livelihood strategies, seasonal work and work opportunities shaped the day-to-day experiences of rural dwellers.

Through a well-researched and highly detailed examination of each of these regions, the reader comes away with a more thorough general understanding of the history of the period, as well as insight into the rural Canadian experience. One can clearly envision the day-to-day experience of the average Canadian rural dweller during this period, and perhaps most striking for the modern reader is the extent to which our lives have moved, not just from the rural to the urban, but from the outdoors being where we spent most of our days, to an everyday in which we barely encounter nature. The book makes a compelling case for the relationship between the rural communities and the development of local, regional and national economies. It is a clear reminder of the role rural Canada played in the processes of growth and development leading into the twentieth century.

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