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*Connecting the Dots: Social and Scientific Perspectives on
Agriculture and Rural Life in Atlantic Canada* (review)

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Connecting the Dots: Social and Scientific Perspectives on Agriculture and Rural Life in Atlantic Canada. Edited by ELIZABETH BEATON. Sydney, NS: Cape Breton University Press, 2009. Pp. 184, \$19.95

Food appears in public discussions these days as a political subject. Increasing numbers of Canadians are being politicized along with it, whether through their interest in the hundred-mile diet, fears about the safety of foreign food production and processing, concern about the plight of farmers in industrialized countries, and/or worries about 'peak oil,' the cost of transportation, and climate change. Academic interest in food is growing in a variety of newly interested disciplines, from environmental studies to history. Crossovers between academic disciplines are becoming more common under the aegis of food studies, while new alliances among rural, land, and resource-based communities and academic researchers are beginning to appear.

Connecting the Dots: Social and Scientific Perspectives on Agriculture and Rural Life in Atlantic Canada is a collection of essays edited by cultural geographer Elizabeth Beaton. It situates food in the contexts of its production and distribution, placing it firmly at the centre of the health of rural communities. This short book presents essays by academics and community activists, most of them first presented at a symposium held in Mabou, Nova Scotia, in 2006. A moving keynote address by American advocate of sustainable rural communities John Ikerd emphasizes the ways in which 'the productivity of the farmland and farm peoples is being extracted and exploited for the benefit of American consumers and outside investors' (17). It sets the tone, or mantra, for the book: as a result of 'specialization, standardization and consolidation of control ... rural communities are left in decline and decay: used up and farmed out' (17). Six articles explore the range of 'social and scientific perspectives' noted in the title, including 'climate change, food security, land resource management, market fairness, the value of rurality and staying on the farm' (10). A research note describes a promising though short-lived sheep-raising experiment in Cape Breton in the 1970s. Two miniature posters describe aspects of pasture ecology. While it clearly documents the vulnerability of current agricultural practices and the communities that rely on them, the book charts some positive trends: the studies of occupational pluralism on the farm, successful fodder crop production in Newfoundland, sustainable grazing practices, and the resilience of small farms all hold out some hope for the reinvigoration of rural economies and societies in Canada. A 'Round Table on Sustainability and Capacity-Building in Rural Communities: Connecting the Dots'

was intended at the conference, and almost works in this publication, to 'connect the dots' between the diverse but vitally interrelated elements of rural life explored in the different components of the collection.

Beaton's introduction teases out some questions raised by all contributors: what are the connections among the past, present, and future of rural life, and how can research best address the wide range of serious concerns involved in sustaining rural communities (10)? Historians are, unfortunately, likely to conclude that rather too many 'dots' are missing from reflections on these questions. With the important exception of the first essay in the collection, the historical horizon of the book is short and thin. Those familiar with seeing the mid-twentieth century as the time when farming and rural communities were transformed by a constellation of factors related to fossil fuel use, overproduction, and globalization may be frustrated by seeing the transformation of farming and rural life collapsed almost exclusively into the post-1980 period, particularly as the devastating effects of Canadian neo-liberal policies on rural life after 1980 are, unfortunately, not historicized in this collection. If past and present are not well linked, the connections established between research findings and sustainable communities do not go far enough to link either to the future. Research in these essays point toward the admirable solution of 'reinvigorating localism and bioregionalism' (145), but because there is little detailed or sustained theoretical analysis of how and why local rural environments, economies, and communities came to be overlooked, ignored, and disempowered in the first place, the processes by which rural communities in Atlantic Canada might be sustained in the future remain obscure. And so, I'm afraid, does the motivation remain obscure: while we might share with the authors a deep regret that an important traditional rural way of life is not sustainable, the collection does not go quite far enough in convincing us that the vast urban majority will suffer serious social, environmental, and economic consequences as a result.

Overall, *Connecting the Dots* reveals compelling evidence about the ways in which farming and rural communities are probably not sustainable under current mainstream global capitalist economic, political, and environmental conditions, gives a heartfelt warning about the loss, and provides a glimpse of some of the local solutions possible in Atlantic Canada. As such, it provides a good introduction to food politics.

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