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Book Reviews

The Fate of Family Farming: Variations on an American Idea. By Ronald Jager. 2004. University Press of New England, Hanover and London. 268 p. $26.00, ISBN 1-58465-026-5, cloth cover.

Anyone who reads this review in this journal would enjoy reading this book. You already read a lot of writing on farming and alternative farming and the harsh things nature and civilization continually threaten farming with. And this book has those things in it. But the arrangements are fresh. There's pleasure taken in the composition and in its aphoristic triumphs: 'It was summertime in New England, and the sheep were in the meadow. ... A pesticide is a rigorous device for developing insects immune to it. ... No one brings a plow to paradise.'

One reason for this is that the author does not pretend to read a lot in the professional and academic literature of alternative and family farming. He can title a chapter 'Four Farms', which discusses the clever practices of four different farms at various points on a spectrum from alternative to industrial, without any reference to Mark Kramer's classic study *Three Farms*. Jager is a retired professor of philosophy from Yale who wrote precisely and imaginatively in his own field. But he's retired to rural New Hampshire where he admires his rural, farming neighbors for their hard work and success and for their reminding him of his own rural upbringing. He wonders at considerable length about the process he's observed in his own lifetime of the ubiquitous farming of his youth becoming the rare family farming of the present. He reads enough in the literature about such questions that he finds useful. He has much more in the book that he draws from interviews with and observations of how his neighbors are actually doing.

The gist of the book, its most original idea at least to me, was that family farming in the sense of resolutely wholesome farming has almost always been subversive to the dominant economic paradigms of the day. Those paradigms demand eventual industrial productivity out of farms as out of factories or schools. But someplace in their evolution from subsistence, cottage or craft activities, farming and crafting and learning go through a necessary economic evolutionary period where the work is done well, at home, with natural materials, primarily for the benefit of those living nearby and making a living directly off the enterprise. It's a wonderful, ideal phase soon pushed aside for something more robust and abstract and amenable to social planning. The Roman latifundia or 'big spreads' drove out the yeomen farming beloved of Virgil and Cicero just as American factory farms drove out the yeomen family farming beloved of Crevecoueur and Wendell Berry. But never completely, since there are always enough farmers perverse and clever enough to figure out how to eddy against the current of the Big Flows. Clever farmers today offer organic produce and gently raised livestock to people alarmed about the miserable nutrition and even poisonous qualities of chemical farming and mass slaughterhouses. Some of these farmers actually get good enough at marketing to make serious money at the business, although never from following a formula. It's hard to teach subversive farming in regular academic curricula, which is mostly beholden to big industrial agribusiness interests anyway. 'Resistance' is Jager's conjuring word. These farms 'are resisting soulless totalitarian tendencies' a thousand different ways. Some begin in classic subsistence, alternative hippy farms, some in family farms that began by pioneering necessity on small land grants; some remain small, some become fairly large like, say, the cooperatives modernizing the production and distribution of 'craft' products like maple syrup. You can't plan for farms like these, or organize a culture's economics to encourage them, since planning and economic efficiency are always prejudiced for scale. But you can praise the praise of alternative agriculture to be found in classic Greek, Roman, European Romantic and early American Jeffersonian writings as Jager does. And you can write poems in its praise as does Wendell Berry, and preach its gospel with the fervent expertise of Wes Jackson, and keep the spirit alive. Jager wonders why Americans favor the term 'farmers' over the term 'husbandmen' the latter of which he thinks better suits the practice of good stewardship on the land. He does the etymological digging to discover the term 'farmer' came with a built-in connotation of farming for business. This makes even its use in the phrase 'alternative farmer' subversive down in the roots.

Given that it does have a gist, the book is more a sampler than a full course meal. Almost every chapter pursues its own line of thinking, from etymology to literary history to statistics to almost novelistic evocations of families sitting around cluttered tables on their farms figuring out their next clever thrust into the soft underbelly of Big Agribusiness. The one bit I did not like personally was Jager's harsh criticism of Henry David Thoreau's harsh assessment of the mostly subsistence farms he knew from his travels

through Concord—where men trafficked in cattle hides to get the money they needed to buy leather shoelaces. Thoreau made fun of anyone who seemed silly from his tight self-containment. But that is just a sample of one thing I found too piquant for my taste. Here's a book for the readers of this journal for your stimulation and pleasure, even if you decide there is little in here to fold into your footnotes.

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Eat Here: Reclaiming Homegrown Pleasures in a Global Supermarket. By Brian Halweil. 2004. W.W. Norton & Company, London and Worldwatch Institute, Washington, DC. xii + 236 p. US$13.95, ISBN 0-393-32664-0, paper.

Eat Here is a well-written, engaging look at the problems that have accompanied the rise of the now-dominant global food system. Author Brian Halweil makes a case for shifting back to local food systems. The argument is presented in nine chapters, each pairing analysis of myriad food system issues with brief case examples of healthier, more sustainable and equitable alternatives currently in place around the world. This approach succeeds in both educating and inspiring the reader.

One of the strengths of this book is the use of creative terminology to bring concepts to life. Chapter 1 introduces us to the overall theme by contrasting the local and regionally produced foods at the Centreville Farmer's Market in Lincoln, Nebraska with the anonymous, 'travel-weary foods' across town in the super Wal-Mart. In Chapter 2 we meet 'transcontinental lettuce' and 'jet-lagged fruits' as Halweil continues tracing the rise of the modern food distribution system. These introductory chapters also begin to make the case for 'food democracy' and rebuilding the local foodshed, 'that sphere of land, people, and businesses that provides a community or region with its food'.

The food industry's 'culture of bigness' is analyzed in Chapter 3. The development of this culture has been accompanied by the precipitous decline of the farmer's share of the food dollar from forty cents in 1910 to less than eight cents in 1997. Halweil identifies major causes of this decline as national and global economic policies (including transportation and subsidies), industry marketing and lobbying efforts, and the concentration of various layers of agribusiness (especially the seed, trade, meat and milk, and retail sectors). This chapter makes one of the key points of the book—that this culture of bigness has also encouraged a 'culture of sameness' which, according to Yale historian Steven Stoll (as quoted by Halweil), marked 'the end of seasonality' which 'has only made it easier for people to forget that their food comes from specific environments.'

Chapter 4 asks, 'Where Have All the Farmers Gone?' and elaborates on the issues introduced in the previous chapter. Herein a description of farm loss and the decline of agricultural work due to mechanization, consolidation, and decreases in crop prices gives way to a discussion of the social effects of 'de-agrarianization.' Chapter 5 goes on to address the loss of agricultural biodiversity and begins to outline techniques for restoring local self-sufficiency, in both rural and urban areas.

The focus of Chapter 6 is on 'Taking Back the Market.' It opens with the story of The Farmer's Diner in Barre, VT, a classic diner with a 'new' twist. Founder Tod Murphy endeavors to provide as much food from local producers (within 70 miles) as possible, having reached the 65% mark and aiming for 100%. The chapter outlines a variety of local food marketing models including farmer's markets, farmer cooperatives, CSAs, value-added processing, farm shops, farm-to-school, restaurant, and other institutional buyer programs. This is the most exciting chapter of the book. It brings the local foodshed idea to life and makes it seem not only possible, but inevitable.

However, the following chapter quickly brings us down to earth with a look at the barriers to these solutions. Chief among them is the concentration of the processing, marketing, and retailing components of the food system. According to Halweil, viable local food systems require the rebuilding of links (such as canneries, butchers, bakeries, etc.) between producers and consumers. The difficulties inherent in this process are evident in the ongoing struggles of The Farmer's Diner. In August 2005, after the publication of *Eat Here*, the diner closed abruptly for 'retooling and regeneration' [Palmer, Robin. 2005. 'Farmer's Diner shuts its doors.' *Times Argus*, August 10. Available at Website: http://www.timesargus.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=2005508100339 (retrieved on 31 May 2006)] with plans to reopen in October 2005. Still closed in May 2006, a phone message indicates plans to reopen in a new location in July 2006.

Chapter 7 does offer some specific suggestions for rebuilding the mid-level food system. One such idea is the local commercial kitchen created to incubate local value-added food processing companies and supporting food entrepreneurs. Halweil also acknowledges that many of the solutions must be made at the national and international policy levels. The chapter ends with policy recommendations largely focused on consolidation, commodity payments, and world trade rules. This sets the stage for the focus of Chapter 8 on the international Slow Food movement, including an important discussion of the class issues and accusations of elitism often leveled at this and other local or organic food movements.

This book is clearly a call to action with appendices on 'What Individuals Can Do' and information on 'Organizations Working to Rebuild Local Foodsheds.' Each chapter ends with a section entitled 'Breaking Ground' in which Halweil briefly describes a community, company, or