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Sally McMurry. *Transforming Rural Life: Dairying Families and Agricultural Change, 1820-1885.* Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995. xii + 291 pp. $42.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-4889-6.

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Sally McMurry has done what all historians should try to do–engage one of the Big Questions in human history. The Question, in this case, is the modern transition from decentralized agrarian societies to more organized industrial societies. The object of her inquiry is nineteenth century American farming, specifically dairying families in Oneida County, New York from 1820 to 1885. By focusing on the Northern farmer, McMurry deepens the historiography of this particular Big Question, which has mostly focused on urban workers, Southern farmers, industrialists, and the environment. Although this study is limited by place and commodity, McMurry broadens the traditional components of her Big Question to include issues of change within the household and its effects on the lives of women. In so doing, McMurry successfully combines the institutional and technological history of farming–the traditional focus of Agricultural History–and the "new rural history." Her work represents the best available synthesis, the kind promoted by Johns Hopkins University Press' Revisiting Rural America series. And it is further evidence that the "new rural history" is no longer the "orphan child with little recognized place as yet in academic curricula or historical writings."[1]

The book begins with an account of the origins of the "Dairy Zone," the area of the Northeastern part of the country where the land, plants, and temperature was particularly well-adapted to dairying. McMurry follows with a detailed discussion of the kinds of cows, feeds, and barns used in the dairy operations. She then summarizes the operations of 475 cheese-producing farms in seven towns in Oneida County, an area where "Euro-American farming was…established…according to a pattern typical for the United States during this era." She views these cheese-making farms as typical of "nineteenth-century dairying in magnified form" (p. 39).

For the agricultural/economic historian, the next section is the most interesting part of the book, where McMurry explains how the cheese-makers approached the market. She engages the entrenched historiographical debate about the capitalistic bent–or lack thereof–of early American farmers by finding a "hybrid system" of farming, one in which both market and non-market influences shaped the operation of farms (p. 44). In this sense she makes the same point that David Danbom made last fall in an H-Rural discussion. He argued that a moral and a market economy existed at the same time, a small scale exchange economy–farmers giving each other zucchinis, jars of preserves, and helping with barn-raising–flourished while farmers sold their products into wider, often international markets. The McMurry/Danbom approach squares with the work of other economic historians, who have been arguing that

capitalism does not mean a no-holds-barred, cutthroat, devil-take-the-hindmost, Hobbesian jungle. It is a matter, rather, of "doux commerce" (sweet commerce) and "bourgeois virtue."[2]

According to McMurry, the cheesemakers "indisputably intended their cheese for the market," but such "market participation blended smoothly with subsistence exchange" and "profit and subsistence happily coexisted" (pp. 44-45). While marketing their products, cheesemakers adhered to a certain sense of "competency," or the notion that one should not be concerned only with profit and accumulation for the sake of it, but for subsistence. The New York State Agricultural Society refused to give a farmer an award after he said he farmed only for the money, for example. Many believed that dairying provided the ideal occupation for "competency"–more so than grain farming, for example, which was more "associated with ecological and economic crisis." But farmers still adhered to a loose sense of "profits," one that was "consistent with the notion of competency" (p. 53).

McMurry's "new" history often sounds like the "old." In the midst of the economic upheavals affecting dairying, few farmers clamored for social and political revolution. They mostly adapted, some quite willingly. As McMurry says, the changes in dairying "had emancipated women from onerous burdens, ensured rural families longed-for material comfort and social enjoyment, and brought new opportunities for entertainment, social and political activism, and cultural exposure" (p. 234). Such views square with older grand narratives of American history told by Hofstadter and Hartz about an American society committed to the "Liberal Tradition." American politics, in large part, is not about debating whether capitalism or socialism is a better system, but about the nature of the given system, capitalism. Political debates are about the best form of capitalism, what kind of limits should be placed on it, and what can be done to temper some of its effects, not about whether it should be toppled. This means that certain individuals or groups can adhere to a certain degree of "competency" within the overall structure. McMurry's story, then, is not one of sturdy farm families crushed by the inexorable dynamics of modern capitalism. Many farmers understood the changes and many welcomed them. For many of those in dairying, the enterprise meant that "a degree of commercialism was fully compatible with republicanism" and "combined pursuit of independence with the liberal celebration of material progress" (p. 15).

McMurry's notion of the "hybrid system" of farming, one involving a complex mix of moral and market influences, is the most important contribution of the book. She mentions the idea of the "Great Transformation," which I assume refers to Karl Polanyi but she does not cite him so I cannot be sure, but she rejects his standard interpretation of the horrifying "emergence" of markets in the late eighteenth century. Polanyi's analysis defined a generation of scholarship and his "view of the economic past retains considerable popular appeal and the devotion of a small but flourishing scholarly community." The "scandal" is that some "still preach Polanyi as gospel." McMurry complicates the story with a sophisticated empirical study indicating the ambivalent (at the worst) and positive responses to capitalistic economic change.[3]

The book is also replete with agricultural economics, a timeless concern for farmers. A prominent method of marketing involved "factors," or middlemen who visited cheese farms seeking a contract to buy the farmers' product. The farmer received an early advance, some supplies, and full payment at the first of the year–like poultry farmers contracted to Tyson or Ralston-Purina in recent years. Middlemen sometimes had difficulty selling cheese, but when supplies were low "they enjoyed making the grocers squirm by demanding high prices" (p. 49). Middlemen would at times keep information from farmers about the nature of markets and the prices paid by those demanding cheese while farmers would promote "a constant circulation of information among Mohawk Valley cheesemakers," making George Stigler's point about the importance of the economics of information (p. 55). "Friction also arose because the broker, not the farmer, received the benefits from a price rise after contracts were signed"–like the complaints of farmers in 1972 who had sold their wheat before the massive Russian grain sales increased prices (p. 51). In 1845, sixty dairymen cooperated in an effort to sell their cheese in overseas markets–like farmer cooperatives such as Grain Terminal Association (GTA) and Far-Mar-C0 after World War II (p. 55). When Robert Peer reduced import restrictions in England in 1847, American diary exports surged–like the American dairy lobby said they would in the postwar period while protesting the exclusionary restrictions of the EEC's Common Agricultural Policy (p. 59).

Another major component of the book–dominating the middle chapters–is attention to the household. McMurry uses the population census to outline the basic structure of cheesemaking households–how many children, how many laborers, how they were compensated. Close attention is given to the role of women in the

cheesemaking household, a "setting in which women and their work commanded a central place" (p. 96). Women bought seed, balanced feed expenses with potential income, and made the preparations for the cheesemaking, among other tasks. They also milked the cows, because, as the Genesee Farmer said, a man's "great, rough, hard hands, and still harder heart, render[ed] him unfit for a good milker; while a gentle, rosy dairymaid, with her kind words, soft hands, and 'So, so, my bossy,' seated on a three legged stool, will fetch out the milk till the froth runs over the pail" (p. 78). Women also "made the overwhelming proportion of home-produced cheese" (p. 80). Contrary to some scholarship which limits women's agricultural labor to subsistence items, McMurry's cheesemaking women were good capitalists "with a lively concern with improving the product, saving labor, and cutting costs" and a "keen sense for the business" (p. 84). In this way women and their "cheesemaking families often aligned themselves with the emergent quasi-industrial order rather than resisting it" (p. 98).

The last section of the book analyzes how this system of cheese dairying fell apart. Ironically, women began to protest that they had been given too much of the central work of the farm and tried to reduce the amount of milking they did and they complained that the cheesemaking process was too dangerous. But the greatest tension within the household involved the question of post-primary education, especially for girls, and its potential for turning youth away from farm life. One girl who attended a boarding school, for example, reported that "school girls…are taught to look with contempt upon farmers" (p. 112). The Genesee Farmer reported that when a boy leaves for more schooling he "becomes associated with a class of lads from the city and large towns, who look upon him as their inferior" (p. 120). Such conflicts, as McMurry sees them, provide a window to the Big Question, "that momentous shift from a rural, agrarian society to an urban, industrial one" (p. 122).

The conflicts spurred the transition from household cheesemaking to factory cheesemaking. It started when a family farm expansion in the county led to cheese manufacturing in a central location, not the household, and ultimately the formation of the Rome Cheese Manufacturing Association, which had ten patrons in 1854. By the 1870s, spurred by the Civil War, the "crossroads cheese factory had become ubiquitous throughout Oneida County" (p. 124). McMurry detects far less resistance to the "Great Transformation" than other scholars claim to have found in other locations, arguing that "at the root of the factory system's success was the willingness of thousands of individual families to become factory 'patrons' " (p. 125). Many women were in favor of the factories since they saved them from the drudgery" of home cheesemaking. McMurry thus warns against those interpretations which have made too much of the "defeminization" of the agricultural labor force, or the blaming of capitalism for the disappearance of "opportunities culturally defined as women's work." She argues that "to emphasize the element of decline in this story is to minimize women's involvement in the process, and to deny the legitimacy of their reasons for wanting to abandon home cheesemaking" (pp. 145-46).

The new factory system meant the "Transforming [of] Rural Life" in Oneida County. After some years the factory system afforded fewer employment opportunities for women and it altered the agricultural landscape of the county. The focus changed from cheesemaking as a process to the singular focus of milking, involving new "thoroughbred" cows like the Holstein and new shelters, feeding methods, and machinery, while farmers expanded their interests into other commodities like hops, poultry, eggs, and lumber. The household fragmented as women engaged in new pursuits like greater cultural "cultivation" in the home, teaching school, attending county fairs and community activities, tending to the poultry, taking various factory jobs (sometimes in the cheese factories), or simply migrating to other parts of the country. The size of the household also shrank due to fewer live-in workers and more wage workers. And farmers "exercised less and less control over their work under pressure of market competition and factory demands" (p. 198). The greater involvement of wealthier and more successful farmers in the organization of the cheese factories, the need for larger amounts of capital, and the policing of farmer' milk for fear of poor quality or adulteration increased social tensions.

McMurry deserves great applause. She writes within the "new history," but she pays attention to economic history and political economy, realizing that th household and the lives of women do not exist in a vacuum. She uses traditional agricultural history to broaden and deepen her story, instead of sneering at the "old history," as too many social historians do. And she engages a Big Question, one that matters, and she does so in a fair and sophisticated manner, absent the typical "wouldn't-it-have-been-great-if-we-just-had-socialism" undercurrent of the Polanyi school. My only complaint about the book is one that can be applied to the "new social history" in general. Often, the social cleavages and categories that were prominent in the given historical moment are

trumped by those prominent in the 1960s, when the "new social history" emerged. Religion and ethnicity, for examples, are overlooked in favor of class and gender.

At one point, for example, McMurry states that "it is difficult to know just what to make of this temperance activity." Instead of having to be explained as a matter of women's "power and liberty," maybe it is a matter of religious conviction (p. 227). It also explains why "Sunday cheesemaking" was such an issue (p. 220). For a complete interpretation the oldest of social history deserves for attention, like that of Tocqueville, who commented that there was "no country in the world in which Christianity retained a greater influence over the souls of men." McMurry's chronology begins in the midst of the Second Great Awakening, after all. And it was the New Yorker Charles Grandison Finney, "probably the most powerful preacher in America," who ignited the "enthusiasm that swept through upstate New York like wildfire in the 1820s and 30s."[4]

The ethnic dimension to social relations also receives very short shrift. McMurry mentions "ethnic difference [as] creating tension between farmer and laborer." The example that keeps recurring throughout the book is disdain for hired Irish workers: Cornelia Babcock declared "Give me anything but an Irishman to settle an account with" and another farm wife expelled her Irish workers for declaring "The more I ates, the more I gits for me work" (pp. 69, 197). The Irish issue is only mentioned is passing, but it deserves a more complete treatment of a "holistic" social history is the goal. If religion received greater attention in the book, it would probably explain, at least in part, the hostility toward the Irish, who were predominantly Catholic, in a state with a strong history of anti-Catholicism.[5]

Ethnicity is probably a more logical category for social analysis than the now trendy race-class-gender troika. McMurry mentions (again in passing), for example, that "Yankees in particular came to have the reputation of 'sparing' their women from milking." (p. 80) And the Welsh typically patronized the same factory and were known to have high credit ratings (pp. 137, 214). Ethnic categorization, whether we like it in 1997 or not, was prominent in the period McMurry examines. Benjamin Franklin and Benjamin Rush thought "Germans were superior in their farming practicies to all other ethnic groups. German farmers, according to this venerated tradition, were described as 'earth animals,' superior to all other nationality groups in land selection, agricultural skills, animal husbandry, barn construction, product specialization, soil conservation, consumption habits, and labor-intensive family work teams." The ethnic and religious issues are also important with reference to market participation. Historians of agriculture in the Midwest and the Great Plains recognize that Yankee/English farmers were less likely to join cooperatives or adhere to ideas of "competency" than were Scandinavian farmers. Catholics were more inclined to join the National Farmers Organization, for another example. As Robert Swierenga has commented, "The literature of rural history is replete with contemporary comments and observations about the relationships between cultural background and farming behavior," and it deserves attention.[6] The debate about whether rural "communities" and "families" accepted or resisted capitalism will be endless. One avenue that may be more fruitful would be to pay attention, as Gregory Nobles has written, to the "differences and divisions AMONG rural people." Nobles has class and gender in mind, as do most "new social historians," but I have religion and ethnicity in mind.[7]

For a study of such a small area, the attention to other Big Questions could have been greater. McMurry mentions that "local newspapers [were] filled with accounts of political ferment as the antislavery movement and later the Republican party gathered force," which I assume would affect social relations, but she says nothing more about it (p. 109). Attitudes toward the frontier could also have received more attention–by 1860, a quarter of rural residents had left New York, a big decision for a household. McMurry attempts in a few places to make connections to the wider political culture–"To replace democratic rationalizations for the native cow with concerns for heredity and explicit ranking was consistent with the new social context"–but the efforts seem strained. Why not, for example, mention Andrew Jackson, his coalition, and his ideas? Such is the core flaw of the "new social history."

Notes

[1]. Robert P. Swierenga, "The New Rural History: Defining the Parameters," *Great Plains Quarterly* 1 (Fall 1981), 211.

[2]. See "May Days: Part of a Polylogue on Feminist Economics," (June 1994), a wide-ranging discussion of such matters on FEMECON-L.

[3]. Deirdre McCloskey and Santhi Heejibu, "A Review in Retrospect of Karl Polanyi's 'The Great Transformation,' " (forthcoming).

[4]. Irving Bartlett, *The American Mind in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Northbrook, AHM Publishing Corporation, 1967), 7, 12.

[5]. Jason Duncan, "The Forging of Catholic Political Identity in the United States: New York, 1680-1840" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Iowa, in progress).

[6]. Swierenga, "The New Rural History," 217.

[7]. Gregory Nobles, "Capitalism in the Countryside: The Transformation of Rural Society in the United States," *Radical History Review* 41 (1988), 175.

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