

From Rural and Urban Solitudes to a Great Swallowing

by Ralph C. Martin

In 1945, Hugh MacLennan wrote his classic Canadian novel, *Two Solitudes*. Part of our Canadian struggle and rich tapestry has been the bridging of both English and French foundational, European heritages. Of course, Canada is more complex with deep aboriginal roots and numerous other cultures. Within this diversity, rural and urban solitudes also warrant attention.

As a fourteen year old 4-H enthusiast I was proud of my Hereford steer, filled out in all the right places, with a straight back and adroit steps through show rings.

My Grade 9 French teacher, recently arrived from a larger city, was perplexed when I explained that I would have to miss her French test to take my steer to the Royal Winter Fair. She thought I needed a better reason to be absent. I was mortified.

Later the same day I approached our Vice Principal, knowing that he also taught agriculture, at Elmira District Secondary School. I told him about my special steer and our invitation to the Queen's Guineas Show. "Congratulations," he said as he shook my hand. "Don't you worry a bit. I'll explain to her that this is a real honour and you can write that test at another time."

My friend Allen also qualified and we loaded our prize animals in their farm truck and drove to Toronto, the intimidating city I had rarely seen, and never overnight. When our steers were settled in straw, Allen showed me how to use the street car to get to our billet. How did he know when to pull the cord and get off?

Our hostess was a proper and formal woman. My mother had warned me to be very polite. She showed us our small and stuffy room, and then asked when we wanted breakfast. I said "six o'clock please." I could see in her ascending eyebrows that I'd said something disturbing. Did this mean breakfast was at risk, I wondered.

Next she asked if eggs would be OK. We nodded politely. "How many eggs would you like?" "Six please." By now her eyebrows were fully extended. "For each of you?" she almost whispered. "Yes please," said Allen with a smile. "And I suppose you each want 6 pieces of toast" she sighed and her eyebrows descended, as I later realized, to resigned reality. "Yes please" we chorused at our evident progress in understanding. My farm boy anxiety, about possibly starving in this strange place, subsided.

Farmers and others in rural areas are less isolated today and with social media, other communication devices and well developed transportation are more in tune with the dominant urban paradigm, including consumption.

Consumers want all food products, all year and expect them to be safe, plentiful and readily available. They try to buy at the lowest price and farmers want to sell at the highest price and both want convenience and reduced complications. However, as consumers request food attributes such as 'local' and 'organic,' they resist paying more as efficiencies of scale and harmonization, along the value chain, are adjusted to meet their requirements. Processors, distributors and retailers, who are mostly urban, also negotiate in the dynamic commercial tension for profitable provisioning of desirable food.

Today 80% of the Canadian population is urban, whereas at Confederation it was less than 20%. We may imagine ourselves as a rural society with plenty of space and it is true, we do have plenty of land. However, less than 5% of our land is arable, while an industrial powerhouse like Germany has 33% arable land and yet only 73% of the population is urban.

Cities are powerful magnets drawing rural people, often young and bright, to appealing livelihoods and lifestyles. Cities are also relentless dispensers of ideas, attitudes and aspirations. Leaders of the creative class, championed by Richard Florida, of the University of Toronto, are frequently associated with cities.

The traditional rural values of loyalty to a particular land base and to husbanded generations of livestock are held by fewer keepers. These folks are at risk of being dismissed as quaint. Current rural land managers, seldom own all the land, under their production system and non-farming owners tend to abdicate stewarding decisions. The psychic tug, of previous generations who cared for a home base, is diminishing.

The two solitudes are merging into a great swallowing of rural identity by urban hegemony. For the sake of sustaining our rural capacity with complex webs of functioning ecosystems, voices of those who live, work and think rurally, as if they intend to stay, should be heard, notwithstanding the compelling hum of city values.

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