

THE LONG QUESTION OF FOOD AND LAND

A Review Essay

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A Year at Killara Farm

Christine Allen with illustrations by Michael Kluckner
Madeira Park: Harbour Publishing, 2012. 192 pp. \$29.95 paper.

The Light through the Trees: Reflections on Land and Farming

Luanne Armstrong
Halfmoon Bay: Caitlin Press, 2012. 256 pp. \$24.95 paper.

Ginty's Ghost: A Wilderness Dweller's Dream

Chris Czajkowski
Madeira Park: Harbour Publishing, 2012. 296 pp. \$21.95 paper.

Keeping It Living: Traditions of Plant Use and Cultivation on the Northwest Coast of North America

Douglas Deur and Nancy J. Turner, editors
Vancouver: UBC Press, 2005. 384 pp. \$35.00 paper.

HUNGER IS INSISTENT. Farming, the source of most food, seems timeless. Perhaps this contrast between daily hunger and the long past of the rural landscape is what makes disputes over farmland especially fraught. Or perhaps it is British Columbia, where the rich plains and valley bottoms so necessary for farming are also so scarce. The provincial government's recent moves to weaken the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR) were remarkable given the ALR's popularity. An Ipsos Reid poll from 2008 found that a remarkable 95 percent of British Columbians "support the ALR and the policy of preserving farm land" (Ipsos Reid 2008, 24). Most British Columbians seem to sense what the provincial government (focused only on farmlands that produce commercial crops) seems to miss: that in this vertical province, farming is about more than farm gate receipts. Commercial and subsistence

farming were not, in the past, easily pulled apart; food security has always been a concern; and farming is deeply implicated in the history of colonialism and the efforts of settler British Columbians to find a place in this province.

Farming has never loomed large in British Columbia's public heritage and historical memory, which is surely part of the reason that its history is largely absent from public debate. Farm museums and heritage sights dot the province, from the BC Farm Museum in Fort Langley to the Museum of the Cariboo-Chilcotin and Kelowna's BC Wine Museum. But they are overshadowed by the preserved RCMP post of Fort Steele, the gold rush town of Barkerville, numerous Hudson's Bay Company posts, and other sites that preserve a history of resource extraction and exploration. A public memory focused on loggers, fur traders, and explorers partly accounts for Christine Allen starting *A Year at Killara Farm* by imagining her little corner of the Fraser Valley as a blank slate. Killara Farm, she writes, was carved out of a forest that "half a century" before had been "virgin rainforest" (1). Recent scholarship gives the lie to this and all such claims. Plants had long been managed for food on the Northwest Coast of North America, including in the Fraser Valley, as Douglas Deur and Nancy Turner demonstrate in *Keeping It Living: Traditions of Plant Use and Cultivation on the Northwest Coast of North America*. Their work refutes widely accepted interpretations of, among others, the Stó:lō of the Fraser Valley and the Nuu-chah-nulth of the west coast of Vancouver Island as hunter-gatherers whose use of abundant salmon resources supported social practices more usually associated with agricultural peoples – that is, social stratification and complex ceremonial and artistic endeavours, concepts of ownership of resources, and fixed village sites.

This complex hunter-gatherer interpretation derives from the work of anthropologist Franz Boas, who studied Northwest Coast societies in the early twentieth century. As a European Jew, Boas sought to undermine theories that linked societal development to environment, theories widely accepted by "environmental determinists, eugenicists, racial determinists, and theorists of crude, unilinear cultural evolution" (Deur and Turner, 24). Like most Europeans, Boas also associated agriculture with growing a small number of domesticated annual crops from seed. For Boas, the Northwest Coast, which lacked the Meso-American crops grown by recognized agricultural nations like the Iroquois, demonstrated that culture and the environment were not linked. The favourable climatic and ecological conditions of the Northwest Coast had not produced agriculture. Complex societies had arisen on the basis

of the exceptional abundance of naturally occurring food. Northwest Coast peoples simply drew on what was already there.

Boas's picture was durable but increasingly troublesome to some scholars. For one thing, it contradicted some of his own evidence. In his depictions of Kwakwaka'wakw practices, Boas describes tidal flats divided into plots of springbank clover (*Trifolium wormskioldii*) and Pacific silverweed (*Potentilla anserina* ssp. *pacifica*), perennials with edible roots tended in large gardens. He describes gardens surrounded by rock walls and divided into individual plots by more rock walls or wooden boards. As early as the 1950s, in a PhD dissertation delivered to Boas's student Erna Gunther, Wayne Suttles speculates that the rapid adoption of potato cultivation by Coast Salish farmers may have shown prior experience with incipient forms of agriculture (Deur and Turner, 182). Deur and Turner, and their contributors, go much further, picturing the Northwest Coast as a "series of anthropogenic [human-made] landscapes" (134). In addition to the estuarine gardens documented by Boas, winter villages on the lower Columbia River clustered around swamps of wapato (*Sagittaria latifolia*), another perennial root crop, and Kwakwaka'wakw people burned meadows to encourage salal berries, huckleberries, blueberries, and strawberries. This burning also encouraged the growth of bracken ferns (*Pteridium aquilinum*), the rootstock of which was "roasted, ground into a flour, and baked into a bread" (Deur and Turner, 140). Burning also maintained fields of blue camas (*Camassia quamash*) well north of their natural range. In the Fraser Valley, the Stó:lō picked blueberries and huckleberries on mountainsides above the valley, after which they burned the sites to increase the size and yield of the berries, discourage pests, and encourage the growth of wild potatoes. Lower down, in the valley itself, well-managed wapato swamps and bog cranberry (*Vaccinium oxycoccos*) sites dotted the landscape.

To European colonizers and anthropologists this did not look like farming. Farming meant tidy rows of one plant, enclosed by fences and replanted from seed every year, not a collection of perennial crops growing together in polycultures. The relative lack of fences may have been especially significant. In the English mind, Patricia Seed (1995) argues, fences signified agricultural improvement; the presence of tidy rows of crops surrounded by hedges, Stuart Banner (2007) shows, led British colonizers in New Zealand to conclude that the Maori were farmers who owned their land.¹ Yet it is now becoming clear that many

¹ In New Zealand, though, as Banner shows, the results were the same: the Maori lost control of their land.

aspects of agriculture, even as Europeans defined it, were present. Coastal peoples encouraged productivity by clustering crops in one location – in estuarine gardens, for instance, some of which were fenced. Digging sticks aerated soils and removed roots; herring, salmon roe, and seaweed were used as fertilizers. Sites were cleared and weeded and berry bushes pruned. Wapato tubers, as well as other plants, were transplanted to sites outside of their natural range where they were maintained. Such sites were owned, often by families, as were seaweed gathering sites, berry patches, and crabapple trees.

I have been using the terms “agriculture” and/or “farming” to refer to these practices; however, it would be more accurate to use the more general terms “cultivation” and/or “food production,” the latter being an anthropological phrase indicating the deliberate encouragement of particular plants for the purposes of producing food. The reassessment of Northwest Coast food production practices is part of a much wider conceptual shift among anthropologists away from the idea that hunter-gatherers and agriculturalists occupy radically different worlds. Traditionally, hunting and gathering, on the one hand, and farming, on the other, have been seen as complete and mutually exclusive means of acquiring a subsistence, as two “stable adaptive solutions.” There was no space in between them, it was assumed; the transition (always seen as a one-way journey to agriculture) was “necessarily rapid” (Deur and Turner, 40). The results of much fieldwork in many parts of the world now show that the line between these two states is often quite blurry and the transition sometimes lengthy. Deur and Turner, quoting L.E. Sponsel, describe them as “overlapping, interdependent, contemporaneous, coequal, and complementary” (15); the Smithsonian’s Bruce Smith simply says that there is significant middle ground between the two (Deur and Turner, 39). And though Deur and Turner’s book is about coastal British Columbia, the Plateau people of the BC Interior also occupied this middle ground. Sandra Peacock (1998) shows that the Secwepemc cultivated root crops like balsamroot (*Balsamorhiza sagittata*), cooking them in earth ovens. In the southern Interior, as John Thistle (2015) shows, wild horses were adopted into subsistence systems before the arrival of settlers, and Interior peoples may have used burning to maintain meadows as sources of animal feed. In the colonial period, the peoples of the southern Interior moved quickly into cattle and horse ranching, just as the Coast Salish rapidly adopted the potato. If the interventions of Interior people were less than those of their coastal brethren, it can no longer be supposed that they simply drew on an undisturbed nature.

Denying a conceptual middle ground served the purposes of colonizers. In 1912, the McKenna-McBride Commission was established to review and to solidify the boundaries of Indian reserves. Many traditional plant cultivation sites were still in use. The commission, however, recognized only certain plants as legitimate food crops. Silverweed and springbank clover were not on the list, so when a Kwakwaka'wakw chief claimed fields planted with these crops, his claim was disallowed. The commission excluded most existing traditional fields, meadows, wetlands, and berry patches from reserves, turning the land over to settler uses. Estuarine gardens were subsequently taken over by competing plants. Forests grew over berry patches and over camas fields no longer maintained by fire. In the Fraser Valley, wapato swamps and cranberry bogs were drained for agriculture. In the Interior, former grazing lands were fenced by settler ranchers and streams were diverted to water cattle, changes that were accompanied by irruptions of grasshoppers and other insects. Over much of British Columbia, the original landscape of subsistence disappeared.

In certain areas – relatively flat, with well-drained soils and a climate temperate enough to support European crops (most of which were originally domesticated in the Near East) – indigenous landscapes were replaced by landscapes of European agriculture. Defying the mountainous nature of the province, settlers established farms wherever they could. Beyond the major farming areas of the Okanagan and Fraser valleys and the Peace River region, farmers occupied whatever valleys, alluvial plains, and plateaus offered enough flat land and water to grow wheat or carrots. Farming was one of the key ways of taking and keeping the lands of others, a “strategy of successful colonialism,” as Cole Harris and David Demeritt (1998, 249) note. Farming imposed a Cartesian landscape of reworked ecosystems marked out by fences and patrolled by farm families well aware of their property rights, a landscape with no room for the subsistence systems of First Nations (Harris 1998). The introduction of farming was also a crucial way for nineteenth-century settlers from Britain and central Canada to grapple with what, to them, was a strange and difficult place. Farming “introduced a vision of the future that was anchored to long pasts in distant places”; farm landscapes were “expressions of introduced cultural and ecological arrangements, and ... drastic departures from indigenous pasts” (Harris with Demeritt 1998, 219). Farming offered the possibility of stable societies rooted in what was thought to be the proper, productive use of the land by families. As Adele Perry (2001) and Christopher Clarkson (1997) argue, farms were an antidote to fears of disorder induced by largely male communities of

miners and loggers. Coming late in the history of what John Weaver (2006) calls the British Empire's "great land rush," farmlands in British Columbia also offered one last opportunity for sons and daughters of the British middle classes or French-Canadians from the long-settled St. Lawrence Valley to get some land of their own.

It is perhaps appropriate, then, that Christine Allen's Killara Farm in South Langley is named after a distant corner of the British Empire – namely, a suburb of Allen's native Sydney, Australia. The majority of the book is devoted to Allen's cultivation of over two hundred varieties of heritage roses and other flowers. Like generations of settlers before them, Allen and her husband, Michael Kluckner, reworked space to fit, in this case, a rather personal vision of a good place to live. Kluckner is best known as the author and illustrator of the popular books *Vanishing British Columbia* and *Vanishing Vancouver*, and, like them, this is an attractive book. Numerous illustrations of flowers and farm animals (mostly watercolours in Kluckner's appealing realist style) adorn the pages of recipes and musings on small struggles with crops and livestock. Allen, familiar to gardeners for her writing in magazines like *GardenWise*, lovingly chronicles her adventures in flower growing, though not, perhaps, in terms particularly accessible to the average reader. My mother, a serious gardener who tends to speak in Latin plant names, enjoyed this part of the book; I, who can barely tell a tulip from a carnation, was mostly lost among the *Rosa primula* and *Helleborus foetidus*. Allen's love for heritage roses is obvious, her garden clearly impressive. One wonders, though, what might have happened had she been able to break out of the shell of the colonial narrative? To be fair to Allen, she and all British Columbians need better histories than the colonialist narratives that BC historians have been offering for generations if they are to do this. But still: Can we imagine a garden that featured, alongside the roses, bright red bog cranberries and bushes bursting with pale red huckleberries? A farm that grew wapato and blueberries? A rural place that reached back not just into the European tradition but also into the local botanical tradition? That reached out to Stó:lō gardeners for ideas? The result surely would be a different sort of experiment in making a place on the land. It would be one that acknowledged the clash in agro-ecological practices and cultures that predated Killara Farm and that worked towards healing some of those wounds. It would be one that grew more out of the place within which it was situated.

The contrast between Allen's untroubled colonization of Killara Farm and Luanne Armstrong's often tortured musings on place and identity could hardly be more stark. In *The Light through the Trees: Reflections on Land and Farming*, Armstrong, author or editor of fourteen books (including several young adult novels), recounts her relationship with her family farm at Boswell on the east shore of Kootenay Lake. Her father, she says, hated the place; every day was a battle with the enemies of the farm, including weather, bears, coyotes, skunks, and wandering cows. Work or starve was his credo. Yet the farm was his life, as it is Armstrong's: she loves her land, feels lost outside it, and farms it even though she does not really need to. Her attempts to work through the contradictions between her feelings and her father's inheritance leads her into difficult questions regarding the relationship between farmers and the nature they rework, and between her own sense that she is at home on her farm and her understanding that this is land taken from others.

Armstrong comes to few answers but several fascinating insights. She is surely right to say that animals have their own mental world, and we do them and us no favours by supposing they are like humans. Her sister, a horse trainer, loves horses, but "she's not nice to them. She's the lead mare and she's in charge" (144). Farmers engage in "animal gossip" not only because animals are fascinating but also because understanding animals and what they need is a constant, ongoing process (80). Armstrong hugs the ownership of her land to her, if for no other reason than that doing so enables her to exclude those whom she judges generally unable to understand the land and her life on it. "Like many people," she writes, "I don't like other humans I don't know in numbers that I can't control" (59). But she knows that her ownership comes through a system of private property that means a neighbour can spray Round Up right next to her organic fields and that the "summer people" can build "an enormous summer home" and dub the property "Wood Nymph Trail" (51-58). She also knows that, in First Nations Ktunaxa teaching, "there are powerful and ancient spirits here, and then there's the lake, itself a presence, muttering in its deep narrow bed, turbulent, wind driven and cold. It's about as un-wood-nymphy as a place can be" (58). One can only cheer.

Armstrong is not a back-to-the-lander: she was in the Kootenays before the hippies, Quakers, and Marxist-Leninist collectives of the 1970s; before "Resisterville," to use author Kathleen Rodgers's (2014) phrase, was built. She partially, but only partially, parallels their attempts to use farming to escape and remake the modern world. Her

attempts are both more personal and much more rooted in the farming history of British Columbia than are theirs. Another, perhaps more common, version of the modern escape narrative concerns the journey into the wilderness. It has been told as fiction by Jack London; more recently as journalism by Jon Krakauer; and as autobiography by British Columbia's Chris Czajkowski, who first became known through a series of letters read on CBC's *Morningside* in the 1980s. In 1991, this series of letters became the bestselling *The Cabin at Singing River*, in which Czajkowski combines details of her efforts to construct her cabin in the west Chilcotin with reflections on the wilderness around her. A series of similarly themed books follows, the latest being *Ginty's Ghost: A Wilderness Dweller's Dream*, in which Czajkowski mixes construction details with letters from and memories of Ginty Paul, the former inhabitant of Czajkowski's property and, like her, a woman who lived largely on her own in the woods. Czajkowski builds her new house, with some help but largely with her own hands, out of a desire for warmth, comfort, an internet connection, and, in the form of a bed built into a bay window, a place to experience beauty. Her (aging, she makes clear) body demands these things. In her relentless focus on the building of her cabin we see, again as in farming, the creating of place out of the process of satisfying material needs.

But hunger is insistent, and efforts to address it find their way into all of these books. When floods wash out the highway and strand Czajkowski in her cabin, she soon runs low on provisions. She plans to walk out, gather supplies from town and her stranded truck, and hitch a ride on an RCMP helicopter back to her cabin. But the Mounties insist on flying her out and putting her up in a motel with a food allowance, leaving her desperate to get back to Ginty Creek so she can complete her work before winter. Allen, meanwhile, eats from her farm. Before the advent of the 100 Mile Diet, January for her was a time for scavenging carrots, parsnips, and leeks that remained in the garden, and cooking Soupe au Pistou using beans and broccoli from the freezer or purchased dried beans, pasta, and canned goods. Each chapter features recipes for Allen's seasonal fare. Armstrong grows food for its "texture, colour, shape, the sense of abundance, the sensuousness of it all." Small farming, she admits, "is mostly tedious physical work, [so] ... I try to find someone else to help can, pickle, dry, bake, juice and freeze the summer harvest ... I like the sense of community and shared effort when there's a bunch of us around the table, peeling peaches and slicing them onto trays for the dryer" (40-41). As in many First Nations societies, community responsibility for preventing hunger had a more

formal expression among the Nuu-chah-nulth. In a system known as *hahuulhi*, chiefs' ultimate control of plant resources brought with it an obligation to ensure that everyone was fed (Deur and Turner, 159-60).

Partisans of local food and food security would find these experiences inspiring and exemplary. Armstrong, I suspect, would find their attitude exasperating, perhaps pointing out that she is simply doing work that makes sense to her and that comes out of a long family history of grappling with the land and farming. Certainly a sharp line between profitable commercial farming and subsistence farming has little historical meaning, as Ruth Sandwell (2012) points out in a recent article. Semi-subsistence family farms like Armstrong's, producing food for home consumption and selling meat or milk or vegetables in local markets, were scattered across the province before the 1940s. The possibility of combining a home garden, a few fruit trees, and a hen or two to produce eggs was part of the suburban dream that "sold" parts of present-day South Vancouver in the years before the Second World War. Other farms in other areas – dairy operations in the Fraser Valley, apple growers in the Okanagan, Chinese and Japanese market gardeners outside Vancouver – were more purely commercial operations. Or so we have traditionally thought. But as Sandwell argues, before the 1940s it was common for farmers in all parts of Canada to engage in occupational pluralism – off-farm work – and to grow a variety of crops in order to support the farm household. Farm families were primarily concerned with the well-being of the household, not with, as a previous generation of historians had it, whether they were capitalist or not. Similarly, Gerard Bouchard (1997) argues that the largely peasant producers of the Saguenay region drew on, and in doing so supported and developed, a capitalist market for food in their region. Bouchard calls this mutuality between two worlds, the peasant and the capitalist, co-integration.

Much of this pluralism, or co-integration, has been invisible, a result of governments interested mostly in commercial agriculture and historians reliant on government sources. Yet even purely commercial farms were often family farms. Prairie farmers employed modern technology and free family labour to produce wheat for the global market. In the Okanagan, private land companies (in the early twentieth century) and the BC government (in the 1920s) installed irrigation systems and subdivided land with the assumption that farmers would produce apples for export to Britain. But these were small farms, generally of four or eight hectares, suited to middle-class English people looking for independence and a pleasant life (see Harris and Phillips 1984). In

my own research on apple growers in Nova Scotia's Annapolis Valley I am finding that valley growers were also mixed farmers (Murton 2013). Apples were their cash crop, but they also grew for their families and local markets. Was the same perhaps true of the Okanagan?

What is clear is that these farms were expected to feed British Columbians as well as to produce exports. It would also seem that provincial elites were concerned about their limited ability to do this. Concern over the amount of British Columbia's food coming from imports, in other words, is nothing new, as the work of James R. Gibson (1985) and Richard Mackie (1997) on provisioning in the fur trade shows. Historians of the settlement era have not tackled this head on, but some fragmentary evidence I uncovered as part of an earlier project, dealing with the draining of the Fraser Valley's Sumas Lake, suggests that the concern with self-sufficiency was still alive in the early twentieth century (Murton 2008). One reason for creating new farmland by draining Sumas Lake, a convention of BC farmers argued in 1918, was that "British Columbia should produce a greater percentage of food stuffs in place of importing the same" ("Resolution re Sumas Lake Dyking" 1918). There was, according to W.L. Macken, president of the Associated Boards of Trade of British Columbia in 1924, an "enormous importation by British Columbia of staple food products continuing year after year," making the reclaiming of the lake "essential" ("Some Plain Facts" 1924). "You're importing more food than you're growing," Premier John Oliver chided the citizens of Vancouver around the same time, suggesting that everyone would be better off if more lawyers and merchants turned to raising pigs and chopping wood ("Oliver Pans Labor and Vancouver" n.d.).

These are scattered and self-interested statements from a small slice of the province's history, but they do show a genuine concern. Though it would take more research to confirm, it is possible that this concern receded after the Second World War as British Columbia experienced a version of the same processes that reshaped agriculture across North America: growing specialization and financialization of operations; general reliance on commercial fertilizers, pesticides, and specialized farm equipment; an exodus from the countryside; and the expansion of sprawling postwar suburbs into farmlands. If so, the establishment of the ALR in 1973, in the context of a widespread perception of a global food crisis, may have been a revival, or possibly just a continuation, of this old worry.² The provincial government today dismisses the

² A point that I argue in a paper now under review with the *Journal of Canadian Studies*. Most of the academic literature on the ALR – unlike the reserve's first annual report – does

importance of small farm output, arguing that it makes sense to roll back protection for farmland in much of the ALR because only a small amount of British Columbia's farmland hosts significant commercial operations. Ten percent of ALR land generates 85 percent of farm sales, the government notes, and only a quarter of BC farms produce more than \$50,000 in annual sales (Moore 2014). Behind these arguments is the assumption that we can rely on the world food economy to feed us. But this is an increasingly dubious assumption, as the global food crisis of 2008, with its wild price spikes for basic commodities such as rice and wheat, suggests. Meanwhile, the sort of industrialized agriculture practised by North American commercial farms is almost certainly not environmentally sustainable, as is shown in recent studies conducted by the UN Commission on Trade and Development (2013) and the UN Environment Programme's International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD 2009). IAASTD explicitly urges support for small-scale farmers as a means to sustainability and food security. Once, small farms were expected to play an important role in feeding British Columbians. If we are concerned about food security, this is still a sensible position.

Concerns with food security, then, are nothing new. The manipulation of the environment to produce food plants – or farming, as we might simply call it – has a much longer history here than settler British Columbians have realized. Anthropogenic landscapes, including wapato swamps, estuarine gardens, and camas beds, once dominated the coastal landscape, providing abundant food. They could do so again. European-style agriculture destroyed or altered these older landscapes of food production and displaced the people who had made them. It was central to the troubled efforts of settler British Columbians to remake this place. Many settler British Columbians, most of them not farmers, I suspect feel now as Armstrong does: that this is our home, that “living here is essential” (186). The contradictions in that position are perhaps more apparent to someone who lives, as most of us do not, in the same place in which she grew up, and where she works with, and on, the nature that she loves and finds essential. “The world creeps on,” Armstrong writes, “getting stranger and stranger,” (194) while she writes and farms, and walks with her dogs and notices the beauty of her world.

not emphasize the role of concerns of a global food crisis in its origins, seeing it as a way of containing urban sprawl. See Garrish 2002-03; and British Columbia, Provincial Land Commission, 1974.

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