

Douglas McCalla, *Consumers in the Bush: Shopping in Rural Canada*. Montréal, PQ & Kingston, ON: [McGill-Queen's University Press](#), 2015. xv + 296pp., map, illustrations, tables, appendices, notes, bibliography, index. Paper; 978-07735-4500-7, Cdn \$34.95.

Performing what contemporary retailers will recognize as a market basket or shopping cart analysis, Douglas McCalla and his team of research assistants collected, coded, and analyzed data from over 30,000 point of sale records drawn from the daybooks of rural general stores between 1808 and 1861. It is an impressive exercise in data-mining surprisingly similar to current retail practices, albeit undertaken for different purposes, and, as the images of daybooks included in the book show, considerably more labour intensive. The results challenge us to rethink many longstanding myths about the settlement period; truisms that McCalla points out are as often shared by specialists as members of the general public. McCalla explicitly locates ordinary Upper Canadian settlers within capitalism. The prices and many of the goods found in rural account books were similar to those found in urban markets. Settlers may have relied on book credit rather than cash, but McCalla convincingly makes the case for a complex economic order in which the exchange of goods and services was largely commercial in nature. The records left by consumers in the bush are, above all, evidence of capitalism in the countryside.

The key primary sources for this study are the daybooks of seven general stores in what is now central eastern Ontario. A daybook was the merchant's itemized record of debits, listed as transactions occurred. Each entry included the commodity or service purchased, its value, and a name, either that of the account holder or, in some cases, the actual buyer. Cash transactions would have been rare, but in any case were not recorded other than as partial payments. A structured sample of 750 customers, roughly half of whom could be linked to census manuscripts and tax rolls, were subject to detailed analysis. The result is a great sense of intimacy with insights into the material lives of rural consumers and their shopping patterns.

Findings fall into two broad categories: new understandings about consumers and new understandings about the retailing operations of rural general stores. In this region of Upper Canada, records showed that most settlers shopped and many shopped quite frequently. There was over the course of this study no transition from self-sufficiency to market participation because there was no period of self-sufficiency. Many of the goods bought in 1861 were already widely purchased in 1808 and most goods were already being bought by 1842. Certainly the array of goods broadened over time: consumers in 1861 could choose from a wider range of fabrics and more sizes in window glass, but both window glass and many fabrics (as well as 15 different kinds of thread and 14 types of buttons) were available to be purchased in the earliest years of this study. The standard household goods, McCalla proposes, were available at price points that could be afforded by all but the poorest families.

Daybook records confirm that the primary function of a general store was to sell imported goods. Fabrics (especially cotton) were by far the most common item purchased, followed by foodstuffs (primarily sugar, tea, and tobacco in that order). Rural buyers also kept up with the trends: when new goods became available (examples include washboards, tweed fabric, manufactured footwear, and commercial paint), they appeared in daybooks of Upper

Canadian retailers at much the same times that they were being adopted elsewhere. Many of these purchases, McCalla proposes, placed settlers “within extended, often global, commodity chains,” connecting Upper Canadian consumers to producers in Britain, India and China through the consumption of goods that were “modern in the context of their times,” and which in some cases were purchased in quantities that McCalla claims “justifies calling them “goods of mass consumption” (20, 153,151).

A second set of findings is more specific to retail operations. Historians have long been divided on the use of store credit in rural settings, some seeing it as evidence of underdevelopment that bound purchasers to monopolistic storekeepers while others see a mechanism that facilitated commerce in the absence of currency and banks. McCalla is firmly in the latter camp, associating book credit with economic development and material diversity.

The system of book credit was more sophisticated than a term such as barter suggests. Prices were consistent from customer to customer and store to store. Variations in price reflected variations in product and were unrelated to a buyer’s negotiating abilities. (Discounts may have been given for bulk and for cash purchases, but there was insufficient evidence to be conclusive.) The relationship between consumers and retail merchants is presented as one of utility maximization. Consumers had clear preferences for various goods and services, and McCalla speculates, sought to get the most value for their work and time as they decided what to buy, what to make for personal use, and what to make for exchange and to generate credit. Income could of course be obtained from other sources, but daybooks reveal an active market in local products, including oats, ash, wood, apples, knitted mittens and socks, moccasins (which generated credit for first nations customers), homespun, and sewn pants and shirts. Home production was guided by what could sell, and crop surpluses, McCalla proposes, “reflected intention, not just luck” (128). There was also a market in labour with credit recorded for work for storekeepers, as well as by way of third party transactions that involved selling goods or working for others.

Just as store credit was not the only source of income, these stores were not the only source of goods in their communities. Inconsistencies and absences in the accounts encourage speculation, and McCalla believes that no one bought everything they would have needed from a single store. Upper Canadian settlers, the rural majority living outside of the main towns, operated in “matrix” with many points of exchange involving goods with a monetary value that must have been generally known” (128, 114-15). Indeed six of the seven stores in the sample had at least one competitor in the same village and there were other stores in nearby villages and towns as well as possibilities for direct exchanges that did not involve storekeepers.

Every source has its particular strengths and weakness. Daybooks provide new insights into the routines of daily life and evidence of goods such as chemicals, foodstuffs, and commonly used fabrics like cotton that were transformed in use or disappeared through consumption. While a full discussion of the sampling methodology is beyond the scope of this review, it should be noted that detailed explanations are supported by extensive appendices, tables, and notes. As an experiment in the use of quantitative sources, *Consumers in the Bush* stands as a model of scholarly research that can be fruitfully discussed in classes focused on

historiography as well in studies of the Canadian experience.

This book complicates our understanding of the settlement period, challenging us to rethink the material and economic lives of settlers and retailers. The discussion privileges shopping over the hard physical labour of settler life, but the key takeaway, McCalla insists, is that home production and shopping for goods were compatible: rural settlers did both. Stores sold goods their communities needed, provided financing for customers, liquidity for their community, and distribution networks that enabled manufacturers to expand. Consumers, then as now, exercised choice in what they bought, allocating their resources between necessities and indulgences, and between home production and store-bought goods. Rural consumers were no different than urban consumers in their willingness to buy new kinds of goods when they had the opportunity to do so. From a retail perspective, the past was not so different than the present.

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