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A Land Not Forgotten: Indigenous Food Security & Land-Based Practices in Northern Ontario by Michael A. Robidoux and Courtney W. Mason

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A Land Not Forgotten: Indigenous Food Security & Land-Based Practices in Northern Ontario edited by **MICHAEL A. ROBIDOUX** and **COURTNEY W. MASON**
University of Manitoba Press, 2017 \$27.95

Reviewed by **TONIA L. PAYNE**

The editors and authors of this compendium are all involved in research and action groups that are concerned with community problems of Indigenous peoples in the rural north of “the geographic area that came to be known as Canada” (17), specifically targeting communities in northern and northwestern Ontario. As well as being scholars and researchers, all the contributors to the book are involved in programs designed to address the intersections of food, land, culture, language, and health—physical as well as spiritual—within the target communities. The Indigenous groups in the selected communities are Cree, Oji-Cree, and Ojibwa; most of the towns are “fly-in” communities (meaning there are no roads, except improvised ones over snow during winter); all are small in population size; all the populations suffer from disproportionate numbers of people with food-related health problems (obesity, type 2 diabetes, and so on); all face significant challenges in obtaining affordable, healthy, abundant foods.

The first two chapters provide an overview of the historical and political background that affects all aspects of life in these Indigenous communities, though here, of course, the focus is primarily on answering the question posed by the first chapter title: “What Happened to Indigenous Food Sovereignty in Northern Ontario?” It is perhaps unfortunate that the socio-historical roots of the problems still,

at this late date, are considered unfamiliar enough to most readers that they need to be presented again: the forced shift from self-sufficient practices to “participation in a market-based food system” (17); the cultural destruction that damaged “the social meanings and relationships that different peoples and cultures have with their food and foodways” (*ibid.*); and the impacts of the residential school system, which not only broke the transmission of generational knowledge but—particularly heart-breaking in terms of relationship with the land and its ability to provide sustenance—also frequently turned tending gardens into a form of punishment. As authors Joseph LeBlanc and Kristin Burnett state,

Many [school children] were left with negative association with that type of work [digging, weeding, watering]; consequently, these individuals did not grow up to tend gardens, even though it was traditionally a common practice in Indigenous communities in this region. (27)

Of course, the damage to Indigenous societies in the centuries since first European contact extends far beyond issues of food, but the premise of this book is to focus on food as an issue that can be readily addressed. To that end, the three central chapters present as case studies several community-based programs, importantly created in close collaboration with the residents of the communities (who clearly know all too well what the problems are), in order to demonstrate not only the possibilities in terms of food procurement and distribution, but also to demonstrate how such programs would actually work:

what questions need to be answered; how funding can be arranged; what the challenges are to success.

Chapter Three, “Collaborative Responses to Rebuilding Local Food Autonomy in Three Indigenous Communities in Northwestern Ontario,” by Michael A. Robidoux, is particularly useful in highlighting the complexity of the problems arising from “limited access to nutritious foods—whether land-based or store-bought in these communities” (51). As Robidoux points out, the extensive research into the problems didn’t provide new information for the communities, but the researchers were able to extend the mandates of The Canadian Partnership Against Cancer (CPAC) to

provide [Indigenous partners] with resources for local land-based programming. In turn, [the researchers’] Indigenous partners were to use these resources to build local food capacity and increase food availability and quality. (52)

Among the problems faced were finding ways to adapt the mandates of grants in order to fit the needs of the community programs—especially as each community had slightly different goals and approaches—and the need to find ways for the programs to become self-sustaining, after the initial impetus and funding had expired. The project plans differed in the three communities, but each in some way involved younger community members, as re-establishing Indigenous methods for educating youth in the people’s ways was seen as central to all the missions.

Chapter Four, “Traversing the Terrain of Indigenous Land-Based Education: Connecting Theory to Program

Implementation,” by Desirée Streit and Courtney W. Mason, gives another gloss of the historical background, specifically how “Indigenous subsistence practices were discouraged and at times demonized” (92), and, as with Chapter Three, the authors acknowledge specific challenges, among them the problem of outsiders (especially those with a government mandate) bringing solutions to the people. As one Oji-Cree community member noted, there is an understandable level of suspicion in the communities, because the people

think that the government is . . . putting these programs in place to understand their way, their culture, their traditions and their values and then they can get rid of them . . . When is that infected blanket coming out again? (87)

The solution to that particular problem is iterated in all the chapters: let the community members know that they own the program. Its design, aims, and implementation belong to the community, and the outside researchers are there only to help the community secure funding and frame their programs in such a way that they fit with the mandates of granting institutions—or, in the case of the project detailed in this chapter, so they match national curricular mandates for educational programs.

Chapter Five, “Pimatisiwin: Women, Wellness, and Land-Based Practices for Omushkego Youth,” by Cindy Gaudet, focuses on the importance of women’s ways within the cultural practices around food—not only in terms of the work traditionally done by women, usually in the preparing of the food, but also in terms of how women teach and the cultural

importance of “female-male relationships, principles, roles, and responsibilities” (133). Again, as in the previous chapters, the programs as designed by the community focused a great deal of attention on connecting youth with all aspects of their culture: not merely food but also matters of spirituality.

For a slender volume, the work is rich in examples and reiterations of the value of the work that has been undertaken in these communities. There are several concerns that are briefly touched upon that would have been good to address more fully: one is the admitted problem of “outsiders” contacting Indigenous communities even with offers of help. Another concern is the problem of potential environmental toxins in any foodstuffs gleaned directly from the land. Chapter three briefly mentions that the researchers “were just concluding a contaminant study” (53) but nothing further is said on how that might connect with the problems experienced in these communities.

One last point arises from the admission in all the chapters that, despite the successes of the projects, not enough food is produced from hunting, fishing, or gardening to fully feed any of the communities, so there is still a reliance on the foods that have to be brought in

through a market system that does not work to the communities’ advantage. Although in the conclusion, the authors note that the programs in this volume are but a few examples of similar initiatives going on across Canada, nothing is proposed to suggest how such programs might be adapted to help larger populations on smaller land areas—or areas where the fecundity of the land has been significantly diminished.

The authors rightly focus on very specific groups in a carefully delineated region, but for their work to have wider applicability, some of these problems would be well addressed. Nevertheless, the book offers some inspiration: the clear emotional and spiritual benefit to the people participating in the programs is enough to make others want to expand on this work, for the betterment not only of Indigenous communities but of us all.

TONIA L. PAYNE is a tenured professor in the English department at Nassau Community College of the State University of New York. She has published scholarly articles both in the U.S. and abroad. In addition to reviewing for *The Goose*, she has contributed book reviews to *ISLE* and *Ecozon@*.