

Being Neighbours: Cooperative Work and Rural Culture, 1830–1960 by Catharine Anne Wilson

Jake Breadman

Volume 116, numéro 1, spring 2024

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1110101ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1110101ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (imprimé)

2371-4654 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Breadman, J. (2024). Compte rendu de [*Being Neighbours: Cooperative Work and Rural Culture, 1830–1960* by Catharine Anne Wilson]. *Ontario History*, 116(1), 110–112. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1110101ar>

Coloured All-Stars joining White teams to great success. After the Second World War, former Coloured All-Stars players were key to the creation and growth of subsequent new Black baseball teams in Chatham, most notably the Taylor Athletic Club of the 1940s and the Panthers of the 1950s. It is no coincidence that the father of Canada's first-ever inductee into the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York was himself a key player on the Chatham Coloured All-Stars and no doubt an inspiration to his son, Ferguson Jenkins Jr., the famed pitcher who starred in the Major Leagues for nineteen seasons.

Lasting recognition for this underappreciated team has only arrived in recent years with induction of the Chatham Coloured All-Stars into the Chatham Sports Hall of Fame in 2000 and Canada's Sports

Hall of Fame in 2022. After reading *Sporting Justice*, if there truly is any 'sporting justice' in our country's sports halls of fame, you can't help but think induction into the Canadian Baseball Hall of Fame must not be far off also. Yet perhaps the most lasting tribute to this remarkable, trailblazing team will remain Miriam Wright's thoroughly researched, stylishly illustrated, and carefully nuanced glimpse into the origins and legacies, hardships and victories of a team of Black Canadian baseball players who loved playing a game and desired only 'a fair break' like anyone else both on the field and in everyday life.

Jason Beck

Curator and Facility Director, British Columbia Sports Hall of Fame

President, Canadian Association for Sport Heritage

Being Neighbours

Cooperative Work and Rural Culture, 1830–1960

by Catharine Anne Wilson

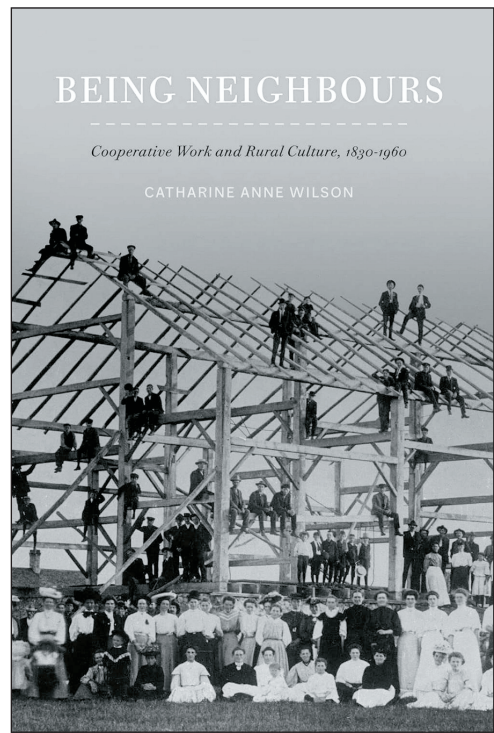
Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022. 432 pages. \$44.95 paperback. ISBN 978-0-2280-1473-7.

Catharine Wilson has written what is bound to become a touchstone in Canadian rural history; you can bet the farm on it. Wilson shows that even if farmers "bet the farm" and lost, most had extensive networks of neighbours on which they could rely for support, which she illustrates well by exploring cooperative work (bees) through an unprecedented study of 112 rural diaries, a project spanning twenty years. Bees were cooperative work events where rural peoples gathered to complete work so demanding it required multiple

hands (and hoofs too!) Barn-raising bees are perhaps the most iconic and required immense mammalian power: sixteen to twenty men and four yoke of oxen (127). Bees were essentially a form of social security; labour provided to one neighbour in need was, in due time, reciprocated. Importantly, though, reciprocity was not immediate, as one cattleman quoted by Wilson notes: 'No, you shouldn't pay back a fellow right away. That would mean that you... looked at it like a commercial deal... If you keep it going fair, it will work out

even.' Wilson interprets this, stating that "labour indebtedness [was] a bond worth maintaining and one that signified an ongoing relationship and trust[.] (92)" Those whose reciprocal labour was inferior, or did not return the favour at all, were deemed "free riders" and lost social capital within their community (68, 85). Bees were also performed for the benefit of the community rather than one family. In the 1820s, for example, inhabitants of Wentworth County set forth to rid their neighbourhood of rattlesnakes which threatened humans and livestock (46).

Being Neighbours will be of interest to Canadian historians for three main contributions. For one, it brings the work of male agriculturists to the forefront of labour history, a large subset of the population hitherto excluded from these histories (17-18). Secondly, Wilson uses bees to provide the first analysis of cooperative work and explores its relationship to capitalism. Cooperative work is typically seen by agricultural historians as an "antecedent to capitalism," but, in reality, bee labour persisted alongside capitalism until the 1960s (19). As farming modernized and became more capital intensive, some forms of cooperative work were adapted to changing circumstances: threshing, wood, and silo-filling bees, for example, persisted until, and just beyond, the Second World War (253). Capitalism and cooperative work cultures thus evolved alongside each other. The third contribution relates to the historiographical debates surrounding Ian McKay's "liberal order framework," which posits an ideological shift amongst British North Americans from "communitarianism" to "individualism" in the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century. Wilson adds complexity to this argument, showing



that farmers embraced both ideologies. Communitarianism (via bees) persisted through the period discussed, but so too did individualism, and sometimes a mix of both as Wilson succinctly states:

In diary keeping, men and women honed their disciplinary and rational thinking practises and took the initiative to record, and potentially reflect, perfect, and progress. In participating in a bee network, they combined obligation and self-interest in a rich dialectic. They expressed their individualism within the confines of what they considered to be good neighbourly behaviour, knowing that neighbours were a valuable resource and provided the nearest and most convenient market for their produce, provisions, equipment—and additional help at crucial periods (22).

I am most familiar with Wilson's scholarship through her fascinating article on plowing matches and rural masculinity in Ontario; I especially enjoyed parts of the book where she provided a gendered analysis of cooperative labour. Male competition permeated work bees as men competed amongst themselves, and for their audience, to display their masculinity. At barn-raising bees, for example, men organized themselves into two teams and competed in "rafter races" to see which team could raise the heavy rafters first (140-42). The winning team were the first to be treated to a dinner laboriously prepared by the hostess and her assistants. Femininity, too, was on display at these barn raisings as hostesses were expected to prepare immense amounts of food for their guests and fellow labourers, which attested to their reputation as a wife and homemaker (188-91). Patriarchy was reified as women were expected to serve the men before feeding themselves (196). A "respectable" table depended on the socioeconomic standing of the hosts, season, and period, but was simple and abundant rather than "stingy" and "uppity," which were vital characteristics of a feast because the hostess and her family's reputation was at stake (200-201, 210). Bees were mostly jovial, but honour culture sometimes drove men to violence. If a man was considered a "free rider," for example, bees gave them a public venue to defend themselves in front of the community and assert their masculinity via violence (226-27).

Elsewhere, scholars have attributed the decline of cooperative work to factors like the widescale implementation of labour-saving equipment like tractors, individu-

alism, and the rise of other forms of social security like insurance. These are all true to some extent, though perhaps overstated (240-41). As previously mentioned, bees were adapted to incorporate new technology. Combines (used to harvest cereals) replaced individual, human threshers and turned the "harvest season" into a few harvest days, but cooperation rather than individualism prevailed: one farmer, for example, cooperatively owned a combine with his siblings that they circulated around the neighbourhood to increase community productivity (257-59). In the 1960s, more people (including my own family) left the countryside for job and educational opportunities in towns and cities, and other forms of sociability prevailed like sports events and voluntary associations (242-48). The prevalence of bees certainly declined but neighbourliness, their essential characteristic, never did.

In the acknowledgements, Wilson writes: "Seeing [undergraduate students'] detective instincts come alive and hearing them get emotionally attached to specific diarists has been one of the biggest rewards for me as an instructor. (xvi)" This is the most rewarding aspect of teaching history, and I know these traits translate to Wilson's students because of her immense passion for agricultural history and rural life; indeed, upon finishing the book, I found myself exploring how I might incorporate agricultural history into my dissertation which is, I think, the best endorsement I can make for *Being Neighbours*.

Jake Breadman
PhD Student, Department of History,
Queen's University