

# Another Season's Promise: Hope and Despair in Canada's Farm Country

by Ingeborg Boyens

Reviewed by Tyler MacAfee, AMM Director of Policy and Communications

For those directly involved with the agriculture industry, the 'farm crisis' is all too clear. However, most Canadians don't fully comprehend this crisis. Ingeborg Boyens appeals to both groups in her well-written and interesting volume, *Another Season's Promise*. By beginning each chapter with a recount of her personal experiences with a typical farm family in southern Manitoba, Boyens expands the volume's dialogue and focus to address the realities facing farming and rural communities in Canada.

The author begins by demonstrating that the crisis is very real and is, indeed, having a major impact on rural Canada. By focusing on the west (where there is 80% of Canada's farmland), she details the realities of the crisis. After establishing the focal point, Boyens explains the importance of the issue. By calling on both the symbolic and economic value of agriculture, she explains the merits of agriculture as "Canada's unsung national dream" and "the unassuming sibling to more dramatic nation-building ventures" like the railway (p. 22).

Boyens then details the history of agriculture in Canada. Beginning with 'King Wheat,' she traces the agriculture industry's development to show the changes that have helped create the crisis facing rural communities today. Focusing on economics, Boyens discusses the importance of both economic diversification and the value-added sector. She also details the impact of transnational corporations, the new structure of agriculture, as well as international trade and policies. She discovers that agribusiness in Canada generated about \$95 billion in sales in 1997, yet most of this was kept and taken out of Canada by multinational companies. Apparently, all links in the production chain are making money except the farmer.

Shifting attention to the international arena, the book explains how the European Union's Common Agriculture Policy is a drastically different approach to farming. Rural infrastructure is outlined as one of the six basic principles of the European Union (EU) agricultural policies, and the EU often talks of the importance of family and community, while North America focuses almost exclusively on the market.

Throughout the book, Boyens is often critical of Ottawa and its lack of policy on rural agricultural issues. Little has been charted for the west since Sir John A. MacDonald's vision of populating the prairies. This can perhaps be seen as part of the reason for the skepticism and debate surrounding the new 'policy' of exit programs, a strategy designed to help ease the burden of abandoning farms. Boyens says, "Canada had somehow taken a wrong turn, no longer viewing agriculture as a way of life that had sustained the country for a century, and instead developing an industrial business that sacrificed those who toiled in the fields on our own behalf (p. xv)."

Boyens is also attentive to the human factor, and the impact the crisis is having on rural communities and people. She argues that, "Canada's agricultural heartland is losing its most precious resource – the people (p. 7)." She observes that a farm is more than a farm – it's a building block of a community. However, this social product is not easily quantified and, therefore, is of little interest to economists and policy-makers.

Using a town in Saskatchewan as backdrop, Boyens shows the importance of agri-

culture for rural communities. When a 'box store' moves into a city and puts the smaller stores out of business, only those directly involved must adjust. The city simply adapts. However, "when farmers go, the businesses and towns go, too (p. 46)." The shift from a farm-based way of life to agribusiness is "straining the very definition of rural Canada (p. 46)" and farmers must look elsewhere to survive. In 1997, 77% of the total average farm-family income came from off-farm sources. It is time to "do more than simply assess costs; they have to assess values." Only then will the rural economy and way of life be truly improved.

This volume makes a number of astute and interesting arguments. It is written in a clever and appealing style. Boyens is correct in assessing that the farm family is the "backbone of rural Canada (p. 266)," and it attracts and deserves the kind of respect in modern mythology "usually reserved for milk and apple pie (p. 259)." However, it is necessary for a new approach and a new method of meaningful support. Otherwise, the farm family will be discussed in the same reminiscent tone as old men discuss their youth. ●

