H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kirk Kardashian. *Milk Money: Cash, Cows, and the Death of the American Dairy Farm.* Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2012. Illustrations. 278 pp. $27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-61168-027-0.

Reviewed by Don Stull (University of Kansas)

Published on H-Environment (March, 2013)

Commissioned by David T. Benac

"In 1944, the United States had 25.6 million dairy cows. Today, there are about 9 million. Those midcentury cows made a total of 120 billion pounds of milk per year. The modern population pumps out 190 billion pounds. Since 1900, we've increased annual per-cow milk yield from roughly 3,000 pounds to 20,000 pounds–a nearly seven-fold rise. At the same time, even though the U.S. population has doubled in the past sixty years, per capita milk consumption has declined. And that is despite the vigorous efforts by the Got Milk? campaign. One effect of this overabundance of milk is that farmers' margins are razor thin, leaving them increasingly vulnerable to the price swings that define the industry" (pp. 69-70).

This is the story Kirk Kardashian tells in *Milk Money*, the latest addition to the milk and dairy section of the library. Other recent titles include *Nature's Perfect Food: How Milk Became America's Drink* by Melanie DuPuis (2002) and *Milk: A Local and Global History* by Deborah Valenze (2011). In contrast to these academic treatises, meticulously researched and laden with notes and references, Kardashian's first book assumes an informal, even breezy, style. This makes for a quick read, and if you do not know much about the dairy industry in America, *Milk Money* is not a bad introduction.

"Between 1970 and 2006, the number of dairy farms in the United States fell by 88 percent from 648,000 to just 75,000. The overwhelming majority of these losses came from farms with 30 to 200 cows." Such dairies are typical of New England, and were for most other dairy-producing regions until the late twentieth century, when so-called megadairies began to appear. "Bigger farms achieve an economy of scale that makes them less expensive to operate.... Between 2000 and 2006, the number of farms with more than 2,000 cows has doubled" (p. 9). As Kardashian goes on to note, "small farms in the traditional dairy states are disappearing ... and milk production is shifting ... to behemoth states in the West" (p. 10). Indeed it is, although *Milk Money* ignores the migration of megadairies from the West Coast to New Mexico, Kansas, and Texas in the last twenty years. Instead, he concentrates on small dairies in New England and New York, contrasting them to large-scale operations in California.

The first chapter, "Down and Out on the Farm," opens with the arrest of a Vermont dairyman, unable to pay his bills thanks to plummeting milk prices and rising feed and production costs. It closes with a New York dairyman shooting his 51 milk cows and then turning his gun on himself. In between, he paints a dismal picture of small dairy farmers trying to hold out against agricultural concentration and fluctuating milk prices. Kardashian then briefly looks backward in his next chapter, "The First Dairy Farmers." He traces these farmers to Iran and Anatolia some eleven thousand years ago. From there, he turns to "The Control of American Milk," in which he recounts American dairy's history through the experiences of seven generations of one family who have milked cows on the same Vermont farm since 1769. This chapter nicely reviews the transformation of dairy from one facet of mixed-use subsistence farming in colonial times, through the emergence of the federal milk price support program following World War II, to the 1996 Farm Bill that established the Northeast Dairy Compact, which regulated the price of milk produced and sold in the six New England states. It concludes in late 2009, when the seventh-generation owner of the farm liquidated his herd. That farmer's assessment of the state of today's dairy industry encapsulates the essential message of this book: "Honestly, what's killing the dairy industry and killing small farms are the big farms" (p. 66). This is arguably the book's best chapter.

Subsequent chapters deal with developments in animal breeding and evolution in milking, from human hands to robots; environmental consequences of the dairy industry's confined animal feeding operations, or CAFOs, in California; producers' reliance on Latino immigrant workers, many in the United States without authorization; treatment of dairy cattle and efforts by animal protectionists to improve their lives; and the monopsonies Dean Foods and the Dairy Farmers of America have created to eliminate their competition and thereby control milk processing and production. The final chapter, "Grass-Fed, Free-Range, Streamline Baby," describes Hudson Valley Fresh, a small nonprofit cooperative that produces and packages its own high-quality milk in glass bottles in upstate New York. Such alternatives to Big Milk are popping up around the country. In the interest of full disclosure, I own stock in a local dairy in northeast Kansas. But while such ventures deliver delicious milk, ice cream, and cheese to those who choose to pay a bit more, they remain chancy operations. "My dairy" sold shares to loyal customers like me, but that did not stave off bankruptcy. It is now reorganizing under chapter 12.

Kardashian wrote *Milk Money* out of curiosity–he became disturbed by radio accounts of "the so-called dairy crisis and its impact on farms and communities" as he drove his daughter to and from her daycare on a small Vermont dairy farm (p. xiii). *Milk Money* is, he says, "a piece of consciousness-raising journalism" (p. xv). He personalizes the dairy industry with firsthand accounts of dairy farmers and breeders, immigrant workers, and college professors. He introduces each character with a physical description, such as this one of a clinical psychologist who treats distraught farmers: he "has bushy gray hair, a frontier mustache, and thin eyebrows; he looks like a modern-day, well-kempt Mark Twain" (p. 20). Kardashian wants us to care about the characters in his book and believe the stories they tell. But these descriptions are formulaic and at times suspect, as when he recounts the conversations "a fresh-faced nineteen-year-old with boyish Mayan features" had with his mother–"a short, weathered woman with grayish black hair and expressive brown eyes" (p. 131)–before he left his village in Chiapas for El Norte. The boy came to Kardashian's attention after he was killed in an accident on a Vermont dairy. How did Kardashian know what the boy and his mother looked like or talked about on that day in the spring of 2009, before he even began researching the book?

We do not know, because Kardashian does not tell us how he conducted his research. Numerous characters, from Vermont and New York to Chiapas and California's San Joaquin Valley, tell their stories in their own words. Presumably, Kardashian interviewed them all–at least, that is what is implied. But nowhere does he actually tell us his research procedures or how he gained access to, and established rapport with, so many key actors in such far-flung places in so short a time–he did not become interested in this topic until the spring of 2009.

This lack of transparency is even more bothersome in his failure to credit his sources, as in the quotation with which I began this review. Those figures are disturbing, and I do not doubt them–much the same holds for livestock producers and grain farmers across North America. But where did those numbers come from? Kardashian never tells us. And this is not an isolated instance. In fact, the author cites not a single reference for chapter 4 (on cattle breeds and milking technology) and chapter 5 (environmental impact of large-scale confined dairy operations), despite a clear reliance on printed sources (see pages 118-119 for one example). All told, he lists fewer than fifty references, a good many of which are secondary sources and of limited relevance. I am not calling for a ponderous academic tome, weighted down with "citation creep." But authors owe their readers basic information on their research and sources, and they owe authors upon whom they draw due credit. Sadly, shallow research methods and failure to properly credit sources are all too common to much recent popular food journalism (Eric Scholsser's *Fast Food Nation* [2001] is a notable exception).

Kardashian is guilty of several patently fallacious assertions. They would be almost funny, if they were not so dangerous. "Genetic and anthropological evidence has shown that humans are endowed with an instinct for farming as a survival mechanism" (p. 23). Farming is a "genetically encoded lifestyle"–and farmers are "conscientious, risk-taking, and self-reliant" (p. 24). Even so, "something in the American DNA seems incompatible with the prospect of hard labor" (p. 154). Then there is his penchant for hyperbole: "Somewhere in the back of every American's mind is a Norman Rockwell painting" (p. 95); tired cliches, such as "from time immemorial" (p. 92); and off-putting attempts to be cute–"The farmer can even choose to receive a text message when a cow is ready to go [breed]. It brings a whole new meaning to the term 'booty call' " (p. 91).

In closing, *Milk Money* is a good overview of Big Milk and those small dairy farmers who still hold out against its onslaught. Despite serious flaws, this book tells an

important story–one that all Americans need to hear. It is at once deeply disturbing and hopeful, for there are viable alternatives to industrial agriculture's mantra: "get big or get out." How successful these small dairy farmers will be, and what their success–or failure–means for America's love affair with milk, remains to be seen. And if American milk drinkers do our part, we can prevent the death of the American dairy farm.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment

Citation: Don Stull. Review of Kardashian, Kirk, *Milk Money: Cash, Cows, and the Death of the American Dairy Farm.* H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. March, 2013.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37485

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.