Catherine Anne Wilson’s *Being Neighbours* explores historical rural culture and the concept of neighborhood through analysis of cooperative labor among the settler population in southern Ontario. To understand the microhistory and social identities of these rural men and women, Wilson compiled diaries written between 1830 and 1960 from more than one hundred rural diarists. Her analysis aims “to explore the relationship between bees and the sustainability of the family farm through decades of change; the bee’s role in the structuring, operation, and definition of neighborhood; and its lasting symbolic significance to rural culture” (p. 4). She accomplishes this with a depth that defies the often bare-bones style of the diarists and supersedes the seeming monotony of their original text to construct a compelling narrative of rural life during this period.

The term “bee” describes a form of cooperative labor where groups of men and women come together to accomplish work on their rural farms. In the book’s examples, the number of participants at a bee ranged from a mere handful to more than one hundred. Such groups and bee networks were composed of people from different backgrounds, ages, classes, etc., with proximity to the host the most common thread connecting them together. These exchanges of labor were flexible and often open-ended, with the expectation that those in the network would respond in-kind at some future point. Bee participants often expected return labor in various forms: from frequent exchanges between small groups of participants, such as firewood or threshing bees, to a single large work party, where more than a hundred workers “raised a barn and reciprocity took the form of a feast and festivities” (p. 5). Wilson details how bee networks were painstakingly created as participants navigated the neighborhood’s social demands and adapted to changing group demographics, circumstances, and interpersonal dynamics.

Popular stereotypes typically describe rural settlers as rugged individuals who eschew cooperation in favor of survival and even profit; however, throughout her analysis, Wilson skillfully...
shows that rural settlers were self-sufficient and independent yet also structurally dependent on one another to maximize productivity and subsequently profitability. Her numerous examples of the largely rural phenomenon of bees takes us to the heart of the rural neighborhood and settler culture during this era, demonstrating the intricacy of rural life and providing a glimpse into how neighborhoods and bee networks formed. With this dependence on neighbors for labor, rural families were connected to one another both socially and financially. Thus, Wilson demonstrates how the proliferation of bee culture throughout this era complicates the narratives of rural capitalism by extolling the necessity of cooperative work among rural residents.

The book is composed of an introduction, eight chapters, a conclusion, and two appendices. Throughout the introduction, Wilson provides much in-depth analysis, leading the reader through her methods and triangulating this book within the greater body of academic scholarship on neighborhood and cooperative work. In chapters 1 and 2, Wilson provides important background information on bees and the functioning of a bee network. Chapters 3 through 5 detail several common neighborhood bee exchanges, including quilting bees, barn raisings, and threshing bees, while chapter 6 examines how the food served (or not served) at a bee had an impact on both the tenor of the day’s events and the social status of the host family. Chapter 7 examines how the unruly behavior, accidents, arguments, injuries, and other disasters that arose during a less-than-perfect bee affected the bee network, an important inclusion in the dialogue. And in chapter 8, Wilson describes the decline in bees and examines several demographic, financial, and cultural shifts that led to the deterioration of bee networks. Finally, the conclusion insightfully rejoins the concepts detailed in the previous chapters and provides further evidence to support Wilson’s thorough analysis of the cooperative relationships and labor exchanges within the bee network—the density, participant overlap, and attendance patterns—and the way these attributes contributed to the settler culture of rural Ontario from the mid-1800s through the early 1900s.

This deeply researched and well-documented book skillfully reflects on rural farm life and the concept of a neighborhood. Wilson’s expertise is evident as she maintains a connection to the individual people within the network even as she examines the larger context of cooperative work, rural life, and neighborhood. The addition of network visualizations next to the included tables could better illuminate the larger context of connections within the bee networks, though this suggestion does not discount the detailed diary analysis and subsequent network of patterns uncovered by Wilson. Finally, though the diaries used are specific to rural Ontario, the themes, struggles, and successes postulated by Wilson will resonate with readers across North America interested in historical rural culture. This is a great read for those interested in cooperative work, rural life, and the concept of neighborhoods, and it adds great value to the available discourse surrounding these concepts.
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