

Three books reviewed by Russell Hunt

## POPULATION POLLUTION & POVERTY

Poverty in Eastern Canada is one of those topics on which everybody has something to say, so it's rather surprising that the obvious things get said so seldom. And the single most obvious thing is that real, quantitative poverty – poverty to compare with the slums of Calcutta, for instance, where people literally possess and have access to nothing but the rags they stand up in – is pretty hard to find here. By the standards statisticians and economists use, Atlantic Canada just doesn't place in the world poverty race.

But of course those quantitative standards – like so many other numerical measurements – just don't apply where men are concerned. A man who is broken, disculturated, hopeless and unhappy, hungry and apathetic, is poverty-stricken whether he owns a car and a television or not. And conversely, a man can own nothing, be physically hungry – even starving – and not in fact be impoverished. A Newfoundland outporter, for instance, may own next to nothing, may have access to almost none of the advantages of our advanced civilization, and yet not be as impoverished, as broken, as an urban slum-dweller with inside plumbing and a television. In fact, the outporter might be a good deal wealthier in ways that count than lots of suburbanites.

Thus the standard measures of poverty – the kind Ian Adams uses in his new study of poverty in Canada, *The Poverty Wall* – don't really tell us much. By a persuasive argument, for instance, he shows that 60 per cent of Canada's families live “*below* the economic level where middle-class life begins.” He argues, in fact, that 6,000,000 Canadians live beyond the poverty wall. And logically, he has a case; we do delude ourselves about being an affluent country, about providing for our own citizens.

But look what he's calling poverty in order to produce those figures: he lumps together the broken urban slum dweller and the working fisherman of Port Morien, the sixth generation maintainer of a broken farm in the New Brunswick backwoods and the inveterate student. All may have incomes under two or three thousand dollars a year, but clearly all are not equally impoverished. You can't really parcel out human misery in that way; impoverishment is a spiritual rather than an economic state, and the failure to make adequate recognition of this fact is one of the major weaknesses of Adams' book.

Not that he doesn't perceive the fact. The most effective – certainly the most deeply felt and believed in – sections of his books are not statistics and the politicians' statements, but the cases. Charlie Wenjack, for instance, the subject of his second chapter, an Ojibway boy who died along the CNR tracks in northern Ontario trying to walk the 400 miles back home to his family because neither he nor they understood why he had to attend school so far from home. Or Jack Fitzpatrick, the fluorspar miner dying of what

kills most of those who work the mine in St. Lawrence, Newfoundland. In these cases the rage Adams brings to the book is clearly justified and clearly does some good. We have to take people one at a time. Six million people racked by poverty means nothing to any of us, and the mere citing of the statistic wastes time that could be better spent on other matters. But twelve-year-old Charlie Wenjack will live for a long time with anybody who reads this book, and will do more to make us *act* on the problem than a truckload of statistics.

*All Charlie had was a cotton windbreaker. And during the thirty-six hours that Charlie walked, there were frequent snow squalls and gusts of freezing rain. The temperature was between twenty and thirty degrees. It is not hard to imagine the hopelessness of his thoughts. He must have stumbled along the tracks at a painfully slow pace – in the end, he had covered only a little more than twelve miles. He probably spent hours huddled behind rocks to escape the wind, gazing at the railroad tracks. Somewhere along the track he lost his map, or threw it away. Charlie must have fallen several times; bruises were later found on his shins, his forehead, and over his left eye. And then at some point on Saturday night, Charlie fell backward in a faint and never got up again. That 's the position they found him in.*

What killed Charlie was not economic deprivation but the side effects of it. He didn't starve to death because there was no money to feed him, or die of rickets or beriberi or pellagra. He died of alienation, of powerlessness, of the knowledge, conditioned into him from birth, that in our society he was as expendable as toilet paper. Statistics about his father's income would be completely irrelevant. Even a photograph of his home and a description of his childhood social environment wouldn't tell us much: what we have to know is how he felt about himself and his situation, and we can tell that from his actions.

The virtue of *The Poverty Wall* is that its case studies show us this. Its failure is a failure of argument; Adam sees the problem as a monetary one almost exclusively and poses the problem as one of income. His clear implication is that we have to redistribute wealth in this country, but he never suggests how. What he does suggest is that industrial development is a necessary first step. Provide jobs, he says; it's a myth that the poor don't want to work. Don't study poverty in the Gaspé, he argues; stimulate some industrial development. Hire local labour for projects like the Mactaquac Dam. The problem with local development schemes isn't their aim, it's that they don't work. Factories simply don't come. Adams' clear implication is not that we should re-examine the rationale of those programs, but that we should find ways of assuring that industry will be attracted to areas of poverty.

And, of course, most responsible economic theorists and practical politicians agree with

him about aims. The New Brunswick Government, for instance, has recently released a White Paper on Social Development and Social Welfare, which uses the key term “economic growth” on almost every page. And when it uses the term, it is referring primarily to “the establishment of viable industries which are developing New Brunswick resources in ways promising returns to the province and our people.” At this point in history, though, it's just becoming clear that industrial development doesn't work, and that if it did it would not bring us what we want. What in fact it does bring us is Westmorland Chemical and Heavy Water and the oil refinery at Come-By-Chance, dislocation, relocation, and disculturation. The attempt to attract business leads to governments granting crippling tax concessions, exempting companies from their ecological responsibilities, financing their failures and guaranteeing their successes. Look, for instance, at the Gerhard Kennedy (Canada) garment company, which closed its doors in Winnipeg just before Christmas and said it was leaving the province because Manitoba's minimum wage had gone from \$1.25 to \$1.35 an hour, and there was talk of \$1.50. And where did it move? “Current operations are being moved to New Brunswick and Québec . . . ,” said the *Winnipeg Tribune* in January. Down where they appreciate industry, and know better than to demand a living wage.

But this is not the only objection to that solution. Look the results of successful industrial development. Look at for instance, where a couple of years ago the Cuyahoga river *caught fire*. In the long run, that's where development leads. For obvious reasons; one of them is so obvious that it's almost never noticed. Look at texts of speeches calling for regional development and you'll notice that no one ever worries about what it is that's going to be produced. As long as we produce, it doesn't matter . . . automobiles, napalm, DDT, heavy water, cosmetics, carbon dioxide, asphalt, IBM cards . . . In other words, the thing produced is no longer the goal; it's keeping people employed that matters, no matter at what.

If *The Poverty Wall* were going to do much good in the long run, it should have cast a more critical eye at the proposed solutions to the problem of poverty in Canada, and to the angles from which it is usually looked at. It's not an isolated problem and it's not a financial one and it's not amenable to short-term solutions. Putting a pulp plant – or even a Michelin Tire factory – in Kenora, Ontario would not have saved Charlie Wenjack and would not help his family. Does anyone, suppose that laying an oil pipeline across the Arctic is going to help even one Eskimo?

What do we do then?

The obvious thing is to step back and take a look at the problem and its consequences in the long run. And a couple of things we ought not to forget when we're looking at it are brought home to us by two recent publications: Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb*, published a couple of years ago by Ballantine Books, and the American Friends Service

Committee's study of population problems published this year and called *Who Shall Live?*

What's the connection between these books and the problem of poverty in Atlantic Canada? Simply this: they point out very clearly one of the dead ends that societies organized like ours tend to walk into. The underdeveloped state of the Maritimes is in some ways – maybe in all ways – a blessing, because we can have a clearer idea where our choices are going to lead because we can see where they have led others. One dead end, and the most clear danger to us now, are the related disasters of pollution and overpopulation. Both of these books concentrate on the second of these two horsemen of our twentieth century apocalypse, but they are in fact inseparable. The more people, the more garbage. Ehrlich's is the more dramatic and frightening of these books. Convincingly – if you believe statistics – he argues that the world is faced with an imminent and unavoidable disaster because of overpopulation. Pointing out that eventually the death rate has to catch up with the birth rate, Ehrlich sketches a number of possible forms the near future might take. The most hopeful one, based on “a maturity of outlook and behaviour in the United State that seems unlikely to develop,” calls for the starvation of one-fifth of the world's population and a rebuilding after the major die-back in 1985. Others are less hopeful and, as Ehrlich points out, more likely.

He paints a gloomy picture indeed as the result of man's inroads against the death rate without matching advance against the birth rate. And he does not offer much hope that we can escape the coming famines, pestilence, nuclear war and environmental catastrophe. He does, however, offer sample letters to government officials, organizational plans for direct action, and arguments to use on your friends, all designed to lower the birth rate and encourage realization of the magnitude of the problem. Ehrlich has no compunctions about the ethics of the situation. It is clear that he sees the situation as desperate and argues that it is past time for desperate measures. There are, he says,

*only two kinds of solutions to the population problem. One is a “birth rate solution,” in which we find ways to lower the birth rate. The other is “death rate solution,” in which ways to raise the death rate – war, famine, pestilence – **find us.***

He does not hesitate to draw the appropriate conclusions: contraception, sterilization, and abortion are all, he argues, so clearly preferable to this that moral issues are insignificant. He is even willing to consider involuntary sterilization – suggesting that sterilants might be added water supplies (where, one wonders?) – finding the only real drawback to be the objections of the people who would be sterilized.

The Quakers are less able to dispense with such moral considerations, and in many ways

their ultimate conclusions are more convincing than Ehrlich's more facile ones. Their recommendations arise out of a consideration of the whole situation – including the complex legal situation with respect to abortion, the social consequences of unwanted children, the moral implications of lessening our traditional reverence for the sanctity of human life. Considering all this, the Working Party produced recommendations that no woman or family should be forced to bear an unwanted child, and that therefore contraceptives and contraceptive information should be freely available, that legal and moral restrictions on abortion should be abolished, and that we should abandon or lessen our nearly psychopathic preoccupation with prolonging life and start examining the effects of that prolongation. That this group – presumptively much more morally conservative than Ehrlich, and in fact fundamentally opposed to compulsory abortion and sterilization and to genetic manipulation and selective breeding – should take this position is convincing evidence of the seriousness of the situation.

In really important ways, though, all this is a distraction from the real issue, which is the way our society is organized. Both environmental pollution and overpopulation are intimately involved with our commitment to a large-and-expanding, slightly inflationary, consumer-oriented competitive economy. And until we reassess that commitment we cannot even begin seriously to combat problems like pollution and overpopulation. Ehrlich himself says, referring to the problem in its most advanced state, in the U.S.A.:

*Our entire economy is geared to growing population and monumental waste. Buy land and hold it; the price is sure to go up. Why? Exploding population on a finite planet. Buy natural resources stocks; their price is sure to go up. Why? Exploding population and finite resources. Buy automotive or airline stocks; their price is sure to go up. Why? More people to move around. Buy baby food stocks; their price is sure to go up. Why? You guess. And so it goes. Up goes the population and up goes that magical figure, the Gross National Product.*

But if we – Canadians no less than Americans – are to remain committed to two gas-gulping, carbon-monoxide-spewing cars per family, to scabless apples and faultless, plastic-packaged produce, to the whitest wash on the block, to giving our mouths sex appeal, to miracle fabrics and vaginal deodorants and disposable packaging, then we are committed to the disastrous future Ehrlich outlines. We are committed to it regardless of our petitions, our letters to the editor, our bumper stickers and our teachings.

Do you know, offhand, a businessman who's willing to stop manufacturing or selling his product and go out of business because it's unnecessary, much less undesirable? Do you know a worker who'll take kindly to losing his job because he worked at a plant that manufactures DDT or napalm or nerve gas or spills mercury into our water or sulphur dioxide into our air? Would you?

As long as we continue to manufacture and work solely for profit, our economy will welcome every baby as a potential consumer – whether we can afford him or not, whether the world can feed him or not. The kind of statistics that impress businessmen, by and large, are these:

*each American baby will consume in a 70-year life span, directly or indirectly: 26 million gallons of water, 21 thousand gallons of gasoline, 10 thousand pounds of meat, 29 thousand pounds of milk and cream, \$5,000 to \$8,000 in school building materials, \$6300 worth of clothing, and \$7,000 worth of furniture.*

And as long as we insist on manufacturing three times as much as we need – even if it is done to keep the economy moving and people employed – we will destroy three times as much of our environment as we have to. Because you don't produce without simultaneously destroying.

In Atlantic Canada we have, still, a chance to stop before we've ruined our environment and before our population has outstripped our resources. But we've got to start in that direction now, and the way is not by a continuation of our blind industrialization and our reckless competition to attract industry regardless of what it manufactures, regardless of its potential to damage the environment, and regardless of its necessity.

Think about it. Can our environment continue to support the reckless manufacture and dispersal of plastic disposable containers indefinitely? Is there really much likelihood that manufacturers will voluntarily stop making them and marketing them as long as there are profits to be made, as long as governments will subsidize their endeavours in order to keep their citizens employed?