

8.4 Fictional representations

Room 202

Chair: Claire Strom

8.41 Fermin Allende Portillo – Literary fertiliser for rural history: the representation of the farming sector in Western literature

Fictional literature may provide a twofold contribution to our knowledge on rural history. On the one hand, literature allows us a virtually approach to daily life, to everyday job of persons devoted to farming activity in the past. On the other hand, it provides a series of texts and narrations which are susceptible of being used as teaching and didactic materials in our classes about the farming sector.

Literature related to the farming sector permits us, for instance, to know what British contemporary people's opinion was regarding the modernisation of the sector which took place in Great Britain during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Alexander Pope, Oliver Goldsmith, Jonathan Swift and George Eliot tell us about this). Literature also refers the way in which the writers – in their role as representatives of public opinion to some extent – noticed the notorious differences between a traditional rural world which was about to disappear, and an industrial world which was coming into being (about these matters we are reminded by Elizabeth Gaskell, Benjamin Disraeli, Thomas Hardy or Spanish Armando Palacio Valdés). Literature likewise explains the way in which the European farming sector attempted to defend itself from the massive arrival of cereals coming from other continents (French writer Émile Zola widely refers to this matter); or – analysing the opposite side – the way in which highly efficient American agriculture produced and distributed its grain on a world-wide level (we are broadly informed about this by American novelist Frank Norris); or, besides, the circumstances by which the American farming sector was to be crashed by the crisis (in the way that John Steinbeck exposes it).

Fermin Allende Portillo is a Doctor of History. He is currently Professor of Economic History at the University School of Business Studies of Bilbao (University of the Basque Country). His recent works are linked to research into Economic history by using fictional literature. Papers recently presented in several congresses include: 'Poor Thomas Buddenbrook! Family Business and Literature' at a Meeting of the Business History Conference and of the European Business Association; Milan, Italy, June, 2009; 'Women's role in family firms as reflected in fictional literature' at the XVth World Economic History Congress; Utrecht, The Netherlands, August, 2009 and 'Travelling by railway: from fictional literature to economic history' at the 7th Conference on the History of Transport, Traffic & Mobility; Lucerne, Switzerland, November, 2009. He is coordinator of an innovative educational project entitled *Literature, Films and Music as teaching tools for economic history* (University of the Basque Country).

8.42 Brian Q. Cannon – 'You can't take the country out of the boy': rural-urban migration in fiction

Over the course of the twentieth century millions of Americans left farms for life in the cities and suburbs. Between 1939 and 1970 alone, nearly 30 million Americans left the farm. This massive migration was unprecedented, and its impact upon rural regions and upon the lives of the migrants was immense. Rural identity and lifeways followed many of these migrants, shaping their experiences.

Novels and short stories explore many dimensions of the migrants' experiences and can serve as a springboard for hypotheses and empirical investigation. In my paper I will identify and examine insights and themes in key works of fiction that trace rural to urban migration. Authors who explore these themes include Theodore Dreiser, Thomas Wolfe, Sherwood Anderson, Ellen Glasgow, William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor and Robert Penn Warren. Harriette Arnow's 1954 novel *The Dollmaker* traces the experiences of a white farm family in moving from rural

Kentucky to Detroit during World War II. N. Scott Momaday explores the experiences of American Indians in the 1950s who participated in the government's relocation program, migrating from reservations to major cities like Los Angeles. A rich array of novels explores the experiences of African American migrants from rural areas, including George Washington Lee's *River George*, Waters Turpin's *O Canaan*, and James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*.

Novels by international authors explore the experiences of rural migrants across the globe in the twentieth century. I will draw upon these novels as a means of identifying universals and geographical particulars in the experiences of migrants. These novels include South African author Modikwe Dikobe's *The Marabi Dance*, set in a Johannesburg township in the 1930s and 1940s and Ibrahim Aslan's *The Heron*, which chronicles the daily life of a family of rural migrants in Cairo.

Brian Q. Cannon is Associate Professor of History at Brigham Young University and since 2003 he has been Director of the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies. Selected publications include *Reopening the Frontier: Homesteading in the Modern West* (2009); *Utah in the Twentieth Century* (co-edited with Jessie L. Embry) (2009); *Remaking the Agrarian Dream: New Deal Rural Resettlement in the Mountain West* (1996); "'Experimenting with the Human and Economic Phases of Agriculture': Casa Grande Valley Farms", *Picturing Arizona: The Photographic Record of the 1930s*, ed. Katherine Morrissey (2005); and 'Water and Economic Opportunity: Homesteaders, Speculators, and the US Reclamation Service, 1904–1924', *Agricultural History* 76 (2002).