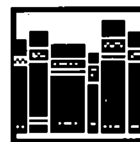
Book Review



The Life and Death of a Rural American High School: Farewell Little Kanawha. A. DeYoung. New York: Garland, 1995, 342 pp. ISBN: 0-8153-0744-6.

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Alan DeYoung's story of the circumstances surrounding the birth, growth, and death of a high school in rural West Virginia is an intellectual contribution of the first order. And *Farewell Little Kanawha* is certainly one of the best stories to be told by an educational researcher in recent decades. Its strength derives in large measure from DeYoung's deftness in crossing disciplinary borders. The interplay of economics, sociology, history (both oral and documentary), anthropology, and biography render this story far more compelling than most educational research. DeYoung bases his narrative, in fact, on C. Wright Mills' precept that social science worth doing must interpret the intersection of biography and history. Mills was the wisest and best American sociologist, and DeYoung is among a very small contingent of rural education scholars to embrace his advice.

The Work In Brief

To some readers, these assets might seem to render DeYoung's enterprise undisciplined. To the contrary, *Farewell Little Kanawha* exhibits a lovely arch-like structure, pillared at both ends by a pair of chapters that, at the beginning, lead readers into how the work was conceived and what motives guided its development. And, at the end, meanings emanating from DeYoung's investigations and reflections are eloquently tied to earlier themes. The arch itself develops the narrative inherent in the biographies and histories of schooling in Braxton County in the 20th century. This is artful research indeed.

Chapters 1 and 2 present the warrant for the cross-disciplinary approach. This warrant, both in language and logic, is accessible, even as compared, for instance, with John Gaventa's (1980) methodological discussion in another fine work on Appalachia, *Power and Powerlessness*.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 treat, with increasingly narrow focus, the settings in which "Little Kanawha" thrived, survived, and declined. Each of these chapters presents intersections of history and biography told in authentic voices. The key biography is that of "KS," the superintendent who presides over the consolidation of Braxton County's middle schools (and the further demise of Little Kanawha) during the course of DeYoung's fieldwork.

In Chapters 6 and 7, DeYoung recounts the booms and busts that shaped schooling in the county. These chapters develop the economic, political, and historical disasters that belie the evident landscape: timbering to the point of disastrous floods; the coal boom and the coming of the railroads; the cycles of oil and gas booms and busts; and the later big federal works (agricultural programs in a state no longer considered to have a single county with an agricultural economic base; a 10-year interstate construction boom; and major flood-control dam projects, one of which wiped out an entire village important to Little Kanawha). DeYoung concludes that, despite the appearance of tranquility, Braxton County presents a credible representation of the repeated dislocations that characterize the Appalachian experience.

Chapters 8 and 9 deal with rural school consolidation in the contemporary era. Chapter 8 is appropriately subtitled "Looking In, Looking Out," because it moves easily from the issues surrounding the consolidation of Braxton County's three middles schools into the final chapter, where the issues of meaning are related to rural schools in general and to rural school consolidations and closures in particular.

Farewell Little Kanawha does more, however. It chronicles the essence of the 20th-century experience in America, the wholesale embrace of industrial tenets, the devotion to elite democratic theory, the suburbanization of a nation and its concomitant diminution of *both* urban and rural life, and the evolution of formal schooling from a community endeavor intended to promote stability and a modicum of virtue into a national and increasingly multinational one (principally to bolster economic and military "competitiveness.") Before moving to why we find that DeYoung's work so aptly captures this essence, we asked

each other why so very little work of this nature has been done.

Why the Big Picture is Regarded as Dangerous

Americans who take charge of the things of the world—by virtue of the positions they inherit in the great systems of power—cannot acknowledge the existence of a rural world. Such an acknowledgment would force them into a fair accounting of the costs incurred by their decisions—into a political, economic, and ethical reckoning that they could not survive. The economy must exclude the possibility that community and countryside possess relevant value. This exclusion is, in our view, a corollary to the logic of the dominant neoclassical view of economic life, with a teleology of limitless accumulation and consumption. On an individual level, people are socialized to achieve ever greater levels of consumption amid neighbors with similar aspirations. Anything less in such a world constitutes failure.

The business of schooling in such a culture is, well, business. Under these circumstances, schooling must demonstrate that it adds value to individuals in the process of developing successful competitors for the marketplace. This goal seems sufficiently abstract that not too many people object. The thought that the real interests of individuals and communities might run counter to national aspirations for global economic and military dominion seldom receives serious consideration. There's just not much profit in the thought.

Rural life, rural literature, rural history, rural philosophy, and, we note with some irony, rural education research are among the marginalized endeavors. This circumstance is so familiar that it is comic. Many of the great American writers have been "regional" writers. When William Faulkner began his international rise to fame, not one of his novels was still in print in the United States. Of course, part of what has happened in the 20th century is that the value of the humanities has declined. They have become, in the prevailing view, a pointless adornment of the elite. Who really cares anymore about literature, philosophy, or history? None of them is a certain mechanism for accumulating wealth or indulging expensive consumption.

Our point, however, is not so much about the decline of the West and its institutions of intellect. Rather, we find that local circumstance—call it "sense-of-place"—inspires people to make meaning and to give meaning to life. The demise of local places contributes to the fact that literature, philosophy, and history have so little hold any longer over the imaginations of Americans. The locality to which we refer need not be rural, of course. But rural localities, as DeYoung demonstrates, embody the idea of "place" much better than the placeless suburbs, and maybe somewhat better than the cosmopolitan metropolis.

The marginalization of rural America is a cultural, economic, and political travesty that reflects the dilemmas of American life generally (see Kemmis, 1990). Only during the past decade have American historians begun to look to the countryside for leverage on such questions as the nature and origins of capitalism or the catalysts of universal literacy. Important, if neglected, questions in education need the purchase that an understanding of rural circumstances provides.

Thus we come to Alan DeYoung's *Farewell Little Kanawha*, which smoothly and accessibly takes the reader back and forth across the intellectual chasm dividing, however fictitiously, the business of schooling from the business of economics and politics. The work accomplishes this feat, we think, precisely because it is rooted in local matters. But because *Farewell Little Kanawha* is rural education research, it stands a good chance of being regarded as marginal.

These are the reasons such stories are rare. They are dangerous. But this work will hasten the day when the educational research community undertakes more "border crossings," when it begins to understand that education is something quite different from the generic function of adding value to human capital (DeYoung, 1989).

Dilemmas of Schooling and Superintendency

West Virginia, unlike most states outside the South, operates only county school districts and has done so since the depression first threatened the existence of the state's new system of public schooling. The state department in this preponderantly rural state takes very little interest in the circumstance of ruralness. To this day, officials of the department rejoice in the fact that they have just 55 county districts with which to contend. This stroke of luck, combined with the chronic perils of economic and political crises that natural resource development often imposes on a state, seems to have produced a very centrally organized state system of education. Local districts have little latitude to develop uniquely responsive educational settings. The state cannot supply the largesse needed for such latitude, and, in any case, regulations prohibit a wide range of involvement by local citizens. In fact, West Virginia is one of the most equitably funded in the nation (Hughes, 1992). This conclusion, however, may depend on a degree of deception not possible when there are hundreds of small districts, since aggregation of finance data from roughly 900 schools to the level of 55 counties probably obscures wider variation. The bulk of school funding in West Virginia comes from the state, so it is no surprise that county boards often feel abused. Talk continues in West Virginia,

interestingly, about "regionalizing" services like schooling. Apparently 55 districts is still too many.

For these reasons, West Virginia was an excellent site for DeYoung's research. The contest between local concerns and the logic of a generic, "one best" system is not likely to be much sharper anywhere else in the nation. In part, this is true because the local culture of West Virginia communities persists (though it is under heavy assault from "information vectors"—media, transportation, economic marginalization). And West Virginia exercises a hold on people precisely because it is different from the national culture that increasingly chokes the entire nation. To be sure, DeYoung is careful to affirm the West Virginia difference as positive, and he shows how interpretations of Appalachian otherness as a sort of pathology have their roots in racism and other attempts at deflecting blame to the victims of misused power.

DeYoung demonstrates that the people he encountered understand the differences that exist. They remain committed to their places despite the seductive behavior of the national culture. One man in Braxton tells DeYoung a characteristic story, poignantly mixed of equal parts pride, dignity, regret, and care for community and family. "J. B." says,

> Well, you know, I come back in '82, my boy graduated from high school in '83, went to the Marine Corps. He's still in the Marine Corps, and I don't even know him, so to speak. You get home on the weekends, or every second weekend. My boy he growed up and I didn't know him . . . We done things together, but I still really didn't know him. So I missed out on a lot. Like I was talking to a lady up there today. Her husband worked for United Coal Mines. Graduated from high school; her and her husband both . . . They've got two small boys. Well, United Coal Mines over in the county shut down. He went to Kentucky. Studying in Kentucky for submining now. She's telling me this morning, it's about three hours away. I forget which town she was telling me it was in, but he was going to commute back and forth every other weekend, or every ten days, or whatever. I said don't do it. You take your kids, you take yourself, you go down there and you find you a place to live. "Well, it's only three hours away" (she said). I said, "It might as well be ten." (p. 126)

The superintendent of schools in the County, KS, is the pivotal character in the story of *Farewell Little Kanawha*. It was he who facilitated the consolidation that in so many other rural places is a trial by fire for incumbent superintendents. Indeed, just a few years previously, a long-time superintendent in neighboring Calhoun County was driven from office by a concerted effort to defeat a consolidation scheme (which eventually prevailed).

KS is perhaps Braxton County's most successful native son, and he holds one of the longest running tenures (nearly 20 years) in a state where the average incumbency is between 2-3 years. Any way one looks at the Little Kanawha story, it seems that KS is doing a remarkable job. Unlike many West Virginia superintendents, KS received his doctorate outside the state, whereas most superintendents in the state bear allegiance to West Virginia University. KS saw the wider world and came back to Braxton County for some reason not disclosed by DeYoung. But it is clear that KS sticks around because West Virginia exercises a hold on him that is similar to the hold it exercises on his neighbors. The biography reported by DeYoung in Chapter 3 demonstrates the similarity of KS's story and everyone else's. It would thus be too easy to paint KS as a villain in the Little Kanawha story, though DeYoung does admit that "KS became an agent of the state" (p. 301). But DeYoung, whose own views differ sharply from those of KS, harbors great respect for this man whom he would probably number among his friends:

> Counter to literature on rural school superintendents in other case studies, . . . KS was a key change agent in his rural but economically marginal county. [His] agency cannot be understood as either a passive or villainous one. Rather, it was an active, calculative, and philosophically informed one. (p. 301)

DeYoung claims that KS sought to empower children to move into a national economy and society. Elsewhere in the book, however, KS makes it clear that his view of the purpose of education is perhaps more complex:

> The pursuit of happiness should be preceded by academic preparation and several experiences that enrich and stimulate the mind, causing the individual to develop his own sense of self-satisfaction and fulfillment. Using the hillbilly dream is a cop-out and causes impoverishment and dependence. . . . A culture of non-work, non-study, and non-responsibility does little to advance the human race. . . . Education is the catalyst or the empowering elixir that allows options to be available to the "good old boy" that can free him of caretakers and transfer payments. (pp. 296- 297)

DeYoung realizes that KS's dilemmas differ from the ones that trouble scholars, and he does not abuse KS's confidences. The fact is that the social, political, and economic forces that shape the history of the county and the

biographies of its citizens also make certain eventualities more likely than others.

Consolidation is one of those more certain eventualities in West Virginia these days. Finances and administrative convenience, as KS would surely acknowledge, argue against retaining small schools:

> Practically speaking, KS knew that only by consolidating the three old schools could he get out from under impending school renovation costs that would bankrupt the system. (p. 287)

But the reason that finance and administration are so compelling is a twisted one. It is definitely not the case that large schools are cheaper to operate as the result of alleged economies of scale, as DeYoung concludes in his review of the literature. However, state regulations and standards render extant schools increasingly substandard—in Braxton County, as elsewhere in rural America. Good education might still take place in such buildings, but the combination of school regulations, safety regulations regarding such things as lead-based paint and asbestos, and the American penchant for "technology" combine to prefigure the abandonment of old buildings. Renovation as compared to new construction is prohibitively expensive; the cost-benefit analysis, particularly when social costs to communities are excluded, does not work out.

New construction is the only acceptable alternative. In West Virginia (and most poor and rural communities), the hitch is that new construction just is not *feasible* with local revenues. Not that rural citizens fail to value education properly. Local income and wealth just do not provide an adequate tax base, though rural communities typically make a tax effort that is proportionately greater than suburban and urban communities. So the state steps in, as in West Virginia, and offers to fund fully any construction plans that meet its specifications. And in West Virginia, "economy of scale" is the rubric under which the new construction game is played. This is an old game (Stephens, 1991) and, moreover, the state's economy of scale standards are utter fabrications, which it has never even bothered to defend (Purdy, 1992).

Little Kanawha's Contribution

Persisting in the place where you live, with the people you love, and discovering and cultivating the meaning in those relationships arguably constitute the meaning of life; but in the world created by the engines of conspicuous consumption, knowing what life is all about has become as inapplicable as literature (Berry, 1990).

What can one say of a civilization in which the issue of living the good life has become irrelevant? Not much that is good.

The reason for this state of affairs, in part, is that national schemes of schooling are questionable enterprises all around the globe. Everywhere, such national schemes look remarkably—eerily—the same (Meyer, Kamens, & Benavot, 1992). It is not difficult to see why. Since the 18th century, and especially with the rise of the natural sciences as the intellectual tool kit for remaking the world in the interest of accumulating wealth, knowledge has become universalized. At least for the present, formal schooling is the implement for diffusing such knowledge. Nearly everyone believes that wealth proceeds significantly from human capital (transportable knowledge, skills, and habits temporarily accumulated by individuals in the workforce). The sorts of knowledge, skills, and habits required to foster capital accumulation are everywhere nearly the same sort because limitless economic growth *is* both end and means for the world system.

Capital—which used to be understood as inclusive of the tools of production—is ever more transportable and ephemeral. Financial markets are increasingly sensitive to one another precisely because capital can wonder the world electronically. But human capital is rapidly becoming equally transportable in the form of software. The sort of abstract, technical "knowledge" that supports limitless economic growth—knowledge of how to execute a procedure—is exactly the sort of "universal" knowledge that can be captured in software. The truth is that this sort of knowledge does not need all that many human beings to develop it, keep it, or use it. Increasingly, therefore, humans confront an inhuman system of production and knowledge.

The emerging postmodern circumstance will sooner or later usher in a crisis for national systems of schooling. Instead of needing more schooling, people will need less; instead of needing greater access to schooling, nations will have to reduce such access. But the need for education, as distinct from schooling, will persist. Education, unlike schooling, must deal cogently at its center with questions about the good life. When education fails, as Hannah Arendt (1968/1954) pointed out, the world of humans and their artifacts inevitably fails.

Instead of cultivating universalized functions and the debased meanings associated with them, education will have to cultivate particularized meanings and, quite probably, the particularized local functions that follow those meanings. DeYoung does not make this critique explicit in *Farewell Little Kanawha*, but it is implicit throughout. And DeYoung does characterize the prevailing, and increasingly dysfunctional and unjust, intentions of schooling aptly:

> Contemporary American public institutions, including schools, stand in opposition to [a high regard for one's place on earth]. It is their intent to create

> knowable and predictable people across entire nations and economies, not regional ones. (p. 292)

The world we think we know—the one in which the phrase "global village" makes sense—is a creation so recent we can remember the one that once prevailed. One of DeYoung's contacts reminds us of this world and its nearby meanings:

> My grandmother, when my mom was growing up, lived seven miles up the road here. Nobody in the family worked [i.e., held a regular job]. There were no wage paying jobs for anybody to work at. Yet, they raised eight kids and put them through school. And I have recollections in the early 1950s. There was no power in the house, there was no natural gas, (they) cooked on wood stoves, had a nice comfortable clean house. They lived a very simple lifestyle and went to bed at 8:00. . . . (Now) when the power goes off for 30 minutes we think we're going to die (p. 328)

One of our favorite writers is Wendell Berry. He makes the educational connection implicit in this passage very well in his wonderful book *The Hidden Wound*:

> the essential cultural discrimination is . . . between the superfluous and the indispensable. . . . Granting the frailty, and no doubt the impermanence, of modern technology as a human contrivance, the human being who can keep a fire in a stove or on a hearth is not only more durable, but wiser, closer to the meaning of fire, than the human being who can only work a thermostat. (Berry, 1990, p. 76)

Anecdotal Conclusions

Is Wendell Berry inapplicable? We think he is quintessentially applicable, and we offer an anecdote in evidence. We've argued about whether to include this anecdote here, because it seems self-serving, though it is not. It reports something that surprised us and tends to confirm a faith that human beings are indeed interested in fashioning wise decisions about the meanings and purposes of education.

The two of us became acquainted through another joint project. It involved the development of a short synthesis piece for a government contract; the topic was the educational implications of the philosophy of Wendell Berry. Whether or not Berry was actually a philosopher was debatable, but we knew the debate would seem obscure to our colleagues in education who easily regard "the middle school concept" and "inclusion" as de facto philosophies. By these lights, Berry could easily be counted as a philosopher. We also knew we were breaking the rules, but we felt this was just good work to do because something relevant to the purposes of rural schooling seemed timely given coeval hyperbole devoted to the National Education Goals.

We were surprised when the work became the most widely requested publication among many developed by the publisher that year. It has remained among the publisher's most popular titles ever since.

We conclude, on this perhaps scant evidence, that much of what passes as important for educational improvement is trivial and that much of value goes untested because it is so at odds with the prevailing wisdom about adding value to human capital. We also hazard the guess that most people who work in rural schools know this to be the case, even if they get very little chance to acknowledge it to themselves and others. Alan DeYoung's *Farewell Little Kanawha* is research that goes to the core of the issues related to becoming educated Americans with a grip on the good life.

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