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## Poking Around Rural America with an Expert Guide

*A Taste of the Country: A Collection of Calvin Beale's Writings* Edited by Peter A. Morrison University Park The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990, 260 pages, \$28.50

Reviewed by Sonya Salamon

Let's face it. Demographers write useful papers, but the prose involved in reporting numbers is typically not very engaging. A singular exception has been Calvin L. Beale who, during a career spanning almost 40 years as a demographer with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, has, with style and grace, produced oft-cited papers and books that track rural peoples and places. It is no accident that newspaper reporters, in particular, seek Beale out. He always rewards them with a pithy and quotable aphorism that succinctly captures the human story of changes within the populations, the small towns, and the economy of rural America. Seldom can a highly respected professional in a field also speak to the general public in words easy to understand. Beale, however, reads the census like a novel and translates the plot into well-turned phrases that are highly informative and jargon-free. His ability to do this derives from his uncanny encyclopedic knowledge of rural geography, history, and demography and a gift for synthesizing these data, enabling him to place new numerical facts in the appropriate spatial, economic, and social context.

Due to his position as a government demographer, Beale's work has more often appeared as congressional testimony, talks, or Economic Research Service reports than in the more easily accessible form of academic journal articles.

Thus, Morrison, the editor, performs a commendable service by gathering together gems by Beale that, while published, would require real detective work to uncover. Such papers might have remained fugitive documents had Morrison not included them in this volume. Of particular interest is a sprinkling of Beale's field notes, written in conjunction with his "busman's holidays" throughout the Nation's countryside. Beale devotes these travels, during which he has visited half of the 2,400 nonmetropolitan counties in the country, to poking about in cafes, cemeteries, churches, and towns. He interviews people or makes observations about the remnants of the past, such as abandoned buildings or the transition from German to English on tombstones, or such changes as community newcomers that tell the human story behind the census record of population fluctuations, persistence, or anomalies. Because of the relative obscurity and remoteness of

rural populations in this vast country, emerging patterns and trends tend to escape the notice of all but the most astute observer. The field notes, while somewhat amusing, also reveal the deep respect Beale has for the uniqueness of local peoples. The book lacks, unfortunately, any examples of Beale's trademark courthouse photographs taken in each county seat he visits.

The book is divided into three parts and gathers a wide range of demographic issues. Two perspectives emerge in Beale's work. Policy issues tend to thread through the fabric that charts overviews of rural diversity, whether regional or topical. Beale keeps in mind the policymakers inside the Washington, DC Beltway as he describes important differences in issues, such as the growth of rural populations or poverty, differences that might escape the notice of those who do not travel the countryside and talk to people. The other focus is on a sequence of topics that has intrigued Beale by being odd or counterintuitive. Such issues have occupied him in his travels over the years and connected him with researchers in other disciplines. It was, for example, an interest in the variation of rural midwesterners' fertility that caused our paths to cross in the late 1970's, when Beale attended a presentation of mine on ethnic differences in Illinois farm-family land transfers.

Included in the book's first section are two of the regional issues that motivated Beale's investigative activities. Beale had noted and mapped a correspondence of high fertility, ethnicity, and religious affiliation among midwestern farmers. Verifying the origins of pockets of ethnic farmers required much digging. After immigration from Europe declined around the turn of the century, census reports, until 1980, did not provide accurate information about ethnicity. Beale observed that, after 1970, high rural fertility had shifted out of the South to the North-Central region, and he sought an explanation. Using county atlases of township plat maps, Beale demonstrated the close connection between the persistence of Catholic ethnic groups among farmers, for example, and high fertility in local enclaves. Most of the data are published here for the first time. This paper illuminates Beale's unique ability to combine historical and local sources to explain patterns no one else would have thought to consider important. Also included in the section is a little known paper, reprinted from a 1972 *American Anthropologist* article, that deals with obscure mixed-racial populations found primarily in the U.S. South who, in the terminology of the period, Beale described as "white-Indian-Negro" (p. 33). Beale locates a number of the groups, explains their origins, lists their many names, and comments on the chances of their

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persistence It is this paper that contains a prime example of the wit in Beale's work After citing in his introduction the highly negative observations about the character of the Melungeon people, made by a woman who had lived among them, as "thieving," "untruthful," and "exceedingly immoral," Beale pens the comment "Miss Drumgoole was essentially a sympathetic observer "

The second section is devoted to Beale's work in characterizing the economic and demographic transformations of the 20th century These selections are particularly illustrative of how Beale used his geographic knowledge to combat what he terms "Procrustean policy beds, of the one-size-fits-all variety all too common in public affairs" (p 59) The pieces gleaned from various book chapters, congressional testimony, and reports focus on the scheme Beale developed for characterizing the country by 26 subcultural regions, distinguished by variation in their settlement patterns, economic activities, environmental resources and constraints, and ethnic makeup A second chapter is concerned with a continuing Beale interest—rural communities in the North-Central region With the Federal Government's rural policy in mind, Beale shows that misconceptions abound about all rural communities "dying," and the effect of decline or stability where each occurs Another selection of the amusing and interesting results of field trips closes out the section, illustrating Beale's essentially anthropological interest in a variety of southern minority groups

In the third section, Morrison includes Beale's seminal 1975 article on the rural population revival of the 1970's that challenged many previously held assumptions about the country's migration and growth patterns Because Beale personally knew the explanation for the growth in a particular area, he was able to show that no one cause explained this shift and that growth had not occurred evenly in all regions or even within regions Another chapter elegantly sketches the sweeping changes in the farm population, with transformations in age patterns, family size, succession and migration, and why these changes have come about Beale's more recent concern with the social geography of rural poverty is illustrated in two chapters that examine the relationship among natural resources, the rural economy, and particularly, persistent minority poverty Showing the spatial relations of rural employment and natural resources in a series of county maps makes a striking impact not possible in a table It illustrates Beale's ability to translate numbers into a short and pungent message

The record of Beale's career provides evidence to those who rely only on macrodata for the value of onsite investigation What is behind numbers is the reality of people who make the choices that generate trends Beale's encapsulated record of rural America is well worth a read by anyone who is fascinated by the diversity and shared features of its past and present