

FAST FOOD: ROADSIDE RESTAURANTS IN THE AUTOMOBILE AGE

by John A. Jakle and Keith A. Sculle

Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999, 333 pages

Review by

John Morrison McLarnon III Millersville University

One of the many benefits of the scholarly life is the physical environment in which most academics work. College and university campuses are, with few exceptions, wonderfully lovely places to spend time. There are few pleasures equal to that of walking across campus on a clear spring afternoon. The grass is brilliant green; the azaleas and dogwoods are in full bloom; the sun peers through a cloudless sky with the temperature comfortably in the 70s; perhaps a gentle breeze caresses the back of one's neck; students sit alone or in small groups, reading, idly chatting and enjoying each others' company. "God's in his heavens, all's right with the world."

Few things can spoil such a stroll. One that can, however, is the pebble. On one occasion, I made such a walk with a pebble in my shoe that I could not seem to dislodge. It seems like such a small, insignificant thing, but with each step it grew larger and larger and more and more annoying. By the time I had reached my destination, it was a boulder. I was completely unaware of my surroundings. There were no flowers, students, sunny skies or gentle breezes—just that damned pebble.

That experience is very similar to what one may have reading *Fast Food*. The book is an absolutely fascinating study of an absolutely fascinating and truly American phenomenon—the roadside restaurant. The authors introduce the work as a "social history of eating out in America's evolving automobile age." (p. 1). Yet the book is much more than that. It is an in-depth study of the evolution itself and of the centrality of the concepts of landscape and place to that evolution. Landscape and place are more than mere backdrops . . . They are "integral to human socialization."

The roadside represents a kind of landscape central to an emergent American modernity. Along the roadside the restaurant sits as a kind

of place central to the organization of modern life. The restaurant, like the gas station and the motel, is a form of commodified place, most of which follow the strict formatting of one or another corporate chain. (p. 18-19)

After this introduction, the authors take the reader on a "place-marker"—centered history of the roadside restaurant, from the quick-service eateries and luncheonettes of the 19th century to the "casual restaurant" chains and the drive-ins, walk-ups, and drive-thrus—the fast-food giants of today. Most have one thing in common: place and the importance of "place product packaging." (91) That place is the roadside—the "frontier of capitalism." Thus to drive through a McDonald's or Wendy's, to stop and eat at a Howard Johnson's, Shaky's, Dairy Queen, or Applebee's is to participate in that larger and peculiarly American experience—being "on the road." (p. 325, 327)

Fascinating though the study may be, the work is spoiled by the proverbial pebble. The authors have the unfortunate habit of inverting adjectives and verbs—

John Morrison McLarnon III, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor at Millersville University in the History Department, P.O. Box 1002, Millersville, PA 17551 USA (John.McLarnon@millersville.edu).

McLarnon teaches 20th century political and constitutional history. He has written several articles on aspects of Pennsylvania history. He received his B.A. in History and Philosophy from Millersville University in 1993, and his M.A. and Ph.D. in American History from the University of Delaware in 1998.

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to-be. Such an inversion can be quite effective when used judiciously. They, however, seem to believe it is the normal way to converse. Thus one's patience is tested reading phrasing such as "prized were interesting places with exposed ceiling beams," (41) "adopted was a building format reminiscent of a Southern California googie coffee shop," (80) "soon brought to a close was a 60-year corporate presence," (88) "intended was maximum profit yield for the owner," "emulated was a local bakery's slogan," (96) and "emphasized are the successful chains that grew to great size." (114) By the time the reader is seventy-five pages, and seventeen inversions, into the book, its promise is lost. There is little history, thesis, or content because the reader is totally focused on this ridiculously pretentious literary affectation. There is no lovely spring day, no beautiful campus. There is only the damn pebble.