

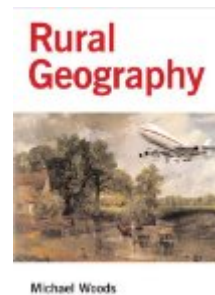
## Book Review

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### **Rural Geography: Processes, Responses and Experiences in Rural Restructuring**

*By Michael Woods Publisher: Sage, London, UK 2005, ISBN 0-7619-4761-2 Price: £22.99*



Rural Geography has been one of the most dynamic sub-fields of the discipline of Geography over the last two decades. Yet, Mike Woods' recent volume is the first textbook to bear this specific name since 1985. To understand why, and also to appreciate the position from which the book is written, it is necessary to look back briefly at the rather arcane development of rural geography text publication. With the luxury of hindsight, three interesting observations can be made which help to reveal the mould from which this book is cast and so alert readers from the outset as to what they should expect.

A first observation relates to the scope of material covered, which is bound to attract criticism from some quarters unless an understanding of the roots of the book is taken on board. The commonly acknowledged point of origin for rural geography texts is the appearance in 1972 of Hugh Clout's *Rural Geography: An Introductory Survey*. In a recent review (of Woods book, in fact), Clout himself admits that this textbook was written out of practical necessity in the delivery of undergraduate teaching rather than a desire to carve out a new theoretically advanced geographical sub-field. Clout was 'up front' about his text being based on 'a limited experience of personal research in England, France and the USA' and so not constituting a 'complete' rural geography. This selective approach has had a lasting influence on subsequent rural geography texts published. A 'tradition' was thereby established which excluded material from the developing world, one that Woods' text upholds. Hence, readers should not be surprised at the fact that this *Rural Geography* text is confined largely to detailed examples drawn from the UK (with some EU context), North America and New Zealand.

A second observation is that rural geography textbooks have tended to be produced in fits and starts since Clout's 1972 original. It was not until some 12 years later that a cluster of undergraduate texts appeared, including Michael Pacione's *Rural Geography* (ignoring the research-led *Progress in Rural Geography* of 1983 edited by this author) and David Phillips and Alan Williams' *Rural Britain: A Social Geography*, soon followed by Andrew Gilg's *Introduction to Rural Geography*. There was then a lull in textbook writing until Guy Robinson's (1990) *Conflict and Change in the Countryside*. A surge in the production of more applied rural policy and planning texts occupied bookshelves during the 1990s, with Brian Ilbery's edited volume on the *Geography of Rural Change* emerging in 1998 as the next rural geography text to synthesise research in the sub-field for a student audience.

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With rural geographers making a significant contribution in the turn towards culture in human geography, more specialised examinations of rural 'excitements' were made at the start of the century, as represented by Jo Little's *Gender and Rural Geography* in 2002 and Paul Cloke's (2003) edited *Country Visions*. Underlying these books, a wealth of important research papers had been produced by rural geographers. New themes addressed included cultural constructions of the rural idyll, rural gender identities and otherness. It is entirely logical that these developments should no longer be overlooked in rural textbooks aimed at a wider readership. Mike Woods' book reflects this cultural engagement and in this respect the timing of it is excellent. The author is able to weave experiences from the application of such cultural ideas throughout the text, and sometimes discuss them explicitly as in the Chapter on Selling the Countryside (12) and Chapter 21 on Alternative Rural Lifestyles.

A third observation that can be applied refers to the treatment of agriculture, the study of which now lies under the umbrella of rural geography. Investigations of the economic geography of agricultural production existed prior to Clout's *Introductory Survey*, with undergraduate texts on agricultural geography appearing regularly until the early 1990s (for some examples, see books of this title by Morgan and Munton, 1971; Tarrant 1974; Ilbery, 1985; and Bowler 1992). Given the strong roots of agricultural geography, writers of rural geography texts seemed to exercise a reluctance to bring agricultural research fully into the realm of rural geography. The result typically was a couple of chapters discussing the structure of agriculture or its position in land use planning. This tension is briefly explored by Woods himself on page 18, yet even in this modern text the hallmarks of this powerful legacy remain as rural geographers continue to divide themselves broadly along 'agricultural' and 'rural social' lines. This, then, goes a long way to explain why agricultural issues are covered substantially (though of course not exclusively) in one chapter on Agricultural Change (4) and as a sub-section of the chapters on Environmental Change (8) and Protecting the Countryside (13). Therefore, readers will have to look elsewhere, such as in Robinson's (2004) *Geographies of Agriculture*, for a more comprehensive treatment of say, the workings and far-reaching consequences on agricultural systems and rural areas of the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy. Despite this tendency, a welcome feature is that some of the concerns of a new 'agri-cultural' geography, such as farmers' construction of their identity (Chapter 14 – Rural Conflicts), commodification of farming activities (Chapter 12 – Selling Countryside) and explorations of societal relations with animals (Chapter 13 – Protecting the Countryside) do make it onto Woods' radar.

Having noted, then, that rural geography textbook production is as palimpsestual as the oft-quoted theoretical nature of the sub-field itself, Woods has delivered a well-written and thoroughly useful book for an undergraduate audience. The text is accessible and, from my experience, is especially effective at engaging readers unfamiliar with rural geography with processes of countryside change. It is structured into four sections. The first, introductory section, makes some positive headway into the old chestnut of 'what is rural', followed by a very useful (though brief) presentation of the nature of rural geography. The section gives readers the chance to contemplate which should come first; defining 'rural' or defining 'rural geography'. The sections that follow reflect the subtitle of the volume. Hence, 'Processes of Rural Restructuring' are covered, and in this respect the book at this point is akin to those older rural geography texts already discussed here. Where Woods makes a welcome departure from the norm, reflecting the rich vein of theoretically-informed empirical work in the subfield, is in the last two sections on 'Responses to Rural Restructuring' and 'Experiences of Rural Restructuring'. These chapters are bristling with lucid summaries of the new ideas and approaches that rural geographers have taken to understanding the countryside over recent years.

At a more pragmatic level, the use of boxes to present key terms or case studies help to reinforce in the minds of students fundamental ideas discussed within chapters. A slight gripe is that these are not always best positioned and can disrupt the flow of the text – see page 22 where 3 lines are left hanging at the bottom of the page underneath the box. However, the biggest disappointment is the quality of the photographs (see Figures 7.2, 12.2 or 14.1) which are most kindly described as ‘snapshots’. The commentary on further reading sources at the end of each chapter again helps to engage the reader actively rather than simply presenting a passive list of bibliographic sources (this is comprehensively treated in the usual way at the end of the book). The volume is also reasonably priced at £22.99 given its size and coverage, especially when compared to a ‘rival’ text such as the *Handbook of Rural Studies* (2006) produced by the same publisher at a cost of £85.00! Overall, this is a textbook that can be wholeheartedly recommended, especially to those unfamiliar with the recent strength of work undertaken in rural geography yet who want a reliable synopsis of it.