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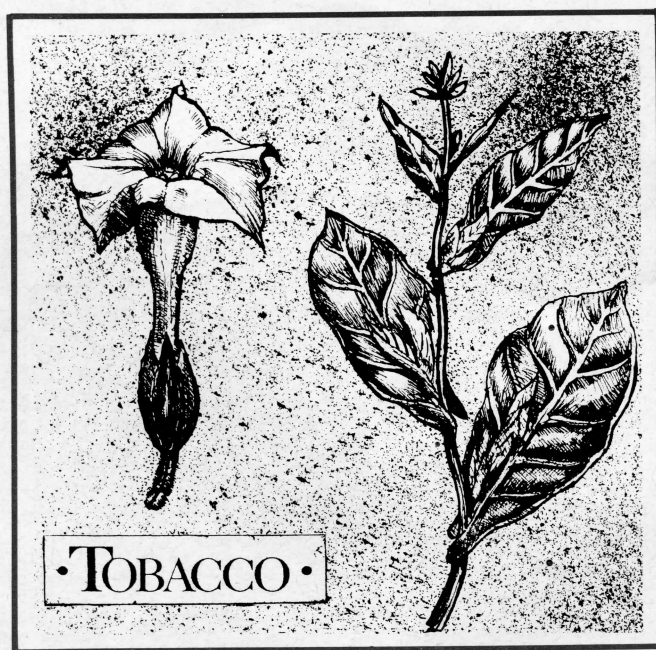
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*A Monthly Journal of Opinion and the Arts*

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## FALLOW FIELDS

*The Death of Tobacco Farming*



NEW POETRY BY GWENDOLYN MACEWEN

FEMINIST WRITING

*Two Literary Features*

# FALLOW FIELDS

## *The Death of Tobacco Farming*

BY DOUGLAS GLOVER

*It [tobacco] has no redeeming social value... tobacco is a money-devouring murderer. – Derek Nelson, Queen's Park correspondent for The Simcoe Reformer.*

*Let Aristotle and all the Philosophers in the World say what they will, nothing is like Tobacco; 'tis the Darling of all Men of Honour, and he that lives without Tobacco is not worthy of Life. It not only gladdens and purges Man's Brain, but it likewise puts him in the way to Virtue – Moliere, Don John.*

GIVEN that practically no one has anything good to say about cigarettes, pipes, cigars, chewing tobacco, and snuff these days, it may come as a surprise to many to know that there still exist a few human fossils who regard tobacco – the plant – with a mixture of aesthetic appreciation, gratitude, and loyalty. For example, tobacco has provided a living for my family since the late 1920s, and it gives me vague twinges of distress (both emotional and economic) to contemplate the possible loss of such a familiar and stout producer of livelihood. This is probably what any species on the brink of extinction feels: puzzlement, nostalgia for the status quo, amazement at the sudden brutality of the forces hell-bent on its destruction, plus a sense of fate, or apocalyptic inevitability – tobacco farmers are 20th-century (agri)cultural dinosaurs. I hasten to add that I have never smoked a cigarette in my life.

People who smoke cigarettes, or protest against cigarette-smoking, more often than not have never seen a live tobacco plant. It stands about shoulder height with broad, lush leaves stretching from a tough, woody stalk. The leaves begin almost at ground level ("sand leaves" – yes, we have our own language: "primers" for pickers, "boat" as in "boat row," "boat-driver" – of a high-sided sled dragged between the rows during harvest, "kills" for kilns, etc.) and become smaller near the top. They ripen from the bottom up, growing lighter, yellower, as the season wears on. The flowers, if you let them grow, emerge at the top of the stalk, a spray of pink and white trumpet shapes, rather attractive if you're not thinking like a farmer, that is, that the flower robs the leaves of food, the leaves being the product. Usually, the flowers are broken off (in a process called "topping").

The leaves are always slightly lighter underneath, so when a wind comes up and the leaves begin to toss the effect can be startlingly beautiful, like a squall moving across a lake. Mornings after a heavy dew, or after a rain shower, you can stand next to

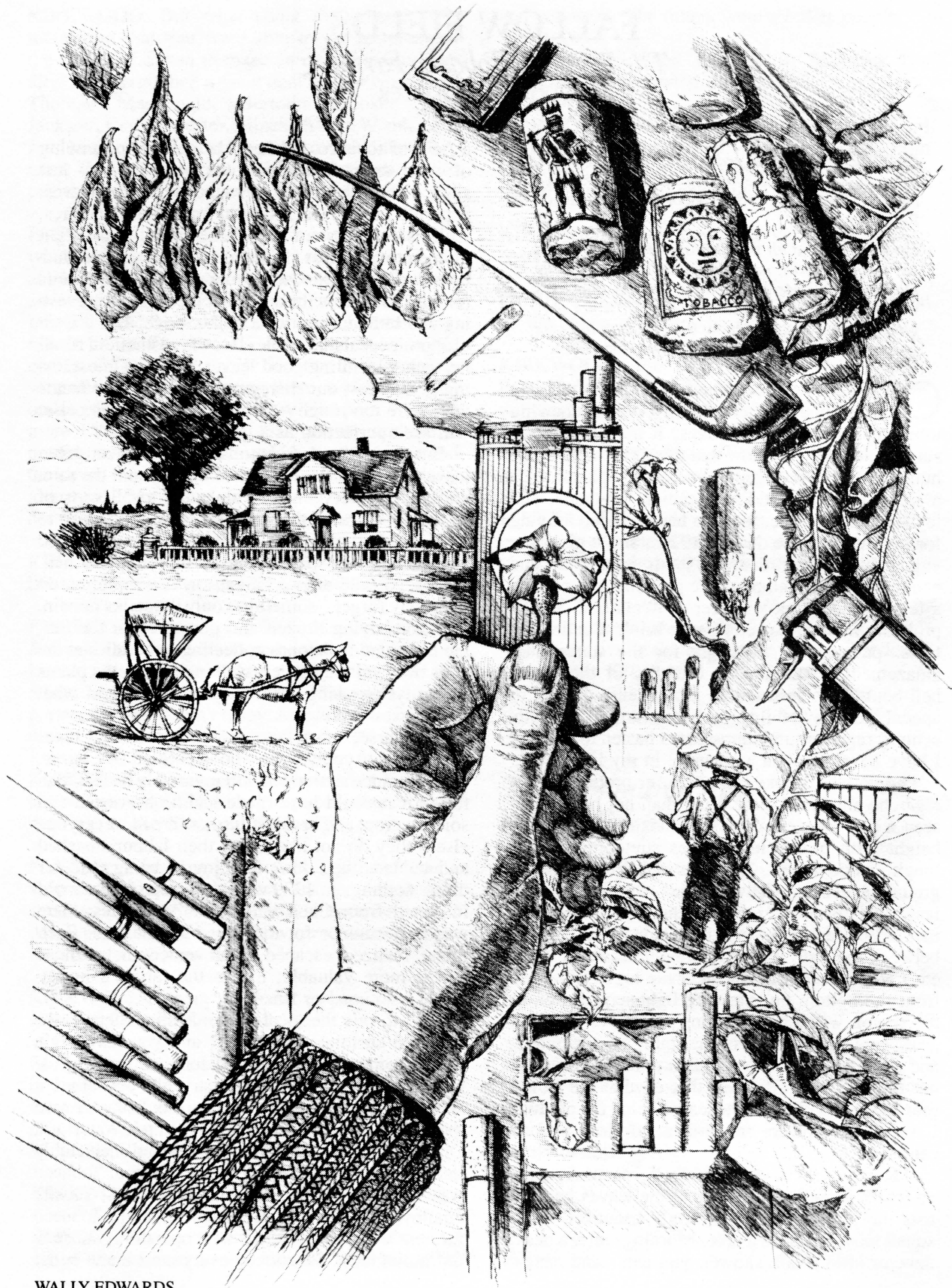
a field of tobacco and hear the soft tump-tumping of water drops falling onto the lower leaves – just silence and that sound of water hitting the leaves. A perfect, broad leaf, without bruises or punctures, with its central stem unbroken, picked at the right moment of ripeness, is the ideal of tobacco production. It cures more readily, more evenly, and it sells (or used to, before the advent of mechanical harvesting and bulk curing) for a higher price. But it is an economic ideal that shades into the aesthetic. I recall my father handling good leaves with an almost loving gentleness; our sharegrowers used to fire hands who were too rough – farmers, like everyone else, will seek perfection as a goal in itself.

But there is a dark corollary. Those great green leaves, bending themselves to the sun and the rain, are by their very nature vulnerable to all sorts of attack, from pests that feed on them to disease to wind and hail and frost. In the 1950s, we endured bad years when we lost three entire crops to hail. A tobacco field after a hail storm is a sight you do not easily forget – sometimes only the stalks remain, the leaves lying broken and punctured in the dirt, the unmelted hailstones collecting in puddles at the ends of rows, the farmers walking among the plants forlornly assessing what they can save and what they must cut down.

Of course, most farmers carry insurance these days, but you could write a book entitled *Of Course*. The insurance settlement will invariably be less than the farmer could have made had he harvested and sold his crop; and besides, farmers are like everyone else – they do not like to see their labour smashed and voided, they don't take joy in being paid for doing nothing. In 1979 we lost a crop to blue mold imported from Cuba via the United States; there was no insurance for that – we ate the loss. Each threat, realized, escaped, or prevented, makes those leaves more valuable; makes the farmer's investment, emotional or financial, greater.

Add to this the local cultural infrastructure, the lore and customs of tobacco, and you may begin to get some picture of what tobacco growing is/means beyond being an industry like any other, a statistical summary. I can only speak from my own experience, what I saw, but growing up in Waterford, Ontario, in the 1950s and '60s seemed ineluctably interwoven with the growing of tobacco. Tobacco was a successful business in those days, mostly unalloyed by the taint of cancer research. Tobacco farmers were considered smart operators, substantial individuals. Practically everyone I knew either





WALLY EDWARDS

worked in tobacco summers, or aspired to work in tobacco. There was a kind of manhood ritual involved: you started as a boat-unloader (if you were a boy) and worked up to primer (the most strenuous) or kiln-hanger (the riskiest – he hung the leaves from the rafters of the kiln). Girls began as leaf-handers and might aspire to become tiers, immensely quick and skilled women who tied leaf bundles onto lathes for hanging in the kilns.

There was romance in this as well as economic gain. Kids who worked in tobacco made a good deal of money – I can't think that children growing up in cities ever had such opportunities. And there was an element of freedom, and crisis – since the crop had to be got in schools often allowed students to miss the first week or so of classes without loss of credit. In the fields you met labourers from far away – in my own case a Chilean refugee, Portuguese immigrants, Spanish university students, a French-Canadian law student, and many others. Invariably, the girls in my high school would come to class in September with photographs of new boyfriends in their purses, boyfriends with names like Jean-Pierre and Michel. It was a world, not nothing; it had its own history, rituals, symbols. It goes without saying that we were not all participating in a conspiracy to kill people with lung cancer, and we can be forgiven for mistakenly thinking, hoping, that it might go on indefinitely.

*Those who still think of farming as a quiet, peaceful, pastoral way of life will find that it is a highly competitive and strongly regulated industry. The Canadian farmer is not free "to be his own boss," free to plan, free to set objectives, or to produce and market what he will where and when he will, unencumbered by regulations and bureaucratic red tape....Land values and some marketing quotas have reached such high prices as to preclude an economic return on investment – Starting a farm in Canada, Agriculture Canada, 1983*

The farm I grew up on has been in the family since 1900, when my grandfather bought it (155 acres less five when the Lake Erie & Northern Railway expropriated a right-of-way through the property in 1914) for \$7,000. About 40 acres of this was mixed woods – maple, beech, and oak – with a swamp and springs that flow eventually into Lake Erie 20 miles away. There were some damp, low spots, which were fenced for pasture then and planted with corn or soybeans now, and some persistently sterile and yellow hilltops ("sandy knolls" my father called them) that still require extra fertilizer and careful erosion control. The rest was relatively fertile sandy loam, good for growing almost anything; ideal, it turned out later, for tobacco.

Besides the farm buildings, a hired man's house,

and a smaller house for summer help, there was a large Georgian fieldstone farmhouse, beautiful, imposing, but hard to heat, built by the farm's original owner, a Dr. Duncombe (brother of Dr. Charles Duncombe, who raised the flag of rebellion in Scotland in 1837). I have looked the place up in an 1877 county atlas: there are three orchards marked, along with a small graveyard.

Whether those orchards survived, or whether my grandfather had a special predilection – his Loyalist forbears settled for a while on the Niagara Peninsula – he started out as a fruit grower. But not just one fruit, or one variety of fruit. This was an era of agriculture before mechanization, agribusiness, monocultures, and, for that matter, tobacco. In the field next to the house, my grandfather grew black currents (picked in 11-quart baskets and shipped by the L.E. & N. to Brantford or taken by car to Norwich and Kitchener) and gooseberries. There was a stile across the railway fence and then a patch of raspberries. South of the raspberries we had a five-acre apple orchard (that's where the kiln yard is now; one lone apple tree is left, dropping its scant, wormy fruit on the cureman's shack year after year). The apples were old-fashioned varieties, mostly out of favour now because they don't store or ship well: Greens, Northern Spies, Snow Apples, and Tallman Sweets (packed in barrels and sent away by rail). North of the barn there were a couple of acres of cherries and about the same in pears (my grandfather tried peaches first, but they were frozen out) – again, what is striking is the variety: Kieifers, hard as bullets when picked; Bartletts for canning; Clap Favourites, a dessert pear that started to spoil practically as soon as it came from the tree.

But the farm's main income came from strawberries, which my grandfather grew in eight- to 12-acre patches, moving the patch every couple of years as the plants went past their peak. Strawberry harvest was the busiest time on the farm, with as many as 60 people; whole families of Iroquois Indians – Generals, Sowdens and Jacobs – came from the nearby Six Nations Reserve to live in rough duplex shacks (they had bunks inside and a cook stove on the porch) my grandfather provided while the season lasted. (There is a shade of irony in the thought that these Iroquois were the same fierce warriors who exterminated the first Ontario tobacco growers, the Neutrals and Petuns, while Canada was still a French colony.) The berries were taken on flatracks to Waterford and loaded onto Michigan Central refrigerator cars bound for Montreal or Detroit. My grandfather did his selling by telephone, anxiously calling between the two cities for the highest price.

By modern standards it was a very mixed farm and quite self-sufficient. Behind the house there was a garden, a chicken run, a hog yard, and a long, red hog barn; once a year my grandfather



killed a pig and made sausages and lard and cured hams in the stone smokehouse. He kept cows, too, six or seven of them for milking, though he never liked them and my grandmother refused to let him build a silo or get too deeply into the livestock side of the business. During the summer the cows were pastured at the edge of the woods on the north side of the property. Twice a day my father or my aunt walked to the head of the pasture lane to shout, "Cow-Boss! Cow-Boss!" and the cows would amble home and into their stalls for milking. Some of the milk was used on the farm, some was sold in large metal cans picked up every day by a dairy truck.

There was a gabled driveshed for storing machinery, with a weathervane and a circular glass window in the gable, and a large two-storey barn with stables for cows and horses on the ground floor, and a grainery and hayloft above. Hay, oats, rye, wheat, and turnips were grown on the farm and stored in the barn to feed the animals (some of the grain was ground into grist at a nearby mill; my aunt split the turnips with a hand-turned cutter), and, naturally, we did not need to buy commercial fertilizers. A windmill pumped water to the house and barn.

For labour my grandfather depended mainly on a permanent hired man (and his wife) who worked on the farm in return for a rent-free house, firewood cut in the woods, milk, use of a driving horse, land for a garden, and wages that amounted to about \$400 to \$600 a year (I'm talking about, roughly, the time of the First World War – the troops were getting \$1.10 a day). During the summer, my grandfather would often employ a temporary hired man as well. There was a second, smaller tenant house for him and his family and, of course, he also got the free milk, firewood and garden.

There were no combines in those days. To harvest the grain they used a binder that cut and bound the sheaves four or five at a time. Field hands leaned the bound sheaves up against each other in tepee shapes until it was time for thrashing. Thrashing and separating were done in the barn; power was supplied by a belt driven off the tractor engine and the straw and chaff were blown into a mow in the barnyard. The hay was drawn in by horses on great flatracks, then hoisted into the loft with forks and pulleys. My grandfather had a tractor for ploughing, disking and harrowing, but he still kept a team or two of workhorses with names like Queen and King, Belgians usually, and a driving horse called Mike, and a buggy, a democrat, and a cutter to drive (in winter they would jack the car up on blocks and use the cutter for trips to town), and my father was still using a horse in the late 1950s for cultivating asparagus and harvesting tobacco.

By all accounts my grandfather was a highly organized, successful farmer. He was able to hire hands to do most of the drudge work; he never left

the place without a tie on. He had a habit of walking around the farm every Sunday, dressed in a suit, planning the chores for the following week. It was his policy to carefully watch what other farmers were planting; when too many people got into one thing, he'd rip it out and try something else. For example, when the market for cherries took a downturn, he pulled out the orchard and put in seven acres of asparagus. That and the fact that diversification allowed him to hedge his bets gave him somewhat of an edge over farmers who just planted a patch of this and a patch of that. He had enough surplus cash to buy the first car in the neighbourhood, radios when they came in, a gramophone, a piano, a Delco electric generating system (the concrete block where it was mounted is still in the basement) for lights when everyone else was still using the old Aladdin coal oil lamps, and, when he got older, to take my grandmother to Florida in the winters.

Except for the pear orchard, most of the fruit was gone after 1925. My grandfather seems to have lost interest in apples when the railway cut through his trees. The late '20s saw a decline in the market for strawberries. As it happened, this decline corresponded with a sudden upsurge in the tobacco market (after the First World War cigarette-smoking began to outstrip pipe-smoking and tobacco-chewing in popularity) and the discovery that tobacco could be grown on the light, sandy Norfolk County soil. (The first crop was harvested near the village of Lynedock in 1923 – hitherto, tobacco had been grown mainly to the south in the Leamington area.) My grandfather tried burley tobacco first as an experiment because it could be hung in the barn and air dried, which meant he didn't have to build curing kilns. But by 1935 he had shifted to flue-cured, or Virginia, tobacco as his main cash crop, and had four wood-burning kilns where the apple orchard used to be. In the beginning, local farmers were under the impression only Southerners (from the U.S.) knew how to cure tobacco. The first expert my grandfather hired was a hillbilly with overalls and a big felt hat. The story is that he couldn't even read the thermometer – he cured by smell. (Growing up, I was to know several of his successors, elderly curemen with deep accents who were always reminiscing about coon hounds and possum hunts.)

By the mid 1940s my father had taken over the farm and was growing about 30 acres of tobacco, rotating it with rye as a cover crop. In 1946 he brought in his first sharegrower (the sharegrower – not sharecropper; he was more like a contractor – grew the tobacco in return for a rent-free house, a garden, milk, firewood, and half the income). The permanent hired man now lived in the smaller tenant house and helped mainly with the livestock and secondary crops. My father still had the pear orchard

and a patch of asparagus by the house where the black currants and gooseberries used to be. And we were back in the strawberry business again, 10 to 15 acres of them, but with an interesting twist: instead of picking berries, we grew plants for resale on the Niagara peninsula. Land was too valuable there for growing the plants themselves. Every spring my mother and father would drive to Virgil to get their orders. Then the Indians would come to dig the plants (everyone had cars now; there was no longer a need to provide housing). The pigs were gone, but we still had cattle – a Jersey cow called Flossie for milk and a number of breeding cows (we sold the calves). And we still grew hay for the animals.

In 1953 my father added a second asparagus patch, for a total of 11 acres. By then the pear trees were growing old. One year he pruned the orchard in March and it got sunburned; we picked the whole crop in a six-quart basket. After that it became what is known as a biannual bearer, putting out fruit every other year. But there was a surplus in the fruit market. Finally my father did something he thought he'd never have to do – he delivered three tons [to the canning factory] and got paid for two. It was either that or not harvest them at all. The next year we burned the orchard and turned it into tobacco land.

My father was simultaneously deciding to get out of the strawberry-plant business. For the sake of disease prevention, he had to keep moving the strawberries to different parts of the farm. But because of the tobacco there was less and less land to move to. Besides, there were new rules governing certification to grow plants that prescribed distances between patches and my father began to think strawberries were too much trouble to bother with.

It was not clear then, though it is now, that a combination of market forces, economic forces (economies of scale, for example), foreign competition (American asparagus, for example), government regulation, and social change were pushing us down the road toward dependence on one single-income crop. Early in the 1950s my father gave up on cattle (and with the cattle went the hired man – really, we no longer had enough work to support him). He changed the kilns from wood- to oil-burners (much to the relief of the sharegrower, who had had to cut all the wood with a cross-cut saw) and hired builders to lower our barn (demolishing the picturesque but now useless barn bridge) and convert it from a general purpose structure into a tobacco pack barn. (Such moves make it extremely difficult for a farmer to go backwards, from specialized to general farming.)

For all intents and purposes, we grew nothing but tobacco from about 1959 on, though there were still many changes to be made in the direction of specialization and mechanization. In the summer

of 1968 I primed on one of the last field gangs in the area to use a horse. (This was on a neighbour's farm; our own workhorse – we only had one left by then, a gentle Belgian mare over 20 years old – had already gone into retirement.) The really arduous stoop labour of harvesting had been eliminated by machines that allowed the primer to sit and be driven up and down the rows of plants. At the kilns, mechanical sewing machines and conveyor belts had replaced tiers and stick-handers.

The latest mechanical revolution came in the 1970s. Farmers began sinking huge amounts of capital into mechanical harvesters and bulk-curing kilns that eliminated even more hands-on labour. To outfit a farm the size of ours would have cost \$250,000 to \$300,000 and my father balked. In order to pay for all that equipment, inflation would have to stay high, tobacco prices would have to continue to advance steadily, and, most important of all, we'd have to grow more tobacco. Even then there were storm warnings. Each year it seemed the marketing boards and the cigarette companies took longer to come to a decision on crop size and price. Scientists seemed increasingly certain cigarettes were a factor in causing lung cancer. For the first time in the long march that began with my grandfather in the 1920s, we failed to move in the direction of progress.

*In July 1985 R.J. Reynolds Inc. of Winston-Salem, N.C., paid \$5 billion (U.S.) for Nabisco Brands Inc. of Parsippany, N.J., giving Reynolds control of Canada's second largest food-processing enterprise with annual sales of \$1.5 to \$2 billion. Imasco Limited, formerly Imperial Tobacco, Canada's largest cigarette manufacturer, owns Shoppers Drug Mart in Canada, Peoples Drug Stores in the U.S., and, in 1986, gained control of Canada Trust, our largest trust and loan company.*

The situation facing tobacco farmers today is one of stunning, almost paralyzing, complexity. Not only are they subject to local and international market forces, the economic confusion left behind by the inflationary '70s, conflicting government policies (not only our own – what happens in the United States, Brazil, or Zimbabwe is of crucial importance to a Canadian tobacco farmer), and manipulation by multinational cigarette manufacturers. Tobacco farmers must also contend with government hypocrisy (governments reap huge revenues from cigarette taxes but refuse to use even a portion of these to alleviate the tobacco-farm crisis) and enormous public criticism brought against them on moral and medical grounds.

Farmers are failing. The Ontario Flue-Cured Tobacco Growers Marketing Board estimates that 400 of its 2,500 quota holders – farmers who have the



right to grow a certain number of pounds of tobacco a year – are in serious financial trouble. Already the price of tobacco land has dropped, in some estimates by more than half. Tobacco quota that sold for \$2.25 a pound in 1984 is currently being offered for as little as 75 cents a pound. Rumours are flying. The bank has put so-and-so on grocery money. The cigarette manufacturers have placed extra security guards on local plants in case of sabotage. X number of tobacco farmers have committed suicide in the last six months. At a rally for tobacco farmers in St. Thomas in November, 1985, Brian Ireland, a member of the Canadian Farm Survival Association, threatened “bloodshed in rural Ontario” if the government failed to declare a moratorium on farm foreclosures.

The actual reasons for a surplus crisis in Canadian tobacco production conform to few if any of the assumptions that underlie the public debate. The crisis has as much to do, for example, with currency devaluations and export subsidies in the Third World as with domestic anti-smoking campaigns. One of the prime culprits is the tobacco farmer himself – he is just too good at his job. Specialized plant hybrids (with names like Delgold, Newdel, Nordel and Virginia 115), improved machinery, and expensive petrochemical-based fertilizers (tobacco’s own green revolution) have quadrupled yields from 800 pounds per acre in 1928 to almost 2,500 in 1975.

In many respects the history of tobacco farming in Canada is analogous to the history of farming in North America as a whole. The trend toward specialization, toward monocultures, is continent-wide. Wheat, beef, eggs, soybeans, chickens – you name it. Every type of farming activity has been altering in the direction of mechanization, economies of scale, larger numbers of middlemen, marketing boards, government regulation. Farms have become machines for making money and the more money they make the more investment there is in specialized plants, equipment, and petrochemical fertilizers, the fewer connections there are to society as a whole (supplying one product is not the same as supplying half a dozen), the more economic inertia there is in the system, and the more difficult it is for farmers to respond to changing market pressures.

My grandfather’s farm was once self-sufficient in fuel, milk, pork, eggs, poultry, livestock feed, and seasonal garden crops, and that produced for sale over a dozen varieties of produce. It posed no threat to the system as a whole to pull out a cherry orchard and put in asparagus, to stop growing strawberries and experiment with tobacco. During the Depression my grandfather made a particularly bad investment in a jam factory; he had to swallow a huge loss and pay off a debt for which he suddenly became responsible. But he sold jam and cut a lot of timber out of the woods for a few years – he

managed because his economic base was resilient and diversified.

Now the same farm has a pack barn that is good for nothing but storing machinery and tobacco, expensive equipment that is useful only for the cultivation of tobacco and cover crops, and seven curing kilns that are good for nothing else whatsoever. Not growing tobacco on this land would mean writing off huge capital investments, making new ones for new machinery and buildings, plus losing cash flow while the changes were being made. What had been decentralized and inherently resilient has evolved into something monolithic and brittle.

“Alternate crops” is the current buzz-word term for diversification – it makes a very complex situation sound comfortingly simple. But it’s no longer a matter of saying next year Farmer Brown will grow tomatoes or wheat instead of tobacco. Though tobacco soil is more or less capable of growing other crops (cucumbers, tomatoes, sweet corn, asparagus, broccoli, strawberries, apples – to name a few), most markets are already saturated. And even if a farmer could find a market for his alternate crop, the probability is that he would not come even close to the income he could have made (until now) from tobacco. According to Ontario Agriculture Ministry statistics for 1984, flue-cured tobacco yielded \$3,400 per acre. The next highest-yielding field crop was grain corn, at \$329 per acre.

The classic failed alternate crop is peanuts, introduced in the mid 1970s with the help of hefty government subsidies. The argument was that if Canadians could grow tobacco, a plant supposedly best cultivated in the southern States, then we could grow peanuts just as well. Unfortunately, little things like heat do make a difference. Peanut yields in Ontario barely amount to 1,400 pounds per acre, compared with 5,000 to 6,000 pounds in the U.S. And the Americans subsidize peanut exports, cutting the price per pound of U.S. peanuts in Toronto to less than half the Canadian cost of production. Only 200 acres of peanuts were grown in Ontario in 1984.

In desperation, researchers and farmers have been looking into so-called exotics: evening primrose, licorice, sunflowers, horseradish, peppermint, flower chick peas, mung beans, garlic. (Desperation leads down strange pathways. Until last year, a firm called Leaf Proteins International Inc., of Raleigh, N.C., was trying to promote the commercial use of protein extracted from tobacco – that is, tobacco as food. The company dissolved, in part, apparently, because of resistance from the dairy industry – tobacco protein was considered a competitor for casein.) But the story is pretty much the same for all the exotics: minimal profit margins and miniscule or undeveloped markets. Farmers are being forced to the conclusion that, in the short run at least, the best alternative

to tobacco may be tobacco at a lower price.

Though successive marketing-board systems have wrestled with a problem of over-supply since the early 1930s, production in Ontario (the country's major producer) has grown from under nine million pounds in 1928 to a peak of more than 238 million pounds in 1974. From 1974 to 1983 tobacco production oscillated comfortably in the 210 million to 220 million pounds range (except for frost and blue mold years). Then, in 1984, it began to drop. The cigarette companies (the Tobacco Manufacturers Council) agreed to buy only 170 million pounds of Ontario leaf that year (down to 130 million in 1986).

Of course, virtually all farm products have undergone price erosion in recent years through foreign competition. Improved agricultural practices abroad (there have been good harvests in the Soviet Union and China, and India, of all places, is becoming a grain exporter), currency considerations (the high U.S. dollar) and foreign subsidies (the EEC) have disrupted export markets for everything from wheat to eggs to tobacco. (Canada exported about 72 million pounds.) Tobacco production has increased dramatically, especially in the Third World, and countries like Brazil, Argentina and Zimbabwe are willing to market their surplus production with amazing aggressiveness, earmarking a portion of cigarette taxes to subsidize their exports at below cost. Suddenly Canadian tobacco is very expensive on the world market. Canadian farmers could lose all or most of that export market in a single year.

In Canada, high taxes (86 cents provincial, 88 cents federal on a pack of 25 cigarettes in Ontario in 1986), municipal bylaws against smoking, the banning of television cigarette commercials, and the anti-smoking lobbies and campaigns have driven down tobacco consumption in Canada at a rate of about six per cent per year since its 1981-82 peak.

Reacting to this crisis, Canadian tobacco farmers, led by the Ontario Flue-Cured Tobacco Growers Marketing Board, have made a complex series of proposals to the federal and provincial governments to effect some solution (not a solution in the sense of saving tobacco but more an orderly phase out or line-holding to prevent an uncontrolled crash that would destroy farmers).

The main thrust of the Ontario board's plan is the formation of a national marketing board, under the National Marketing Board Act, that would control and equalize production across the country. A national marketing board would also lobby for import controls to protect Canada's dwindling domestic market from cheap foreign imports ("Close the borders!" was the rallying cry at farmers' meetings a year ago when the national board was being discussed) and set prices for domestic sales at a comfortable margin above the cost of production. Currently, the national marketing board proposal is stalled because

the federal cabinet is unwilling to risk the anger of the anti-smoking lobby and because a new farm marketing board at this time might upset free-trade negotiations with the U.S.

The Ontario board has also negotiated a one-year export-price subsidy (more or less a donation from the cigarette manufacturers to be passed on to the consumer through increased cigarette prices) to improve Canada's competitiveness in the international marketplace and is backing a quota buy back or cancellation plan by which the government would purchase quota from tobacco farmers (with a portion of cigarette taxes) as an incentive for them to go into alternative crops.

This quota cancellation program, like the national marketing board scheme, has found little official support, mainly because governments prefer not to be seen bailing out producers of known carcinogens. It is, however, the most humane and rational way of dealing with the imminent ruin of an entire agricultural sector. The crux of the matter is money. Many farmers understand the senselessness of carrying on but are financially (because of indebtedness) and structurally (because of their physical plants and the lack of possibilities for diversification) trapped into continuing to grow tobacco.

In point of fact, many farmers, either willingly or unwillingly, have already dropped out of the tobacco business (in 1976 there were 2,400 farmers in Ontario who grew and marketed tobacco; in 1985 there were 1,700). In 1970, six farms with land adjoining ours grew tobacco; now only two do. One neighbour sold his tobacco quota and invested in a chicken farm and a new-car agency. He rents the home farm out for market vegetables like tomatoes. Another neighbour rents out both his land (for tomatoes) and quota and operates a custom heavy equipment business. A third, who sold his quota in 1984, rents his land for soybeans and vegetables. A fourth sold his quota and rolled the capital over into ginseng, a tricky, capital-intensive, long-term crop that has become popular in the area (too popular – the price has already begun to go soft).

Last year we planted 33 acres of tobacco, down from 40 in 1985. As of this writing, it is altogether possible that we have grown our last tobacco crop (with all the dislocation and loss this entails). We are thinking about putting in some ginseng, about up-to-date woodlot management that would allow us to derive some small but steady income from timber, about fish farming (those springs), about renting out more land for vegetables instead of field crops (renting being a transitional tactic, something to do until we figure out what to invest in ourselves).

One thing is clear: Canadian tobacco farming is going to suffer, contract, and perhaps even disappear in this climate of economic crisis and social obloquy. The fat years are gone; all is flux, as Heraclitus said. ■