

Sutton **Stokes**

Baltimore

..“The Right Thing to Do”

TAKING A CLOSER LOOK AT QUAKER OATS



Quaker Oats advertising campaigns have long aimed not only at the stomach, but the conscience: “Think you don’t have time for a hot breakfast?” asks one. “Think again.” The implication is clear: there is something especially wholesome and nourishing about a piping-hot bowl of oatmeal, and the smiling man in eighteenth century garb offers a product that makes it easy to do what another Quaker ad calls “the right thing to do.” But how can we be sure? What makes food “right”—health effects alone, or ethical/moral considerations about the business of getting that food from the farm to the grocery store?

This paper rubs the sleep out of its eyes and takes a closer look at what’s in the steaming bowl on the breakfast table. It turns out that a dollar spent on Quaker oatmeal is a dollar in PepsiCo’s bank account, and that part of that dollar goes to one of the world’s largest suppliers of beef cattle. Meanwhile, it’s no coincidence that the suicide rate is climbing among the farmers of the Canadian Great Plains ... In the increasingly globalized agribusiness industry, think there’s any such thing as a “safe” food? Think again.

[O]ne boy, who was tall for his age ... hinted darkly to his companions, that unless he had another basin of gruel per diem, he was afraid he might some night happen to eat the boy who slept next him, who happened to be a weakly youth of tender age.

Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*

Introduction

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“Please, sir, may I have some more?” In one of the most famous scenes in English literature, poor Oliver Twist is desperate for a second helping of oatmeal. Readers know that he must be hungry indeed to want more of the thin, gray gruel¹ that passes for sustenance in the workhouse to which the boy is confined.² By contrast, modern-day consumers of Quaker Oats Old Fashioned oatmeal—with butter, syrup, and brown sugar, thank you very much—can count themselves lucky, as their morning repast cooks up wholesome, hearty, and filling.

Oatmeal eaters may count themselves virtuous, as well. After all, everyone knows that oatmeal is good for you (right?), and more environmentally conscious consumers might pat themselves on the back for eating lower on the food chain, as *Diet for a Small Planet* recommends.³

Regular consumers of Quaker Oats may want to look closer at their oatmeal, however—to join poor Oliver in asking, “please, sir, may I have some more?”

More information about where the oats come from would be a nice start, perhaps sprinkled with a dash of disclosure concerning who gets paid—and who does not—along the way. It turns out that your Quaker Oats dollar is part of the bottom line for one of the world's largest beef producers (so much for eating low on the food chain) and that, because of the ever more corporatized nature of agriculture worldwide, little or none of that dollar goes to small farmers fighting for the lives of their diversely planted, relatively sustainable farms.

This is not to say that Quaker Oats oatmeal is the worst possible choice for consumers who are trying to minimize the harm they do with their daily purchases. On the other hand, there is in Quaker Oats oatmeal a cautionary tale that suggests that *no* food marketed by a large corporation is without its detrimental effects on farmers, international trade, the environment, and so forth. It may be foods like Quaker Oats oatmeal, in fact, that show just how far down the road to utterly globalized agribusiness we have already gone, and that those consumers and citizens interested in making a stand may fast be running out of room.

Picking at our Food

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Until recently, I had never been in the habit of thinking particularly hard about the effects of my food choices. Certainly such thinking never went beyond the potential effect of a particular food on my cholesterol level, waistline, or arteries. And even this thinking was rarely informed by much more than the nutrition chapter of my high-school biology textbook, an oversimplified newspaper article, or simple gossip and rumor. Like many people, I have always had the nagging sense that I should learn a little more about nutrition and health.

But there are those who call for a deeper level of scrutiny as well. As demonstrated by such things as the collapse of Jamaica's dairy industry, indigenous peoples defending mineral resources with automatic weapons in Mexico, sweatshops from Micronesia to Karachi, and countless other tales of the increasing globalization of trade, it seems increasingly vital that consumers—especially First-World consumers—pay attention to the effects of their consumption on the rest of the world.

As the product we can least afford to do without, our food—where it comes from, how it is grown, and who benefits from its sale—deserves our closest attention. At the most self-interested level, after all, food produced unsafely can affect human health. Globally, food's very necessity increases the likelihood of arrogant and scofflaw behavior on the part of the international corporations who purvey it. This is because, while you can easily boycott Nike for that company's use of sweatshop labor, what do you do to show your disapproval a company's use of bioengineered grains? Stop eating bread? What brands? What about animals who ate that grain before slaughter? Who sells the meat from those animals, anyway? The octopus-like nature of many of the largest multinational

corporations involved in food production and marketing means that the very same board of directors may oversee, directly or indirectly, many different brands of foods that are daily staples for many.

Why Quaker Oats?

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Having decided to pay closer attention to our food, it remains to decide where to start. Some consumers may already have a good sense of the controversies surrounding the most obvious “red-flag” food industries: meats and dairy, tropical fruits, genetically modified organisms, and so on. Some consumers may already avoid some of these categories of foods and feel that they are doing “enough.”

My purpose in this paper is not to prove such a decision somehow wrong, nor is it to increase the categories of foods that conscientious people can only guiltily gulp down. But there is a great deal more to consider than whether the production methods for a particular food are cruel to a particular animal, or whether a certain company puts antibiotics in your milk (though these are important issues, as well). If we are to think globally about breakfast, lunch, and dinner we must also answer larger questions about the corporations we support with our grocery-store dollar—how big they are, their “synergies” with companies in other industries, and their overall effect on the world food market.

These large questions have some ominous answers where the Quaker Oats Company is concerned. Perhaps most ominous of all is the fact that it takes hours and hours of research to answer these questions in the first place. Rural sociologist and food expert Jack Kloppenburg, Jr. wonders how “[consumers] can act responsibly and effectively for change if they do not understand how the food system works and their own role in it.”⁴ Compounding the problem is the fact that Quaker has not always been honest with consumers, as will be revealed below. Finally, though the Quaker Oats Company, now part of PepsiCo, has enough money and reach to exert a sizable influence on worldwide agricultural and trading issues on its own, the company regularly does business with even larger and more diversified international corporations, such as the privately held—and truly gigantic—Cargill Corporation. Citizens interested in affecting oat agriculture or oatmeal production will therefore find themselves squaring off against some of the most powerful financial entities on the planet.

A Brief History of Oat-eating (and Oat-selling)

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Regular television viewers in the late 1980s grew accustomed to character actor and Quaker pitchman Wilford Brimley’s gruff dietary advice: “Quaker Oats: it’s the right thing to do, and the right way to do it.” Brimley portrayed the grizzled patriarch of a rushed and harried family whose members believed they did not

have time for a healthy breakfast. Brimley's character dismissed their objections and whipped up steaming bowls of Quaker Oats in minutes, astonishing his relatives not only with the ease of preparation but also with the great flavors now available in Quaker's various oatmeal products. Having reminded yet another careless young person how quick and easy it is to "eat right," Brimley concluded every commercial by pronouncing Quaker Oats "the right thing to do."

This advertising campaign deftly evoked and updated an association of oatmeal with home, hearth, and family that industry observers have noted as an important part of the brand's selling power.⁵ This selling power is substantial: while only about 4% of American adults eat hot cereal for breakfast⁶ (and it is adults who are the main consumers of oatmeal⁷), 60% of these adults buy their oatmeal from Quaker to the tune of about US\$485 million in annual sales.⁸ Whether all of these adults also consider oatmeal some sort of "comfort food" is impossible to say; at the very least, however, commercials such as the ones starring Brimley work hard to connect oatmeal with solicitous older relatives and an old-fashioned, slower way of doing things.

Oatmeal is a natural for this kind of connection, of course. It does not just feel old-fashioned, it is. In fact, foods consisting of some type of grain stewed in water or milk, with whatever additional ingredients were afforded by the particular local environment, seem to have been common to all agricultural societies since beyond the reach of recorded human history.

Such time-shrouded origins are in keeping with the "staple" status of porridges and gruels as a sort of primeval *ur*-food in many cultures worldwide. Ancient Europeans and Scandinavians made offerings of porridge to their household gods, for instance. Traditional German and Russian proverbs taught children that "porridge is our mother" and, as late as the early 1900s, porridge was still the main course of the traditional winter equinox meal in some parts of Germany. Even more striking, the old German word for "porridge" originally meant simply "food," while some African societies still consider the porridge they make from their local grain to be the only consumable that can accurately be described as "food."⁹

As food anthropologist Elisabeth Meyer-Renschhausen notes, however, the relative desirability of porridges and gruels among Westerners nonetheless suffered some dramatic reversals and advances over the last few centuries.¹⁰ Staple though porridge may have been, Europe's first experience of real variety in food in the Middle Ages and subsequent increasingly class-based differences in diet sharply reduced the status of oatmeal and other porridges.¹¹ The emergence of *haute cuisine*, combined with the fact that only Europe's nobility could legally hunt or fish, increasingly stigmatized porridge as a food of last resort for the poor or for those too infirm to attempt more solid foods. In various languages, idiomatic expressions associated porridge with prisons and army barracks, and referring to someone as a "porridge eater" was derogatory in much of Europe.¹²

Negative attitudes toward porridge and gruel were evident in literature as well. Readers of *Oliver Twist* will recall oatmeal (or “gruel”) as the apparently lowest-cost food available to the malevolently tight-fisted workhouse directors in whose charge Oliver found himself. Dickens, writing in the 1830s, certainly does not portray the “thin gruel” of which Oliver wants a second helping as a dish that anyone with the slightest choice in the matter would prefer.¹³

Negative connotations aside, however, porridges remained a constant in the diet of the vast majority of Europeans until the late 1800s.¹⁴ Ironically, porridge—and the poor diet of lower-class Europeans it had come to symbolize—may have been one factor that had so many Europeans interested in emigrating to the New World.

As European colonies in the New World expanded, in turn, new, cheaper foods flowed back to Europe and almost entirely replaced the stigmatized porridges. Instead of the now relatively costly porridges, Europe’s working class began to subsist instead on bread, potato-based stews, and sugared coffee.¹⁵ Anthropologists working in Germany between 1900 and 1950 found that the old ways of milling grain and preparing porridge had almost entirely vanished.¹⁶

But the old ways were not the only ways and oatmeal itself did not vanish, as Quaker Oats consumers know quite well. In fact, strangely enough, it is the period of the late 1800s—apparently the nadir in the desirability of oatmeal and other porridges in the Western world—that saw the birth not only of the Quaker Oats Company but the modern American breakfast cereal industry as a whole.

This was no miracle, but rather the result of canny entrepreneurship in response both to popular interest in new discoveries in health and nutrition and WASP angst about increasing levels of immigration from eastern and southern Europe. As things turned out, America in the late 1800s was ripe for an oatmeal revival.

Several factors made such a revival possible. Historian Harvey Green notes that, after the Civil War, Americans had the general sense that they had once been made of sterner moral and physical stuff.¹⁷ At the same time, industrial metaphors for human health and nutrition led the growing middle class—with its growing disposable income—to wonder about the quality of the fuel, or food, that was powering the machinery of their bodies.¹⁸

Also, where the health and nutrition reform movements of past eras had been characterized by judgmental religious moralism and had tended toward extreme asceticism, the leaders of the health and nutrition reform movements of the late 1800s styled themselves as men of science and medicine. It did not hurt that they were also skilled hucksters and self-promoters.¹⁹

The combination of these factors resulted in an American buying public extremely receptive to health claims in food advertising and to food faddism and physical culture in general.²⁰

While, as historian Harvey Levenstein reminds us, developing societies typically increase their consumption of meat and decrease their consumption of

grains, American cereal entrepreneurs in the late 1800s “managed to promote the opposite process at breakfast: the replacement of the traditional slabs of meat with various forms of highly processed grain.” Foremost among the “zany ... entrepreneurs of the breakfast industry who almost single-handedly destroyed the traditional American breakfast” were John Harvey Kellogg and Charles W. Post. Though it was actually Kellogg’s brother William who invented the Corn Flake and designed a successful business model for the Kellogg’s company, it was the outrageous quasi-medical posturing of John Kellogg on the one hand and the self-promotion acumen of Post on the other that must be credited with implanting a connection between cereal and good health so firmly in the mind of the American public.

Under the influence of these talented businessmen, Americans came to believe that cereals could cure various acute conditions as well as deliver the recently understood calories and vitamins that captured the imaginations of even the best-fed Americans in the first decades of the twentieth century. Meanwhile, advances in sealed packaging would protect consumers from the newly discovered scourge known as bacteria.²¹

Though official Quaker company histories make no mention of any 1880s-era cereal revolution other than a resurgence in oatmeal eating, it seems clear that the oat-milling companies that would eventually merge to form the Quaker Oats Company benefited from this shift in the popularity of grain-based breakfast foods. This seems clearest from the simple fact that, while as late as the 1850s oatmeal manufacturers were struggling against a popular perception of oatmeal in America as “horse feed,” in 1888 the business of making and selling oatmeal seemed viable enough to warrant the merger of the seven largest oat-milling companies in America into the unit that would, in 1901, incorporate itself in the state of New Jersey as the Quaker Oats Company. This new entity was largely the creation of four men: Ferdinand Schumacher, a German immigrant who founded the German Mills American Cereal Company in the 1850s; John Stuart and George Douglas, a Canadian and an American who ran the North Star Oatmeal Mill; and Henry Parsons Crowell, who had come into possession of an oatmeal operation named the Quaker Mill Company in 1881.²²

The Quaker Mill Company had registered its trademark, “a man in Quaker garb,” in 1877, though neither the founders of that company nor the men who decided to adopt that company’s trademark for the Quaker Oats Company were ever members of the Religious Society of Friends.²³ This willingness to trade accuracy for image—one reason Quaker is credited with being the first modern “brand” in the sense we understand the word today²⁴—has served the company’s bottom line ever since. The evocation of a religious sect whose members are popularly believed to be scrupulously honest and principled helped the Quaker Oats Company achieve the reputation of wholesomeness and plain dealing that is recognized by industry observers as an asset to the company even today.²⁵

The approximately 100 years of the Quaker Oats Company's existence have been marked by steady, if at first modest, growth. Quaker first diversified in 1905 by launching a line of animal feeds, and the years since have seen many additions to the company's stable of product lines. Quaker launched its own cold cereal lines in the 1920s ("Puffed Wheat" and "Puffed Rice") as well as the first of many faster preparations of oatmeal ("Quick Quaker Oats," which cooked in only 3–5 minutes). The company purchased the Aunt Jemima Mills Company in 1925 and the dog food line Ken-L Ration in 1942. Each of these divisions would eventually control dozens of product lines under these separate brand names. Quaker also purchased and later divested Snapple and Fisher Price. Other activities included operating a munitions plant during World War II.²⁶

As steady as Quaker's growth was throughout the twentieth century, it was not until recently that the company began attracting notice as a diversified and dynamic money-maker that might make a good target for acquisition itself. Coca-Cola expressed interest first, but it was their competitor PepsiCo that ended up absorbing Quaker Oats in August of 2001 at a cost to PepsiCo of about fourteen billion dollars. That purchase price was about three times as much as Quaker's 2000 net sales, and more than fourteen times as much as Quaker's 2000 profit.²⁷ To the untrained eye, this may look like a bad deal for PepsiCo's shareholders but, as PepsiCo CEO Steve Reinemund points out, "it wasn't a purchase of the Quaker sales. It was a purchase of the opportunity to grow the sales."²⁸ At the time of the purchase, Reinemund hoped that such growth may increase PepsiCo's income by as much as four hundred million dollars a year by the year 2005.²⁹

In particular, PepsiCo was most interested in the possibility of growing the sales of one Quaker product in particular. Gatorade became a Quaker holding when Quaker purchased the Stokley-Van Camp company in 1983.³⁰ As far as investors are concerned, Gatorade—which generates about four billion dollars in sales per year,³¹ as opposed to the five hundred million and seven hundred million that hot and cold cereals generate, respectively—is the most interesting thing about Quaker Oats.³² The fact that Gatorade is *not* actually a Quaker product has not gone unnoticed among industry observers like Prudential analyst John McMillin, who thinks that PepsiCo may soon put some of Quaker's food segments up for sale.³³

If PepsiCo does chop up its Quaker segment, traditionalists and nostalgists may cry foul. After all, to a certain mindset it seems somehow pitiful for such a venerable brand to be kicked to the curb. But perhaps such a transformation would not be out of keeping with the spirit of the cereal revolution that gave birth to Quaker Oats in the first place. Oatmeal and sports drinks are not as disparate as they seem, after all. Gatorade's ad campaigns have convinced residents of the fattest nation on earth that they regularly require a restorative drink designed especially for elite athletes operating at the upper limits of human endurance. Health-food hucksters John Kellogg and Charles Post would

approve, and they would look with interest at other PepsiCo products designed to appeal to health-conscious consumers, such as Wow chips with Olestra and fat free Rold Gold pretzels.

Why am I Eating this Stuff, Anyway?

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When I first started eating oatmeal regularly, I did not know much about the stuff other than what the Quaker Oats Company had told me through its advertisements. I was in my early twenties, and starting to realize that I could not get away with eggs and bacon every morning indefinitely.

I switched to oatmeal as part of a general move toward a lower-fat and lower-calorie diet. I picked oatmeal in particular because I had a vague sense—those commercials again—that oatmeal was good for the heart as well as for various digestive and eliminatory processes, and that eating the stuff was indeed “the right thing to do.” Just like the American consumers of the late 1800s who abandoned their traditional, meat-based breakfasts in favor of some type of cereal, I made Quaker Oatmeal a regular part of my diet from that point on.

But was I correct—have cereal enthusiasts since the late 1800s been correct—that oatmeal is “good” for the body? Never having sought independent verification of Quaker’s warm and fuzzy commercials, what basis did I really have for deciding that this product was in fact “good for me?”

For one thing, there is the package itself, where it is plain to see that Quaker Oats is anxious for consumers to think of this product as not merely healthy but almost medicinal in nature. Emblazoned above the head of the rosy-cheeked Quaker mascot is a blaring banner: “Oatmeal Helps Remove Cholesterol!” The back of the package goes into more detail, explaining that “eating a good-sized bowl of Quaker Oatmeal for 30 days will actually help *remove* cholesterol from your body ...” [emphasis Quaker’s].

Not surprisingly, the package does not point out that consumers interested in increasing their fiber intake could do much better than Quaker Oats. In a ranking of hot cereals by fiber content, the Center for Science in the Public Interest places Old Fashioned Quaker Oats in the bottom third of its list.³⁴

It is interesting to note here that the only reason that companies are permitted by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to advertise the heart healthiness of their fiber content is thanks to the Quaker Oats Company itself. After three years of petitioning by Quaker Oats, and after reviewing a body of research largely funded by Quaker Oats, the FDA in 1997 started allowing foods with at least three-quarters of a gram per serving of the soluble fiber beta-glucan to make the cholesterol reduction claims quoted above.³⁵ Such claims have been featured on Quaker packaging and advertising ever since.

Why was Quaker Oats so intent on being allowed to advertise oatmeal’s fiber content? In a word: sales. Convince your customers that your product is not

merely healthy, but actually has a specific, semi-medicinal effect on the body—what the food industry refers to as a “functional” food—and you have vastly increased your sales potential. While sales of plain old packaged foods expand only 1–2% annually, functional food sales increase by around 10% per year.³⁶

The prospect of such an increase may have been what motivated Quaker to bend the truth in a notorious ad campaign that was “designed to deceive,” according to the Center for Science in the Public Interest. The campaign featured Quaker consumers whose blood cholesterol levels dropped an average of twenty-five points after a month of oatmeal breakfasts. The Quaker Oats Company later admitted that only part of the overall drops in cholesterol levels were related to oatmeal consumption, and that the rest could be chalked up to “other lifestyle changes” that people already interested in changing their diets could be counted on to make.³⁷ In order to see these kinds of gains from the oatmeal alone, you would have to eat two or three bowls a day. Even then, warns nutrition specialist Jur Strobos, “a diet high in fat can negate any benefits from the oats,” and anything less than a daily regimen will not see much of an effect on cholesterol levels.³⁸

Perhaps the best that can be said of Old Fashioned Quaker Oats is that there is no particularly good reason not to eat it, though consumers would do well to remain as skeptical of this company’s advertising claims as they would of any other company’s. A more forthright Wilford Brimley script might read: “Quaker Oats. It probably won’t hurt you, and it may even help you. A little ...”

Good for Whom?

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Some people would be comfortable stopping this analysis here. After all, we have a pretty good sense of this food’s effects on the body and even know the best serving size for optimal results. What more is there to find out?

Lots more, according to an increasing number of environmental, political, and cultural critics who would prefer that we think in broader terms, that we not frame the question simply in terms of direct health effects—and certainly not just in terms of the individual consumer—at all. Pointing to “the ecological and social destructiveness of the globally-based food system,” food scholars Jack Kloppenburg, Jr, John Hendrickson, and G. W. Stevenson call for consumers to pay closer attention to “how and by whom what they consume is produced, processed, and transported.” This closer scrutiny is a first step toward achieving the more locally based, responsible, and transparent system of food production and consumption they call “the foodshed.”³⁹

Environmental scholar Lydia Oberholtzer and researchers John C. Ryan and Alan Thein Durning⁴⁰ also see a value in increased transparency and offer useful models for tallying and totaling what author David Orr calls the “true cost”⁴¹ of the food we eat. Oberholtzer’s “Commodity Chains” push us to concentrate on

the flow of money to and from the various parties involved in bringing a product to our tables, and how that money influences attempts to establish local or alternative chains of food supply, or the “foodshed” Kloppenburg describes.⁴² Ryan and Durning provide a practical model of a sort of “farm to fork” analysis that, by showing us the various stops a food product makes on its way to our tables, helps suggest points of conflict, tension, or unnecessary wear and tear on the planet.

Farm to Fork

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No matter who conveys our oatmeal to our breakfast tables, or how, there are certain unavoidable steps to the process. The oats must be planted and harvested, and the grains must be separated (threshed) from the grasses. These threshed oats must then be stored until they can be brought to a facility capable of hulling, cleaning, steaming, toasting, and flattening them. The oats are then ready to be cooked and eaten, or ready to be packaged and distributed, depending on how local the foodshed is. Quaker’s oats, of course, are packaged and then brought by truck to warehouses and supermarket chains.⁴³

Certain other aspects of oat production depend on who is doing the producing; some of these aspects have changed a great deal over time. If my grandfather had been an oat farmer in the early 1900s, he would have lived somewhere in the northern Great Plains—perhaps in North Dakota, the historical center of American oat farming. As late as the 1950s, there is a good chance he would have relied on horse-drawn technology to harvest his oats.

Today, oat farming—like all commercial agriculture—is large-scale, high-tech, and vastly expensive. Modern equipment and chemicals have sharply increased crop yields, but at a steep price. In order for farmers to enjoy the benefits of these advances, they must have room in their budgets (or, more likely, on their lines of credit) for combine harvesters that can cost hundreds of thousands of dollars. Pesticide and fertilizer application, meanwhile, can run farmers as much as US\$60 per acre.⁴⁴

As a result, though a modern-day oat farm might produce as much as three times as many oats as my fictional grandfather’s early-1900s farm, it would be a lucky farmer indeed who owed only three times as much money as my grandfather would have owed in the 1930s, with his much lower overhead.⁴⁵

The question remains, also, as to where this debt-ridden farm would be located, assuming that it is part of the Quaker Oats commodity chain. That is, where does Quaker get its oats? True to the complaints of critics of food industry globalization such as Jack Kloppenburg, this information—as well as information concerning later steps in the chain, such as processing and distribution—is extremely difficult for the average consumer to come by.

You've got a Friend in Canada

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The Quaker Oats Company itself is far from forthcoming on the subject of its own commodity chain. The company's corporate website, which includes such information as how to give oneself an oatmeal facial treatment, says nothing about where the company gets its oats. At the toll-free number printed on my package of Old Fashioned Quaker Oats, a customer service representative told me that "most" of the oats Quaker uses are grown in Canada, but she quickly backpedaled when I pressed her for details. How much is "most"? Does Quaker always buy from the same suppliers, or does it play the field?

Customer service representative "Bobby" told me she did not know the answers to any of those questions, and could not give me the telephone number of anyone who would. She also said she did not know the locations of any Quaker factories, just that they are "all over the country." She could not elaborate on any of the steps between field and fork (actually, I eat mine with a spoon), but took my address and promised to send me a pamphlet with general company information. When the pamphlet came, it, too, was devoid of information about where Quaker gets its oats, or what route they follow to American breakfast tables. This vagueness seems to suggest that Quaker simply cannot say with certainty where it gets its oats from one month to the next.

One thing that is certain is that Quaker does *not* get its oats from the US. The past half-century has seen a dramatic decline in the amount of American farmland devoted to oat cultivation. In the mid-1940s, oats were the single most widely planted crop in US soil, with over 18.8 million hectares seeded for oats in the peak year of 1946. By the year 2000, there had been a 90% decrease in the amount of American farmland used for oat cultivation.⁴⁶ American oat production has fallen similarly precipitously, dropping 67% between 1991 and 2001 alone.⁴⁷

During that same decade, as US oat production fell and US oat exports became essentially negligible, the US imported more oats than any other country on earth, accounting for 80% of world trade in the commodity.⁴⁸ Since 1999, this has worked out to a flow of around 1.7 million tonnes a year into the US, most of it from Canada.⁴⁹

Even those oats that are grown in the US do not make it onto anyone's breakfast table. Farmers make a distinction between cash crops, which are crops grown for sale, and hay or feed crops, which are grown as food for livestock. Oats grown in the US are primarily used as animal feed, with almost no oats fit for human consumption (or "milling quality" oats) grown in the US.⁵⁰ Even most feed-grade oats originate in Canada, for that matter, which is a drastic change from as recently as 1991, when feed suppliers in the state of North Dakota looked no further than the borders of their own state for the vast majority of their oat purchases.⁵¹

At first glance, these numbers seem to suggest some sort of decline and fall of the American oat farmer, in favor of the Canadian farmer. In fact, while it is true that the Canadian numbers are not quite as dramatic as the US numbers, Canadian oat farming also suffered an extreme decline over the same period, with total planted acreage decreasing by about 70% between the 1940s and today.⁵² For that matter, there are almost no oat-producing nations that have not experienced at least some decline in oat production over the past half-century. So it is not as though farmers in the First World have seen their markets flooded by cheaper Third World oats, a pattern true of other crops such as wheat, rice, and so on.

Rather, it is the horse's fault. The overall worldwide demand for oats has dwindled, at different rates and beginning at different times in various countries, depending on the extent of the dependence of farmers in those countries on horses, who have always been the world's biggest consumer of oats.⁵³ American acreage devoted to oats has dropped off sharply since the 1940s because it was from the 1940s on that the American farmer's dependence on horses began decreasing most rapidly.⁵⁴ A similar cause is probably at the root of the decline in Canadian oat production as well.

But these figures leave a basic question unanswered: some oats are still grown in the US, just not for people. Why are no milling-quality oats grown stateside anymore? The answer to this question has to do with increased globalization of trade. Put simply, while oats can be (and are) grown all over the continental US, growing milling-quality oats requires the relatively cool summers of the northern Great Plains states. North and South Dakota, Minnesota, Iowa, and Wisconsin have always been the leading US producers of oats for grain.⁵⁵ But as good as the climate of these states is for oat-growing, it is not yet ideal. Ideal oat-growing climates are actually found even further north, such as in the provinces of Saskatchewan and Alberta in Canada, parts of Scandinavia, and so on.⁵⁶ In simplest terms, this means that milling-quality oats can be produced with less input, and therefore more cheaply—with more of what economists call comparative advantage—in places like Canada's Great Plains.

This did not matter in the early part of the twentieth century, when transportation costs and import tariffs erased this Canadian cost advantage. But as transportation costs decreased and trade restrictions increasingly fell by the wayside, it began to make more sense to international agricultural traders to get their oats from farther north than the American Great Plains. This in turn has led American farmers to focus more and more on those crops—wheat, corn, sorghum, etc.—that they *can* offer at more competitive prices.⁵⁷

Canadian Farmers Feel the Crunch

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Canadian farmers, then, grow some of the best milling-quality oats in the world, and they send a good deal of them to the US by way of the Quaker Oats

Company. It is by no means true, however, that the high quality of their oats and their proximity to the US ensures them some sort of sinecured niche in the market. Canadian farmers face the same market forces and competitive pressures as American farmers do, and those forces and pressures are harsh in the extreme. Canada's Midwestern provinces are seeing a colossally high rate of farm failure and anecdotal evidence suggests a skyrocketing suicide rate among Canadian farmers. According to journalist Florence Williams, "[o]f 55,000 farms in Saskatchewan, a sparsely populated province the size of Texas, 15,000 [were] likely to go out of business ... " in 1999.⁵⁸

Part of the reason for so many failures is that Canadian farmers, like American farmers, face increasing pressure to "get big or get out." Part of this pressure comes from the decreased public and increased private funding of agricultural research the world over, resulting in inputs and technology that are of much more use to monoculture corporate farms than they are to smaller farms that depend on a greater degree of crop diversity.⁵⁹

Another pressure comes from the increasing consolidation of grain storage and processing operations under ever larger corporate umbrellas. One example of the increasing corporatization of Canadian agriculture was the 1997 decision of the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool, a farmer's collective dating to 1924, to become a publicly traded company.⁶⁰

Collectives and cooperatives such as the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool have traditionally allowed farmers to increase profits without increasing acreage by sharing with other farmers the costs of processing, marketing, and transporting their crops. As these co-ops and collectives transform into profit-maximizing middlemen, farmers can increase their profits only by increasing their acreage. The ever-decreasing competition among these inexorably consolidating middlemen, in turn, drives up the prices farmers must pay for these services.

Finally, the disappearance of farmer-owned and -operated collectives means the weakening of the support and information exchange networks for farmers with priorities other than those set by agribusiness giants. The support offered by a collective might once have emboldened farmers considering diversifying their crops or trying organic methods of farming, but such approaches are not compatible with the race to the horizon that the corporate-favored large-acreage, monoculture farms force on their neighbors.⁶¹

This pressure to expand acreage is further increased by the ever more common practice among corporate grain processors of setting minimum shipment sizes at grain elevators and processing facilities. If the minimum is set at 5,000 bushels, for example, the farmer who produces only 4,000 must find a middleman who purchases undersized shipments and then sells consolidated shipments to the processor. The processor still pays market value, so farmers must accept less than market value for their undersized shipment, reducing their income even more. Another farmer who cannot pay his bills means another farm likely to be absorbed into a much larger and likely corporate-owned operation,

which certainly will not do anything to help farmers resist the effects of rampant corporatization.⁶²

Quaker Oats eaters who are wondering what this has to do with their oatmeal should direct their attention back to the recently privatized Saskatchewan Wheat Pool. This company owns a processing operation called Can-Oat Milling, which is the world's leading oat-product supplier.⁶³ Can-Oat brings us back to Quaker, in turn, because the fact that it exports 95% of its output to the US and concentrates on supplying to cereal manufacturers makes it highly likely that your next spoonful of Old Fashioned Quaker Oats passed through Can-Oat's state-of-the-art milling facilities in either Portage la Prairie, Manitoba or Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.⁶⁴

But Wait, There's More

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Another massive player on the Canadian oat scene is the multinational corporation Cargill. Cargill is privately held, so it is difficult to identify all of its activities in a particular market, but it is unlikely that the company has bothered to acquire any actual oat-processing operations in Canada. Instead, Cargill accumulates processed oats from wherever it can get them most cheaply and sells them to Quaker. Canada is the preferred source, for reasons of proximity and quality, but Cargill's massive fleet of cargo ships allows it to turn to distant oat-growers like Scandinavia during upturns in Canadian prices, as the company did in April of 2002.⁶⁵

It is ultimately the presence of a company like Cargill at any point along the Quaker Oats commodity chain that must give the conscientious consumer the most pause. A list of Cargill's operations is staggeringly long and varied. In addition to processing, distributing, or manufacturing salt, syrup sweeteners, coffee, sugar, metal, and bulk electricity, Cargill is also the world's number one vegetable oil producer, the world's third largest beef packer, the biggest animal feed producer in the US, and a main supplier of eggs to McDonald's. All of this is in addition to operating the above-mentioned worldwide cargo fleet.

In a 2000 speech to his board that has since been removed from the Cargill website, Cargill's CEO crowed that "you'd be hard pressed to get through the day without eating a product made with Cargill ingredients"; even if you do get through the day without *eating* a Cargill ingredient, though, you may be reading this by Cargill electricity, and at any point in the day you may be using any one of hundreds of thousands of products transported daily by their ships.⁶⁶

Members of Cargill's Board of Directors include the presidents of the Raycon Oil Gas Company and the Brookings Institution, as well as the CEOs of Honeywell and 3M.⁶⁷ Cargill employs 101,000 people in 60 countries.⁶⁸ It is probably faster to list commodities in which Cargill does *not* deal—the company's reach and influence define the very terms *reach* and *influence*.

As an example of what's within that reach, consider what happened when Cargill announced plans to purchase the grain merchandising division of Continental Grain, a smaller US animal feed supplier. Investigation by the US Department of Justice into possible violations of anti-trust law found that the purchase would indeed "substantially lessen competition for purchases of [grains] ... enabling Cargill to unilaterally depress the prices paid to farmers." But the filing of these findings was delayed until the same day that other Department of Justice officials greenlighted the purchase—approving, in other words, against the recommendations of their own investigators, what agribusiness watchdog A. V. Krebs described as Cargill's attempt "to virtually own this nation's grain trade."⁶⁹

The ease with which companies like Cargill can acquire their smaller competitors is not the only worrisome aspect of such companies, however. Also disturbing is the ease with which the leading agribusiness corporations partner up on large projects, eliminating even the semblance of meaningful competition. In 1998, for example, Cargill launched a joint international biotechnology development and marketing venture with industry giant Monsanto. As if Cargill were not big enough on its own, Monsanto is the world's second largest marketer of seeds, seventh largest in pharmaceuticals, and fifth in veterinary medicine.⁷⁰ What do get when you cross one eight hundred pound gorilla with another?

For one thing, you get a partnership ideally suited to create the "distancing" of consumers from producers that Kloppenburg finds so troubling.⁷¹ As Kloppenburg might ask, is Cargill "destructive of the land and of human community" in the 60 countries in which it does business?⁷² With so many layers of stores, marketers, distributors, and suppliers between consumers and producers, who can be sure?

This "distancing" is a problem partly because of the way it restricts and even eliminates the flow of information. In his analysis of media conglomeration, communications scholar Robert McChesney identifies three criteria essential to successful democracy: equitable distribution of resources; the sense on the part of citizens that "an individual's well-being is determined to no small extent by the community's well-being"; and an "effective system of political communication ... that informs and engages the citizenry." These things "provide ... democratic political culture with a substance that cannot exist if everyone is simply out to advance narrowly defined self-interests, even if those interests might be harmful to the community as a whole."⁷³

Companies like Cargill have the luxury of always paying the lowest worldwide prices for any products they buy, which can put farmers on opposite sides of the world in competition with each other and create the race to the bottom that everyone (except Cargill) loses: greater consolidation of farms with a tendency toward unsustainable monoculture, reductions in protections for workers and the environment, and so on. At the same time, Cargill's stake in any specific locale is null—it is simply not in the financial interests of a company that can go

anywhere and buy anything to care too much about any one place, or the people who live there. Leaving aside the question of whether or not companies like Cargill fit McChesney's formulation of being "out to advance narrowly defined self-interests"—although it is hard to imagine Cargill's directors signing on to a business plan that did not fit this description—it is plain on the face of things that companies like Cargill, Quaker, and PepsiCo feel no imperative to "inform and engage the citizenry."

There is certainly nothing wrong with eating oats. As many analyses of American beef consumption show, we would be living much less greedily—and more efficiently—if we ate the grains that the cattle eat instead of eating the cattle.⁷⁴ Oatmeal and other oat-based foods are a chance to do just that, but it is cruelly ironic that consumers attempting to "eat lower on the food" chain by eating Quaker Oats contribute to a revenue stream with tributaries leading to the bank account of a major beef supplier like Cargill. Even if consumers limit their concerns to the issues of oat production itself, the ever-larger farms created by the practices of agribusiness giants like Cargill, and the monoculture agriculture such farms are likely to practice, are excessive users of pesticides and fertilizers, and are wasteful of dwindling resources like fresh water and topsoil.⁷⁵

Is this the Only Way?

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Oats can be grown differently. North Dakota farmer Bob Finken grows several crops, including oats, on 1,550 acres. His crop rotation is such that his land rarely lies fallow, and he uses "no-till" planting equipment that minimizes topsoil loss.⁷⁶ Another farmer, Charles Johnson of South Dakota, grows oats and other crops in a six year rotation on 1,800 acres in an operation that has been profitably organic since 1976. His rotation, which makes use of "green manures," or crops that are simply cut and left in the fields to add nutrients to the soil, eliminates his need for insecticides, weed killers, and commercial fertilizers. And while his oats, which he grows for his own animal feed purposes, are not a big moneymaker, it is clear that organically grown crops can be a significant source of income for a farm. Johnson's big seller is organic soybeans, which often earn him anywhere from twice to triple what conventionally grown soybeans would.⁷⁷

Consumers can try organic oat products through companies like Country Choice, based in Minnesota (www.countrychoicenaturals.com). Certified organic by third-party certifier Oregon Tilth, Country Choice oat products (they have "Old Fashioned Rolled Oats" and "Quick Oats," just like Quaker) consist of at least 95% organic ingredients grown without harmful chemicals or tillage methods. You likely will not find them in your supermarket, but you might at a gourmet supermarket chain such as Whole Foods or an independent natural foods store. And, according to food anthropologist Meyer-Renschhausen, what

you give up in convenience, you more than gain in flavor and nutritional value. She argues that modern milling methods rob oats and other grains of much of their food value, and that this is a little examined factor in the shift away from porridges in the eighteenth century:

[A] diet deprived of its natural goodness made the diversification of the modern diet necessary. It must also have been the loss of the old “naturally” sweet grain porridge that brought about the heightened need for sugar [as an additive] ...⁷⁸

Oatmeal porridge, made from oats grown naturally and processed gently, sustained millions of people for thousands of years. Some of those for whom it is still a traditional and staple food cannot conceive of doing without it: “What, no porridge?” asked a member of an African tribe for whom a particular grain-based porridge is a traditional staple, when he learned what the European diet consists of. “I call that starvation.”⁷⁹ Perhaps consumers willing to look to older, more traditional forms of oatmeal would find something far superior to the bland, ascetic dish to which we have grown accustomed.

Conclusion

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Quaker recommends a dash of salt in its Old Fashioned rolled oats. I recommend taking the various claims that are made about oats generally, and Quaker Oats specifically, with at least a dash of salt, as well. As I have shown, oats certainly are not bad for you and may even improve the health of some people, but Quaker’s oats may not be quite as wonderful as that company would like you to believe. Consumers increasing their oat bran intake in order to help reduce their cholesterol levels will see more benefit from the oatmeals made by Old Wessex (75% more fiber per serving than Quaker) or Arrowhead Mills (25% more fiber per serving than Quaker).⁸⁰

Companies like Quaker routinely try to maximize profits by shifting operations and purchasing around the globe, all out of the sight of consumers. The ability to buy, sell, and process foods thousands of miles from the people who eat them has to be counted among the already considerable assets of Quaker, PepsiCo, Cargill, and other multinational agribusiness corporations.

It would be bad news indeed for Quaker and its corporate parents if the company were forced to sell most of its oatmeal to the residents of, say, Saskatchewan. Surrounded by the failed small farms and ever-expanding large ones resulting from the market pressures that companies like Quaker supplier Cargill bring to bear, that particular pool of consumers might very well decide to try to force Quaker and other companies to do a different sort of business. As things are, however, it seems preposterous in the extreme to imagine Quaker consumers the world over banding together and forcing any substantive change.

“We are,” as food scholar Jack Kloppenburg asserts, “embedded in a global food system structured around a market economy which is geared to the proliferation of commodities and the destruction of the local.”⁸¹ The Quaker Oats commodity chain is a case in point. Among other things, Kloppenburg recommends “secession,” or the “hollowing out” of big agribusiness as usual by the decision of consumers first of all to support alternatives wherever they can be found, and then to work toward making these alternatives more local.⁸²

Oatmeal eaters can take the first of these steps by exploring products like those offered by Country Choice, although this company, located in Minnesota and not publicly held, is also extremely distant from most of us and no more transparent to the casual researcher than larger companies like Cargill, which are at least periodically examined by journalists. But I do not mean to suggest that any great share of the problems with agribusiness today can be solved by consumers who switch oatmeal brands. Instead, the point here has been to suggest that when even consumers of relatively benign and sensible-seeming foods like oatmeal are implicated in the disappearance of small farms, the increasingly monoculture nature of the farms that remain, and the increasingly monolithic nature of agribusiness itself, there may no longer—if, indeed, there ever have been—foods that can be considered “safe” simply by type, category, or food group.

There is no such thing as a type of food that does not warrant a closer look. Until we achieve the local, transparent, and responsible systems of food production Kloppenburg describes, we will have to substitute our own scrutiny, and our own activism in response to what that scrutiny finds, to “inform ... [the] self defense and secession” that allow us to take our first halting steps into “the foodshed.”⁸³

Notes

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- 1 Throughout much of this paper, I will use the terms *oatmeal*, *porridge*, and *gruel* essentially interchangeably. There are fine distinctions to be made, however. *Oatmeal* can mean either the substance resulting from grinding or otherwise processing oats, or the food that is made by stewing this substance in milk or water—that is, the cooked, finished product you expect to find in your bowl when someone offers you oatmeal for breakfast. I will use the word entirely with the latter meaning. *Porridge* and *gruel*, likewise, are foods consisting of ground or otherwise processed oats or other grains stewed in milk or water. Generally, porridges are thicker, while gruels are more watery.
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- 3 “Eating Low on the Food Chain” is a chapter heading in Francis Moore Lappes popular *Diet for a Small Planet*, which was first published in 1971.
- 4 Jack Kloppenburg, Jr, John Hendrickson and G. W. Stevenson, “Coming into the Foodshed,” *Agriculture and Human Values* 13, no. 3 (1996): 34.
- 5 Says financial reporter David Snyder: “Like most people, I have fond memories of a hot bowl of Quaker oatmeal on a winter day.” David Snyder, “Crisis Campaign: Save Quaker, Buy a Snapple,” *Crain’s Chicago Business*, 19, no. 29 (1996): 13.

- 6 Bonnie Liebman, "The Great Breakfast Debate," *Nutrition Action Health Letter* November 1999, http://www.cspinet.org/nah/11_99/great_debate.html (April 26, 2002).
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- 9 Elisabeth Meyer-Renschhausen, "The Porridge Debate," in *Changing Food Habits: Case Studies from Africa, South America, and Europe*, ed. Carola Lentz (Frankfurt A.M.: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1999), pp. 185–187.
- 10 Meyer-Renschhausen, "The Porridge Debate," p. 182.
- 11 Meyer-Renschhausen, "The Porridge Debate," p. 187.
- 12 Meyer-Renschhausen, "The Porridge Debate," p. 185.
- 13 Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1984), p. 17.
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- 15 Meyer-Renschhausen, "The Porridge Debate," pp. 187–188.
- 16 Meyer-Renschhausen, "The Porridge Debate," p. 191.
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- 18 Harvey Green, *Fit For America*, p. 283.
- 19 Harvey Green, *Fit For America*, p. 317.
- 20 Harvey Green, *Fit For America*, p. 297.
- 21 Harvey Levenstein, *Revolution at the Table: the Transformation of the American Diet* (New York: Oxford, 1988), pp. 33–34, 153, 149.
- 22 Official company histories in various formats are available at <http://www.quakeroats.com/about/history.html> and at <http://quakeroatmeal.com/Archives/History/indexoat.cfm>. The claim that Americans in the 1850s considered oatmeal "horse feed" and would not eat it is made in "Quaker Oats Revisited," an unpublished history of the Quaker Oats Company last revised in May of 2001, which I received by mail after requesting information about the company from the customer service number printed on a package of Quaker Oats Old Fashioned.
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- 24 Rob Owen, "The History Channel Looks at American Icons," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, November 25, 2001, <http://www.post-gazette.com/tv/20011125tvweektv2.asp> (February 22, 2002).
- 25 David Snyder, "Crisis Campaign: Save Quaker—Buy a Snapple," *Crain's Chicago Business* 19, no. 29 (1996): 13. Matthew Herper and Betsy Schiffman, "Pepsi Bought Quaker, Now What?" *Forbes.com* October 2, 2001, <http://www.forbes.com/2001/08/02/0802topnews.html> (April 26, 2002).
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