

McEldowney Jensen, J. (2002). *Post-Secondary Education on the Edge: Self-Improvement and Community Development in a Cape Breton Coal Town*. New York: Peter Lang. Pages: 160. Price: \$24.95 USD (paper).

**REVIEWED BY ANN SHERMAN, ST. FRANCIS XAVIER UNIVERSITY.**

In *Post-Secondary Education on the Edge: Self-Improvement and Community Development in a Cape Breton Coal Town*, Jane McEldowney Jensen addresses the ways residents of Glace Bay, Nova Scotia, an economically distressed town, perceive post-secondary education. She tells us that historically the lack of work available locally, as well as the personal costs involved in acquiring credentials, have worked against the assumption that education can act as a strategy for economic development. Nonetheless, the people of Glace Bay continue to hold education and the perceived purposes of that education to be of central importance to them.

Jensen is convincing in her assertion that education must be realized in ways that go beyond the grants from the government so often described by the participants in the study, if it is to support economic development. Instead, she suggests that a definition of education must be created that highlights each individual's potential for growth within the community itself, as well as within the Canadian context. Like the Glace Bay residents she lived amongst and interviewed, Jensen questions how academic credentials alone can lift an economically distressed community like Glace Bay as a whole, if the systemic issue of regional economics is not also addressed.

Jensen paints a picture of a town in crisis struggling to survive. Glace Bay was a fishing community that became a thriving coal mining community. With the closure of the mines, these communities became abandoned spaces, where people were forced to redefine themselves and their sense of space (p. 3). This book examines questions of self-improvement and community development as they

relate to education in a context of economic struggles. Participants were asked if educational achievement of individuals always resulted in improvement of the community and at what cost to those involved did this occur? Issues of out-migration from Cape Breton are also addressed in the book, specifically in relationship to those people who obtain a post secondary education and then are forced to leave to use that education.

Jensen doesn't question the value of post-secondary education, nor is she criticizing efforts and initiatives that offer further training to those adults without employment. Rather her intent is threefold. First, she wants to help us question assumptions that underlie the belief that post-secondary education is the answer to problems of unemployment. Second, she seeks to expose the hierarchy broadly involved in post-secondary educational processes. Finally, she convincingly argues the actual benefits to sustainable development offered by local knowledge and everyday collaborative practices of learning and knowledge production (p. 6).

In descriptions that verge on caricatures, Jensen describes various members of the Glace Bay community and their effort to both create and re-create themselves. Located on the south eastern shores of Cape Breton, Glace Bay is no different than many other communities in the region that use its geographic location, beauty, as well as its many folk traditions (music, dance, language) to attract tourists from around the globe. Part of the attraction to the area is the people themselves and their ability to maintain a sense of pride, while at the same time making fun of themselves. They live in one of the most economically marginalized areas of Canada and yet attract thousands of tourists each year through stereotypes of clannishness and creativity that characterize the highland lifestyle with self-deprecating pride (p. 13). Jensen describes a warm and generous people who joke about receiving unemployment insurance, while in the next breath are strategizing about ways to ensure their children's success. Some of the most enjoyable reading moments in this text are the descriptions and comments of the people of Glace Bay.

Jensen describes how post-secondary education has played a strong role in the town since the early 1900s. St. Francis Xavier University, located a couple of hours away, began to offer programs supporting development, as well as other academic programs. A satellite campus located in nearby Sydney became a university (University College Cape Breton) in its own right in the 1980s and is well supported locally. In addition, technical and other practical courses have been available to the community throughout the past several decades. However, as Jensen tells us, many people became dependant on the coal mines and felt they should not have to leave town in order to work. As in similar communities, people in Glace Bay have little control over the economic and political decisions that control their futures, and education alone has not improved their sense of empowerment. Unfortunately, this inability to gain economic security or other forms of political power through education has led to a cynical and often times defeatist attitude toward academic challenge. This attitude only increases the problem and grassroots community development is resisted with a sense of sad frustration. Jensen tells these stories with a certain compassion that draws the reader in, while creating more understanding than pity.

Jensen urges those involved in post-secondary education to become aware of both the reproductive and productive possibilities within strategies for negotiating a knowledge economy through increased education. As she reminds us, learning is no burden to carry, if the outcome of that learning can be made positive and productive (p. 137). If this does not happen, then it should be of no surprise to anyone when the legitimacy of that learning is questioned.

The residents of Glace Bay strongly advocated the positive role education played in economic development. Yet, their experiences demonstrated to them the negative aspects of that strategy and they questioned the effectiveness of formal education. Within Glace Bay, the local knowledge and wisdom includes networks of complex information shared amongst residents, which included personal explorations of self-improvement (p. 138). Perhaps, suggests Jensen,

there is a way to use this more informal way of acquiring knowledge to empower economic development locally.

Jensen successfully argues that self-sufficiency is what is required in order for sustainable development to occur in Glace Bay. The much asked question “Training for what?” gives rise to her observation that the route to success in Glace Bay is not to train for jobs that don’t exist, but to improve oneself in ways that fulfill the human spirit (p. 138). Phrases like “We are survivors not winners” and “We live in quiet desperation” leave the reader with a better understanding of the enormity of the challenge facing the people of Glace Bay. They value post-secondary education, but there needs to be a better match between the educational achievements of these people and economic opportunities. Jensen leaves us with a clearer understanding that until larger issues of regional economics are addressed locally, provincially, and federally, post-secondary education alone will not bring about the much needed community development.



### **Erratum - Vol. 34, No. 1**

Damer, E. (2002). *Discovery by Design: The Department of Mechanical Engineering of The University of British Columbia Origins and History 1907-2001*.

**Reviewed by Carolyn Baillie, Faculty of Applied Science,  
Queen's University.**

**Correct spelling: Caroline Baillie**