

Katz, Yossi and Lehr, John C. *The Last Best West: Essays on the Historical Geography of the Canadian Prairies*. Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1999. 243 pp.; maps, photographs, bibliography, index.

This excellently produced collection of important essays by two of the leading scholars on Canadian prairie settlement is a book that should be in everyone's library. However, the volume itself adds little beyond bringing these papers within two covers and is therefore very much a neglected opportunity to advance existing scholarship.

Less all-encompassing than its title suggests, the book consists of nine substantive chapters, and a short conclusion, that focus on the settlement of six ethnic groups (the Mennonites, the Ukrainians, the Jews, the Hutterites, the Mormons and, examined in less detail than the others, the Doukhobors). Eight of the chapters have previously been published and two papers by other scholars have been included, most notably John Warkentin's 1959 paper on Mennonite settlement.

The authors succeed admirably in meeting their stated goals (p. 12)—which are to analyze the settlement experiences of the six groups, to demonstrate the merits of comparing them and to illustrate the importance of culture and institutions in the settlement process. Each of the case studies is well-conducted, and the two concluding general chapters are an excellent illustration of how cultural geographers at the top of their game can interpret the subtle impress of different ethnic groups upon the landscape.

The challenge that the authors are unable to meet, however, is in preparing a successful edited collection. All of the papers have been reset for this edition but some obvious errors, such as the misspelling of Rupert's Land or Premier Lougheed (pp. 122, 127, 153) and the accidental insertion of pieces of text (pp. 24, 95), have not been caught. The introduction and conclusion are too thin to provide the reader with either the benefits

of Katz and Lehr's current insights or the necessary critical apparatus with which to approach the various materials on her or his own. The papers themselves give little appearance of having been revised with republication in mind; if they had (as the back cover claims), the volume would not suffer from the two faults of repetition and a somewhat unfocused discussion.

The first may seem to be a quibble, but after reading about the provisions of the Dominion Lands Act of 1872 for the fifth time (pp. 47-8, 127-9, 153, 168 and 192), the reader wonders at what point repetition between the unedited papers of the collection becomes redundancy. Historians may question why the paragraph-long quotation from a field director of the Jewish Colonization Association bears repeating, with different punctuation, only ten pages later (pp. 151, 162). Geographers might be curious whether *two* virtually identical maps of settlement are needed in *both* the Jewish and Ukrainian cases especially, regarding the latter pair, when *neither* map has a key, and they occur within five pages of each other (pp. 45 and 125, 75 and 80 respectively). Certainly, the repetition throughout the various papers of the characteristics of each ethnic group's settlement seems unnecessary and, in this respect, Chapter 7 (itself essentially a recapitulation of the case studies) is but the most egregious example of one of the collection's major weaknesses.

The second problem, a lack of clear argument, is almost inevitably caused by the unedited juxtaposition of papers that have previously appeared elsewhere, at different dates, with different purposes, and (in two cases) by different authors. Theories, arguments and conclusions that work together nicely in one paper are shown in a different light when read in conjunction with neighbouring chapters and their original analysis made to appear more diffuse in consequence. To take a case study used in a number of the chapters as an example, the authors explore the reasons why Jewish settlers were unable to sustain a rural existence in the Canadian prairies, ultimately moving into cities such as Winnipeg within a generation or two

of immigrating to the “Last Best West”. Their conclusion is that settlement size and density were simply not great enough to reach either the “critical mass” of numbers or the propinquity needed to support the many religious activities that an Orthodox way of life required (pp. 144–9) — Jewish settlers not being allowed by Canadian authorities to establish the nucleated villages that would have been necessary because of the restrictions of the Dominion Lands Act against group settlement.

This seems reasonable enough, but it is an explanation that seems less conclusive as the reader then encounters the authors’ work on other ethnic groups. Thus, the Hutterites—a religious group actively discriminated against by Canadian and Albertan legislation—were quite capable of establishing thriving *communities* on the prairies, one reason being that they purchased land (p. 175), so bypassing the restrictions against group settlement of the Dominion Lands Act (which only applied to free land). The Mennonites, who originally established open-field villages out on the prairies, did so because they initially totally disregarded the Act and then, as a group, were able to win an exemption from the federal government, in the so-called “hamlet clause” of 1876 (p. 157). The larger number of Ukrainians simply overwhelmed immigration agents who soon came to see block settlement in the government’s own interests (p. 208). Finally, the Mormons, by coming to agreements with irrigation companies, were also able to settle private lands and thus establish their own villages (p. 206). Indeed, such was the desire of groups such as the Mormons to nucleate that some who settled Dominion lands, once they had fulfilled the Act’s requirements, subsequently physically relocated their farms on their own land to create villages (p. 148).

We surely begin to wonder why Jewish groups could not have adopted similar strategies to the problems of rural settlement. We have to wait until Chapter 9 to read Katz and Lehr’s answer to this mystery: essentially that the Jews were poorly organized. They argue that the groups we might have expected to have acted in this respect, such as the Jewish Colonization

Association (JCA), because they were secular, “never appreciated the importance of nucleated settlement for the survival of Jewish religious life” and “[a]s it failed to appreciate this point the JCA did not effectively advocate the Jewish cause in its dealings with the Canadian government; for it is clear that the government was not disposed to offer special concessions voluntarily to any immigrants” (pp. 203–4). Such an argument would have been more convincingly made if it had been, first, incorporated in the case study; second, reconciled with the rather contradictory statement made earlier in the book that the JCA was well aware of the problems of isolation and cautioned prospective settlers against it (p. 57); and, third, set against the experiences of either equally small or disorganized groups—such as the Doukhobors and the Ukrainians—groups that nevertheless successfully settled the prairies.

Beyond taking the opportunity to hone their arguments in this way, the volume contains a number of most interesting speculations which could have been developed had the authors revised the work. For example, their suggestion that Jewish settlement experiences in the Canadian prairies could be compared with Jewish migrants’ far greater success in developing rural communities in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Palestine (p. 151) is another comparison that might ultimately prove far more instructive than the comparisons that exist in the current volume. The discussion of how gender influences the construction of a cultural landscape (women being, they argue, more traditional) is another that cries out for more work (pp. 97, 181). Certainly, their assessment of Terry Jordan’s provocative hypothesis that some European cultures were “pre-adapted” for success in the New World—a thesis they only refer to in passing (p. 127)—would have made fascinating reading, for it still appears to offer the most coherent overall explanation for the patterns that this volume seeks to investigate.

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