2004

Book Review: Place: Lethbridge, A City on the Prairie

Don Gill
University of Lethbridge

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly
Part of the Other International and Area Studies Commons

http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/261

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

"The wind is a sea in Lethbridge, and usually by noon the tide rises and the city begins to flood."

In 1998 Joan Stebbins, curator at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery, invited Toronto-based photographer Geoffrey James to photograph the city of Lethbridge, Alberta. James is known for his large format black-and-white photographs of specific sites: formal French gardens; the city of Paris; the running fence on the border separating the US and Mexico; asbestos mines in Quebec. In late 1999 his photographs were exhibited as "The Lethbridge Project." Subsequently novelist Rudy Wiebe was invited to write a parallel text to accompany James’s photographs for Place.

Lethbridge is a small city located at the junction of the Old Man and Belly Rivers in the southwest corner of Alberta. This area is bounded by the Montana border to the south, the Rocky Mountains to the west, and the expanse of the prairie to the east. Rudy Wiebe first came to Lethbridge as a child in 1947 and still has family ties to the city. His text is an intimate portrait formed by the intermingling of memory and factual history. Wiebe’s meditations are on the landscape of history: place-names, Aboriginal oral histories, settlement, weather, the Japanese-Canadian presence, WW II prisoner of war camps, coal mining, business, industry, racism, childhood memory, golf course development, and the High Level Bridge (spanning the coulee, the Canadian Pacific Railway bridge is the most visually striking structure in town).

Wiebe begins a section of his text with an extended description of the ever-present wind in Lethbridge, a description rooted in deep familiarity. This familiarity is offset by Geoffrey James’s unfamiliarity. James’s photographs, in his words, “. . . make no claim to be a portrait of Lethbridge in any conventional sense.” James visited Lethbridge four times over the course of a year to produce a body of images expressing his particular view of the Place. His black-and-white photographs follow the manner of the New Topographic photographic movement of the 1970s filtered through the influences of Atget and Walker Evans. They are concerned with the urban edge and vernacular architecture rather than an appraisal of the city that would meet with the approval of the local Chamber of Commerce.

DON GILL
Department of Art
University of Lethbridge