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Review of *Community and Frontier: A Ukrainian Settlement in the Canadian Parkland* by John C. Lehr

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At first glance this slender volume appears to be nothing more than a study of one small and seemingly insignificant Ukrainian Canadian settlement located in the harsh bush country of southeastern Manitoba. Appearances can be deceiving. While Community and Frontier is most assuredly a case study, it is a brilliant little work—a true gem—that sparkles with intellectual vitality as it broadens our understanding of the entire Ukrainian Canadian experience, particularly in the pioneer phase.

The author, John Lehr, a well-respected historical geographer at the University of Winnipeg and an important contributor to the field of Ukrainian Canadian studies, has in some ways been doing the fieldwork that informs this project for the better part of 40 years—and his familiarity with the Stuartburn district and its people comes through on every page. More to the point, Lehr achieves his goal of using this subregion and its largely Ukrainian-speaking settlers to “demonstrate the complexity of pioneer settlement and community formation on the frontier” and fulfills his desire to illustrate the “crucial role played by geography in the evolution of new societies on the margins of the British Empire, where ‘regional’ colonies were created within much larger colonies in a hierarchy of dependence.” In meeting these rather grandiose objectives, Lehr has employed a broad array of sources, including ethnographic interviews (many of which date back to the 1970s), a host of archival sources, the Ukrainian- and English-language press, and an extensive set of published works, ranging from contemporary government reports up to the most recent scholarship on Ukrainian Canadians.

Organized into nine thematic chapters, and taking a decidedly postmodernist approach to the subject at hand, Community and Frontier places the Stuartburn district into several different contexts. The work starts with a well-considered analysis of how Ukrainian-speakers came to Canada at the close of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century and then moves into the specifics of the settling and colonization of the Stuartburn district. It is here that we see Lehr’s genius for moving from the general to the specific and back again come to the fore. His appreciation of the preexisting divisions among Ukrainian-speakers—often determined by religion, specific place of origin within the Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires, exposure to nationalist sentiment, etc.—allows him to go well beyond the usual “outsider’s view” and see the nascent Ukrainian Canadian community as a diverse and often deeply divided entity in the somewhat problematic process of creating a “Ukrainian identity,” even as it was being called upon to adapt to the norms and mores of the dominant British Canadian culture. In Lehr’s work there was no singular “old country” tradition at work in Stuartburn; instead, there were several conflicting traditions, all of which competed with each other as the settlers struggled to eke out a living—and a way of life—in a subregion hardly endowed with natural bounty.

What is most refreshing about this work is that Lehr is not looking for heroes or villains: the choice of the Stuartburn district by the Ukrainian-speaking settlers, with its marginal lands, swamp-like conditions, and tree cover, was not the result of the work of heartless agents of the Canadian state, bound and determined to fill up every last square centimeter of western land, nor of unthinking, ignorant settlers. Rather, the district was consciously chosen for its short-term advantages—such as easily accessible supplies of wood and water—and then grew and developed in spite of its long-term disadvantages as a farming district, primarily because of the well-studied phenomenon that is chain migration. Nor does Lehr shy away from aspects of life in Ukrainian communities that shine a less-than-flattering light upon his subjects: alcohol, ether and patent medicine abuse, domestic violence, criminality, anti-Semitism, virulent fights over matters of religious (and secular) affiliation are all dealt with in a manner that shows both sensitivity to the plight of the settlers and a keen appreciation of the cultural baggage that was transported by them to the Canadian frontier.

Most praiseworthy of all, however, is the way in which Lehr manages to surmount the parochialism inherent in so many case studies. While a central part of his argument is that settlements like Stuartburn developed their own unique “social, cultural, and economic resources” through the work of individuals and grassroots organizations, the author never loses sight of the larger picture of the Canadian “corporate frontier,” the partially determining effects of environment, the hierarchical relationship of hinterland regions to submetropolitan and metropolitan
centers, and other such structural factors. Indeed, at the end of the day, some readers will wonder if Harold Adams Innis, and perhaps Marx, have not had just as much an effect on Lehr’s analysis as Michel Foucault. But that is a moot point; indeed, I would argue that the perspectives are nicely balanced. What is not debatable is this: John Lehr has produced a work that deserves to be read by every serious student of the settlement process, the “frontier,” western Canadian history, ethnic history and—oh, yes—Ukrainian Canadian history. The only factor that demands further explication in this work is the role—often mentioned but rarely discussed in any detail—of the grassroots intelligentsia in the development of the Stuartburn district. This, however, is a minor flaw in an otherwise outstanding piece of work.

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