

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

1991

Review of Vulcan: The Making of a Prairie Community

David C. Jones

University of Calgary

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Jones, David C., "Review of Vulcan: The Making of a Prairie Community" (1991). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 623.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/623>

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.

Vulcan: The Making of a Prairie Community. By Paul Voisey. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988. Illustrations, photographs, maps, introduction, notes, bibliographical note, index. x + 341 pp. \$37.50 cloth, \$18.95 paper.

Vulcan is a long awaited study of the formation of communities in southern Alberta. It is an insightful rendition of the development of settlement, agriculture, social life, and society in the Canadian West. Starting with the common theoretical explanations of the origin and nature of western communities—including cultural, metropolis, frontier, and environmental hypotheses—it fashions a unique and complex interpretation.

Since few students have understood the settlement process and the homestead system as well as Voisey, many features stand out in this superb study. Again and again, Voisey takes exception to common myths. Settlers were not victims of an inhuman settlement policy; the real victims were those who hung on after the drop in property values. Western communities were not "sleepy, stable places," where the majority sought comfortable, permanent homes, but mobile and aggressive hubs dominated by the desire for wealth. *Vulcan*-area settlers were not particularly ignorant when they rejected the

barrage of mixed farming propaganda; their decision to specialize in wheat was well founded. The greatest numbers left not after the slump of the 1920s and 1930s, but while the net populations still escalated. Farm sizes did not increase because the homestead system failed to offer migrants enough turf to survive, but because large farmers coveted more land. And these same farmers failed not because of drought, flagging wheat prices, and over-extension of capital, but because technological and labor requirements made smaller family farms more efficient.

Voisey enhances his argument with thirteen maps, sixteen photos, and twenty-eight figures. His careful sifting of statistics will certainly satisfy all in the quantifying lobby, except fanatics. He has also converted reams of figures into easily comprehensible graphs, thus wisely avoiding a book of logarithms.

Vulcan, in sum, is a striking contribution to the historiography of settlement. It is difficult to criticize—especially for its omissions, for Voisey has made an impassioned plea for tolerance in readers who might wish for more.

Yet there is a sense in which this valued work leaves a longing. This form of history explains destiny in terms of culture, metropolis, frontier, and environment, but rather faint is the interaction of these shaping forces with *character*. There is at times a submergence of personality, or perhaps more precisely, a sprinkling of it, so that the creative powers of *individuals*, while still present, are not fully explored. It may be sacrilegious in the summer of social history to suggest that the testing of *personality* is the essence of existence. The study of such testing requires hard introspective questioning about ultimate meanings, about spiritual insight, about the larger lessons of individual odysseys.

Much of Voisey's period highlights adversity, yet how settlers handled this central fact of existence is only partially clear. The analysis of affliction requires thoughtful, reflective, and retrospective commentary, by the afflicted and the observer. And doubtless, some theory needs to be cast to handle the progressive reactions to hardship. God forbid, it may even entertain

the possibility of spiritual progression! The historian does not have to accept it; indeed, one essence of this book is its modification of most theories. Yet the questions—what is it about settlers' existence that lent it *substance*, that fulfilled them or thwarted them, and where did they stand on the question of human potential regardless of confinement and circumstance?—are crucial to settlers' ethical and self-critical evolvment and to the significance they attached to their experiences.

Rather too few pillars with moral force emerge in this study, too few comforters, servants, uplifters. Such models of tolerance, compassion, and affection exist in their own individual ways in every era, and perhaps more than all else, save immovable faith, enhance joy and give meaning to suffering.

Doubtless the pursuit of these concerns will lead to a sequel. But given the same stewardship, patience, and thoughtfulness Voisey has invested here, such pursuit will certainly shed an uncommon illumination on issues as unplumbed in the general literature as they are profound.

DAVID C. JONES
Faculty of Education
University of Calgary