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Fall 2002

**Review of *The Last Best West: Essays on the Historical  
Geography of the Canadian Prairies* by Yossi Katz and John C.  
Lehr**

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Traci, Carl J., "Review of *The Last Best West: Essays on the Historical Geography of the Canadian Prairies* by Yossi Katz and John C. Lehr" (2002). *Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences*. 632.

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**The Last Best West: Essays on the Historical Geography of the Canadian Prairies.** Yossi Katz and John C. Lehr. Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press, 1999. 243 pp. \$25.00 cloth.

John Lehr is well known for his longstanding interest in and intimate knowledge of Ukrainian and Mormon settlement in the Canadian West. More recently, he has teamed with Yossi Katz to examine Jewish settlement and to analyze the influence of institutional factors on settlement success. The purpose of this collection of previously-published papers is to contribute to a “full understanding” of frontier agricultural settlement through the use of a comparative approach that analyzes the role of culture and institutions (social, religious, and government) in the settlement experiences of several ethnic groups in western Canada. Chosen for detailed treatment are the groups noted above, with added chapters on the Mennonites (by John Warkentin) and the Hutterites (by Bill Laatsch). The authors also include references to the Doukhobors in the comparative chapters.

Chapters 1 through 6 offer a good introduction to five ethnic groups (two chapters are devoted to the Ukrainians) that transformed—albeit ephemerally in some cases—the natural landscape into distinctive cultural landscapes. Chapters 7 through 9 (“Religion, Culture and Settlement,” “Ethnicity, Institutions, and Landscape,” and “Institutions and Pioneer Settlements”) focus on comparative analyses. A conclusion (“Time, Space, and Society in Prairie Settlement”) summarizes the authors’ findings.

While the early chapters provide necessary detail on the settlement experiences of these groups, the collection’s strength lies in the comparative studies. The authors highlight the importance of a holistic perspective in

studies of the agricultural settlement frontier. Katz and Lehr maintain that in the face of (largely) unchanging administrative frameworks and physical environment as well as the region's unchanging isolation, it was the multi-faceted societies of a variety of ethnic groups that created the "rich mosaic of cultural landscapes" in the Canadian West. Further, it was the varying ways in which immigrant cultures and institutions interacted with the institutions of the host society that contributed to their success or failure. To ignore this important interaction, they argue, is to thwart a full understanding of the settlement experiences of these groups in the western Canadian agricultural frontier.

The material on the grasslands settlements of the Mormons, Jews, Mennonites, and Hutterites is of particular relevance to those interested in prairie frontier settlement in the United States, pointing to potentially fruitful comparisons with similar groups there.

Drawing together free-standing journal articles into a thematic collection results in some unwelcome repetition of basic material. Although limiting the collection to those groups investigated thoroughly by the authors is quite understandable, it does narrow the applicability of the comparative analysis. The papers by Warkentin and Laatsch add the settlement experiences of two significant ethnic groups, but little is made of them in the important comparative sections. Closer proofreading would have eliminated several unfortunate misprints. Some inconsistencies between articles (in the acreage granted the CPR and in the number of quarter sections in a township, for example) are, because of contiguity, perhaps more noticeable here than in the original sources.

Although not new material, the collection brings together important insights into the manner and relative success of the frontier experience of several ethnic groups in western Canada. It should stimulate questions and comparisons which otherwise might remain unexplored in the scattered original sources. **Carl J. Traci**, *Department of Geography, Trinity Western University, British Columbia*.