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Review of Settlers' Children: Growing Up on the Great Plains

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Settlers' Children: Growing Up on the Great Plains. By Elizabeth Hampsten. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991. Notes, selected bibliography, index. xii + 252 pp. \$22.95.

Elizabeth Hampsten wrote *Settlers' Children: Growing Up on the Great Plains* to answer some basic questions about the lives of children during the settlement era in North Dakota (with a few examples added from South Dakota and northwestern Minnesota). "What was it like for children in the first years of settlement . . . what did they think of their childhood?" (p. 3) she asks. To provide the answers she examines memoirs and other autobiographical materials written by people who were children on the Plains and also examines the writings of some plains mothers who detailed the lives of their children. Most of these people are "obscure" or unknown, although Hampsten does use the writings of Hamlin Garland to illustrate some concluding points. This is not a standard history by any means; in fact, it is not a history at all. Hampsten is an English professor and while she deals with the past in this book, she does so from the perspective of literary analysis and without the sense of time and context an historian would bring to the work. The result is a book that is

extremely frustrating for an historian to read and review. The raw materials are fascinating and readable. The author's understanding and interpretation of them is questionable.

Hampsten starts from the premise that while many people said that they moved west *for* their children's benefit, the result of the move was that children led brutal, degraded, and difficult lives in extreme poverty. They had to work on the new farms, family members died, educations were sacrificed, the litany of troubles and abuses goes on and on. It is the men who bear the guilt. They almost always initiated the move in some vain and foolish attempt to better the family's lot and never considered the impact on their wives and children. Men were poor parents, distant and cold, caught up in work and neglectful of their tender charges. The old country in this treatment is always a place of "care and safety" (p. 68) for children; the Plains is a nightmare of suffering. If Hampsten's interpretation is taken to its logical conclusion, she is arguing that no one should ever have risked the journey to the Plains, or anywhere else for that matter. The old home is always better, even if there is no work, little food, high mortality, and the Czar is going to conscript your sons. Hampsten's views and her choice of source material unwittingly seem to endorse the views of Camille Paglia, staunch anti-feminist and current flamboyant gadfly of the literary world, who likes to say that if women ran the world we would still be living in grass huts.

Another problem with the book is Hampsten's difficulty transcending her own middle-class, modern, urban values as she deals with her materials. Things appear strange and gruesome to her that are not at all so if the context is understood. For example, in one German-Russian family biography that explains daily life in some detail, one son likes to kill gophers and examine their insides. In the same memoir the family wrote of a bed haunted by the spirit of the women who had died in it giving birth. The family had the priest exorcise the home with no luck but finally cured the ghost problem by getting rid of the bed. Both of these episodes are typical of their time and place. Rural boys often

killed gophers; many counties paid bounties for them. If this boy had some scientific curiosity and investigated the biology of his prey, more power to him. The family ghost story is representative of peasant folk culture. Even today the Catholic church conducts some exorcisms. It may seem strange to the more scientifically minded but it was not unusual in the culture of those whose lives the memoirs reveal. Yet Hampsten sees oddities and even horror everywhere. She also seems to suspect some kind of conspiracy of silence when a more typical boosterish account of the German-Russian family's hometown focuses on the growth of the town and a history of its businesses rather than the strange or odd. "The article ignores ghosts and eviscerated gophers in favor of the number of buildings and their position on the block" (p. 223), she writes. Of course it does! The memoir of the ghosts and gophers is a personal story of family memory. The history of the town is a public profession of its past and its faith in the future. The two do not necessarily contradict each other. Because one family believed in ghosts does not negate the fact that the community had grown and flourished economically. *Settlers' Children* is full of this sort of misapprehension.

This is a strange book but it does have a redeeming point. The autobiographical materials are excellent and Hampsten often lets the authors speak for themselves at length. These materials make the book worthwhile. For those who want a surer, clearer interpretation of children's lives in the west, however, Elliott West's book *Growing Up With the Country: Childhood on the Far Western Frontier* remains the best choice.

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