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Review of *Main Street in Crisis: The Great Depression and the Old Middle Class on the Northern Plains* By Catherine McNicol Stock

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Main Street in Crisis: The Great Depression and the Old Middle Class on the Northern Plains. By Catherine McNicol Stock. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992. Introduction, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. xiii + 305 pp. \$37.50.

The analysis in this book rests on the contention that by the time of the Great Depression there existed on the northern Plains a broad commonality of culture and interest that may be termed "the old middle class." The old middle class was a petty-producer class comprising both town and country. It espoused such values as hard work, egalitarianism, and community service, enforcing them through community organizations and public ritual. When a new middle class, the bureaucrats of the New Deal, proposed fundamental reforms in the society and economy of the Plains, they found Dakotans receptive to aid—of course, given the magnitude of the emergency—but stubbornly resistant to reform. It was the common values of the old middle class that laid the groundwork for its defense.

Evaluation of *Main Street in Crisis* depends on whether the reader is willing to believe in the overriding importance of this "old middle

class" in Dakota culture. The reader who accepts the premise will be delighted with the book and will devour the chapter-essays delving into the Farm Holiday Association, farm women, freemasonry, and the North Dakota capitol building. The reader who rejects the premise—and it is not one that can be proved or disproved, only argued—will judge the book sadly in error (although the same reader still may enjoy the narrative's engaging details).

It would be unfair to dismiss *Main Street in Crisis*, as many scholars and residents of the region may be inclined to do, as one more, albeit sophisticated, attempt to brand the people of the Plains as reactionaries. It would be quite in order, however, to point out that the peoples of the Dakotas were (and are) deeply divided by ethnicity, religion, locality, and occupation; and that the perceived common values of the old middle class may be merely coincidental responses by diverse peoples to the colonial conditions described by Elwyn B. Robinson thirty years ago.

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