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Review of *The Persistence of Ethnicity: Dutch Calvinist Pioneers in Amsterdam, Montana* By Rob Kroes

Frederick C. Luebke

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, fredluebke@comcast.net

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The Persistence of Ethnicity: Dutch Calvinist Pioneers in Amsterdam, Montana. By Rob Kroes. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992. Appendix, bibliographical essay, indexes. 161 pp. \$29.95.

One small island in the archipelago of ethnicity found in the northern Plains and western mountains of the United States is a rural colony of Dutch Calvinists in the Gallatin

Valley near Bozeman, Montana. Founded about a century ago, this community of farm families has retained a strong ethnic identity down to the present time. Rob Kroes, chair of the Department of American Studies at the University of Amsterdam, unexpectedly encountered this patch of Dutch ethnicity in his American travels. He was captivated by what he found and ultimately wrote this book about it.

The Persistence of Ethnicity is not just another digest of desiccated social data but an engaging account, exceptionally well written, that probes the role of religion in the maintenance of ethnicity in the American West. Atypical perhaps in the small size and isolated location of the area of its focus, this case study is all the more valuable because these very characteristics (combined with the availability of excellent sources) allow Kroes to explore and test his ideas with ease.

Following an introductory chapter on the conceptual foundations of his interpretation, Kroes places his Montana Dutch within the context of emigration from the Low Country to the American high country, emphasizing environmental conditions, economic adaptations, and the inseparability of church membership and national origin among Dutch Calvinists. Two chapters demonstrate brilliantly how an imaginative scholar can exploit collections of family letters for research purposes. In the last two chapters Kroes develops his thesis that, paradoxically, internal conflicts over religion explain the persistence of ethnicity. He argues that intense debates about sin, grace, and predestination were the source of vitality among the Amsterdam Dutch. Theological divisiveness produced the glue that bound these people together in "their conviction of being a covenanted people" (p. 9).

Kroes's paradox is at once the chief strength and weakest link in the chain of his argument. As a close student of both Dutch and American culture and language, he has mastered the intricacies of Calvinist theology, the historical debates between champions of orthodoxy

and pietism, and their manifestations in Dutch-American Calvinist denominations and the colony in Amsterdam, Montana. But Kroes is too closely tied to the sociological orthodoxies that have guided sophisticated research in the persistence of ethnicity and its boundaries, all of which interpret religious faith as an auxiliary force in a fascinating social process. This leads him to present much evidence supporting the frequently expressed view by Dutch Montanans that "the secret of their continued communal existence is in their church and common faith" (p. 100). But this, he says, is too simple, because some people of Dutch ancestry retain an interest in Dutch ethnicity even though they have moved out of the circle of Christian Reformed faith. He thus makes no distinction between mere nostalgia and the deep ethnoreligious identity that has the capacity to influence, often unconsciously, the decisions of everyday life. Kroes is unwilling to let ethnicity serve religion; he insists on theoretical grounds—and contrary to his best evidence—that it must be the other way around.

This objection aside, Kroes's book is a joy to read. His mastery of English (apparently not his mother tongue) is stunning. Engaging metaphors abound. Although his style is often personalized, it is neither intrusive nor self-centered, unlike much contemporary journalism. His interpretations of behaviors and phenomena are subtly nuanced and impressively erudite. Although Kroes never makes comparisons with other ethnoreligious immigrant communities in the United States, possibilities abound, particularly with rural Lutherans from Germany and Scandinavia and German-speaking Mennonites and Hutterites from Russia.

FREDERICK C. LUEBKE
Department of History
University of Nebraska-Lincoln