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Review of *Town Life: Main Street and the Evolution of Small Town Alberta, 1880-1947* By Donald G. Wetherell and Irene R.A. Kmet

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Town Life: Main Street and the Evolution of Small Town Alberta, 1880-1947. By Donald G. Wetherell and Irene R.A. Kmet. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1995. Photographs, maps, abbreviations, appendices, notes, comment on primary sources, bibliography, index. xix + 368 pp. \$24.95 paper.

Town Life is the first in a series of provincial centennial commemorative volumes intended to explore neglected aspects of Alberta history. It greatly expands the focus of Wetherell and Kmet's previous Alberta-centered studies on the symbiotic relationship between leisure and provincial culture and on the evolution of domestic architecture. The authors justify their current study on the solid ground that town life is an important topic much neglected by historians and others hitherto preoccupied with urban and farm experiences. As they point out, the town, after all,

has been "a meeting point for urban and farm lives," playing an essential role "in binding together urban and rural communities." Wetherell and Kmet are sympathetic to the notion that villages and towns more than cities are likely to reflect a region's particular character.

In their search for the essence of town life and the nature of its contribution to Alberta's urban development, the authors fix their attention on the Main Street where business and social life centered. They identify Main Street as the primary manifestation of a community's perception of itself and its future. For their purpose Wetherell and Kmet have selected nine small towns they see as representative of Alberta's major economic areas and phases of the province's economic history. Given their intention to create a composite picture of town life, they do not properly explain their rationale for selecting certain towns over other communities that are arguably more appropriate. It is not clear, for example, what advantage lay in selecting two mining towns located virtually side by side when other mining town alternatives were available, or, in the first place, why three of the nine selected towns should be coal-mining centers. A series of related questions come to mind. Why did the authors elect not to include one of the emerging oil towns representative of the developing petroleum industry in the interwar period? Did they think of including one of the more ethnically diverse farm service centers in the park belt?

After considering various aspects of town formation, the political and economic life of towns, as well as the development of Main Street and community life, the authors offer a number of conclusions. One of their more important observations is that external forces rather than local initiative and entrepreneurialism invariably had a much greater impact on determining which towns would grow and which would fall behind. They also show the critical role towns played during this period in establishing the primacy of Anglo-Canadian culture. Other primary conclusions

such as the assertion that “through their domination of local government and their status as community leaders, main street interests shaped the economic, social and cultural priorities of towns” do not take the reader significantly beyond conventional wisdom. For this reason the concluding chapter is disappointing: it does not do full justice to the promise of the introduction or the potential of the discussion in the body of the work, especially the several excellent chapters that comprise the “Main Street and Community Life” section.

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