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Review of *Settling the Canadian-American West, 1890- 1915: Pioneer Adaptation and Community Building* By John W. Bennett and Seena B. Kohl

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Settling the Canadian-American West, 1890-1915: Pioneer Adaptation and Community Building. By John W. Bennett and Seena B. Kohl. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995. Maps, charts, tables, notes, bibliography, index. xiii + 295 pp. \$50.00.

In *Settling the Canadian-American West*, anthropologists John W. Bennett and Seena B. Kohl focus on the common cultural legacy of what they describe as the "Canadian-Ameri-

can West Heartland"—an area roughly conforming to Paul Sharp's "Whoop-up Country" in southeastern Alberta, southwestern Saskatchewan, and the northern "Montana Hi-Line." The authors' question concerning the enduring influences of the frontier is an important one, and there are historiographical reasons for uniting the region. Unfortunately, this study ultimately disappoints.

The book's title is misleading since the study itself is less a binational approach to settlement than an exploration of the shared heritage of a specific community. But, in their search for sameness, the authors tend to ignore relevant national differences in favor of environmental influences, summed up as "adapt or die." This often leads to oversimplification and unexplored contradictions that weaken their arguments. For example, the emphasis on rugged individualism encourages a consumer approach to emigration and resettlement, obscuring the "push" factors that stimulated mass migrations in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Similarly, stereotypical images of the "lone pioneer" and the male values he represents are problematic for an analysis of women's frontier experiences.

In part, these problems reflect the limitations of the authors' sources. Much of the history surveyed here relies on secondary sources, often incorporating old narratives that have been superseded. The study of cultural legacy rests on the local histories of the region, written by those three and four generations removed from original settlement. This is not a history of the "stayers"—a minority of all immigrants and a fraction of those who settled in the area—but the remembered history of the "stayers" as told by their descendants. The "frontier value system" that emerges as the cultural legacy of the western heartland romanticizes settlement experiences, valorizing the against-all-odds struggle of an elite group of founders and closing off enquiry into the cultural purposes the legacy serves.

The idea that "staying" is the acid test of the "pioneering spirit" that underpins the heartland's cultural legacy remains unexamined.

Perhaps the more successful “adaptive” behavior was leaving. We never find out because the “leavers”—according to local lore, the “not serious,” the uncommitted, impatient, ambitious, and highly social—never get to tell their story. Yet the “leavers” loom large in the dominant narratives of generations of “stayers,” making their struggles all the more heroic by contrast.

Most interesting, and most telling of all, are the autobiographical sketches of some of the “stayers” that form the book’s final chapter. These life stories underscore the explanatory inadequacies of such familiar tropes as rugged individualism and extreme egalitarianism that Bennett and Kohl see as the heartland’s legacy. They suggest that “successful adaptation” was less a question of moral character than a matter of access to material and psychological resources.

The authors raise a number of interesting issues but miss the opportunity to explore the question at the heart of their investigation: beyond sustaining the original settlement project, what purpose does the cultural legacy of the frontier serve? Whose community-building narratives does it underwrite and why? This study will be of limited usefulness to those seeking further understanding of the legacy of colonization and settlement in Canada or the United States.

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