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Review of *The Prairie Schoolhouse* by John Martin Campbell

Sally Salisbury Stoddard

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, sally.stoddard@windstream.net

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The Prairie Schoolhouse. By John Martin Campbell. Foreword by Tony Hillerman. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996. Foreword, preface, photographs, bibliography. xvi + 150 pp. \$60 cloth, \$29.95 paper.

John Martin Campbell, in this fine book consisting of sixty black and white, well-conceived photographic plates and explicative text, has created an evocative picture of the prairie schoolhouses, the age from which they sprang, their environment, and the people for whom these formulaic structures fulfilled many functions. Older folks who grew up in the largely poor, rural areas of the vast American prairies will easily identify with Tony Hillerman's anecdote in the foreword, and they will surely experience a deep nostalgia and a profound sadness for the decay of the schoolhouse concept as well as the decay of the physical structures and all that they symbolized. Times were hard in an often alien and forbidding climate on the prairies, and life at best was a constant struggle for those who persisted. Even the graininess of the images becomes a metaphor for the true grit required for these prairie children to garner an education while their families struggled to survive and thrive in the face of drought, blizzard, poverty, sickness, and death.

Campbell tells stories best in his images of interior details of the schoolhouses themselves. These are close-ups not just of a physical structure but of a learning structure as well: the raised teacher's platform extending across

the far, narrow end of the single room; the roller-mounted wall maps inviting the reader to pull one down to see how much the world of those early pupils has changed in the intervening years; the wainscoting and chair rail protecting walls against deterioration; the Palmer-method penmanship prototypes forming the upper blackboard border. Outdoors the playground equipment and outhouses, being necessary adjuncts of the time, add important elements to the story.

Surprisingly, the photographs even evoke the sound of singsong recitations of the pupils and the rap of the teacher's ruler calling the class to order and the shouts of children playing tag in the long grass of the schoolyard. What more might we have learned if Campbell had chosen to include excerpts of prairie schoolhouse memories in the words of some of those children now grown old? Perhaps we would better understand the sense of personal development and community-building which these structures represented and which our larger schools of today often cannot sustain. Nevertheless, Campbell's photographs and accompanying text paint the prairie schoolhouses large with the love of learning.

SALLY STODDARD
Lincoln, Nebraska