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**Review of *Writing Off the Rural West: Globalization, Governments, and the Transformation of Rural Communities* Edited by Roger Epp and Dave Whitson**

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**Writing Off the Rural West: Globalization, Governments, and the Transformation of Rural Communities.** Edited by Roger Epp and Dave Whitson. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press and the Parkland Institute, 2001. xxxv+330 pp. Notes. \$34.95 paper.

Emerging from a conference on globalization and rural communities held in Edmonton in 1997, *Writing Off the West's* seventeen chapters (plus a short afterword by prominent rural activist Nettie Wiebe) focus on the decline of rural communities in western Canada and the difficulties some rural people face when adapting to socioeconomic changes caused by globalization and freer international markets.

Most of the volume's twenty-four authors specialize in sociology, geography, political science, and history. Curiously, not one of them has any background in agricultural economics, a discipline that has studied issues pertaining to family farms, rural economies, and globalization intensively throughout the past several decades. Though not invalidating what the authors have to say, this does leave the reader wondering whether something is missing in their arguments and analyses.

The book does a compelling job describing the symptoms of decline in rural communities across western Canada. Indeed, the stark images the editors evoke of driving along a secondary highway where the "horizon is bereft of the familiar elevators that once announced towns and villages," where "the pavement is likely patched or broken," where "the road is virtually empty save for tandem trucks that spin a rock at your windshield," elicit feelings of hopelessness and despair throughout the region and far beyond. Certainly, they reflect the economic difficulties faced by the

hardworking and entrepreneurial people who populate this large region of the Canadian federation.

Several of the authors wax nostalgically about the Prairie of the past, as though the economic and social conditions of thirty years ago, fifty years ago, or even eighty years ago, produced an ideal and even prosperous agricultural industry and wonderful living conditions. This vision does not match the region's history. Ever since the Prairie provinces were settled in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, their agricultural-based economies have been subjected to the vagaries of harsh and uncompromising international markets for their (mostly) export crops, relentless downward pressure on (real) commodity prices (as a result of new technologies), lack of suitable and sufficient opportunities for diversification or off-farm employment, and outward migration.

It is difficult to avoid the feeling that many of the authors have been looking too closely at the symptoms of the problems and not trying hard enough to understand underlying causes. Governments receive much criticism throughout the book for opening the economy by signing international trade agreements, allowing agricultural research to become privatized and patented, and insufficiently supporting (that is, subsidizing) a primary industry in Canada. But primary producers in western Canada have long agitated for rules-based international trading agreements that would give them more secure access to the markets they need for their produce. Only 20 to 25 percent of Prairie wheat production is sold to Canadian consumers in a normal year.

While subsidies going to the agricultural industry have been reduced in the last decade, continuing subsidies represent a major part of farm incomes in western Canada, remaining far higher than they were at any time before the 1980s, a period claimed by several authors to have been more prosperous in rural areas. Furthermore, there is convincing evidence that subsidies have damaged the rural economy over time rather than strengthened it. Contrary to what is stated several times in the book, governments have not had an explicit policy to remove farmers from the land. Rather, many government programs have tried to do just the opposite: keep smaller farmers on the land. These undoubtedly have exacerbated the economic situation in rural Canada over the years.

Although the authors paint a rather dismal picture of a disintegrating industry and a dying way of life, they present little more than anecdotal evidence in support of their arguments. It is not difficult to find contrary evidence of commercial farmers and rural leaders who are optimistic and

looking to the future with enthusiasm. When *Maclean's* (the national weekly news magazine) printed an article on the misery and distress in rural Saskatchewan (complete with black-and-white photos), the president of the Saskatchewan Urban Municipalities Association (SUMA) responded with a sharply critical letter complaining about the article's tone of pessimism and despair and pointing to the many growing communities, new business investments on farms and in small towns, and the pride and spirit of the people of Saskatchewan.

The authors' empathy for an industry and a way of life undergoing financial stress is admirable. Several chapters are carefully researched and well written, including one on the two solitudes of rural white and aboriginal communities in Saskatchewan, one on declining health services in rural areas, and one on political conflicts that occur when urban people (most with good jobs) try to prevent rural-based industries from being established. There is no question that the social and political pressures facing rural people are enormous as they continually struggle to adjust to an ever-changing world. However, the enduring optimism that characterizes rural people throughout the world is clearly present in the rural areas of western Canada. This book fails to capture that "can do" and "never say die" spirit. As the president of SUMA remarked, their "optimism [is] undiminished by hard times and unburdened by the gravity of the challenges ahead." **K. K. Klein**, *Department of Economics, University of Lethbridge*.