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Review of The Minds of the West: Ethnocultural Evolution in the Rural Middle West, 1830-1917. By Jon Gjerde

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The Minds of the West: Ethnocultural Evolution in the Rural Middle West, 1830–1917. By Jon Gjerde. (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1997. xiii + 426 pp. \$39.95)

Although this highly structured book is in some respects narrowly based, it is also a synthesis of considerable magnitude that coordinates the thought and research of many historians who, since the late 1960s, have studied the assimilative experiences of European immigrants in the United States. Jon Gjerde, whose first book brilliantly analyzed the emigration from Balestrand, Norway, to the upper Middle West, now centers on the cultural contrasts and conflicts that evolved between northern European immigrants and native-born migrants from the northeastern United States as the Middle West was settled in the nineteenth century.

For Gjerde the Middle West is merely the place where this cultural interaction occurred. He makes no serious effort to assess environmental variables. He identifies the region as a fertile agricultural area that was opened to settlement at a time when literally millions of Americans and Europeans sought new homes in the middle of the continent. It was a huge but lightly populated area where people of varying cultures could create highly homogeneous communities that insulated them from significant interactions with people of other languages, values, customs, and traditions.

Although Gjerde draws extensively on the work of other ethnocultural and immigration historians, he grounds his analysis on primary research necessarily limited by place and language. Norwegian Lutherans and German Catholics in Minnesota and Iowa are his major sources. Other ethnoreligious groups such as German Lutherans, the Dutch Reformed, and Irish Catholics are frequently cited, but some groups not uncommon in the rural Middle West, such as Czechs and Poles, are absent. Gjerde also makes effective use of novels about immigrants by such writers as Hamlin Garland, Ruth Suckow, and Herbert Quick.

The heart of Gjerde's book is the contrasts he draws between two cultural complexes he calls "minds." The American mind, rooted in New England Puritanism, was individualistic, pietistic, nativist, and progressive, fostering democracy and economic development; the European mind was corporatist, particularist, authoritarian, and creedal, valuing collectivist institutions, notably family, church, and guild. Gjerde traces divisions and frictions created by these two competing mentalities. Often framed in spiritual and moral terms, they affected household systems, gender divisions of labor, land distribution, inheritance patterns, family relationships, and politics, notably issues of women's suffrage, schools, and prohibition.

Although the grandeur of his conceptual architecture sometimes leads him to underestimate the range of behaviors within a given group, American or European immigrant, Gjerde also stresses the persistence of intra-ethnic diversity as well as inter-ethnic rivalries within large religious groups. It was precisely such interactions that stimulated the creation of immigrant institutions that were initially protective and productive of ethnic consciousness. They muted localistic or regional differences. A German-language newspaper, for example, had the effect of glossing over the deep differences between Bavarians, Holsteiners, Rhinelanders, and Pomeranians, making Germans of them all. "Ethnicity" is thus a product of American, not European, experience.

At bedrock, Gjerde's account is assimilationist: He shows how inter- and intragroup frictions and conflicts shaped the evolution of rural Midwesterners and attenuated their differences. This is not an easy book to read, but it deserves careful study by all historians interested in American social history, especially multiculturalists.

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