

*Main Street in Crisis: The Great Depression and the Old Middle Class on the Northern Plains*, by Catherine McNicol Stock. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992. xiii, 305 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, appendix, bibliography, index. \$37.50 cloth.

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In the past fifty years, a myriad of studies have been done on national economic and social programs spawned by the Great Depression. But during recent years historians have begun to move away from a national focus and examine individual state responses to the thirties. This is a much needed development. Catherine McNicol Stock's *Main Street in Crisis: The Great Depression and the Old Middle Class on the Northern Plains* is such a book. Stock centers her study on the experiences of the old middle class (in North and South Dakota), which she defines as men and women who own the means of production on a small scale, such as farmers and small merchants, primarily of Anglo or Scandinavian background.

In examining how the old middle class worked to protect "the independent authority" of their culture and their economic dominance, Stock examines a wide variety of programs and institutions, including Dakotans' response to and participation in New Deal programs, particularly the AAA; activities of Dakotans in farm protest groups such as the Farm Holiday Association; and the response of the largest fraternal group, the Masonic Order, to hard times. Stock also examines women's experiences in the Great Depression. In perhaps the most unusual chapter, Stock details North Dakotans' efforts to build a new state capitol after the original burned in the early thirties. Stock sees this effort as an example of how Dakotans developed coping strategies to deal with unwanted change. Frustrated in their attempts to construct a traditional structure with local labor, North Dakotans accepted the resulting modern statehouse by imbuing it with the ambience of pioneer life. This they accomplished in two ways: first, by placing a statue of a pioneer family on the statehouse grounds; and second, by inviting old-timers as special guests to the dedication, and then praising their hard work to settle the area. Somehow by surrounding the new building with the "spirit of a pioneer people," the new edifice became acceptable.

The author offers a valuable analysis of the old middle class and its efforts to retain power. She also moves far beyond those considerations. In writing on Dakota women, for example, Stock provides a good sense of women's self-perceptions of their work and contributions to their families and communities. At another point, she provides an insightful view of Dakota literature and how

authors such as Rose Wilder Lane viewed the impact of the Great Depression on pioneer values.

Through all of these activities, Stock searches for the response of the old middle class to economic hardship and pressure for change. She concludes that the group lost power, especially to the new middle class ("the postproducerists"), which she describes as "county agents, advertisers, relief officials, social workers, photographers, government-sponsored club organizers, and chain store managers" (207). The old middle class, "through a myriad of strategies," tried to understand the new world and "to find renewed meaning in the old" (208).

Throughout, Stock presents an accurate view of Dakotans' cultural and economic views. To this reviewer, having grown up in central South Dakota, the description and assessment of the old middle class, their views on subjects such as welfare and their attitudes toward nonproducers (as contrasted to their role as producers) ring particularly true. As Stock so clearly shows, life in this area was not as simplistic as sometimes assumed, but just as complex and worthy of study as any area in the country.

One major aspect of the study, however, might give some readers pause. In combining the histories of North and South Dakota, the author is obviously ignoring some differences. Although the states are contiguous, their geographical and climatic features differ somewhat, as do the backgrounds of their populations. In a study of this type, it is difficult to give the reader a sharp sense of differences between North and South Dakotans, and Stock does not attempt to. Rather, she mutes the differences. It also seems that the study does not give equal attention to both states, but rather emphasizes the experiences of North Dakotans.

Overall, however, this is an excellent study. While it includes agriculture and the farm population, it really provides the first solid study of small-town society in the northern plains that includes a good sense of social class, community values, and response to a time of need. It would be extremely worthwhile if other scholars would follow Stock's lead and do similar studies of other midwestern states.

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