

Book Reviews

North Dakota: A History, by Robert P. and Wynona H. Wilkins. New York: W. W. Norton, and Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1977. pp. xii, 218. Illustrations, maps, notes, suggestions for further reading, index. \$9.95.

In *North Dakota: A History*, Robert and Wynona Wilkins of the University of North Dakota have presented an honest and straightforward treatment of the North Dakota experience. Within the space limitations imposed by the editors of the States and the Nation series, the authors have captured much of the flavor of the state and the essence of its past without succumbing to the local chauvinism which so often mars state studies.

As the Wilkins recount it, the North Dakota experience is not a very happy one. A marginal land, treeless, arid, and beset by a cruel climate, North Dakota became home for those pushed out of more habitable regions. First Indians expelled from the forests by stronger tribes, then Norwegians and Germans forced out of Europe by poverty and oppression formed the bases of North Dakota's population. The Indians adjusted to the area, but the whites attempted to adjust the area to themselves, practicing the same kind of agriculture and developing the same institutions which worked in more temperate, better-watered regions. At times they were successful, but continuing physical problems, the isolation of the state from market areas, and the overwhelming economic dependence on wheat led to severe economic crises, particularly during the 1930s when drought, dust, and depression combined to bring incredible hardship to North Dakota.

The Wilkins explain the state's political radicalism by referring to its marginal nature. North Dakota has the most truly radical political heritage of any state in the Union, and it is appropriate that the authors devote much of their attention to politics. From the Nonpartisan League days on the eve of World War I through the red-baiting years of the early fifties, colorful characters like Lynn Frazier, Gerald Nye, William Lemke, William Langer, and Usher Burdick espoused a native, agrarian-oriented radicalism which stressed selective public ownership, popular government, and isolation in foreign affairs. Their thinking, the authors contend, was not analytical, but was characterized by a fear of domestic and foreign conspiracies against the public interest by selfish people, usually capitalists. The Wilkins note that this radical activity resulted in the creation of a few state-owned enterprises. Ironically, given the conservative thrust of their thesis, they claim that these enterprises failed because they were not extensive enough. Aside from that, the Wilkins believe radicalism succeeded

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only in giving the state a national image of foolishness and immaturity. The authors believe that this radicalism was misdirected. Instead of Minneapolis millers and British bankers, the real oppressors of the state were the physical conditions which made it marginal, and by not addressing these the radicals disserved the state. This argument, inspired by Richard Hofstadter's famous attack on the Populists, is the most disturbing portion of a generally admirable book. The Wilkins' thesis carries the deeply conservative and very American implication that one's problems are probably one's own fault and are certainly one's own responsibility. To apply this thesis to the North Dakota political heritage is to besmirch a basically decent and humane part of the state's experience and to distort reality. There may be no simple conspiracy to exploit us among those who dominate our society and our economy, but there is agreement among them that they should continue to dominate, even if that entails the exploitation of others. And to say that the basic problems of a people derive from geography or climate or limited resources does not change that fact. People who live in marginal places like North Dakota may, because of the hardships of their lives, have a heightened consciousness of the inequalities and exploitations of an economic and social system. It is both cruel and wrong to imply that they invest these exploitations and inequalities as a means of ignoring their real problems.

The Wilkins believe the recession of radicalism after World War II was part of a more general maturation in North Dakota. As David Plowden's fine photographic essay illustrates, isolation, climatic severity, a stark landscape, and sparse population continue to characterize the state. But North Dakotans have made an uneasy peace with their environment, aided by modern transportation, communications, and conveniences. The authors believe that North Dakotans are also at peace with themselves, proud of their contributions to the nation and comfortable in a society which honors the home, the church, and traditional American values. With maturity has also come a degree of prosperity which has allowed more people to stay in the state and enjoy the advantages it offers.

The Wilkins have painted an honest portrait of North Dakota, and they have refused to paint over the problems and shortcomings in the state's experience. That they love North Dakota is clear, but they love it with open eyes. By loving the state honestly, they have served both it and history well.

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