

Prevailing Over Time: Ethnic Adjustment on the Kansas Prairies, 1875-1925, by D. Aidan McQuillan. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990. xix, 292 pp. Graphs, charts, tables, notes, appendixes, index. \$37.50 cloth.

REVIEWED BY ROBERT P. SWIERENGA, KENT STATE UNIVERSITY

"Land makes a people" was the simple dictum of Frederick Jackson Turner to explain the frontier process, but James C. Malin insisted that human ingenuity could surmount the limitations of any physical environment. Malin thus prepared the way intellectually for a generation of scholars in the 1970s and 1980s to explore the influences of Old Country ways among European rural peasants who took up farming on the midwestern frontier. These scholars, among whom D. Aidan McQuillan is prominent, grant environmental givens but believe that settlers' religio-cultural values and economic goals had as much, if not more, influence on their farming behavior as did climate and soils.

McQuillan, a historical geographer and student of the late Andrew Hill Clark, has devoted most of his career to the study of ethnic group farming behavior in Kansas and the Midwest, beginning with his dissertation research in the early 1970s on which this book builds. *Prevailing Over Time* is the fruit of this research. It offers the first methodologically sophisticated analysis of this important subject. The author stands squarely in the pluralist camp. He shows that ethnic components of culture, religion, language, territoriality, and particularly social values influenced group members to farm differently.

The locus of McQuillan's meticulous and nuanced study is a thirty-two county area in the prairie plains transition zone of central Kansas. He compares Mennonite, Swedish, and French-Canadian farmers with each other and with a control group of American-born farmers. For each of the Kansas decennial censuses from 1875 to 1925, McQuillan sampled farm operators in six townships, two for each ethnic group, with one located in the center of the community and one on the fringe. Highly clustered ethnics could thus be compared with their less isolated brethren. (Clustering had little effect, McQuillan finds.) McQuillan also used deed records to map land ownership changes.

The three ethnic groups were well-chosen, for they form a work-ethnic continuum, with the clannish, thrifty, and industrious Mennonites on one extreme; the clannish but indolent and inefficient French Canadians on the other; and the diligent but more individualistic Swedes in the center. McQuillan does not explain why he ignored the

largest foreign-born group, the Germans, but one suspects they were too difficult to isolate for study because of their numerous subgroups. The Russian Mennonites, of course, were of German stock.

The book follows a chronological pattern, beginning with the immigrants' Old Country background, the founding and growth of the ethnic communities in Kansas, their economic advancement, and, most important, their farming decisions over the fifty years. Technical details, including the meticulous process of selecting the sample townships and calculating population turnover, persistence rates, crop yields, and farm income, are wisely relegated to appendixes.

McQuillan's major conclusion is that the farming systems of the three ethnic groups converged over time, although substantial differences persisted, particularly among the Mennonites. The French-Canadians and Swedes farmed quite similarly to each other and to their American neighbors. The Swedes were the "most uncertain," the French-Canadians the "least cautious," whereas the Mennonites displayed an "uncanny ability" to create the best balance in farming decisions. McQuillan rightfully cautions that ecological adjustment did not necessarily signify Americanization, since the immigrant Mennonites adapted most readily. They had farmed the arid Russian Steppes, where the climate and rainfall were similar to that in central Kansas, whereas the American farmers suffered from their prior conditioning in the humid Mississippi River valley. Moreover, the information flow did not always pass one way, from Americans to immigrants; the Mennonites instructed their neighbors on successful Kansas farming methods.

McQuillan is that rare geographer who avoids the trap of geographical determinism, but occasionally he yields to temptation, as when he states that the open Kansas landscape "seemed to overwhelm" the immigrants and create "problems of anomie" because the "accepted wisdom from an earlier home had short life on the Kansas prairies" (192, cf. 200). The author also overemphasizes the impact on the immigrants' landscape of the rectangular survey system with its dispersed homesteads. Most European farmers had made the transition from peasant villages to individual farmsteads before emigrating to America. That the ethnic farmers in Kansas were as mobile as their American neighbors should not be surprising (196), because recent research into European society reveals that laborers were frequently on the move. But to his credit, McQuillan allows that social forces, ethnic networks, and religious values were as important as environmental forces.

Because of the quantitative and technical nature of this book, it will be cited more than read. Yet it offers the first comparative analysis

of immigrant adjustment in agriculture and will serve as the baseline against which to measure future research. Hopefully, some scholar will be inspired to try a similar study of Iowa, perhaps including German Lutheran, Irish Catholic, and Dutch Reformed farm colonies. *Prevailing Over Time* highlights the elusive ethnocultural dimension in pioneer farming that is missing in James C. Malin's *Winter Wheat in the Golden Belt of Kansas*.

Settlers' Children: Growing Up on the Great Plains, by Elizabeth Hampsten. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991. xii, 252 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$22.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY DEBORAH FINK, AMES, IOWA

Children made up well over half of the population of the plains in the early years of settlement. Now these children are beginning to emerge as proper historical subjects. Good. After all, the experience of children, more than that of any other group, shaped the future of plains society. *Settlers' Children* is a welcome addition to the small body of midwestern history written from the perspective of its youngest and least articulate inhabitants. Centering on the European-American population of North Dakota, Elizabeth Hampsten draws from both historical narratives and interview narratives to reconstruct the world of these children.

Children's history grows out of the interrelated disciplines of family history and women's history. Women's history has deepened our understanding of the family by helping to document its complexity and the significance of economic activity which historical subjects themselves tended to discount. This, together with women's close association with children, links children's and women's history in both theory and substance. Hampsten, already known for her work in women's history, draws this connection.

Going beyond the myths of health and abundance in the fertile West, Hampsten presents a more troubling and more complex picture of overwork, minimal education, and early death. She leaves open the question of whether or to what extent these conditions were peculiar to the plains or whether they merely intensified a pattern existing in prairie states, in eastern states, and in northern Europe. Existing studies of the lives of European and eastern American children may provide the basis for further study and comparison. The subject matter might well be applied to a parallel examination of rural children in Iowa.

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.