

Review

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Francoise Noël. *Family and Community Life in Northeastern Ontario: The Interwar Years*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill Kingston University Press, 2009. 349 pp. ISBN: 978-0-7735-3592-3.

In *Family and Community Life in Northeastern Ontario* historian Francoise Noël focuses her attention on a specific “study area,” one which runs along the border between Ontario and Quebec and includes six townships and three urban areas from North Bay to Mattawa. It is an area economically dominated by the railway, logging, farming, and mining. It is ethnically diverse and religiously shaped by the “conflict with Catholic hierarchy for control of the Ottawa Valley [...] and the entire region to the north” (4). Noël argues that the conflict between French and English Canadians, Catholics and Protestants, affected the degree of interaction between the towns and surrounding townships, facts which guided her choice of the term “study area” over the social and economic coherence implied by the term “region” (4). After describing the settlement of the area, Noël includes chapters on everyday routines of family life and the household economy; celebrations and domestic occasions such as Christmas and New Years; the rituals surrounding rites of passage like weddings and funerals; congregational community life; elementary and high school experiences; recreational and leisure activities; the community-building aspect of sports; and community celebrations.

Noël situates her contribution within the literature on the history of the Canadian family. She notes that while the rise of the “domestic occasion” has been amply studied in the United States, it has received far less attention here (5). She argues that “the family, particularly through its rituals, played an important role in maintaining cultural traditions and creating in its members a sense of ethnic (or religious) identity” (6). One of the strengths of her work is a broader application of what is meant by the term “community”; she argues that her study “uses ‘community’ as a lens through which to study daily life just beyond the boundaries of family” (9). While she ultimately sees the “congregation,” due to its ethnic homogeneity, as the most important community to which individuals belonged, she also sees communities created in or by “schools, community halls, parks, rinks, and the streets” (9-10). These public “arenas” are important given that much of her study area is rural, but also because she aims to explore the interaction between, and the fluidity of, such community identities.

In addition to the history of the family, Noël’s work makes some interesting contributions to other aspects of Canadian social history. For example, she offers a thoughtful discussion of children’s understanding of their

neighbourhoods. In addition to her detailed descriptions of play, valuable in and of themselves, Noël also explores how this terrain allowed children to interact with others their own age, something specific to the urban dweller. Here the book offers a good sense of the class differences in the daily lives of the area's residents and a clear sense of how these were affected by rural versus urban residence. In particular, the book offers an excellent description of how wedding rituals varied in town and country.

While Noël's study makes some valuable contributions, it also contains some rather notable weaknesses. Unfortunately, as Noël readily admits, she was unable to secure interviews with local Aboriginals, which certainly could have added a compelling component to her narrative. In her defence, she suggests that their numerical presence in the area during the interwar years was not significant (page 255, fn. 16), but this explanation seems unconvincing. At the very least, it would have been interesting, albeit an imperfect solution, had she included remembrances of those she did interview about the presence of natives in the study area and their relations with other ethnicities. The study fares only slightly better with the issue of gender. While there is some discussion of gender, as in the breakdown of chores or leisure activities, it is not a primary category of analysis throughout, which seems odd in a history of family life. Instead, references to the activities of the young mostly use the non-gendered terms "children" or "students." Arguably the lack of attention to both gender and ethnic differences are key weaknesses in Noël's analysis. In part, these lead to her somewhat surprising conclusion: "While the maintenance of strong community boundaries, particularly those between ethno-religious groups, in a period when difference was not readily tolerated, might have led to social conflict, in fact a relatively high degree of social harmony prevailed" (255). But surely there must have been some social conflict? Yet, virtually none is offered here.

Noël's treatment of oral history also has its strengths and weaknesses. Noël's research base in this respect relies on "full life-course" interviews with subjects, now in their seventies and eighties, who she met through community contacts and who grew up in her "study area" in the 1920s and 1930s. She addresses the challenges of memory and offers, referencing Neil Sutherland's work, that the reconstructions recounted by her subjects of daily routines are more reliable because they have become part of the interviewees' "scripts." Taken together, patterns are identifiable. Noël is upfront with examples of failing memories that conflict with (also imperfect) census data for the area; these examples would perhaps validate the wariness of those already critical of the reliability of oral histories. For those less wary of oral histories, and instances of mis-remembrances aside, Noël has amassed an impressive collection of interviews, and her footnotes detail how key her bilingualism was in persuading otherwise reluctant subjects to be interviewed. Given that, it is disappointing that

the voices of her historical actors are somewhat muted in this work. Too often she has paraphrased and summarised their words. By doing so, she is able to present a rewarding level of detail, but the paraphrasing sacrifices the unique voices of her subjects, something one might hope to hear in such a study. In the opening pages of the first chapter (38-48), for example, Noël outlines the daily lives of Loretta Cundari, Rita Landriault, and Clifford T. Alger, three people whose stories she terms “representative accounts” that “show that daily life could vary considerably according to class, ethnicity, and religion” (48). Her book would have been more successful had the level of detail and use of the actors’ voices throughout the book matched that provided in these ten pages.

In her acknowledgements, Noël writes that there is a fine line between writing a micro-history and a local history (xiv). It is a balancing act that she does not always successfully navigate. At different points throughout the work, her book reads like a celebratory local history. I imagine that this stems in part from the book’s narrative structure, but also from the above mentioned failure to explore conflicts within and between the various communities she studied. Criticisms aside though, I very much enjoyed this book and the valuable detail it has to offer. Partway through reading it, however, I found myself hoping that Noël would publish subsequent works using these same interviews, allowing the voices of the historical actors to come across more clearly, thereby highlighting the richness of her interviews.