

Review

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Randy William Widdis. *Voices from Next Year Country: An Oral History of Rural Saskatchewan*. Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre/University of Regina, 2006. 104 pp. ISBN: 978-0889772021.

This slim volume is a treasure trove of memory. Indeed a good two thirds of it consists of direct and lengthy quotations from forty-five old timers from rural Saskatchewan. Throughout the book, they compare and contrast a simpler time with today's world. The former is one of a close-knit, communitarian world, a time of "social cohesion" (6-11), one when farm families depended on one another, cultivated not only wheat, but informal and face-to-face relations, supported an array of localized institutions, and engaged politically. The modern time is one of distended relations, with paved highways undermining local focus, the gospel of rationalism disemboweling community, global economies sending youth from home, and chemicalized agriculture turning farms into businesses. The theoretical canvass on which this oral history is hung is a variation of modernization theory, the old *Gemeinschaft-Gesellschaft* dichotomy writ large.

A central strength of the book is this dance between theory and analysis, between voices of the past and academic consideration. As an historical geographer, Widdis is especially interested in how place matters, both imagined and lived, and in one that produces healthy social, cultural and psychological lives. In his concern to identify social features that that produce "effective," "collective action" (7), he makes use especially of Robert Putman's *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*¹ (Princeton, 1993). The reproduced rural voices in this book fall in line with this agenda. They venerate family ties, denounce apathy, bemoan rural depopulation, criticize neo-liberal government policy, and offer folk wisdom. They seem eager to outline a simpler and better past; with perhaps with a sense of romance, the past they see had less western alienation than exists today, fewer economic concerns, less class division, indeed, seemingly fewer weeds and drought. And most of the interviewees readily denounce most panaceas of the present; the voices are versant in the blizzard of contemporary acronyms of agencies meant to improve rural economies - NISA, GRIP, CFIP, AIDA, REDA, LIFT – and the interviewees speak of them as if they were common parlance elsewhere. Widdis himself heralds these voices as those

¹ Robert Putman, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

that can cut through the jargon of the myriad official studies on which policy makers have come to rely.

Widdis' oral history is thus a particular kind of historical narrative. It is meant to contribute to policy decision and to help ensure "the survival" [viii] of rural places. The voices are offered as a contribution to contemporary debate; the book prescribes solutions as readily as it describes situations. In this spirit, Widdis makes no apology for overtly directing and shaping these oral histories; even though the questionnaires are not reproduced, they seem to have been quite pointed. The few questions actually repeated for the benefit of the reader - "if their definitions of community had changed over time" (15), or to comment on "politics in the past and the role of government in particular" (60) - suggest the author's rather particular agenda. In defense of Widdis, he is transparent about his methodology, aware that the interview is itself a "cultural construct" (2). He even warns readers that his subjects are the elderly and thus ones with a very particular perspective; he speculates on alternative views that the current, successful, business-oriented farmers may have on a globalized economy or local email-savvy community organizers may have on the internet.

There is little to fault and much to praise in this sprightly and engaging book. If there is a concern it is that the book's focus is too strictly shaped by a modernization lens. The abundant use of the term "traditional" seems problematic; in the history of rurality, "traditional" can of course point to many different social constructions. Just when in history was rural life "traditional" - in pre-immigration, nineteenth-century, village-bound Europe; in early-twentieth century, ethnically-dissected Saskatchewan; in the 1950s when nascent consumerism was town-based and homemaking spun up in feminine mystique? Knowing that "tradition" is always relative also suggests that perhaps the elderly will always lament a golden time of the past, one that may well not exist outside of "memory."

The book is well written, concise, thoughtful, and the voices nicely produced. Disclosure of the interview instrument - the list of questions actually asked - would have clarified the process by which the memories were produced. That the conclusion contains a whole paragraph simply reproduced from a previous section of the book suggests that the book could have benefited from more careful editing. An index would have opened up the book to ethnographers and a bibliography made the scholarly context more transparent. These criticisms aside, the book does introduce students of rurality to local wisdom and Widdis deserves congratulation for eloquently introducing these actors to the world away from rural Saskatchewan. The book may be addressed to policy makers, but it makes a fine contribution as well to other fields, rural history and oral history in particular.