

**Voisey, Paul. *Vulcan: The Making of a Prairie Community*.  
Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988. Pp. x, 341.  
Illustrations**

Edward J. Davies, II

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expansion of the separate school system. This growth was not always supported unambiguously by the parishioners. Gaffield's discussion shows that several parishes had no great urge to set up separate, French language schools, despite the proclamations from the Archbishop. Often, the parish priest was caught up in the middle of such conflicts.

The establishment of the separate schools did not solve all educational problems. Such issues as overcrowding, lack of instructional equipment, the poor quality of the teachers, and - in particular - of the English taught in these schools were common to many separate schools in the county. These conditions made it difficult, if not impossible, for Francophone children to continue their schooling past the primary level. Thus, the price for the safeguarding of French-language education may have been the blocking of further educational (and, eventually, occupational) opportunities.

The final chapter gives a summing up of the conditions in Prescott county at the beginning of the twentieth century. The demography, ecology, social structures and institutions of the county point to "cultural fission" - the "two solitudes" in the microcosm of a peripheral county.

Overall, this book fills an important lacuna in our understanding of the development of the relations between Canada's two charter groups. Its strength, in presenting an integrated history of Prescott county, is also its weakness: while the author hints at developments in the second half of the twentieth century, the connections to these developments and their analysis are made only sporadically. Nevertheless, this is a very readable and informative work.

John de Vries  
Department of Sociology and Anthropology  
Carleton University

Voisey, Paul. *Vulcan: The Making of a Prairie Community*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988. Pp. x, 341. Illustrations.

The character of frontier society in North America has long generated intense scholarly debate. Historians have proposed various models to explain the evolution of society in newly settled regions. Paul Voisey's study of early 20th-century Vulcan, located in south-central Alberta, challenges these long held notions.

Indeed, Voisey's quite convincingly asserts that none of the current models adequately explain the nature of frontier society. He successfully argues that the interaction of tradition, environment, metropolis (any outside influence directed at the local community), and frontier (the process of building communities where none existed) moulded society in newly settled regions. Voisey also questions long cherished notions about frontier development, particularly those related to motivation for settlement. Voisey's meticulous and careful examination of settlement, agriculture, and social life underscores the interplay of these phenomena in transforming the prairie around Vulcan into a prosperous wheat producing region.

The pioneers who settled Vulcan were primarily young men from the American midwest and eastern Canada drawn by the free, government-sponsored homesteads, the promise of quick returns from wheat-hungry, metropolitan markets, and rising land values. Of middling backgrounds, these men arrived with sufficient capital to exploit the cheap and seemingly inexhaustible land.

A speculative boom accompanied Vulcan's opening in 1904 and small-scale speculators were major participants in this boom. Many were in non-farm occupations and their sole intent was to capitalize on rising land values which accompanied the prosperity of wheat. Often speculators completed houses, barns,

and other necessary improvements to entice those who were interested in farming. Rising land values could tempt virtually any farmer to sell for profit and, having garnered the quick return, move on to new opportunities elsewhere. As Voisey points out, the breaking of millions of acres of new land in the plains states, such as the Dakotas after 1900, frequently lured profit-oriented settlers away from Vulcan. As a result, a succession of owners often developed farms as land changed hands again and again. For many, Vulcan was just one stop on a long journey.

During its early boom years geographic mobility was extremely high in the Vulcan area. Few settlers stayed more than five years and by 1938, just 15% of the original pioneers who arrived in 1904 remained in Vulcan. Not until the collapse of the wheat market in the post-1920 years, would this mobility subside. Voisey concludes that Vulcan was hardly "the sleepy, stable place" so often called to mind by the frontier.

Voisey centres his analysis of crop selection on the choice settlers faced between mixed farming and intensive specialization in wheat. Advocates of diverse crops comprised metropolitan-based agencies such as the Dominion Department of Agriculture. These supporters stressed the long-term benefits of mixed farming, especially soil conservation and protection against crop failures. Yet, the environment was ideally suited for wheat production. The flat, treeless plains invited "extensive use of machinery" which greatly increased productivity. Wheat's deep roots enabled it to overcome the aridity of the Alberta plains by collecting water from every possible source. Given its quick and inexpensive start-up costs, wheat also accommodated the speculative tendencies in the settlers and their geographic mobility.

Interested more in quick profit than long term benefit, Vulcan's settlers rationally chose wheat over mixed farming. Yet, many pioneers still maintained small farmyards that enabled them to cultivate diverse crops.

These provided a psychological link with their midwest homes and traditions where mixed farming had been an important part of their lives.

Once having decided on wheat, Vulcan farmers confronted the task of choosing a farm technique appropriate to the arid, prairie environment. In this case, they opted for the dry farming technique known as the Campbell System. Developed in the American midwest and popularized by Dry Farming Conferences, the system stressed the use of the deep cutting plough which aggravated soil conservation problems common to the prairie. Until the climatic disaster of the 1930s, farmers refused to acknowledge dry farming as a cause for poor harvests.

Experts from the Department of Agriculture advocated trash farming. This technique involved farm machines which cut the soil at a slight angle and a far shallower depth, in short, machines that distributed the soil least. This technique reduced pernicious soil drifting that threatened the very foundation of the region. Ultimately, the depression with devastating drought and the development of efficient trash farm technology forced the settlers to abandon their long cherished and costly dry farming technique.

Voisey's analysis of farm size reveals a complex story, one keenly affected by events beyond Vulcan. The ambitions of large-scale entrepreneurs coupled with the wheat boom of the pre-1920 years produced bonanza farms, which dwarfed their smaller-scale competitors. The bonanza farm created a tremendous demand for labour, not a strenuous burden in the pre-World War I years when costs for hired help were insignificant. In their quest for larger farms, these entrepreneurs eagerly embraced new technology as a means of bringing more land under production and capitalizing on the buoyant wheat market. The very size of these farms and the labour demands of the pre-1920 technology called for ever larger

numbers of hired hands.

World War I produced a crisis for large and small farmer on the Vulcan prairie. Labour costs soared and remained high when wheat collapsed after the war in the wake of new overseas competition. Bonanza farmers, unable to withstand the new economic pressures, folded during the twenties. Their size, according to Voisey, had failed to give them a significant edge over their competitors.

Their smaller-scale competitors, who aspired to large farms, now sought to reduce labour costs rather than expand their land base. They slowly adopted evolving technology such as gasoline tractors and threshing-combines, which appeared during the 1920s and the 1930s. These new or improved devices enabled the small-scale farmer to dispense with the expensive contractor whose machines and hired labour had supplemented the labour needs of all farmers before the 1920s.

For those who wished to expand in the post war years but feared the fluctuation of an unsteady wheat market, farm tenancy supplied a ready-made solution. Faced with a shortage of purchasable land and money, Vulcan's settlers opted for short-term tenancy that allowed them to expand or contract depending on wheat prices. The percentage of those who rented land rose from 16% in 1916 to 62% in 1941, a figure that clearly supports Voisey's analysis. In Vulcan, farm tenancy did not imply poverty or inferior social status.

Social life in Vulcan proved to be a rich and varied experience. Local residents eager for social contact created a well developed institutional structure. Settlers were willing to overcome the distance imposed by the nature of wheat farming, low population density, and the pioneers' inherited preferences for individual farmsteads. More than 60 organizations ranging from card clubs to baseball teams comprised the basis

of interaction among the residents in the Vulcan area. These cut across town, hamlet, and countryside and united the Vulcan residents in a web of institutional ties. The vast majority of these organizations sponsored numerous activities unrelated to their main purpose in order to sustain interest and justify the effort and time required to attend regular meetings. Social clubs, for instance, often sponsored swimming forays and guest lecturers to complement their normal activities. The well-developed organizational structure, as Voisey underscores, contrasted sharply with notions that sparsely-populated frontiers were unable to sustain social organization.

The proliferation of these groups met another critical need, namely the accommodation of Vulcan's newcomers. A community that experienced intense geographic mobility and high proportion of strangers, Vulcan demanded institutional mechanisms to allow newcomers participation in the community's affairs suited to their willingness and time. The numerous organizations gave recent immigrants that opportunity. As a rural community with a small and low density of population, Vulcan also required a high rate of participation to sustain this institutional structure, a need obviously met by the area's residents. Vulcan certainly failed to conform to the rural sociologist's notion that population turnover undermined rural communities and their social organizations.

The small, dispersed population created by wheat farming shaped two key institutions, the school and the church. Faced with a shortage of students and meagre funding, school officials were unable to provide adequate facilities or recruit well-trained teachers. These liabilities severely hampered the school system's chief task of instructing the children and introducing them to British culture.

In the sparsely settled Vulcan prairie, churches, too, coped with small numbers, inadequate funding, and inability to recruit

experienced ministers. At the insistence of their communicants and in response to these conditions, the two main Protestant denominations, the Methodists and the Presbyterians, merged to form the United Church. Clearly, the absence of established churches and "entrenched interests" on the frontier facilitated this merger. The new interdenominational church avoided controversial theological issues and stressed a bland, Christian universalism, hardly reminiscent of the fiery, evangelical Protestantism so often associated with rural communities. In fact, attendance, even in the newly formed United Church, rarely exceeded 50% of the membership, a figure which reinforces Voisey's conclusion that religion played a minor role in the lives of Vulcan's settlers.

Vulcan showed none of the disparities in wealth often associated with maturing agricultural regions. It remained a community dominated by settlers of middling origin, a characteristic enhanced by the increasing suitability of the family farm for wheat production after 1920. The strength of the petite bourgeoisie also undercut the development of a local élite. With key business establishments decentralized to meet the demands of this dispersed population, no private sector institutions existed to serve as the basis for an economic élite. At the same time, inexpensive land and the homestead program ensured widespread ownership of the one key natural resource.

In his analysis of social relations Voisey stresses the absence of ethnic, class, or occupational conflict so common in more densely settled agricultural areas and metropolitan centres. Canadian and American settlers with similar backgrounds and values dominated Vulcan's population; while the small and well assimilated ethnic minorities posed no challenge to its cultural hegemony. The widespread participation in Vulcan's numerous institutions promoted cooperation. At the same time, informal

exchange networks, which enabled the farmers to share labour and machines, involved a strict social code that reduced conflict and even lessened the personal feuds that emerged as the main form of tension, according to Voisey.

Voisey's seminal work makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the 20th-century frontier society. In particular, his analysis of the metropolitan influence places the community in the broader national context and underscores the interdependence of locale and the larger society. Voisey's work complements the growing body of research in the American context that stresses the impact of large-scale organizations, nationally-based pressure groups, and new consumer goods in shaping the life of the twentieth-century community. Like their counterparts in American communities, Vulcan residents looked to the metropolis for urban styles, new products, and leisure activities. According to Voisey, Vulcan's settlers embraced goods and services, such as automobiles and movies, offered by the new twentieth-century, metropolitan economy. Voisey suggests the tension generated by the new consumerism when he comments that farmers often chose homegrown foodstuffs over store-bought goods. As he points out, this decision reflected their 19th century, agricultural traditions. Yet, Voisey largely passes over the conflict between the new consumerism and the older producer ideology, which has sparked considerable attention from scholars of mass consumer society and, no doubt, played a part in the growing secularism of Vulcan's residents.

Unfortunately, Voisey's comments on the impact of ethnicity on Vulcan's population lack the originality that distinguishes most of his analysis. Vulcan's population consisted chiefly of Anglo-Protestants and a small minority of assimilated German, Dutch, and Scandinavian residents who posed no challenge to the dominant culture. Given these conditions, the absence of ethnic

conflict is hardly surprising. Still Vulcan's settlers reacted vigorously when confronted by ethnically very different Eastern European immigrants brought in by the Canadian Pacific Railway. The Catholicity of these workers (presumed, since their religious ties are not identified) may have contributed to this hostile attitude. Yet, Vulcan's Protestant congregations had already accommodated a tiny Catholic population of western European or Canadian origin. Events such as the arrival of these immigrants could spark the ethnic sensibilities. Voisey concludes that ethnicity must be combined with other characteristics such as race, class, and culture. This recommendation is hardly novel since political, labour, and immigration historians have long recognized the inadequacy of ethnicity alone. As a result, they have integrated culture, class, and race into their studies of social conflict.

These minor criticisms aside, Voisey's work is impressive for its care, thoroughness, and originality. His work should be read by all interested in community and, no doubt, will serve as a guide to future scholars who venture into this research field.

Edward J. Davies II,  
Department of History  
University of Utah

**Cohen, Albert. *The Entrepreneurs: The Story of Gendis Inc.* Toronto: Mclelland and Stewart, 1985. Pp. 220. Illustrations. \$19.95.**

**Levine, Allan. *The Exchange: 100 Years of Grain Trading in Winnipeg.* Winnipeg: Peguis, 1987. Pp. xv, 278. Illustrations. \$24.95.**

Winnipeg's metropolitan growth and influence until the 1920s and reduced status since are reasonably well-known aspects of Canadian urban history. These two studies of Winnipeg economic institutions, the Grain Exchange and Gendis Inc., add depth to our