

Family and Community Life in Northeastern Ontario: The Interwar Years.
By Françoise Noël. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University
Press 2009. xiv + 354 pp.

"[I]t is precisely because they were ordinary people living ordinary lives that would otherwise have been forgotten that their recollections are so important" (255). So ends Françoise Noël's informative, if occasionally pedestrian, study of "ordinary" folk experiencing the interwar years in North Bay and environs. Her volume offers much for the student of "everyday" life as well as those interested in rural and children's lives, Franco-Ontarians, northern Ontario, and more. Local historians will surely enjoy the book. Other readers may find that Noël's "navigating the fine line between local and micro-history" (xiv) occasionally falters, with overabundant detail and slightly self-evident conclusions. Yet, like her subjects, the "ordinary" is ultimately of real significance.

Noël, a professor of history at Nipissing University, examines the intimate details of "community," a rather elusive setting *and* process "just beyond the boundaries of family" (9). She focuses on a "microhistory" of what the book's title terms "Northeastern Ontario." Truth be told, this is a study of a smaller geography—from Mattawa on the east to North Bay and vicinity on the west. Even that is inconsistently covered terrain: one reads most often about North Bay society. For those interested in the broader picture, it can be mildly frustrating to read so much about North Bay in a book purportedly on northeastern Ontario!

But one must not throw out the baby with the bathwater. There is much of interest here for anyone curious about northeastern Ontario. Over forty interviews buttress archival materials, a useful reading of secondary sources, and a close, if necessarily selective, reading of local newspapers. Local census materials bring to life various aspects of "ordinary" life. The interests of local historians notwithstanding, one can question whether we need five pages on the "Rinkey Dink" women's softball team (213–217) or similar minutia on church and school. The recollections, while rich, are inevitably imperfect. Indeed, Noël concedes the limitations of her interviews: more youthful informants are over-represented, and there are few recollections about important issues like right-of-passage rituals (83). In addition, the diligent use of newspapers, while important, has built-in sampling problems; funeral coverage, for instance, is much more likely for those of some means.

Whatever impatience and doubt may arise while reading the book, the abundance and breadth of data it contains whets the appetite, and supports Noël's ultimately persuasive assessment that "everyday" detail tells us

much. Broader discussion, in fact, provides depth and momentum. After establishing the basic geographic, demographic, and historical setting, Noël considers a series of themes, including domesticities (family settings and celebrations); rites of passage and of faith; institutional settings; schooling; recreation; and community celebrations. One might quibble with Noël's categorizations: it is not exactly clear why "recreation" becomes "leisure" while "sports," addressed in its own chapter, is apparently neither. Nevertheless, her very strong command of detail ensures clear imagery of a population moving from an earlier social model to a more formal, "modern" setting. A particularly valuable element of the book is her study of the rural setting, where comparative isolation resulted in greater persistence of "older" social patterns; "modern" life arrived in rural northeastern Ontario much later than in the urban "north."

Rural settings are less well served by archival and interview sources, so in these cases societal changes are drawn out less extensively than those occurring in North Bay, a feature of the book that weakens its supposedly regional focus. That said, this reviewer shares Noël's view that "a detailed exploration of family and community life is only possible at the level of the local" (12). That local focus also supports a central theme of the book—that "shared social spaces," which to varying degrees helped diminish the social divisions of religion, ethnicity, and class, emerged in northeastern Ontario communities. In addition, Noël provides a strong reminder that "community is not static, but a social process" (9). While the book's ever-more-abundant detail on North Bay may give rise to criticisms that Noël privileges "detail over assessment," it offers important analyses even as it provides detailed treasures for those interested in the local for its own sake.

Noël eludes the pedant's fate by retaining a focus on thesis. She is careful to assess the causes, character, and consequences of the societal evolutions that she traces out in such detail. She also takes a balanced tone; while feminist issues emerge, the tone of *Family and Community Life* is very much analytical, not dogmatic. That said, there are times when one can discern a "presentist" perspective. For example, Noël seems surprised by many of the challenges facing rural populations between the World Wars, including the need for children to make long treks to small schools and the inclination of adults to combine farming with wage work. With roots in the marginal farmlands of the provincial resource north, this reviewer regards such circumstances as ordinary, not unusual. Similarly, Noël's comment that the "strap ... was still in use" (148) in the interwar years seems odd given that said item remained in schools into the 1960s.

Thankfully, these irritants are infrequent. Overall, this work usefully blends analysis and many sorts of data. Importantly, the contents capture the authentic voices of the informants, and Noël's writing is mercifully clear of the turgid language that so often invades social histories. A smattering of illustrations and maps enhance a generally evocative tale of societies shifting from "traditional" to "modern" Canada.

While a minor complaint might be raised about the jarringly abrupt beginnings of new chapters, the occasionally bumpy ride provided in *Family and Community Life* is well worthwhile. "Bottom up" history certainly has its critics, but Noël shows that micro-history matters; as she puts it, "every local area has its own particular story to tell" (13). While its local details will appeal particularly to residents of northeastern Ontario, this thoughtful and deeply researched work also provides broader insights into individuals, families, and community. Readers of *The Northern Review* might wish for more attention to the issue of "North." Noël treats this term as a label rather than a concept or a form of self-identification. Indeed, one searches in vain for the sort of thoughtful discussion of "North" found in Kerry Abel's *Changing Places* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006). Perhaps the difference in the two books reflects the geography of Noël's study, in particular her focus on the transition zone between northern and southern Canada.

In the end, rather than condemning Noël for what is not in her volume, one should applaud her achievement in examining the private and domestic spheres as arenas of community character and social change. Conscientiously researched, carefully thought out, and effectively written, *Family and Community Life in Northeastern Ontario* brings positive attention to microhistory, assesses family and community, and reminds us that northern provincial settings are both relevant and interesting.

Peter V. Krats, Department of History, University of Western Ontario

Learning Native Wisdom: What Traditional Cultures Teach Us About Subsistence, Sustainability, and Spirituality. By Gary Holthaus. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008. viii + 266 pp. Bibliography, index.

In the North, many communities are experiencing a critical mass of sustainability challenges caused by, among other things, the changing climate's impacts on the land, weather, and seasons; increasing social and political pressures resulting from oil and natural gas development; the rising costs of food, fuel, and other commodities; and an uncertain